


Political-affective scenarios of black women in post-colonial contexts: an intersectional analysis of Buchi Emecheta's works /
Cenários políticos-afetivos da mulher negra em contextos pós-coloniais: uma análise interseccional sobre obras de Buchi Emecheta

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate, from the perspective of intersectional theories and gender studies, what oppressions affect Nigerian women portrayed by writer Buchi Emecheta in the novels *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Such analysis allows us to observe the effects of post-colonialism, motherhood, marriage and race on the lives of the characters Nnu Ego and Adah, who leave their original communities trying to conquer better living conditions in urban contexts. In order to substantiate the observations set out in the article, Crenshaw (1989), Hill-Collins (2000), Kilomba (2019) and Hudson-Weems (2019) were used as main bibliographic contributions. By aligning the theoretical references with the literary text, this study also seeks to understand the cross-cultural nuances that are presented in the narratives of African authors. Through these two narratives, the importance of the article is justified by the need to fight the social and anthropological stigmas imposed to African women.

KEYWORDS: Intersectional theories. Buchi Emecheta. *The Joys of Motherhood*. *Second Class Citizen*.

RESUMO

O presente estudo almeja investigar, à luz das teorias interseccionais e dos estudos de gênero, quais opressões atingem as mulheres nigerianas retratadas pela escritora Buchi Emecheta nos romances *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) e *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Tal análise permite observar os efeitos do pós-colonialismo, da maternidade, do casamento e da raça na vida das personagens Nnu Ego e Adah, que saem de suas comunidades originárias em busca de melhores condições de vida em contextos urbanos. Visando a fundamentar as observações dispostas no

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artigo, foram utilizadas como principais aportes bibliográficos Crenshaw (1989), Hill-Collins (2000), Kilomba (2019) e Hudson-Weems (2019). Ao alinhar os referenciais teóricos ao texto literário, o estudo busca compreender também as nuances transculturais que se apresentam nas narrativas de autoras africanas. Diante dessas duas narrativas, a importância do artigo é justificada pela necessidade de combater os estigmas sociais e antropológicos impostos às mulheres africanas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pensamento interseccional. Buchi Emecheta. The Joys of Motherhood. Second Class Citizen.*

1 Introduction

An analysis of literary texts that cross cultural borders allows us to better understand the customs and values of other cultures. In this sense, exploring the pages of Buchi Emecheta's novels provides an opportunity to identify the cultural contexts of Nigerian women, the problems arising from their insertion into discriminatory societies, and their relationship with motherhood. For this reason, this article aims to contrast the experiences lived by the protagonists of two of the author's works, *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979, and *Second Class Citizen*, published in 1974, taking into consideration poverty, family relationships and the effects of colonialism.

With that in mind, the contributions of Crenshaw (1989), Hill-Collins (2000), Kilomba (2019), Hudson-Weems (2019) and Emecheta herself (1988) will be used as the theoretical framework. In this way, intersectional studies present themselves as an important alternative to decentralize epistemologies from the north to the global south, allowing to problematize the deleterious effects of colonialism on the lives of African peoples, especially women. The debate pertinent to intersectional ideas and their relationship to narrative will be taken up again in the later section.

The author of the narratives, Buchi Emecheta, was born in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, and established writing committed to the deconstruction of stereotypes attributed to African women. Emecheta had a very poor childhood, but on seeing her brother attend school, she insisted on also receiving formal education herself. She received a scholarship to an elite school, but her intellectual success was accompanied by another family loss, the death of her mother. At age 11, she became engaged to a man with whom she lived in an abusive marriage. As she tells in the article *Feminism with a Small 'f'*, for not accepting Emecheta's texts, her then-husband destroyed the author's first manuscript. Even so, Emecheta did not give up on literature.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* (2018), the character Nnu Ego, the daughter of a great tribal leader, fails in successive attempts to get pregnant. Because of this, after being ostracized in her

community, she is sent as a wife to a man in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria. In the other novel studied, *Second Class Citizen* (2018), Adah is a studious woman whose opportunities are limited because of her race and gender. Reaching for a better life, she outlines strategies to emigrate from Nigeria to England. Adah's London experience, however, is marked by racism and xenophobia, oppressions she has to deal with, coupled with her violent husband and the responsibility to raise her children without a support network.

Given these narratives, the analysis will begin with a contextualization of feminisms and an investigation to elucidate whether the experiences of Nnu Ego and Adah are the same and what types of oppression affect these women. In a second moment, the article will address how and for what reasons the roles of mother and wife, although sometimes desired, imprison these women, whether in a post-colonial society or in a foreign one. Finally, it will be observed how African writers struggle to free themselves from the monolithic representation made about themselves in Western literary production, through the valorization of their ancestry.

2 Intersectional Feminisms and Literary Representations

The historical trajectory of traditional feminisms has allowed a series of achievements of rights for women, such as universal suffrage, access to higher education, equal salaries, reproductive rights, and stricter punishment for crimes such as femicide – but not for all women. The profusion of theoretical perspectives and practical movements in favor of female causes originally favored white, Western, and heterosexual women. In such a context of segregation, the need for black feminisms to broaden the scope of the feminist struggle arose. In this context, in the nineteenth century, Sojourner Truth, a woman who was enslaved for forty years, became a symbol of abolitionist struggles and for women's rights after her release. Her famous speech *Ain't I a Woman* is still remembered for highlighting race and gender disparities.

Throughout the twentieth century, discussions about what would later be known as Intersectionality developed from debates by black feminists, who did not see themselves represented in the elitist and exclusionary feminist movement, which was reverberated in the United States of the 1970s. Among the thinkers, we highlight the Combahee River Collective, headed by Barbara Smith. In a historical scenario, later, the discussions and protests against the war in Vietnam were added to other causes, such as the exclusion of black feminists by their white

counterparts. Discrimination within the movement was also a flag raised by other authors in the country such as Angela Davis, bell hooks and Patricia Hill-Collins.

In light of all this, American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw looked into cases where sexism and racism were not enough to justify discrimination, such as General Motors hiring white women and black men, but not black women. Crenshaw (1989) argued that black women are excluded from both feminist theory and anti-racist discourses because their set of experiences reflects in intersectional oppressions of race, class and gender. For the author, the consequences of these exclusions do not have an easy solution, as the intersectional experience is more impactful than merely the juxtaposition of racism and sexism.

Crenshaw (1989) still points out the invisibility of intersectional discrimination in contexts in which economic, cultural and social forces that affect women place them in other systems of subordination. Then, due to the force of habit, this structure of oppressions remains obscured, while only the most obvious and immediate discriminations are perceived. In other words: in some cases, it will be possible to notice, for example, racism – but not its specific expression, which affects black women more significantly than black men.

Such unfair treatments are manifested in the character of Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (2018). Nnu Ego belongs to the Igbo ethnic group, and if she followed the path expected of a woman in her society, she would be considered successful. Nnu Ego already enjoyed some advantages, being the daughter of a great tribal leader and having as her first husband someone who holds a prominent position. However, on failing to get pregnant, she feels humiliated by her community. After all, the main function of a woman in that culture is reproductive. Therefore, when she does not correspond to the role of mother expected, as an idealized performance, she becomes useless to her peers.

3 Political, social and economic effects of motherhood

The characters' relationship with motherhood and marriage directly impacts their journeys of poverty. The two end up in the same position, informally leading a large family, but they come to

this point through different paths. Hill-Collins' (2000) articulation of controlling images as a gender-specific representation for black people justifies the imprisonment of Adah and Nnu Ego's behaviors and bodies. Thus, the processes of subjectivity of these characters are minimized – even though the literary construction demonstrates the complexity of their characters, the society in which they are inserted is incapable of seeing them as such.

In this sense, Hill-Colins (2000) overlaps intersections of race, gender and class to theorize about the matriarch image, whose central characteristic is the inability to behave according to gender expectations. In this way, black women who support the family often wonder if they have done something wrong – an issue that astonishes Nnu Ego and, above all, Adah, since their male partners do not contribute enough to provide for the needs of the home.

The work contexts of the two families are different. Nnaife, Nnu Ego's husband, has always worked, but in professions that are not very prestigious and are stigmatized as feminine. Throughout the novel, Nnaife washed clothes for settlers, caught golf balls at a local club, mowed grass, and enlisted in the army to fight a war that was not waged by his nation. In addition, he managed his own finances poorly and sometimes went into debt due to alcoholism, causing Nnu Ego to take over the management of the household economy.

Despite accumulating personal failures, Nnaife remains violent and exerts his power over his wife. It is noted that the controlling images proposed by Hill-Collins (2000), which consists of the regulation of the behavior of black women and an influence on gender identities, serves to chain Nnu Ego to an uncomfortable life:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. (EMECHETA, 1979, p. 137)

Such features are also found in Adah's story, similarly compelled to work exhaustively. Her husband Francis did not engage in any trade. Focused exclusively on his education, while his wife worked, Francis was not even successful, as he failed his exams countless times. When necessity came, he became a postman, but not without complaining and blaming Adah for his failures. Francis has acquired British habits, has been religiously converted as a Jehovah's Witness, and has the

desire to impose such cultural changes to Adah – but only those that can be beneficial to him. After all, he does not abandon the urge to beat his wife, an acceptable habit in his homeland.

Ironically, given Francis' lack of assistance, it is possible to align Adah's trajectory with another controlling image proposed by Hill-Collins (2000): the prosperous mother. This specific class designates poor working-class women who make use of public policies to which they are entitled in order to organize their family dynamics.

This image provides an ideological justification – that the fertility of black women is paramount and needs external resources for its maintenance – so as to foster prejudice. After humiliations, with her children sick because they were delegated to the care of a woman who allows them to rummage through the garbage can, Adah is discriminated against by her neighbors since she managed to find an opportunity in the daycare center for her children. Although she is legally entitled to such benefit, equity is merely formal, as bureaucracy and the intersections of race and class set obstacles to achieving this public policy. In practice, it is a right not attributed to “second-class citizens”.

The affirmative action achieved proves to be insufficient, because Adah continues to work hard, suffering from xenophobia, racism and domestic violence. However, society sees her as privileged. Hill-Collins (2000) demonstrates that women who fit this controlling image seem to pose a cost threat to political and economic stability – even if they are just exercising their citizenship. Even when she gets quality health care, another benefit of the public sphere, Adah is left with a feeling of being tapped:

The conversations around her went on buzzing, buzzing. These women were all happy and free. They seemed to have known each other for years and years. She was ashamed of herself, because somebody, she did not know who, had decided to make a fool of her. She was lying there, all tied up to the bed with rubber cords, just like the little Lilliputians tied Gulliver. (EMECHETA, 1974, p. 114)

Therefore, such stereotypes and controlling images subject the fictional women under analysis to extremely poor and unhappy lives. Even though Nnu Ego has longed for a prolific family, she is imprisoned by it, since commitment and love for her children cause her to starve; the duty of an elder wife also subordinates her to multiple humiliations. Adah is also manipulated by a series of attributes that the community – whether Nigerian or British – wishes to inflict on her, regardless of her will or well-being.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013), studying the main concepts of the political and cultural effects of colonialism, created an entry for a postcolonial body. Paradoxically, they emphasize that there is no such post-colonial body, but the black body is central to colonial and post-colonial discourses, as these bodies were controlled by imperialist forces – with slavery as the utmost example.

In this context, it is worth noting that the black body – and its markers of difference beyond skin color, such as hair and facial features – is subjugated by colonizing peoples even after the independence of the colonized countries. When Adah and Francis are in London and need to rent an apartment, they are rejected by multiple owners merely because of their African-derived bodies:

In any case, Francis and Adah had to look for another place to live. [...] During the days and weeks that followed, she had asked people at work if they knew anywhere. She would read and reread all that shop windows had to advertise. Nearly all the notices had ‘Sorry, no coloureds’ on them. Her house-hunting was made more difficult because she was black; black, with two very young children and pregnant with another one. (EMECHETA, 1979, p. 70)

In this way, the effects of racism are visible in multiple ways because both are rejected from every property they seek to rent. However, a problem that falls exclusively on Adah is also apparent: the responsibility for the children, another limitation imposed by motherhood.

On female imprisonment, Kilomba (2019) points out that women are seen from the male perspective on a scale of subordination. That is, while the man is the main character, the woman is othered. More than that, Kilomba (2019) describes the black woman as “the other of the other”, because she contradicts the dominant pattern in three layers: for not being a man, for not being white, and for not being a black man. In other words, black women suffer violence from many subjects and looks, causing their identity to be left out of the picture.

In the fictional narrative, it is possible to draw a parallel between the writings of Emecheta (2018) and Kilomba (2019). After all, black men are also victims of oppression, but they still achieve a more comfortable position in the social hierarchy than black women. Nnaife, a character in *The Joys of Motherhood* (2018), is a man minimized by the effects of the policies of foreign authorities on his country since his entire work and religious reality were linked to the ideals professed by immigrant bosses. By exercising subordinate functions for the colonizing people and abdicating native customs in order to profess the Christian religion, Nnaife's culture is delegitimized. Still, as

a man subjugated to colonialism, other life-enhancing elements, such as quality education and inclusive public policies, are denied to Nnaife.

Francis, from *Second Class Citizen* (2018), is better educated than Nnaife, but his conditions are not less oppressive. Living in Europe, Francis is familiar with structural racism and begins to introject the idea that he deserves less than white citizens. He makes concessions of his customs and fails to recognize his own ancestry in an attempt to fit into a more accepted collective model. However, when Adah achieves benefits commonly offered only to white families, Francis faces the same discrimination again. Therefore, Nnaife and Francis are victims of a single social antithesis described by Kilomba (2019): the absence of whiteness. The racism suffered by them is aggravated due to the consequences of postcolonialism and immigration, but they are not oppressed by other intersections, as their wives are.

The place of “the other of the other”, proposed by Kilomba (2019), is fully occupied by Nnu Ego. In her trajectory, she does not choose her husband, is rejected by her community when she cannot get pregnant, is sent to marry a man she feels repulsed by, suffers from domestic violence and, ultimately, is neglected by her children. Such oppressions are culturally imposed on females, taking away their autonomy. Nnu Ego does not suffer from explicit racism, because she is situated in a reality of an absolute black majority. However, secular systems of institutional racism hinder social mobility and the access of the black population to mechanisms of inclusion, such as education. As such, Nnu Ego finds herself trapped in a reality of menial services, extreme poverty and gender discrimination, even getting beaten up when she is pregnant, according to the following excerpt:

Nnaife lost his temper and banged the guitar he was holding against her head. Nnu Ego began to scream abuse at him: "You are a lazy, insensitive man! You have no shame. If you hit me again, I shall call the soldiers in the street. Haven't you any shame?" Nnaife made to go for her again but held back when Oshia started to howl with fear. He turned to look at the frightened child and in that split second Nnu Ego lifted the head of the broom and gave Nnaife a blow on his shoulder. She ran past him, pulling the howling Oshia along. "Go and get a job, you! Who is your father that you can come here and beat me, just because we are far away from anywhere?" Nnaife did not chase her. He sagged down on a chair rubbing his shoulder. "If I stay here with this mad woman, I will kill her," he muttered to himself. (EMECHETA, 1974, p. 91)

It is possible to place Nnu Ego's experiences in contrast to Adah's since both fit the mold of “the other of the other”. In some moments, the violence suffered by both is similar, as when they

are humiliated and attacked by their husbands. However, in other situations, it is urgent to highlight the particularities of each experience. Adah, for example, is the only one on whom birth control is imposed. In the first moment of the narrative, when she arrives in London, her husband forces her to consult a doctor in order to adopt contraceptive methods. Later on, when Francis becomes a Jehovah's Witness and the couple already have three children, she wants to implement contraceptive practices, but for that she needs her husband's authorization. Aware of Francis's refusal, Adah manipulates the documentation so as to get a diaphragm. However, when her husband finds out, Adah is humiliated and beaten:

Soon it was midnight, and the row which Adah had dreaded flared up. [...] Did Adah not know the gravity of what she had done? It meant she could take other men behind his back, because how was he to know that she was not going to do just that if she could go and get the gear behind his back? Francis called all the other tenants to come and see and hear about this great issue – how the innocent Adah who came to London only a year previously had become so clever. Adah was happy when Pa Noble came because at least it made Francis stop hitting her. She was dizzy with pain and her head throbbed. (EMECHETA, 1979, p. 160)

Therefore, Kilomba (2019) is correct in pointing out the various antitheses that underlie violence against black women, since even black men, marked by racism, can still exercise power over black women. Thus, it turns out that Adah and Nnu Ego are oppressed by the same causes, racism and sexism, but not always in the same way. Domestic violence and the feeling of not belonging to the place where they establish a home are converging points of discrimination in the journey of the two characters. There are also some forms of violence that only one or another character experiences, such as Adah's birth control.

4 Black women writers and their fictional anthropological clippings

Certainly, the constitution of multifaceted characters, which contradicts clichés commonly intended for female characters, demonstrates the author's will to disentangle herself from the

Western canon. Building on an Afrocentrist principle that focuses on female experiences, Hudson-Weems (2019) coined the term *Africana Womanism*, which applies to the study of *The Joys of Motherhood* (2018) and *Second Class Citizen* (2018).

Seeking to highlight the reality of women of African descent, Hudson-Weems (2019) emphasizes that the reality of these people is not covered by traditional feminism or by African intellectuals. Some of the key concepts for *Africana Womanism* are self-definition, self-naming, family-centeredness, adaptability, authenticity, recognition, respect and ambition. It is interesting to note that only a few apply to the lives of Adah and Nnu Ego, such as the adaptability with which they settled into new cultures and Adah's ambition for education-led social ascension.

Overall, the principles of *Africana Womanism*, such as a positive and flexible male companion, are absent from the trajectories of Adah and Nnu Ego. Even if the characters have not fully experienced the harmony of such a movement, with a support network composed of other black women, it is important to highlight that the existence of fiction with African women as protagonists is, in itself, a manifesto to corroborate African culture in the world, written from their own experiences.

Emecheta herself (1988), in a theoretical-critical text, tries to distance herself from major ideological issues, summarizing her writing only to fiction written from the perspective of the African woman. She rejects the Western view of the writer by vocation, taking on the role of an ordinary writer who feels the need to write in order to maintain her mental health. In fact, complex academic reflections in Emecheta's fictional work are not explicitly proposed. However, by genuinely delving into the daily lives of African women, who do not have enough representation, Emecheta makes her writing political.

Final considerations

The study of the novels allows us to understand that the invisible range of intersectional oppressions proposed by Crenshaw (1989) affects both Nnu Ego and Adah, who are highly discriminated against - although the other members of the community in which they are inserted do not sympathize with their pain. Furthermore, it was noted that the characters do not always suffer the same forms of abuse, but these oppressions are caused by the same factors – race, class and gender. In Adah's case, xenophobia is added to the causes.

It is also possible to identify, in Emecheta's literature, characters attached to the controlling images proposed by Hill-Collins (2000). Adah and Nnu Ego are the providers of their homes, but have no power over family choices and still suffer domestic violence. In this sense, such subordination imposed on them by black men corroborates Kilomba's idea: the black woman is the other of the other, for not being a man, not being white and not being a black man.

Indeed, at times Adah and Nnu Ego's experiences are miserable, imprisoned by poverty and motherhood. However, the representation of these experiences proposed by Emecheta allows the African culture to be placed in a more faithfully manner based on the experiences of its own people – and not repeating a narrative disconnected from real customs. Still, using a theoretical framework that privileges intersectional studies, it offers new possibilities for the recognition of a shared humanity among the most distinct societies.

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