Otherness in Buchi Emecheta’s Second-Class Citizen: A Postcolonial Rendering

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Abstract—In postcolonial discourse, the concept of the “Other” represents someone who carries dark human traits such as stigmatization, subjugation, domination, socio-political or cultural misrepresentation. The “Other” represents one of the main postcolonial concepts in literary studies because there is indisputable evidence that the term is a colonial construct. In essence, colonialism has left a permanent mark in the minds of the colonized people and this imprint has significantly manifested in literature. This analysis, thus, aims to explore how the colonial “Other” is represented in Second-Class Citizen (1974), one of the prominent postcolonial novels written by Buchi Emecheta, an author from the colonized African society. This study adopts textual analysis in which context-oriented technique is used to understand the character traits of the colonial “Other” in the two selected texts. The analysis draws upon Postcolonial theory, particularly Edward Said’s Orientalist approach. We show that Emecheta represents the colonial “Other” as backward, inferior, and of lower social class. Also, this representation is based on economic and socio-cultural differences as well as conflictual relationships between African indigenous people and British citizens.

Index Terms—colonialism, inequality, orientalism, othering, social class

I. INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta was a writer from one of the colonized African nations, Nigeria, and her novels mainly focus on the conflicts between modernity and tradition as well as the problematic and uneven position of women in colonist and African societies. She began writing stories relating to her experiences in life, comprising the difficulties she primarily encountered in British society. Emecheta’s Second-Class Citizen (1974) is amongst prominent postcolonial writings that characterize the colonial “Other” with certain ideological imprints. This analysis, therefore, considers a rendering of Emecheta’s Second-Class Citizen to understand how the author portrays the colonial “Other” from a postcolonial perspective. As such, this study draws upon Postcolonial theory, particularly Said’s Orientalist approach. The “Other”, concisely, implies a homogenous figure, obsessed by feelings that are determined by race as against individuality, personality, and premeditated decision-making (Barry, 1995). In postcolonial studies, the concept of the “Other” is used for cultural representation or the colonizers’ depiction of the colonized or the West’s domination of the non-Western (Said, 2011).

Colonialism has left a permanent mark in the minds of the colonized people and this imprint has significantly manifested in literature (De Vita, 2010; Hassan, Azmi, Lawan, & Abubakar, 2019). The “Other” represents one of the main postcolonial concepts in literary studies because there is indisputable evidence that the term is a colonial construct (Saeed, 2013). In the 18th century, there emerged several writings in Europe and Africa regarding colonialism in several genres, which include literature on philosophy, science, and fiction (Abubakar, Lawan, Hassan, & Azmi, 2020). As Fanon (1967) advocates in his famous work entitled Black Skin White Masks, the representation of the “Other” explains the supremacy and dominance of the superior over the inferior “Others”. According to Saeed (2013), this form of “man-made” representation creates uneven power that replicates inequality in society. The representation of the “Other” with established practices of dominance has certain significance in literature. Literary texts are used to portray negative images of the “Other” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2000). Al-Saidi and Ahmed (2014) believe that literature expresses the means to sustain authority over the “Other” in sociocultural or political circumstances while the “Other” is perceived as different from the “Self”. Also, Said (1978) points out that the prolonged Western colonialism has adversely influenced the most objective texts including those written by the most educated western orientalists. According to Said, these works are highly subjective, portraying the “Other” as weak, strange, feminized, and illogical. To Said, the “West needs to depict this difference to authorize the power of the superior ‘civilized’ West over the inferior ‘primitive’ East” (p. 5).
Furthermore, the representations of the “Other” vary according to the context of discourse (Loomba, 2015). For this reason, it is significant to analyze how the “Other” is represented in postcolonial literature. In light of the foregoing, this study seeks to explain how the colonial “Other” is represented in Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* from a postcolonial perspective. Based on Postcolonial theory, particularly Said’s Orientalist approach, this study offers a rendering of the representation of the “Other” in the selected novel. This study explores the latent meaning of the selected text via literary analysis within the context of postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial theory, a theoretical concept of postcolonialism, reveals the aftermath of colonialism based on political and socio-cultural practices as a reaction to the colonial past (Hassan et al., 2019; McEwan, 2019; Said, 2011). The “Other”, which this study aims to analyze, is a very significant concept in postcolonial theory and literature (Bhabha, 1993). The concept of the “Other” is generally a matter of labeling because one has a moral reason for labeling the stranger as the “Other”. One becomes a subject by showing the negative and threatening qualities of oneself to the “Other”, which becomes “the fetish of colonial discourse” (Bhabha, 1993, p. 78).

Postcolonial theory is specially adopted for this study because of its critical theoretical discourse on how the “Other” suffers from exploitation, domination, and discrimination (Césaire, 1994). In this regard, Behdad (2000) believes that the concept of “postcolonialism” addresses the issues surrounding domination in terms of “cultural practices”. In particular, this study adopts Edward Said’s Orientalist approach to analyze the selected novels. Said’s work, *Orientalism* (1978), is the forerunner of Postcolonial theory (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). According to Said (1978), the fictitious representation of the “Other” in terms of political, economic, cultural, and social domination happens “not just during colonial times, but also in the present” (p. 357). In *Orientalism*, Said explains how human society is represented based on superior and inferior “Others” (Varisco, 2017). Said (1993) also hypothesizes that the “Other” is a western creation, “it was the culture that created that interest, that acted dynamically along with brute political, economic, and military rationally” (p. 12). Implicit in this creation, according to Said, is the view that European society is superior, rational, flexible, and developed.

According to Ayyildiz (2017), the “Other” in Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* is depicted from an African woman’s standpoint on her native culture which is despoiled in colonial writings. This analysis, thus, aims to explore how the colonial “Other” is represented in *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), one of the prominent postcolonial novels written by Buchi Emecheta, an author from the colonized African society. A study of this nature is envisaged to advance our understanding of how the “Other” is depicted in an under-searched text, *Second-Class Citizen*. Consequently, an exploration of the representation of the “Other” in the selected novel could offer a different perspective regarding the existing knowledge on “othering” based on socio-cultural and political reasons. In essence, this study could advance our understanding of how superior and inferior “Others” are portrayed in postcolonial texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Second-Class Citizen

For this analysis, the description of *Second-Class Citizen* is summarized. *Second-Class Citizen* reveals the conflictual positions between the “Other” and the superior and explains how the indigenous people of Africa suffered from discrimination during the periods of colonization and post-colonialism. The novel constructs a world full of dualism, for instance, the foreigner and the native. The author uses this binary opposition to criticize social, political, cultural, and economic practices during the postcolonial period. The selected novel narrates the story of Adah, who at 8 years dreamt of traveling to the United Kingdom “because of Lawyer Nweze’s success” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 39) through Western education and because of the way expatriate whites who work in Nigeria influence Nigerians with their attractive lifestyles. Adah gets a good job and keeps money with the intent of getting her relatives to travel to Europe. Her idea is based on her desire to get herself and her husband to further their education in the United Kingdom and thereafter become prominent figures in Nigerian society. Adah and her husband succeed in traveling to the United Kingdom, come into contact with some Nigerians, Mr. Noble, and Mr. Okpara, both of whom believed England is a land full of opportunity.

The scope of *Second-Class Citizen* connects the complex gap between the struggle for dignity and social issues during the periods of African independence to the more complex political and socio-economic challenges of the present. This connection leads the novelist to turn her gaze, and thus, raise issues about the subjects of gender, class, and racial relations in society. Hence, the position of *Second-Class Citizen* in postcolonial studies is highly relevant, primarily because the text discusses marginalization and domination over subordinates in addition to class distinction in society. Additionally, *Second-Class Citizen* offers an opportunity to advance the voice of the oppressed or dominated people. By raising their voice, the oppressed succeed in getting the chance to represent their reality which has been denied by the so-called superior (Kaya, 2018). This study seeks to offer yet another understanding of *Second-Class Citizen* to explain how the African author represents the “Other” in post-colonial African societies.

B. Characterization

Characters are indispensable elements of fiction (Çakir, 2011). The characters of *Second-Class Citizen* fit into two well-defined frames of the African natives and the “Other”. The African natives are represented by Lawyer Nweze,
Adah, Francis, Mr. Noble, and Mr. Okpara, while non-African characters include Bill and Peggy. The text presents characters through their speech means of description as well as their thoughts or actions (Abrams, 1981). Bill is depicted as a knowledgeable, wise, caring colleague and a friend of Adah at the Chalk Farm Library. He is a big handsome Canadian young man who is running away from his mother because she wants him to marry a girl of her choice in Canada. Bill “came to England to escape”, where he met Eileen because “he was too handsome to be left alone” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 153). He knows much about black writers and encourages Adah to read the works of other black writers besides Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa. He “tut-tutted at her and told her what a shame it was that an intelligent black girl like her should know so little about her own black people… During the staff break, he would talk about authors and their new books” (p. 152). In response to Bill’s influence on her, Adah starts reading Marx, James Baldwin, and other books.

Bill also encourages Adah to develop her writing skills because he believes she will be a good writer if she decides to write. Therefore, in reaction to Bill’s encouragement, Adah decides to write her first book, The Bride Price, and he is the first person she shows the manuscript to read. After reading the manuscript, “Bill took it quite seriously” and he “said it was good, she should get it typed out, and he was going to show it to somebody” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 165) for publication. Therefore, he stands out as a perfect representation of a dynamic character in the text, because of his ability to maintain his friendship with Adah and Peggy at the Chalk Farm Library. As a friend, he succeeded in influencing and developing Adah in her job as a young librarian and a young writer. Therefore, Bill stands out as a positive influence in Adah’s personal development in the text. Another interesting character in the text is Peggy. She is interesting because she is “not very beautiful but small and fun to be with” (p. 151). Peggy “is heartbroken because her Italian summer-holiday boyfriend did not fulfill his promise” (p. 151) of coming back to England to marry her. Her problem is how to get enough money to travel to Italy to see her boyfriend. However, Peggy is one of the friends Adah has outside her home. Like Bill, Peggy believes Adah will “be a writer, a real one” (p. 166) if she decides to write a book. Peggy likes reading books with Adah as a way of developing the latter’s reading skills and speed. Also, both Peggy and Bill believe Adah has no problems in life because the latter is “happily married to a brilliant husband who reads to become a Cost and Works accountant” (p. 153).

Adah likes to stay in the company of Peggy and Bill because they make her forget all her worries. Thus, Peggy is a dynamic character in the text. These characters interact to reveal the influence of white characters on Africans in the text. Lawyer Nweze is the first African character that shows how the Whiteman positively influences Africans as he travels to the United Kingdom to study Law and returns to Nigeria successfully. His people, Ibuza people, see him as somebody who brings developments, success, and relief to them because of his contact with British citizens. Ibuza women compose songs, weaving the name of the new lawyer into them. These women are so proud of this new lawyer because to them it means the arrival of their very own Messiah. Thus, Adah says “if people like Lawyer Nweze and others could survive it, so could she” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 36). She forces herself into primary school because in her African society, boys “were usually given preference… Even if she was sent to school, it was very doubtful whether it would be wise to let her stay long” (p. 9). Then, she saves money to write the entrance examination, which eventually earned her a scholarship to Methodist Girls’ School. In England, Adah realizes that she is the “Other” because she is an African immigrant because of “discrimination all over the place” (p. 58).

III. METHODOLOGY

For analysis, this study adopts textual analysis in which context-oriented technique is used to understand the character traits of the “Other” in Great Expectations and Second-Class Citizen. The context-oriented technique refers to a “heterogeneous group of schools and methodologies which do not regard literary texts as self-contained, independent works of art but try to place them within a larger context” (Klæver, 2013, p. 32). The context here could be nationality, gender, politics, culture, or history. It is against this background that this study analyzes Second-Class Citizen using Said’s Orientalist approach.

Particularly, the analysis focuses on the textual expressions of character traits, such as cultural relationships, identities, beliefs, and attitudes, especially as portrayed in the main characters. This is because meaning and fictional forms are inseparable (Friedman, 1975). Themes are extracted from the novels and inferences are made from the text itself. Written communication, such as novel texts, consists of textual codes with implied meanings. These meanings are further interpreted to induce useful narratives. Thus, the study explores the literary content of the selected novel by focusing primarily on contexts and character traits concerning the portrayal of the “Other”. This is because a logical procedure to identify emerging themes is to relate the textual content with cultural and historical context (McKee, 2003; Younes, Hassan, & Aziz, 2020). The analysis is conducted by in-depth reading of the primary text to explore how Buchi Emecheta represents the “Other” from postcolonial viewpoints.

IV. REPRESENTATION OF THE OTHER

The setting of Second-Class Citizen involves African and European cultures. According to Abrams (1981), the “setting of a narrative… is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs; the setting of… a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place” (p. 175). Therefore, the setting of Second-
*Class Citizen* covered places like Lagos and London, in “the days before Nigerian independence when nearly every boat from England brought hundreds of English graduates and doctors to work in the schools and hospitals of Lagos” (p. 150). Lagos represented a place of mimicry. For example, *Second-Class Citizen* shows the overall consequences of this mimetic nature on Nigerians before and after their political independence.

As an African author, Emecheta tends to represent the “Other”, African natives, as backward, inferior, and of lower social class. This representation is based on the existence of economic and socio-cultural differences as well as conflictual relationships between African indigenous people and British citizens. *Second-Class Citizen* shows the consequences of mimicry on Nigerians before and after their political independence. Mimicry describes a situation whereby “colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to mimic the colonizer by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013, p. 155). In *Second-Class Citizen*, African women in Lagos “dyed their hair, and straightened it with hot combs to make it look European” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 8) because they desire to be the Whites. They align themselves unconsciously with the lifestyle of the “Other” because, as demonstrated in the novel, Lagos is where the British influence the African indigenous people with their lifestyles. The novel posits the glittering aspects of the British and how the indigenous people are attracted to them. An example is where the Whiteman creates a stare of surprise among the indigenous people at the wharf in Lagos: The European arrivals gaped at them. They had never seen anything like it before. The climax of it all was when an English man took their photographs. He even singled out women with babies behind their backs and took several shots of them. Ma and her friends were really happy to have their pictures taken by Europeans! (p. 15).

Emecheta characterizes Africans as people who tend to believe that everything about the British is unique, perhaps because of the impact of Western colonization in Africa. People in Lagos “were really happy to have their pictures taken” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 15) by the Whiteman. Also, the salaries of Africans working with the Whites in Lagos are more than their counterparts working with the government or elsewhere. For instance, “Adah was selected to work as a Librarian in the American Consulate Library at Campbell Street” (p. 26), and her salary was three times more than Francis’ salary. She ignores the stigma by looking for a first-class job in London. Therefore, “Adah was happy she’d got a first-class job... it was still news that she had got herself employed in a library, doing a first-class citizen’s job” (p. 45). Additionally, the Whites provide the best healthcare services for their Nigerian indigenous staff in Lagos. Adah and her son Vicky are beneficiaries of this scheme. The expression below illustrates this point.

Vicky... the child she had had in the best hospital in Nigeria, in the best ward, under the most efficient Swiss gynecologist the Americans could get for her as a member of their staff, which was one of the innumerable fringe benefits attached to working for the Americans (p. 65).

The above context corroborates Chukwuma’s (1989) thought that *Second-Class Citizen* is a text that depicts the effect of imperialism on black people. In *Second-Class Citizen*, African characters scramble for the West because they believe that the “passport to prosperity was England” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 79). This belief is one of the reasons why Adah “made a secret vow to herself that she would go to this United Kingdom one day” (p. 16) so that she “was soon going to be called ‘been-to’, which was a Lagos phrase for those who had ‘been to’ England” (p. 27). This idea of feeling inferior is described by Chukwuma (1989) as an unfortunate situation that causes black African characters in *Second-Class Citizen* to believe Europe is the best place to stay. According to Chukwuma, the narrator in *Second-Class Citizen* imitates the colonized’s penchant for western values instead of African culture, which indicates the pro-European mentality of Africans in the novel, a mindset that believes African culture is inferior to western culture. These outcomes concur with the assumption of Said’s Orientalist approach which suggests that European society is superior, rational, flexible, and developed (Said, 1978).

A significant subject worthy of concern in *Second-Class Citizen* is that the novel promotes the colonial viewpoint that the East is inferior to the West and that several people from colonized nations prefer to live in a foreign country in pursuit of a livelihood. It is against this background that several colonial kinds of literature depict the colonized countries as inferior to the West. An essential illustration from the text is when the heroine, Adah shows her preference to live in the United Kingdom rather than her country Nigeria. *Second-Class Citizen* also deals with the further movement of Nigerians from their country to the United Kingdom in search of education, in search of eligibility. Characters, such as Francis, Mr. Babalola, and Mr. Noble “threw up their jobs, asked for their gratuities... and packed their bags for the trip to the United Kingdom in search of education, in search of eligibility” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 79). They believe that their African societies will deny them the opportunity of getting the best education, an eligibility “that would make them free, free to rule their country” (p. 79) after gaining political independence.

On the other hand, Emecheta depicts London as a place of racial discrimination, where the British discriminate against the African characters based on skin color. An expression from the text illustrates thus, “Adah who nurtures a dream of going abroad, works and saves up enough money for herself, her husband and children to travel” (Emecheta, 1974: 4). Although she finds a job at the Chalk Farm Library, she is denied the privilege of enjoying good social amenities like housing and healthcare services. The English society gives her the impression that she is a second-class citizen because of her skin color: “Nearly all the notices had “sorry, no colored” on them...she was never aware of this at home in Nigeria (p. 70). Therefore, *Second-Class Citizen* reveals “situations that open up several dimensions of the woman’s problematic position in traditional society and in a world changed by colonialism” (Wilson-Tagoe, 1997, p. 15).
Second-Class Citizen reveals the Whites in London as people who perceive Africans as second-class citizens and are prepared to stay away from Africans because of their skin color and foreign “Otherness”. In this regard, Lawrence (1974) writes “I was not expecting at all any prejudice or discrimination. As a matter of fact, I did not know I was a colored man until the English told me so” (p. 40). Similarly, a large number of houses in England, as portrayed in Second-Class Citizen, have this caption on them “Sorry, no Coloured” (Emecheta, 1974, p. 70). Additionally, the English people do not allow African tenants to keep their children with them in their houses, especially parents who go to school or workplaces, because “only first-class citizens lived with their children, not the blacks” (p. 47). This inscription signifies that Africans are not wanted in such houses. As presumed in Said’s Orientalist approach, the dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized world is based on racial segregation (Said, 1978).

V. CONCLUSION

This analysis explored how Buchi Emecheta portrays the “Other” in Second-Class Citizen from a postcolonial perspective. Second-Class Citizen portrays the “Other” based on the existence of economic and socio-cultural differences as well as conflictual relationships between African indigenous people and British citizens, where the British become the center while the African natives become subjected to the rule from the center. Emecheta portrays the “Other”, African natives, as backward, inferior, and of lower social class. Through the lens of the Orientalist approach, this analysis reveals that Adah, the protagonist in Second-Class Citizen, creates a binary opposition between the superior West and the inferior East due to the colonial background in her country. The West is represented as a place of freedom and independence and the East as a depressing place where there is barely any room for change.

Additionally, Second-Class Citizen exposes the Aftermath of colonialism, where the power struggle between African indigenous people and the colonizers gets displaced upon power relationships. Thus, Emecheta re-echoes the cultural struggle of African immigrants with the Westerners as well as highlights the cultural disorientation of Africans in England. In this regard, De Vita (2010) mentions that “Africa’s literary canon proves to be a conversation between cultures, epochs, and worlds about the self-sacrificial restoring of order in the wake of devastation’s chaos, a healthy reintegration of empowering” (p. 433). In essence, this study found that the portrayal of the “Other” in the selected text shows the integration of social and cultural practices between the “Other” and the African natives. Thus, the issue of representation of the “Other” is rooted in the ideological formation of Second-Class Citizen. The depiction of the “Other” reveals the existence of stereotypes, mimicry, and socio-political powers in Africa and British societies. In essence, the concept of the “Other” plays an important role in the interrelationship of identity, gender, and race.

Moreover, Second-Class Citizen presents the Westerner as a source of positive influence to the “Other”, African indigenous people, in the development of the continent. Similarly, in Orientalism, Said critiques the superior position of the West and the inferior position of the inferior “Other”. Nevertheless, this analysis shows that the representation of the “Other”, as portrayed in Second-Class Citizen, is based on economic and socio-cultural differences. Also, this analysis reveals the dialectic of place and displacement in the historical time and socio-cultural conditions depicted in the novel. There is a vast literature on the representation of the ‘Other’ in Postcolonial texts. However, this study is limited to how the “Other” is represented in Emecheta’s Second-Class Citizen. Further research may draw a comparison of how the “Other” is represented by different postcolonial writers.

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