

## **Patriarchal Hegemony: Gender Inequality as Reflected in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come***

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**Abstract:** Gender inequality is among the most commonplace practices of civil rights violation which exists in all parts of the world with distinct consequences in different regions. It is quite a customary and prevalent issue in Nigerian society. This form of wrongdoing is a reoccurring decimal in Nigerian literature. A great multitude of authors, ranging from Chinua Achebe to Flora Nwapa, from Femi Osofian to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have used their literary works as veritable tools to address the delicate and sensitive gender inequality. This article studied the impacts and implications of gender inequality and discrimination which is perpetuated within the ambit of obnoxious cultural practices as contained in the works of Buchi Emecheta and Sefi Atta.

**Keywords:** gender, inequality, discrimination, Buchi Emecheta, Sefi Atta

### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is one of the major and grave issues affecting all cultures and societies, particularly in Africa. African countries seem to suffer from this practice of civil rights violation more, perhaps, due to how their respective cultures are organized in a way that endorses male superiority and female victimization. This is mainly brought about by the type of gender roles African cultures assign to men and women. Gender discrimination can manifest itself in different forms of treatment individuals, especially women, encounter in gaining access to quality education, healthcare, political representation, employment, religious freedom, and overall awareness of their well-being. The United Nations, from its inception, has a track record of addressing human rights irrespective of gender. The United Nations World

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Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in June 1993, maintains that:

The human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in the political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life, at the national, regional, and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex, are priority objectives of the international community (United Nations, “Vienna Declaration and Program of Action”).

In line with their vision, the United Nations over the years have made laudable efforts toward the implementation of gender-based Human Rights Laws. There are advocacies embarked upon by the United Nations in many African countries, Nigeria inclusive, that target the eradication of obnoxious cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based violence and discriminatory cultural practices. There is an array of cultural practices in Nigeria and Africa that are targeted toward the marginalization and dehumanization of some gender sects, especially women. According to Chika Ifemeje and Nneka Umejiaku (2014, 18), the customary practices of gender inequality and discrimination manifest themselves in diverse ways and forms as “they include inter-alia: legalized wife battery; or chastisement; wife inheritance; harmful widowhood practices; payment and refund of bride-price; marginalization of women’s right in the event of dissolution of customary law marriages; female disinheritance; female gender mutilation; female trafficking; and son-preference syndrome and polygamous nature of customary law marriages, etc.”

Gender inequality remains a mainstream discussion amongst scholars for many years. This is because the idea of gender inequality is pervasive. Hannelie J. Wood (2019, 1) highlights gender inequality as one of the most extensive customary cultural practices all over the world and defines it as “culturally and socially created differences between men and women when both sexes do not have the same share in the decision making and wealth of a society.” Inequality is the outcome of cultural norms and historical traditions, geographic locations, and religious rituals prevalent in society (Stump 2008). Inequality is closely linked with economic and social segregation. The existence of economic and social barriers immensely contributes to inequality. These obstacles prevent upward movement in social hierarchy through income and wealth structure (Kleven and Landais

2017). Gender inequality is noticeably prevalent in the multicultural society inherent in Nigeria. Roles and functions are assigned to an individual in Nigerian society largely based on gender expectations and cultural stipulations. Linda Anyalebechi (2016, 64) posits that:

In Nigerian society, the role of men and women are socially constructed in such a way that women occupy an inferior position in the scheme of things. There are many obstacles and prejudices that prevent women from participating in social activities or even owning properties, the society regards women as things to be possessed, as objects of rights rather than regards them as fit.

Therefore, the idea of gender inequality arises in many societies because women are relegated to domestic functions which largely limit the actualization of some of their dreams and ambition. This relegation shoved women to the background by not empowering them and making them vulnerable. In a similar vein, G. Allanana Makama lays focus on the limitation of women's progress on the social ladder and pressuring them to accept the cultural roles ascribed to them as evidenced by "women's self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria with a very high birth rate as well as the cultural roles associated to women - the role of childbearing, child-raising, and homemaking" (Makama 2013, 122). Together with religion, lifestyle, and upbringing, the patriarchal social order, which is prevalent in Nigerian societies and cultures, plays a major role in encouraging the subjugation and discrimination of women which leads to gender inequality.

Discrimination is a type of general inequality that refers to the unequal or prejudicial backing of an individual or group in terms of gender. Several reasons and factors are responsible for the discriminatory cultural practices against women in Africa and Nigeria. Some of the factors that have paved the way for gender inequality in Nigeria and Africa include, but are not limited to, practices like values on women's childbearing role, lack of independence or autonomy by the women, early marriage, and excessive childbearing, forced marriage, overbearing domestic workload, disinheritance of women, etc. Makama observes the prevalent discrimination faced by women in Nigeria as she continues, "Nigerian women, like their counterparts, around the world, face a lot of discrimination that limits their opportunities to develop their full potential based on equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labor market, due

mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work, and discriminatory salary practices" (Ibid).

Despite the laws that are articulated to protect the rights of citizens irrespective of gender, discriminatory and obnoxious cultural practices still hold sway in Nigeria. The Nigerian authors also have employed the efficacy of their literature to combat this menace bedeviling Nigerian society yet not so much success has been achieved in the complete eradication of these obnoxious cultural practices. It is very important to eradicate these obnoxious cultural practices that discriminate against women and advocate for gender equality because

Gender equality and women's empowerment is a fundamental development goal that is globally entrenched and envisioned for sustainable development. Women play significant and diverse roles from home to workplace, to society, as a homemaker, societal well-being and job seeker, and job provider respectively. Promoting gender equality is an essential component of the development strategy that seeks to enable people, both men, and women, to reduce their poverty and bring about improvement in the standard of living (Lawal et al. 2016, 354).

It is against this backdrop that this study is faced with the problem of deciphering through a qualitative research approach the factors that are responsible for the continuation of discriminatory and obnoxious cultural practices that violate fundamental human rights and encourage gender dehumanization and marginalization. There is an array of literature text emanating from Nigeria that has its thematic preoccupation with the perpetuation of obnoxious cultural practices that are detrimental to women. Some of these works include but are not limited to *Anthill of the Savanna* by Chinua Achebe, *Women of Owu* by Femi Osofian, *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, *Triumph of the Water Lily* by Stella Ify Osammor, writings by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, etc.

Achebe sought to build an exemplary society in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, as a benchmark or model for balancing the gender imbalance through his characterization of female characters. In his play *Women of Owu*, Femi Osofian, in his reworking of Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, uses this sensitive issue of prevalent gender inequality as women refuse to comply with the gender roles allocated to them by the patriarchal society. Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* puts a great

deal of emphasis on marriage and procreation whereby women are expected to perform their cultural and societal role as wives and childbearing mothers in their contribution to population increase and continuation of family lineage. Stella Ify Osammor's *Triumph of the Water Lily* recounts the story of a young man, Odili, and his wife, Nkem, in which Nkem fails to perform her cultural role as a childbearing woman and voluntarily denounces her traditional role as a wife to adopt another personality – that of a free and independent woman. Chimamanda Adichie regarded gender inequality as a blatant injustice and dedicated her writings to bringing about a world in which women would receive the recognition they deserve in terms of equal civil rights and get their fair chance to realize their full potential.

This article used Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* to survey the impacts and implications of gender inequality and discrimination in Nigerian society. As a theoretical framework, the theory of “feminist institutionalism” was selected as an approach that seeks to discover and explain how power is divided among institutions. It aims to challenge the prevalent power distributions within institutions and promote change by recognizing and defying institutional obstacles that assert to uphold gender inequalities and different types of discrimination. According to Tammy Findlay (2012), “The relationship between gender and institutions has long been an interest of feminist political scientists seeking to understand how power and inequality are produced and reproduced through governmental and nongovernmental structures and processes. Recently, feminist institutionalism (FI) has provided most of the thinking on gender and state institutions”. In Nigeria for instance, gender roles and expectations are deeply rooted in the cultural institutions, and this puts the female folk in a disadvantageous position because their male counterparts remarkably dominate cultural institutions. This theory is relevant to the study of Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*.

#### GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMECHETA'S *SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN*

Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian-born novelist, was an important female African writer and certainly Nigeria's best-known woman writer with more than 20 books bearing her name. She enjoyed immense popularity for her novels that address the hardships and adversities

encountered by modern African women who were expected to maintain traditional and subservient roles allocated to them by their patriarchal societies. In an obituary published after her death, she was applauded as a “novelist who overcame barriers to education and whose writings epitomized female independence” (Busby 2017). Her heroines frequently go against the prohibitive customs and traditions dictated to them and hope to achieve economic and social emancipation. Katherine Frank hails the literary achievement of Emecheta and applauds her, “Emecheta’s novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant of the African woman, an unparalleled portrayal in African fiction and with few equals in other works of literature as well” (Frank 1982, 477).

*Second-Class Citizen* (1974) was Emecheta’s second novel and portrays the struggle of women to acquire education and exist in a dominantly European white society.

The novel centers around a young Nigerian girl called Adah, who wishes to move to the United Kingdom in search of a better life. Adah experiences the first form of gender discrimination even before her birth as her parents voiced their preference to have a male child. Adah was born into a society in which a woman, who can’t give birth to a male child, is scorned by the people of her tribe due to the preference or superiority bestowed upon the male gender over the female counterpart. From the very moment of her birth, Adah endures rejection and oppression on the account of her gender. Emecheta (1994, 1) introduces her thus:

She was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So since she was such a disappointment to her parents, her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth she was so insignificant.

Adah is seen as an object of utter disappointment and insignificance in the eyes of her parents as well as her local tribe due to her gender. This reflects the mindset and perception prevalent in Nigerian society. Emecheta wishes to divert the readers’ attention to the fact that the girls’ perception is molded from the very moment of their childhood in such a way that they begin to possess a low opinion of themselves concerning the opposite gender. Adah’s personal experiences oblige her to form a very low opinion of herself and her gender as she regularly endures maltreatment and subjugation.

As Nigerian society is largely patriarchal, the girl child has often been denied receiving formal education. It is a widespread belief that only a male child is expected to have a formal and sound education. Eno Ekpenyong Umana (2011, 1) observes that “The patriarchal system in Africa makes women insignificant and regards female education as irrelevant. It causes women to be denied the rights and privileges that men enjoy”. The prevalent view is noticed as Adah’s parents engage in a discussion regarding her education:

School - the Ibos never played with that! They were realizing fast that one’s savior from poverty and disease was education. Every Ibo family saw to it that their children attended school. Boys were usually given preference, though. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still discussions about whether it would be wise to send her to school. Even if she was sent to school, it was very doubtful whether it would be wise to let her stay long. “A year or two would do, as long as she can write her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew.” Adah had heard her mother say this many times to her friends. Soon, Adah’s younger brother, Boy, started school (Emecheta 1994, 3).

Against all odds, Adah never loses her determination and purpose to pursue her education. She is fully aware of how a proper education can bring her closer to her dream. She doesn’t quit her education even at the expense of receiving a beating from her cousin when she buried the money her cousin gave her for buying a steak because she was going to use it for the registration for her common entrance examination.

Forced or arranged marriage is another instance of gender discrimination in Emecheta’s novel. Arranged marriage is a very widespread phenomenon in tribal communities, especially among the Igbo, in which a marital union is organized by the families, mostly by the parents of both parties, and is expected to bring materialistic benefits like finance or property. Adah’s mother, Ma, and her uncles started searching for a potential suitor for Adah to marry so that they can use the bride price to finance her brother, Boy’s, formal education and maintain their selfish personal interests. Adah was determined not to comply with her society’s impositions and to play the role of a submissive wife as she states:

She would never, never in her life get married to any man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee: she would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a

master and refer to as “Sir” even behind his back. She knew that all Ibo women did this, but she wasn’t going to! (Emecheta 1994, 14).

However, she highly frustrates them by refusing to cave in and marry a wealthy man when, in fact, she chooses a student, Francis. Adah’s marriage is not founded on genuine love but based on convenience. “In short, Adah had to marry... Adah congratulated herself on her marriage... To Adah, the greatest advantage was that she could go on studying at her own pace... That Francis was too poor to pay the five hundred pounds bride price Ma and the other members of her family were asking” (Ibid, 19). Therefore, she proves herself to be a woman of ambition and remains steadfast in her determination to have a better life. Nonetheless, Emecheta’s heroines, like Adah, frequently question and confront the restrictive traditions dictated upon them and seek to achieve economic and social freedom. Although she refused to be labeled as a ‘feminist,’ Emecheta reveals her purpose when she declares “I have not committed myself to the cause of African women only. I write about Africa as a whole” (Tioye 1983, 49).

Women in the patriarchal Igbo society were assigned traditional gender roles. They were depicted as being submissive, inferior, inarticulate, and respectful. In marriage, they were supposed to be obedient to their spouses, take care of household chores and run errands, and bear children. Adah voices her disapproval of her husband, Francis, as he submitted himself to the dictates of the patriarchal culture as the narrator states, “...most of the decisions about their own lives had to be referred first to Big Pa, Francis’s father, then to his mother, then discussed amongst the brothers of the family before Adah was referred to” (Emecheta 1994, 23). Even though she and her husband do not take part in decision-making related to family matters, they would not be able to refuse or denounce the decision and had to bow down to their elders. Procreation or childbearing is the first and foremost duty of women in Igbo society. As all the family property should be handed over to a son, marriage is not consecrated with a male child and is considered as same as the family with no child, as women cannot be credited as they are unable to keep a family name. In Adah’s case, she managed to earn the love and acceptance of her parents-in-law as she obediently carried out her duties as a wife and gave birth to children. In accordance with the common belief, “A woman would be forgiven everything as long as she produces children” (Ibid, 22). A childless woman, according to Basden (1996,

88), is not a human being as she failed to fulfill her being; a man who begot a lot of children is regarded as wealthy and fortunate. Adah proves her worth and performs her customary duty only when she gives birth to her children.

#### GENDER INEQUALITY IN SEFI ATTA'S *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

Sefi Atta, an award-winning Nigerian American novelist, has proven herself as one of the most captivating writers and achieved international recognition with several literary awards dedicated to her name. Her writing concentrates on predicaments that Nigerians plunge into and strive to rediscover themselves. Heather Hewett (2012, 27) recognizes Atta's literary achievement as she remarks, "the interconnections remain elliptical in her short stories and emerge as more casual in her novel; but in each, they provide both text and subtext with layered and powerful resonances." Her works have been translated into numerous world languages, her radio plays have been aired on BBC, and her stage plays have met an international audience.

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* is a coming-of-age and her debut novel. It was set in Nigeria in 1971 and narrates the story of its protagonist, Enitan Twaio, who struggles to express her opinion in a country with a long history of subjugating women. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes the rightful comment on the novel: "There is wit, intelligence, and a delicious irreverence in this book. But it is Sefi Atta's courage in choosing to look at her fictional world through fiercely feminist lenses that I most admired." Likewise, Buchi Emecheta expresses the following about the novel: "*Everything Good Will Come* is like listening to an old friend recounting and bringing up-to-date and to life the happenings in our beloved city of Lagos. From Ikoyi bordering the Marina to the south nearing Yoruba towns, every part is reawakened and alive: red, throbbing, like the heartbeat of a healthy newborn... I was sorry when I came to the end" (See "Everything Good Will Come").

*Everything Good Will Come*, as in all bildungsroman, narrates the physical development of the protagonist, Enitan from her early teens to her thirties as she questions, confronts, scorns, and complies with the cultural norms prevalent in postcolonial Nigeria. Sefi Atta brings forth the painful and hurtful implications of patriarchal authority and the adverse outcomes of gender inequality. Atta encourages Nigerian women to assert themselves both in the public and private realms. At

the outset of the novel, the author introduces Enitan, the protagonist, as an eleven-year-old teenager. She is an innocent and naïve girl with no tangible real experiences of her own. She is naturally under the influence of her mother and discovers the strict and rigid realities of the prevalent customs. She has constantly been reminded of traditional gender roles and to display behavior demanded by her patriarchal society. She announces, “From the beginning, I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations” (Atta 2005, 7). Despite her inclinations, she had to learn to be obedient and subservient.

The prevalent practice of the preference for a male child, typically seen in Nigerian traditional societies, can also be observed in Atta’s novel. It has not succumbed to contemporary changes in societies but has persisted due to the yearning of families to beget a son to maintain the family name and safeguard its lineage. Owing to the significance and eminence assigned to a male child, there is often massive pressure on spouses to conceive sons in marriages. The novel demonstrates this widespread routine tradition through the characters of Enitan’s parents, Sunny, and Arin. Arin’s inability to bear a male child brought about a major fallout in their marriage. She had one who passed away due to sickle cell anemia and refused to re-experience the pains of childbirth to fulfill her cultural responsibility. Arin loathed her husband’s fervor to go outside their marriage to find a woman who would be willing to bear him a son. She expresses her contempt as she informs Enitan:

He was no good. After you were born, I told him I didn’t want another child. God had blessed us with a healthy child. Why risk having another? But his family wouldn’t hear of it. He had to have another wife, and his mother, that woman who suffered so much herself, threatened me too. Your father never said a word to support me. (Atta 2005, 173)

This vehement insistence on male children not only compels women to accept their inferior position in society but also directly affects their psyche and prompts them to taking decisions concerning their reproductivity.

The traditional roles assigned to women in Nigerian traditional communities are another form of gender inequality. Women are expected to function within the confines of their homes as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. In patriarchal homes, men are customarily empowered to handle the financial matters of their homes. In other

words, they are breadwinners and seekers of sustenance. As women did not have financial independence, they solely depended upon their husbands to take care of their needs. Enitan's mother reminds Enitan of her domestic duty when her mother calls after her through her kitchen windows while she is out playing with her other girls as she hears her mother shouting: "Enitan, come and help me in here" (Atta 2005, 7). Enitan's friend, Sheri, accepts the gender roles assigned to her as she is fully aware that she would not be able to do anything to change the prevalent social belief in patriarchy. She portrays a vivid picture of her traditional society to Enitan when they engaged in a heated conversation: "' Eh!' 'Women are not Presidents' 'Why not,' 'Our men won't stand for it. Who will cook for your husband' 'He will cook for himself' 'I'll drive him away' 'You can't'" (Ibid, 33). With this momentary outburst, Sheri simply voices the traditional role of women and expects Enitan to embrace her domestic duty as a wife and housekeeper. However, Enitan refuses to succumb to this patriarchal mandate when she scorns her friend, Sheri, for becoming subservient and accepting the role of a housewife: "Sheri was the Nigerian man's ideal: pretty shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman's station. Now she was a kitchen martyr" (Ibid, 105). Harry Olufunwa (2015, 62) highlights women's subservient role: "Nigerian women are supposed to cook for the family and to labor in the kitchen, regardless of their education levels". Sheri simply conforms to the traditional gender roles assigned to women.

Another instance of gender inequality hinted at in the novel is Enitan's inability to resist gender roles even though she has refused to conform to the societal expectations mandated by the patriarchal power. Two important male characters in Enitan's life, namely her father, Sunny Taiwo, and her ex-husband, Niyi, who have exercised a positive influence on her life and have helped to shape her view of life, turn out to be a great source of disappointment and frustration in her personality. Her father, Sunny Taiwo, is a respected lawyer in his professional circle and fairly liberal in his views. Enitan has maintained a close relationship with him. He endorses an "enlightened sexism", so he wishes her to believe that patriarchy remained in the past and that men do not believe in it anymore (Douglas 2010, 9). Thus, Enitan's father advocates a myth that women are already deemed equal to men unless they willingly choose to be kitchen martyrs. In other words, he acts as a man of conscience who advocates the rights and empowerment of women, so he effortlessly assures his young

daughter that he is a liberator who will empower her. However, he vigorously urges her to submit to the societal notion, pushes her to surrender to her husband, and starts to act with her the same way he acts with her mother. As a result of the hypocritical attitudes of Sunny Taiwo, Enitan realizes the true reason behind her mother's subordination and begins to question her status as his worker. She must depend on her father as a patron and sponsor as she does not earn enough to stand on her own two feet. As she feels awakened, she reflects:

I had always believed my mother chose to depend on my father. The evidence was there in her dusty certificates. Now I felt no different from her, driving the car he had bought. My father would give me a car, but he would not pay me enough to buy myself one. If I were taking the car with me, I deserved it. If my mother took a house, two houses even, she deserves them. The power had always been in my father's hand (Atta 2005, 152).

Enitan receives a second blow from her husband, Niyi, who used to encourage her to stand up for her rights when the men at her job try to take advantage of her, revealing his true color when he urges her to cook for his family and guests. She discovers that her husband is just like her father, and she is supposed to comply with the demands of these men. When she voices her displeasure concerning her expected docility and obedience, particularly about being ready to prepare food for Niyi's brothers, he fervently responds,

'Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me woman wrapper.' Wrapper was the cloth women tied around their waists. Woman wrapper was a weak man, controlled by his woman. I thought he was paranoid. I said it was too bad. He was the very person who had encouraged me to be strong at work. He was asking me to fly within specified perimeters (Atta 2005, 185).

However, as a man, Niyi expects to exercise control over his wife who is supposed to act as a kitchen martyr and serve her husband willingly and exhibit unconditional submission.

## CONCLUSION

This is a pointer that gender roles assigned to women of Africa the responsibility of cooking in the home, yet this is not supposed to be used as a tool to marginalize women of Africa; through many feminist activities inherent in Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Atta's

*Everything Good Will Come* where women rise above mere domestic tools to empowered and respected personalities in the society. Through the character of Adah, Emecheta negates the ugly perception of women in the Nigerian culture and thus advocates for equal opportunities and treatment for both female and male children. The fact that Adah as a female child struggled to acquire education placed her in a position where she can agitate and defend her fundamental human rights. Education is responsible for her financial empowerment and thus she was able to live a life devoid of complete dependence on her husband rather she was even the one providing for her family. On the other hand, Sefi Atta approaches gender roles and expectations in her novel from the purview of marriage and family systems. Atta, in her novel, *Everything Good Will Come* demonstrates through the characters of Sunny Taiwo and Arin, Enitan's father and mother, the relevance placed on the preference of male children in Nigerian society.

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