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SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN *SCARLET SONG* BY MARIAMA BÂ AND *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN* BY BUCHI EMECHETA

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Abstract
The literary writings of the African woman after the colonial period is an expression of her personal experience in the patriarchal society. Thus, the colonized woman is oppressed in two ways: first is the structure of indigenous patriarchy, second is the foreign masculinist-colonialism. This was the case of Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta who, endeavored to deconstruct gender hierarchy and the oppression of the African woman in Senegal and Nigeria respectively, by using characters of their protagonists in their works- The Scarlet Song by Bâ, and Second Class Citizen by Emecheta to bring to notice the extent of female subjugation in the African patriarchal society. Their literature is a representation of events undergone by women in their different geographical locations of Africa. For instance, Bâ infers on Islamic discourse in Scarlet Song while Emecheta deduces from the Igbo tradition in Second Class Citizen. Two of them show intertextuality between their works and also they display some themes that expose the female suppression and oppression in the African patriarchal world.
Key Words: Female oppression, Islamic discourse, Igbo tradition, African woman, Patriarchy.

Résumé
L'écriture littéraire de la femme africaine après la période coloniale est une expression de son expérience personnelle dans la société patriarcale. Ainsi, la femme colonisée est opprimée de deux manières: la première est la structure du patriarcat indigène, la seconde est le masculinisme-colonialisme étranger. C'était le cas de Mariama Bâ et Buchi Emecheta qui, se sont efforcés de déconstruire la hiérarchie des genres et l'oppression de la femme africaine au Sénégal et au Nigéria respectivement, en utilisant les personnages de leurs protagonistes dans leurs œuvres - The Scarlet Song par Bâ, et Second Class Citizen par Emecheta pour mettre en évidence l'étendue de l'assujettissement des femmes dans la société patriarcale africaine. Leur littérature est une représentation des événements subis par les femmes dans leurs différentes zones géographiques d'Afrique. Par exemple, Bâ déduit du discours islamique dans Scarlet Song tandis qu'Emecheta déduit de la tradition Igbo dans Second Class Citizen. Deux d'entre eux montrent une intertextualité entre leurs œuvres et présentent également des thèmes qui exposent la suppression et l'oppression féminines dans le monde patriarcal africain.
Mots clés: oppression féminine, discours islamique, tradition Igbo, femme africaine, patriarcat.

1. Introduction

History reveals that there have been women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Cady Staton, Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva and others from the United States and Europe who have been engaged in the battle of women's emancipation from men's chauvinism and exploitations as seen in the work of Justina Okoye, *Gender Consciousness in Selected Works of Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Ifeoma Okoye and Zaynab Akali* (43). Presently Francophone and Anglophone female writers like Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sowfall, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and others through their literary works are giving vent to their emotions and freedom of expression on the oppression of the African woman because of the patriarchal nature of the African society. By their works and image of the African woman

subjugated to the background through her oppression by her male counterparts emanates the demand for her social emancipation and transformation. It is in this way that they present this belief of feminism, whose main objective is total liberation and transformation of the woman. Justina Okoye, further explains that: "Feminism as an ideology incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality" (1). These Feminist writers take the responsibility of protesting against the exploitation of women by their male counterparts so they criticize and oppose certain social norms and practices in their society that subdue the women, thereby, degrading them to look like second class citizens in the society.

According to Bruner and Bruner, one of the assertions often made about contemporary women writers, particularly in Africa, or more precisely those whose cultures have not allowed them to write or be heard until recently is that they have an absorbing personal and domestic stories to tell (10). Such was the case of Emecheta who was writing from her inert experience and not some fairy tale. She narrated an autobiographical story of her emigration and her early years in England. However, the entire multiple problems of intercultural conflicts, race prejudices, ethnic stereotypes, religious and culture myths are seen all through her narration in *Second Class Citizen.*

Mariama Bâ, like Buchi Emeheta, uses fictitious characters in her novels to explain the "home-front-activities" as it concerns the woman in the African patriarchal context. Being aware that many critical analyses have been scholarly done on her works within Africa and beyond, this article, therefore, does not propose to be a complete study of all the writings of Mariama Bâ and the late Buchi Emechta but it explains the fact that many authors have made several significant contributions to their fiction, despite their different geographical locations in Africa: Mariama Bâ is from Senegal and the late Buchi Emecheta was from Nigeria, Bâ writes in French while the late Emecheta writes in English. Both women have won international recognition owing to their literary works.

In Africa, female subordination and oppression is an irritable topic in many literary discourses because of the nature of some existing cultural and religious beliefs. Hence, Bâ and Emecheta among other critics like Flora Nwapa and Catherine Acholonu maintain that: "African women are traditionally subordinated to sexist cultural mores" https://iproject.com.ng/linguistics-emecheta-second-class-citizen-and-nwapa-efuru/index.html. This same cite went ahead to explain that the colonial masters did not help matters to normalize the 'non-even' education system that African men received. Hence they are privileged to have a well-rounded education like their European counterparts before the mid-nineteenth century while the African women received only utilitarian, cosmetic skills in domestic science centers. These could only prepare them to be useful helpmates of their educated husbands who would intimidate and also lord it over them in the home and other social activities, thereby making their relationship to be master/subject instead of husband/wife union. In any case, many women in African patriarchal societies have had one reason or the other to lament because they feel humiliated, unfairly treated, and oppressed in their various homes. And this is why these female writers describe the

African woman and her oppressive condition in the patriarchal society similar to how Taylor defined (social) oppression:

> …a form of injustice occurs when one social group is subordinated while another is privileged, and oppression is maintained by a variety of different mechanisms including social, stereotypes, and institutional rules. A key feature of oppression is that it is perpetrated by and affects social groups … oppression occurs when a particular social group is unjustly subordinated, and where that subordination is not necessarily deliberate but instead results from a complex network of social restrictions to implicit biases and stereotypes… (520-521).

Bâ and Emeheta had a complementary objective of restoring the dignity of the female gender from her male subjugation and oppression in the African patriarchal world. Hence, they advocated that there should be a change and amendment of African cultures, values, beliefs, and norms. This desire to make amends is because of the social construct of the relationship between man and woman where there is this 'African traditional imbalance' of power in the male/female relationship. According to Bâ, "these facts can help us become aware of African needs for societal change, a change more political than merely making speeches" (https://en.m.wikipedia.org.wiki/scarlet-song). This is because she experienced the impact of this unequal liberation of power and so, advocates that people should reduce the harmful impact of their culture to suit both male and female alike. These female writers envisaged that women are distressed physically, culturally, psychologically, and financially to a very great extent due to the men's obnoxious and nefarious actions on families. Based on these facts, Bâ and Emecheta moved in their mission to expose and criticize the illogical behavior manifested by men which are not in any way condemned by the society due to power structures in African patriarchy.

2. Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta: Biographies

It is important to have some background information of facts that triggered the inspiration of these two female writers who shared the same dreams and aspirations as can be envisaged through their literary works.

Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta were of different descent, both biologically, geographically, and educationally. But, in their infancy, both shared the same political undertone in their different countries. Bâ was born in Dakar, Senegal. Her father was a career civil servant, a minister of health in Senegal in 1956. Fate drove her to be raised by her traditional grandparents, so she had to struggle even to gain the education because as Muslims, they did not believe that girls should go to school. She later married a Senegalese member of Parliament, Obèye Diop-Tall, and this was where she saw the other part of life. Not being able to cope with her marriage which was filled with a lot of maltreatment from her spouse, she divorced him and left with her five children. Hence, her frustration with the fate of the average African woman as well as her ultimate acceptance of it drove her to write her first novel, *Une si Longue Lettre* translated as *So Long a Letter*. In this semi-autobiographical epistolary work, Bâ depicts the sorrow and resignation of a woman who must share the mourning of her late husband with his second younger wife. This short book was awarded the first Noma Prize for publishing in Africa. (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/scarlet_song). Bâ in her works advocates that women on their own should create confidence in themselves, which infers that women need to be active in the

common goal of emancipation to avoid being looked at as "good-only-in kitchen" by their male counterparts. She believes that traditions and customs do not agree with the modern/educated African woman, especially the Senegalese woman whom she urges to stand up and change her fate. Through her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, in *Une si Longue Lettre,* Bâ expressed herself and this includes the situation where she implies that she has not given up waiting to refashion her life, saying that, despite everything (disappointments and humiliations), hope still lives within her, because the success of a nation depends inevitably on just such families. Mariama Bâ shows that truly, books can be peaceful weapons:

> The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence.
> Various signs are associated with sound: different sounds that form the word.
> The juxtaposition of words from which springs the idea, Thought, History, Science,
> Life. The sole instrument of inter-relationship and culture, unparalleled, means
> of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing
> effort that leads to progress. They enable you to better yourself…
> *(https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/scarlet-song).*

Therefore, Bâ as a Senegalese figure represents a kind of female Leopold Sedar Senghor. She shows that not only men are important in this world and so, for women to succeed in this life, they should identify themselves and also trust in themselves to overcome these multiple injustices that make up their lives (see https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/scarlet-song). However, Bâ is motivating the women to take responsibility for their lives and stop living on self-pity. In all her works, she demonstrates the innate character of males and also men's irresponsibility to women when it comes to sexual matters.

Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and Politics of Gender* notes that: "Mariama Bâ portrays women realistically, grounding her female characters in society and making them subject to historical forces. Her portrayal of men, however, is also like that of her predecessors in some of their novels, problematic". (145). Stratton went further to portray the ugly remarks of Ojo-Ade who is particularly bitter in his complaint about Bâ's representation of his gender saying: "Man, the unfaithful husband', Man the womanizer' -Bâ's novels describe him in all his negative forms without an exception to console his pride (146-147).

Her Nigerian counterpart, Emecheta was equally moved to write owing to the events that took place in her personal life history. She was born in Lagos, Nigeria because her parents were Igbos migrated from the Igbo town Ibusa (Igbuzo) in the now Delta State. She attended Methodist Girls' Missionary school, but her education was cut short due to the death of her parents. She got married to Mr. Sylvester Onwordi, at the early age of sixteen. She moved to London, England to join her husband in 1962, where she became a victim of conjugal violence. She divorced her husband and left the relationship with her five children. Also in that frustration, she started writing novels, one of which was her semi-autobiography, *Second Class Citizen*. This novel is a narration based on her childhood in Lagos and her early life in London with her husband before she divorced him, just like Bâ, Emecheta was driven into writing due to the frustrations she encountered from her infancy to her married life.

Consequently, in her works, she attempted to correct a lot of anomalies that the average African woman suffers in her matrimonial home and the society at large. As noted by Marie Linton

Umeh in *Feminism in African Literature* of Helen Chukwuma, Emecheta has garnered various prizes: *Second Class Citizen* won the Daughter of Mark Twain Award in 1975. *The Slave Girl* earned her both the New Statesman/Jock Campbell Award in 1978, and the Best Third World Writer for 1976-79 accolade in 1989. *Joys of Motherhood won* The Best Black Writer in Britain in 1980 (74). Umeh further explained that the literary force of Emecheta as the most talented and prolific Anglophone African female writer moved her to illustrate the lackadaisical Igbo cultural norms which prevent women from participating in a wide range of activities that are assumed to be preserved for men only. She further posits that Emecheta as a feminist clarifies family romantic, nostalgic ideas whereas some African writers pretend and describe polygamous homes as good and peaceful, she tries to be the mouthpiece of the illiterate African wives, and daughters who cannot come out publicly to defend their course (74).

In all, these two female writers are feminists who portrayed the blatant truth of the man as regards subjugation of the African woman, thereby attracting many critics on their works from the other sex.

3. Summary of both Works

3.1 *The Scarlet Song*

Mariama Bâ received international recognition with *The Scarlet Song*. The work narrates the tragic story of the marriage between a Senegalese man, Ousmane, the son of a poor Senegalese Muslim family and Mireille, a French woman whose father is a French diplomat. After the marriage, Ousmane moves back from Paris to Senegal, where he once again adopts his traditions and customs. But, as a European, Mireille could not cope with this type of life, especially when Ousmane takes a second wife. The traditional African society is generally a polygamous one, especially as it is acceptable in the Islamic religion, but Mireille could not accept it. In addition to all the hardships that she suffered in the marriage, she is scorned and racially discriminated against by her mother-in-law and husband's friends. Bâ criticizes the tyranny of tradition and exposes the despair of cross-cultural marriages. She succinctly captures the costly sacrifice of this lady in her farewell letter to her parents in *Un Chant écarlate* when she said:

> “Je tourne le dos à un passé protégé pour embarasser l'inconnu. Je le sais. Je renonce à l'aisance pour l'aventure. Je le sais encore. Je me dis que le bonheur ne se donne pas. On le mérite” (149)

> “I am forgetting my secure past to welcome the unknown. I am very conscious of that. I am renouncing stability for adventure. I am very certain about that. But I am sure that happiness does not come by chance. One has to pay for it"
> (Our translation).

It reveals the confusion, frustration, and hardships experienced by Mireille as a result of the husband’s abandonment of her for his second marriage. Their marriage fails especially because of the weakness and egoism exhibited by Ousmane who lacks the stability and personal will that would have helped him to control his sexual instincts and bring real happiness to their home. His main goal of marrying a French lady was to help him reach the higher echelon of society. In the end, the French government takes the responsibility of repatriating her to France.

3.2 *Second Class Citizen*

In *Second Class Citizen,* Buchi Emecheta creates an incisive story of female oppression in a patriarchal society. She used the character of her protagonist, Adah, to depict the intelligent African woman who is determined to study even though there is not much means or will to have her education, particularly after her father dies. She shows that Adah "with her head up, in determination…walked down the center looking for Mr. Cole's class (11), (he is a Sierra Leonian neighbor living next door to them) […] came to him and pleaded I came to school - my parents would not send me!" (12).

Fate drove Adah to be brought up by her uncle, and her experiences were so oppressive that she opted to marry Francis at an early age. They moved to London, England in the early 60s but life is hard in London, unlike what she used to think about the white man's land. Not only is there racism which makes it difficult to find accommodation, but Francis himself becomes Adah's greatest obstacle.

The title of the novel is quite symbolic because it connotes the life of the protagonist in London and earlier in Nigeria, where, even her parents regard her as a second class citizen because of her gender. She is the primary breadwinner for the young growing family with her job as a librarian both in Nigeria and in London. Francis even becomes physically abusive and also cheats on her. He becomes too lazy and entirely dependent on his wife, added to the succession of failures in his academic career. Emecheta artistically describes how Igbo traditional culture exploits women through a system of assigned and devalued roles that emphasize that women are unequal to men. Recalling the picture of her childhood days in the character of Adah, Emecheta's fictional representative, recollects that after her father's death, all the family savings were put away for her brother's (male) education. As a result, Adah had to study hard to win a scholarship to enable her to attend a secondary school on her own. Being a child of fate, Adah acquires a job at the Museum, and this fact is the main force that keeps her family together. Adah too easily realizes that her financial contribution to the household "stopped Francis from walking out on her." Hence, *Second Class Citizen* is a diatribe against Francis who turned out to be an African chauvinist male, with his vaunted role to be a breadwinner. It is also an autobiography of the early and marriage life of Emecheta, inspiring her to defend the cause of the African woman, and clearly shows ugly aspects of traditional Igbo life.

4. Feminine Oppression in *The Scarlet Song* and *Second Class Citizen*

Opportunistic and ambitious, Ousmane never stops to manifest his male chauvinism, always trying to relegate Mireille to the background, but exploiting her financially to satisfy the whims and caprices of his mother and his second wife. He continues to abide by the unbending practices of the Senegalese norms and Muslim religion which encourage and support polygamy. He refuses to make any allowance in consideration of this woman who has sacrificed parental love, luxury, and comfort to come to Senegal, a different environment from her own. Commenting on the degree of the pain inflicted on this woman, Mbye Cham remarked in his article "Contemporary Society and Female Imagination", A study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ in *African Literature Today* that: "It is both physical and psychological, and it transcends race,

class, ethnicity, and caste, hence the universality of this cry of the woman subjected to this condition" (89). Lonely, frustrated, traumatized, and pushed to the wall by her husband's reckless abandon, Mireille becomes schizophrenic, drugs her little son, and almost killed Ousmane, the husband. From the account of this story, it is clear that Islamic religion influences some obnoxious practices which suppress the African woman in a patriarchal society. Ironically, it is women who contribute most to the hardships and ordeal of Mireille in this story. Yaye Khady, her mother-in-law hated her right from the time Ousmane sent their wedding picture home to his parents in Senegal. Regarding Mireille as a white witch, she vows to fight her until she gets back Ousmane, her son. This is why she barges into their bedroom, intruding into their privacy any time she feels like. It was at her insistence that Ousmane marries a second wife.

Emecheta shows Adah her protagonist, as a survivor despite all the upheavals she encountered in her childhood and London. Right from her infancy, she is discriminated against and relegated to the background by her parents because of her gender. She is born when everybody in her family is expecting a boy. This is the situation in a real traditional Igbo setting, where male children are valued more than the female ones so, they do not enjoy equal rights. This is the reason Adah did not have the privilege of being sent to school by her parents, even though she took her younger brother daily to school. Unfortunately, her mother who is a seamstress contributes to convincing her father that she did not have any need to go to school. Thus, similar to her Senegalese counterpart, Emecheta emphasizes that religion and some traditional norms support the patriarchal practices which encourage the domination and exploitation of the woman. Francis uses religions one-sidedly to show the changing capacity of human nature in the male sex. He changes religion according to his whims and caprices. For example, he was once a Muslim at an early age. On realizing that Adah could be equipped with birth-control gear, he went Catholic. When he started failing his exams and was feeling very inferior to his fellow Nigerians, he became a Jehovah’s Witness (122). Justina Okoye in the same work above noted Susan Stringer’s opinion which also agrees with these feminist writers, she implies that religion and marriage stand as institutions that encourage the suppression and domination of the African woman (16).

Emecheta uses the character of Adah to reflect on her social isolation in England and then relates it to her domestic abuse. This implies that the cultural injustice that exists in her African home is affecting her because there in London, it would have been easy for Adah to call the Police, but when she remembers the indigenous tenets of culture and tradition, her force of action goes down psychologically and emotionally thereby making her a second class citizen. Having suffered all through in the hands of her mother, Adah gets married to Francis and continues her suffering from his subjugation, financial slavery, and wife battering, even amidst the segregation and racism of the whites in London. Therefore, she sees her entire life as a second class citizen and that illusion gave birth to *Second class citizen*. Considering this point Mbye Cham posits that:

> The cumulative experience of these women, then, underscores the dialectic of oppression and struggle/regeneration that is one of the distinguishing features of the work of Mariama Bâ, and this dialectic itself undergirds the basic structure of the novels (93).

By their works and projection of the African woman subjugated to the background through the oppression of her male counterparts, there arises the demand for her social emancipation and transformation. Emecheta used her novel to portray the oppression of the African woman in a patriarchal society. So, she calls out for "Un réveil de la conscience" “Conscience Awareness” (Our translation) to every woman, because she believes that the African woman can still achieve a goal despite the upheavals which she undergoes in life both paternally and in marriage. In fact, Emecheta agrees with the adage which says that: "the downfall of a man is not the end of his life”. According to Umeh, in the same work above “Buchi Emecheta has come a long way from “rags to riches” …almost like a fairy tale … she has been able to recognize a certain aspect of women's subjugation and accordingly sought to save herself" (80-81). Emecheta was able to achieve all that with determination and sufficient effort, she was not in any way a-time-waster. Umeh continued to throw light on the effort of Emecheta, how she advocates that the African woman especially the Nigerian woman should endeavor to rise against any type of oppression or subjugation: parentally, educationally, geographically, politically, and especially through her marriage in the patriarchal society.

In portraying female characters in their works, Bâ and Emecheta demonstrate their unyielding capacity to contribute to women's liberation and thereby motivate the women to cry out for their emancipation from the above-listed subjugation by their male counterparts. These two feminist writers achieved their goal of a fulfilled woman by awakening their conscience to take the responsibility of improving themselves. Be that as it may, the African women should not remain in her shell and assume the position of second class citizens where their male counterparts have relegated them. These two African feminists are soliciting that women should rise up against the challenges of marital suppression like intimidation, domestic violence, infidelity, and other forms of marginalization meted against them in the society.

5. Conclusion

These daring female writers of the 20th century- Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta share a common goal of liberating African women from the shackles of male subjugation and obnoxious influence of African culture. Worthy of note, the two are autobiographical, and in their narrations, they are really presenting what they saw, touched, lived and not some old folklores from books, but their own personal experiences, and how these experiences have psychologically moved them to write, this writing which Bâ usually refers to as “war” with their pens (weapon), she would always call the pen a "weapon". Hence, Buchi Emecheta who seemed to be a nobody eventually climbed the enviable educational echelon, because she was determined to recognize her position in women’s subjugation and as such decided to lift her head above waters just as she titled one of her novels.

In the same vein, Mariama Bâ also pulled herself up from the dust in the character of Ramatoulaye who took an optimistic decision in the final diary saying:

> I have not given up wanting to refashion myself. Despite everything- disappointments and humiliations- hope still lives on within me…The word ‘happiness’ does indeed have meaning, doesn’t it? I shall go in search of it. (89).

Marie Linton Umeh once more in her article "The Inimitable Buchi Emecheta" in *Feminism in African Literature* written by Helen Chukwuma asserts that: "Emecheta's iconoclastic yet revisionist imperatives are laudable because her agitations aim at improving the quality of life between man and woman, individual and community, for the total growth and complete fulfillment of the African woman as well as man" (81).

These two literary authors underwent the trauma of single-parenting, cared for their many children single-handedly, carried the family cumbersome responsibilities without their husband's love, without care particularly when they know very well that their husbands were healthy and bubbling with life somewhere. They both suffered outright marital ordeal and trauma. Little wonder Umeh continued to appraise the fact that: "Emecheta's revolutionary imperative is her recognition of the need to strike a "balance", "equalization" and "alliance" in male-female relationships within the Igbo socio-cultural framework"… "Emecheta's vision of liberation is to achieve BLACK (not just female) transcendence" (81), while Florence Stratton on her own part also emphasizes that, Bâ urges women writers to politicize their art to 'use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon' in order to overthrow the status quo that harms them. The outcry of these feminists is for nothing else other than to achieve a total African woman whose freedom is enhanced.

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