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**Gender Inequalities and  
Sustainable Paths  
in Buchi Emecheta's  
“*The Second Class Citizen*”**

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**Gayathri B  
Chitra Sivasubramaniam**

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**Introduction**

*Gender inequality* is a pressing issue that affects women and girls worldwide. Gender inequality remains a formidable barrier to achieving a fair and just society, as it is rooted in historical traditions, systemic biases, and discriminatory practices. While tracing through annals of history, entrenched patriarchal systems have perpetuated disparities between men and women. Across continents, societies have grappled with gender norms and expectations that limit opportunities and perpetuate unequal power dynamics. Understanding the historical context is crucial for unravelling the complexities of contemporary gender disparities. A myriad of factors, both structural and cultural, perpetuate gender inequality. Discriminatory laws, institutional biases, and traditional gender roles contribute to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Economic disparities, limited access to

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**Gayathri B\***

**Chitra Sivasubramaniam**

*Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, Email: [gayathri.balasubramanian96@gmail.com](mailto:gayathri.balasubramanian96@gmail.com)*

*\*Corresponding Author*

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education, and inadequate health care further compound the issue. Understanding these root causes is essential for formulating effective strategies to address and dismantle the structures that sustain inequality.

Buchi Emecheta stands as an exemplary figure in literature, particularly renowned for her insightful exploration of complex themes such as gender dynamics, cultural identity, and the pursuit of personal agency. Buchi Emecheta actively commits to unravelling the layers of societal norms and expectations that often constrain women in her literary journey. Born in Nigeria in 1944, Emecheta faced formidable obstacles in her personal life, including the loss of her father at an early age. Despite these challenges, she exhibited resilience and determination, eventually moving to London to pursue higher education. Her experiences as an immigrant woman navigating the complexities of cultural assimilation and gender expectations influenced her writing.

As a pioneering Nigerian author, Emecheta's works have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape, earning her accolades for her profound storytelling and astute social commentary. Amidst her noteworthy body of work, the novel "Second Class Citizen" emerges as a poignant and illuminating narrative that delves into the intricacies of gender discrimination and the challenges faced by women within a patriarchal society. "Second Class Citizen," published in 1974, is a testament to Emecheta's ability to weave personal experiences into a compelling narrative that transcends individual stories to address broader societal issues. The novel follows the life of its protagonist, Adah, a Nigerian woman who faces the intersectionality of gender and race as she strives to carve out a meaningful existence in a foreign land. Adah's journey encapsulates the struggles and triumphs of many women, mirroring Emecheta's commitment to giving a voice to the silenced and marginalized.

The novel "Second Class Citizen" by Buchi Emecheta holds profound significance in addressing gender inequalities, shedding light on the challenges faced by women and emphasizing the transformative power of overcoming these disparities. The exploration of gender

inequalities in the novel serves several essential purposes, such as the representation of real-world struggles, highlighting systemic injustices, empowering female characters, the intersectionality of gender and immigration, cultural critique and transformation, advocacy for women's rights, educational empowerment, and call to action for social change.

The novel "Second Class Citizen" by Buchi Emecheta holds significant relevance to the broader discourse on sustainable development goals, particularly within the context of gender inequalities. The exploration of these themes (Addressing Gender Inequalities, Educational Attainment, Economic Empowerment, Cultural Identity and Empowerment, Health and Wellbeing) within the novel aligns with crucial principles and objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), underscoring the interconnectedness of gender equality and sustainable paths to development.

The research paper explores the intersections of gender inequalities and sustainable paths within Buchi Emecheta's novel '*The Second Class Citizen*.' It delves into the narrative to examine how the novel sheds light on the complex interplay between gender disparities and the pursuit of sustainable development. The central question guiding this analysis is: What insights does the narrative offer for addressing gender inequalities in the context of personal and societal development? By investigating the multifaceted experiences of the protagonist, the paper seeks to uncover valuable perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges women face and potential pathways for fostering sustainable change.

### **Literature Review**

Research on global gender disparities shows the significant impact of gender-based inequalities on economic, social, and political development. Women worldwide experience discrimination and underrepresentation in all sectors of society. The Gender Development Index (GDI) developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) measures gender-based inequalities in various areas, and a gender gap exists in countries worldwide. Gender disparities have led

to significant economic losses, and promoting gender equality is vital for economic development, especially in developing countries. Enhancing educational opportunities for girls is also crucial in promoting gender equality and improving economic opportunities, health outcomes, and political participation. Addressing gender inequalities requires a multifaceted approach, including policies and programs from governments, private sector initiatives, and challenging cultural norms and beliefs that justify gender discrimination. Active involvement from communities and civil society is essential for promoting gender equality globally.

The novel *Second Class Citizen* by renowned Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta is a landmark literary work addressing female characters' struggle to break free from oppressive gender roles and cultural constraints. This paper aims to undertake a literature review of relevant research on second-class citizens, exploring key themes previously analyzed and highlighting the research gap on gender inequalities and sustainable development in the context of the novel.

Several themes and issues have emerged in previous analyses of *Second Class Citizen*, highlighting the novel's significance as a work of feminist literature. One central theme is the struggle against gender inequality in Nigerian society, where women are oppressed and forced to take on subservient roles. The main character, Adah, is shown to be constrained by patriarchal norms that restrict her from pursuing education and professional opportunities beyond the household. Other female characters in the novel face similar challenges in their attempts to challenge the limitations imposed on them by society. Secondly, the novel highlights the experience of diaspora and migration, challenging notions of cultural identity as Adah navigates her sense of identity and belonging as a Nigerian immigrant in the UK. The themes of diaspora and migration are central to the novel and reflect the complexities of navigating life as an immigrant in a foreign culture. Identity and belonging are recurrent themes in the novel, highlighting the characters' struggles as they reconcile their cultural backgrounds and experiences. A third theme in the novel is the recurrent

motif of motherhood. The novel addresses how motherhood affects women's lives, their education, and careers, and the expectations placed upon them by society. The theme of motherhood is closely linked to gender, highlighting the societal expectations placed on women to prioritize family over personal aspirations.

Although a substantial body of literature analyses second-class citizens, researchers must address some gaps in understanding the novel's feminist themes. One significant research gap is exploring gender inequality and its role in promoting sustainable paths in the context of the novel. Sustainable development promotes equal opportunities and well-being while maintaining the natural environment for future generations. Gender equality is essential to sustainable development; research has shown that improving women's lives and increasing gender equality can lead to economic development, poverty reduction, and better environmental outcomes. Therefore, there is a need to examine how gender inequality intersects with sustainable development issues for second-class citizens.

### **Analysis of Gender Inequalities in Second Class Citizen**

#### **1. Economic Disparities**

*"I personally could only see education as a means of escape from the drudgery of a manual job or a loveless married life".*

Adah, the protagonist of the novel, is expressing her desire to escape her current life, which she finds unfulfilling and oppressive. She believes that education is the key to achieving a better life and opening up opportunities that would not be available to her otherwise. This highlights the importance of education and its potential for empowerment, particularly for women in societies where gender discrimination is prevalent. Despite the obstacles, Adah persists in her desire for an education and eventually makes her way to London, where she fulfils her longtime dream of obtaining a university degree. The novel shows how economic and gendered limitations dictate women's choices, with Adah's desire to leave manual labour and attain a better future through education and independence. Furthermore, Adah sees education as a means of breaking free from a loveless marriage and

desires to marry someone who shares her ambition and values. Understanding the limitations of marriage and loveless relationships, she avoided continuing manual labour and being dependent on a spouse for her upkeep.

*“She would have liked to go away and come back with money so that she could pay Elizabeth back for all the things she had spent on her”.*

In this chapter, Adah, the protagonist, grapples with profound financial challenges as a young woman in Nigerian society. Having just given birth to her first child, she reflects on her financial situation, navigating the difficulties of being a single mother in London while confronting racism and sexism. Adah leans on her friend Elizabeth for support, receiving clothes and essentials, but feels a sense of indebtedness, desiring to repay Elizabeth for her kindness. This aspiration underscores the socioeconomic constraints and gender disparities Adah faces as a Black African woman in London, with limited employment opportunities that often lead to underpayment and exploitation due to race and gender. Furthermore, Adah is a single mother without financial support from her husband, who has returned to Nigeria and refuses to provide for her. Her determination to repay Elizabeth illuminates the significance of financial independence for women, particularly from marginalized communities. This narrative underscores the need for a more equitable society that values and prioritizes the financial autonomy of all women, emphasizing the impact of communal support among women facing similar challenges.

### **Educational Limitations**

*School - the Igbos never played with that! They were realizing fast that one’s saviour from poverty and disease was education. Every Igbo family saw it to their children attended school. Boys were usually given preference. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still conversations 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*

*has heard her mother say this many many times to her friends. Soon, Adah's younger brother, Boy, started school. (9)*

The quotation underscores the significance of education in Igbo society, despite the prevalent gender-based discrimination favoring boys over girls in educational opportunities. Within the community, education was viewed as a pathway to escape poverty and disease, offering a better life for individuals and their families. Nevertheless, Adah and other girls faced denial or restriction of education, as some parents considered it unnecessary or unwise for girls to receive more than the basic skills of reading and writing. Adah's mother epitomizes this mindset, advocating for a brief stint in school, likely emphasizing sewing skills over broader education. This perspective implies that the community perceived Adah's potential as limited and doubted her ability to enhance her life through education. The quote sheds light on the societal disparities and discrimination that hindered the advancement of girls like Adah, making it difficult for them to pursue fulfilling lives.

*"Francis insulted her for not being able to speak an "educated" language and ridiculed her desire to go to university, saying that a good woman did not need things like that".*

In the novel, Francis insults Adah, the protagonist, criticizing her for not speaking what he deems an "educated" language, particularly in the context of her aspirations for university education, a goal he dismisses disdainfully. The narrative depicts Adah as a determined and ambitious woman challenging societal expectations and striving for higher education, defying traditional gender roles imposed by figures like Francis, who embody the conservative and patriarchal mindset prevalent in the depicted society. Francis's insult reflects not only ingrained gender biases but also underscores the broader theme of societal constraints on women's aspirations. By ridiculing Adah's academic ambitions, Francis exemplifies the prevailing belief that a "good woman" should conform to traditional roles, discouraging intellectual pursuits associated with men. This incident serves as a poignant illustration of the gender inequalities Adah confronts,

emphasizing the societal resistance against women seeking education and personal fulfillment beyond traditional roles. Adah's journey in the novel becomes a compelling exploration of her resilience in overcoming such gender-based obstacles and her determination to challenge societal norms.

### **Social Expectations**

*“She must act and think as a wife and mother should, and become a good Christian because her husband's religion would ultimately determine hers”.*

This excerpt from Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* underscores the societal constraints placed on Adah due to expectations regarding gender roles and religion, shaping both her personal and professional life. The quote captures Adah's mother's perspective, revealing the entrenched belief that Adah's primary role should be as a wife and mother, precluding her pursuit of education. Adah's mother also insists on adherence to her husband's religion, diminishing Adah's individual beliefs and aspirations, exemplifying the patriarchal norms ingrained in Nigerian society. The imposition of her husband's religion serves as a stark illustration of the societal expectations that relegate women to subordinate roles. Adah's struggle for even a basic education within her own family highlights the pervasive gender biases restricting women in Nigeria to traditional roles. This quote serves as a poignant reminder of the imperative to eliminate gender-based biases, including those rooted in religion, to cultivate an inclusive and equitable society. Adah's aspirations are thwarted by rigid gender roles, limiting her educational and professional opportunities and reinforcing her subordinate position. Thus, it illuminates the formidable challenges women face in overcoming strict religious and patriarchal norms, hindering their personal and professional aspirations.

*“It was wonderful to think of the world outside, but it was impossible to imagine her being part of it. She was black, female, and poor.”*

The quoted passage from Chapter 10 of Buchi Emecheta's *“The Second Class Citizen”* encapsulates the profound challenges faced by



the protagonist, Adah, as she envisions a world beyond her immediate circumstances. Emphasizing the intersectionality of Adah's identity—being black, female, and economically disadvantaged—the passage underscores the layers of adversity she encounters. The descriptors “black, female, and poor” delineate the intricate web of societal prejudices and systemic inequalities she navigates, with each aspect of her identity subject to racial discrimination, gender-based limitations, and economic challenges, respectively. This intersectionality compounds Adah's struggles, creating a complex matrix of societal expectations and biases that limit her possibilities. The passage reflects the pervasive influence of societal norms marginalizing individuals based on race, gender, and economic status. Adah's difficulty imagining herself beyond her immediate circumstances is not a reflection of lacking ambition or capability but rather a consequence of systemic barriers arising from the intersectionality of her identity. This internal reflection provides readers insight into the nuanced and layered nature of Adah's experiences as a woman in a society rife with ingrained prejudices and limitations, contributing to the novel's overarching theme that explores the impact of societal expectations and systemic inequalities on individual aspirations and self-perception.

### **Solutions for Gender Disparity Suggested in the Novel *Second Class Citizen***

1. **Education:** Promoting education is essential to reduce gender disparities and combat gender inequality. Empowering women through formal and informal education provides them with the necessary skills and knowledge to challenge societal norms that perpetuate gender-based inequalities. Adah's struggle for education in the novel highlights the importance of providing access to quality education to women, as seen in the quote, “She knew that education was the only way out of poverty, and it was education that would make her a writer” (Chapter 17).
2. **Economic Empowerment:** Women's equal economic participation can reduce gender disparities and aid in

sustainable development. Giving women access to credit, vocational training, and entrepreneurial resources to start small businesses can promote their economic empowerment. Adah's relentless pursuit of a career illustrates the importance of providing opportunities for women to engage in paid work, as stated in the quote: "She needed a job to sustain herself, so she could save some money and attend college" (Chapter 15).

3. Political Representation: Encouraging women's participation in politics can contribute to the promotion of gender equality and the eradication of gender-based discrimination. Women's political participation can challenge patriarchal societal norms, increase the representation of women's opinions, and ensure the coordinated efforts and resources of women in promoting sustainable development. The quote, "If women learned how to use their power and complicate life for men, life would become richer and more interesting" (Chapter 8), highlights the importance of women's political empowerment and inclusion in decision-making processes.

### **Social Development Goals to Prevent Gender Inequality**

1. SDG 4 - Quality Education: Promoting quality education is essential in preventing gender disparities and providing equal opportunities for all. Gender-responsive education systems and programs are necessary to ensure equitable access to education; as the quote states, "Education was the only way out of poverty" (Chapter 17).
2. SDG 5 - Gender Equality: Achieving gender equality is necessary to promote sustainable development. This goal seeks to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women in education, employment, and political representation, as well as make efforts to eliminate gender-based violence, as seen in the quote, "She was a woman, and in his eyes, women were toys to be played with and owned by men in Nigeria" (Chapter 11).
3. SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth: Providing women with decent work opportunities and promoting their

economic empowerment can reduce gender disparities and promote sustainable development. The quote, "She needed a job to sustain herself, so she could save some money and attend college" (Chapter 15), highlights the significance of providing women with access to paid work opportunities, vocational training, and entrepreneurial resources.

### Conclusion

Social Development Goals offer a framework for promoting sustainable development, eliminating poverty, and promoting gender equality. Through policies that address poverty, education, gender equality, and the promotion of decent work opportunities, we can prevent gender inequality issues and promote sustainable development. The novel *Second Class Citizen* illuminates women's daily struggles, highlighting the need to promote gender equality and empower women through concrete policies and interventions that promote the SDGs.

The novel *Second Class Citizen* explores gender-based inequalities experienced by Adah and other female characters. However, there is a need for further research to explore how these gender-based inequalities depicted in the novel impact the wider Nigerian society and contemporary implications. Future research could address these gaps by taking an intersectional perspective, exploring the role of men, examining agency, exploring sociocultural context variations, and assessing contemporary implications. This research will be critical in identifying avenues for promoting gender equality, empowering women and reducing gender-based inequalities in Nigeria.

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