

Migration, Racism, and Female Survival in *Second-Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*

Baneshwar Gorain¹

Research Scholar, Department of English

Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad

Dr. Devyani Singh²

HOD, Department of English, B.S.City College, Bokaro

Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad

Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, a pioneering Black British feminist writer, is renowned for her powerful portrayal of African women negotiating identity, race, and gender within oppressive social structures. Drawing extensively from her own experiences as a Nigerian immigrant in Britain, Emecheta's fiction exposes the harsh realities of migration and the compounded struggles faced by Black women in a racially and patriarchal biased society. This research examines the themes of migration, racism, and female survival in her semi-autobiographical novels *Second-Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*. The study explores migration as a disillusioning process that replaces hope with systemic exclusion, where racial prejudice manifests through inadequate housing, exploitative labor, and social alienation. Racism, intertwined with sexism, relegates immigrant women to the margins, while patriarchal control within marriage further intensifies their vulnerability. At the same time, the research foregrounds female survival as a dynamic and resistant force. Through the protagonist Adah, Emecheta illustrates how endurance, motherhood, education, and creative expression become strategies of self-preservation and empowerment. By analyzing the intersection of race, gender, and class, this paper argues that Emecheta redefines survival as an assertion of agency rather than mere endurance. Ultimately, the study situates Emecheta's work within Black British feminist literature, highlighting her critical intervention in narratives of migration and womanhood.

Keywords *Migration; Racism; Female Survival; Black British Feminism; Gender and Identity; Patriarchy; Diaspora; Buchi Emecheta.*

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta occupies a significant position in postcolonial and Black British feminist literature for her uncompromising portrayal of the lived realities of African women in diasporic spaces. Writing from her own experience as a Nigerian immigrant in Britain, Emecheta gives voice to women who are doubly marginalized—by race in a predominantly white society and by gender within patriarchal structures. Her semi-autobiographical novels *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) present an unflinching account of migration not as a promise of liberation but as a complex journey marked by struggle, displacement, and systemic exclusion. Through these texts, Emecheta challenges idealized narratives of migration by foregrounding the emotional, economic, and social costs borne by immigrant women.

Migration in Emecheta's fiction is portrayed as a disillusioning process that replaces hope with harsh realities of racial prejudice and social alienation. The protagonists' encounters with inadequate housing, exploitative labor, and institutional discrimination reveal how racism operates at both structural and interpersonal levels. Immigrant women are relegated to the margins of British society, often confined to low-paying jobs and deprived of dignity and security. Emecheta exposes how racial hierarchies intersect with class inequality, reinforcing the outsider status of Black migrants and denying them full participation in the social fabric of the host nation.

Alongside racial discrimination, Emecheta highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchy, particularly within marriage and family life. Female characters are burdened by domestic responsibilities, economic dependence, and emotional abuse, which intensify their vulnerability in an already hostile environment. Patriarchal expectations limit women's autonomy and suppress their aspirations, making survival a daily struggle. However, Emecheta refuses to portray her female characters merely as victims of oppression.

Instead, *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* foreground female survival as an act of resistance and self-assertion. Through Adah, Emecheta presents survival as a dynamic process rooted in resilience, education, motherhood, and creative expression. Adah's determination to write, to learn, and to provide for her children becomes a means of reclaiming agency in the face of racial and gendered marginalization. This study, therefore, examines how Emecheta redefines survival not as passive endurance but as a powerful assertion of identity and independence within oppressive social structures.

Second-Class Citizen (1974)

Buchi Emecheta powerfully encapsulates the experience of migration and its gendered consequences through the very title of her novel *Second-Class Citizen (1974)*. The phrase reflects the inferior social position imposed upon Black immigrant women in Britain and becomes a metaphor for racial, economic, and gendered exclusion. Emecheta, widely regarded as one of the most productive and influential African women writers, draws extensively on her own life to shape this narrative. Her early exposure to inequality in colonial Nigeria, followed by her experiences as a young immigrant woman in Britain, deeply informs her literary vision. Separated from her indigenous language and cultural roots by colonial education and further alienated by Britain's rigid class system, Emecheta writes from a position of displacement and exile. These experiences lend authenticity and emotional depth to her portrayal of migrant life in *Second-Class Citizen*.

The novel is semi-autobiographical and reflects Emecheta's own struggles as a Black woman, a single mother, and an aspiring writer in 1960s Britain. Through the protagonist Adah, Emecheta explores the harsh realities faced by immigrant women who migrate with expectations of progress but encounter racism, poverty, and social isolation instead. Adah arrives in Britain to reunite with her student husband, believing education and migration will offer opportunity and dignity. However, she soon confronts a hostile society where racial prejudice restricts access to housing, employment, and social acceptance. Her status as a Black woman places her at the margins of British society, reinforcing her "second-class" position both publicly and privately.

Emecheta's narrative also situates *Second-Class Citizen* within the broader tradition of Black women's writing, which emerged to foreground experiences distinct from both white feminist and male-centered Black narratives. Identity formation becomes central in this tradition, as Black women's lives are shaped by the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class. In Adah's story, migration intensifies these intersections by forcing constant negotiation between cultural expectations and survival in an alien environment. While racism and patriarchy limit her freedom, migration simultaneously opens new possibilities for resistance. Adah's determination to educate herself, provide for her children, and pursue writing reflects a gradual assertion of agency.

Second-Class Citizen presents migration as a transformative yet painful process, particularly for women. Emecheta portrays female migration not merely as physical movement across borders but as a psychological and social journey marked by struggle, adaptation, and self-reinvention. Through Adah's resilience, the novel redefines survival as an active engagement with oppression and positions Black immigrant women as agents shaping their own identities despite systemic constraints.

The Ditch

Drawing heavily from Emecheta's own experiences as a single mother living in state-provided housing, *In the Ditch* exposes the everyday humiliations faced by Black women migrants who exist at the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression. The title itself is symbolic, suggesting not only physical poverty but also social

entrapment, where immigrant women are confined within systems designed to marginalize rather than support them. Through the protagonist Adah, Emecheta dismantles romanticized notions of migration and presents Britain as a space where survival is a constant negotiation rather than a guarantee of opportunity.

Central to *In the Ditch* is the representation of institutional racism embedded within the welfare system. Adah's life in the council estate—referred to as the “ditch”—reveals how state structures that claim to offer support instead reinforce dependency and social stigma. Welfare officers, housing authorities, and social workers exercise power over Adah's life, regulating her access to resources while subjecting her to surveillance and moral judgment. As a Black immigrant woman with multiple children, Adah is often viewed through stereotypes that associate Black motherhood with irresponsibility and excess. Emecheta critiques how these racialized assumptions dehumanize immigrant women and deny them dignity. The welfare system, rather than functioning as a safety net, becomes another mechanism of control that restricts autonomy and perpetuates marginalization. In this way, *In the Ditch* exposes the contradictions of a society that claims liberal values while systematically excluding those who fall outside its racial and class norms.

Gender and patriarchy further complicate Adah's struggle for survival in *In the Ditch*. Although physically separated from her abusive husband, Adah continues to bear the psychological and economic consequences of patriarchal control. As a single mother, she carries the full burden of childcare, domestic labor, and financial responsibility in an environment that offers little sympathy or support. Emecheta highlights how immigrant women are expected to perform excessive emotional and physical labor while remaining invisible within public discourse. Motherhood, while a source of strength and motivation for Adah, also becomes a site of vulnerability, as social institutions use her children to justify intrusive intervention and control. The novel thus illustrates how patriarchy does not disappear in migration but is reshaped within new social contexts, intensifying women's marginalization through isolation and economic precarity.

Despite these oppressive conditions, *In the Ditch* powerfully foregrounds female resilience and survival as acts of resistance. Adah refuses to internalize the demeaning narratives imposed upon her and consistently asserts her sense of self-worth. Her determination to educate herself, seek better living conditions, and maintain independence reflects a quiet yet radical form of resistance. Unlike traditional narratives of heroism, Emecheta presents survival as a daily struggle marked by endurance, strategic compromise, and self-belief. Writing itself becomes a crucial form of agency for Adah, allowing her to articulate her experiences and reclaim control over her narrative. Through this emphasis on self-expression and persistence, Emecheta challenges portrayals of Black women as passive victims and instead presents them as active agents navigating oppressive systems with courage and intelligence.

The Ditch occupies a significant place within Black British feminist and diasporic literature by documenting the often-overlooked experiences of immigrant women at the margins of society. The novel situates personal suffering within broader social and political frameworks, demonstrating how racism, sexism, and class inequality intersect to shape the lives of Black migrant women. By centering Adah's voice, Emecheta transforms the “ditch” from a space of silence into one of testimony and resistance. The novel does not offer easy resolutions but insists on the importance of visibility, agency, and self-definition. In doing so, *In the Ditch* lays the foundation for Emecheta's later works and contributes to a larger literary project that challenges dominant narratives of migration, welfare, and womanhood. It affirms that survival itself, when enacted with dignity and self-awareness, becomes a powerful form of resistance against exclusionary social systems.

Motherhood as Both Burden and Resistance

Motherhood occupies a complex and central position in Buchi Emecheta's *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, functioning simultaneously as a source of intense burden and a powerful form of resistance. For migrant women like Adah, motherhood significantly deepens vulnerability within an already hostile social environment shaped by racism, poverty, and patriarchal control. As a single mother in Britain, Adah bears the full responsibility of childcare, domestic labor, and economic survival, often without emotional or institutional support. The welfare system, rather than offering genuine assistance, treats motherhood with suspicion,

reducing Adah to a stereotype of the “dependent” Black woman. Her children become a reason for social surveillance and moral judgment, restricting her freedom and reinforcing her marginal status. Motherhood also limits her mobility and employment opportunities, making economic independence a constant struggle. In this sense, Emecheta presents motherhood as an exhausting and isolating burden that exposes the unequal expectations placed upon women, especially those positioned at the intersection of race, gender, and class.

At the same time, Emecheta reimagines motherhood as a dynamic site of resistance and self-empowerment. Rather than portraying Adah as defeated by her maternal responsibilities, the novels show how motherhood becomes a driving force behind her resilience and determination. Adah’s commitment to her children fuels her refusal to accept humiliation or defeat, motivating her pursuit of education, stable housing, and creative expression. Motherhood gives her a sense of purpose that counters the dehumanizing narratives imposed by both racist institutions and patriarchal relationships. By choosing to protect, nurture, and educate her children, Adah actively asserts her agency in a society that seeks to marginalize her. Emecheta thus challenges traditional portrayals of motherhood as passive self-sacrifice and instead presents it as a conscious, empowering choice. Through this dual representation, motherhood emerges as both a site of oppression and a form of resistance, revealing how female survival is rooted not only in endurance but also in love, responsibility, and the determination to create a better future despite systemic constraints.

Marriage and Domestic Oppression

Marriage in *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* is shown as a major source of domestic oppression for women, especially for immigrant wives like Adah. Instead of providing emotional support or security, marriage becomes a space where patriarchal power is exercised. Adah’s husband controls her life by restricting her education, discouraging her ambition, and misusing her income. Although Adah works hard to support the family, her efforts are not valued. She is expected to obey her husband and accept her role as a wife and mother without complaint. Migration does not reduce this control; in fact, living in a foreign country increases Adah’s dependence on her husband, making her more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

Emecheta also shows how marriage isolates women and silences their voices. Adah’s husband uses emotional manipulation and violence to maintain authority, making her feel powerless and trapped. Domestic oppression is not only physical but also psychological, as Adah is constantly made to doubt her worth and abilities. Her desire to write and educate herself is treated as selfish and unacceptable. Through this portrayal, Emecheta criticizes traditional gender roles that expect women to sacrifice their dreams for marriage. However, Adah’s eventual decision to leave her oppressive marriage represents an important step toward self-respect and independence. Emecheta presents this choice as an act of courage, showing that resisting domestic oppression is essential for female survival and personal freedom.

Conclusion

Migration, racism, and female survival form the core concerns of Buchi Emecheta’s *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, where women’s lives are shaped by continuous struggle and quiet resistance. Through the character of Adah, Emecheta presents migration as a deeply challenging experience that exposes women to social exclusion, economic hardship, and racial discrimination rather than opportunity. Racism operates not only through open prejudice but also through everyday systems such as housing, employment, and welfare, which consistently place Black immigrant women in vulnerable positions. Alongside this public oppression, domestic life and marriage become sites of control, limiting women’s ambitions and reinforcing patriarchal authority. Yet Emecheta’s narratives move beyond suffering to highlight resilience and agency. Motherhood, education, and self-expression emerge as powerful tools through which women assert dignity and reclaim identity. Female survival is portrayed not as passive endurance but as a conscious struggle for self-respect and independence.

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