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A Nigerian writer living London

Abstract

In the Ditch was like my sixth child. I felt exactly like that, just as if I had had another child. It came out in June 1972, when I was twenty-seven, almost five years to the day when I first started to send articles to magazine editors. Its publication showed me another thing about creative writing, namely that one does well in the topic one knows best. Because I was living in the 'ditch', a lone parent with five children, I was able to write in more depth about this. I realized then that I would not have to wait till I was forty before writing. If only I could stick to the subjects I knew best, and write about them truthfully, about the way I felt or saw them, in the type of language I could manage best, then I would not go wrong.

A Nigerian Writer Living in London

In the Ditch was like my sixth child. I felt exactly like that, just as if I had had another child. It came out in June 1972, when I was twenty-seven, almost five years to the day when I first started to send articles to magazine editors. Its publication showed me another thing about creative writing, namely that one does well in the topic one knows best. Because I was living in the 'ditch', a lone parent with five children, I was able to write in more depth about this. I realized then that I would not have to wait till I was forty before writing. If only I could stick to the subjects I knew best, and write about them truthfully, about the way I felt or saw them, in the type of language I could manage best, then I would not go wrong.

But despite the little success I had with *In the Ditch* I was still bitter about all that was happening to me. Why did I make the mistake of marrying the man I did? Why was the world not blaming him for what he had done, and why was everybody blaming me for not forgiving him when he came back begging me to take him back? And why did the critics regard my enthusiasm about everything as naïvety? And why were those people I met earlier on in my writing career so patronising, patting me nicely on the back whenever I could clean my own nose, and why was it accepted in certain circles, that any black woman who wanted to make it in a field like this, must marry white?

I did not know then what I was up against. It was a kind of experience which was more shocking than painful. I still laugh about one publisher who deducted the money he paid for all the dinners he took me to from my royalties. I won't say much because these people have so short a memory that those of them alive are still my friends. But though I finished *Second Class Citizen* in November 1972, it was not published until 1975, when I had given up hope of ever appearing in print again in England. The most important thing is that the book was published, and by a young publishing firm who were then regarded as a radical firm.

Funnily enough, it became a classic, and some still regard it as the best work I have ever produced. But all I know was that after this book I felt confident about regarding myself as a writer.

It is very autobiographical. I was trying to answer all the questions people asked about in *In the Ditch*. In chronological order of happenings, *Second Class Citizen* should have been published before *In the Ditch*. But, as I have explained earlier, *In the Ditch* just happened.

The language in *Second Class Citizen* is chattier, like that of someone making out a case. Even though I was bitter, I was becoming slightly guilty because I was making a success out of my life. Somehow there is that thread of belief in Christianity which makes one believe that this world is a place for suffering. And if one does not suffer all the time, one is destined for the everlasting fire. We all know that the Bible says that 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God'. I knew even then that one should not take all that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount too literally, especially when one sees the very rich living rich and dying rich in the developed part of the world. Yet, that doubt had been sown in me, and however much I tried to quell it, it would pop up in some rather embarrassing situations. So because of this and for many other reasons I felt I had to tell my readers my background, as a means of justifying whatever goodies I was having at the moment. By the time I was nearing the end of the book, I had completely fallen out with my first publishers, so I thought it would never be published anyway. So I went all out, and in my own brand of English, for I had somehow forgotten the Cockney language I mastered when I was living at the Pussy Cat Mansions. Much later, many people saw some similarities of form between *Second Class Citizen* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. All I can say is that I write in what I consider my own style and choose my subjects in my own way. If there is any resemblance to the Dickensian models, then it is purely accidental. But maybe it is not so accidental because, like all secondary school children in English Colonial Africa, we knew most of Dickens' work almost parrot fashion. So our brand of English still sounds like that of these early masters, and very much like what one hears over the World Service of the BBC. I think that is one of the reasons I can never write a book like *In the Ditch* again. I learnt, and was forced to speak the London accent then for the sake of survival. If I had started to speak my classical biblical cum Dickensian English then, I would have gone under.

Because I have fallen out with my first publishers, all well-known publishers refused to accept *Second Class Citizen*. So my hope of making a living from writing was dashed even before it was born. I then took to

teaching to supplement my income, still hoping that one day I would be published. When it did come, I was this time cautious in my enthusiasm. But the book was well received and brought me again into the lime-light. I find it very difficult to cope with publicity. Many people would find this difficult to believe, but it is true that if I could afford not to appear at any launching or the post-mortem interviews that follow publications, I would do so. But one has to do these things to please one's publishers. And because of this publicity, my relationship with people became very difficult. I got bored with the boring ones very easily. I can now afford to avoid such people, but before I had to put up with them, because otherwise I would be friendless, alone. I was learning to enjoy being alone in order to be able to gather my thoughts. I soon gave up teaching for it was affecting my work. I could no longer cope with the staff-room situation, with the children, and especially with the fact that I had to teach Social Sciences, a subject I was growing disenchanted with. I did not mind giving talks on these subjects once in a while, but to keep talking about them every day to children who in most cases would rather be working and earning some money was just too bad. I felt I'd had enough. I went into Community Work, and the same thing happened. Then Camden Borough told me they were closing my branch of Mother and Toddler's Club and would I like to go and work in Kilburn, another part of London. I refused. I was going to set up on my own. I was going to be a full-time writer.

It was a precarious type of living, it can still be, especially if one has five growing children to feed, but like everything I was determined to do, I stuck it out. I am happy I did, because I think I became more relaxed, I became the type of dream mother I had been wanting to be with my children, and I could afford to indulge in my thoughts and was able to write about anything that came into my head.

I am glad I wrote *Second Class Citizen*. Because with that book, all my bitterness evaporated. I remember when I gave an interview to a young journalist on that book, she cried all through when I tried to relive all that I had gone through. Sophisticated and very modern people kept asking me, 'Why did you stay in such a marriage for so long?' The simple answer was that I was not brought up to think that there was any other life for a respectable Christian woman. I now know better; writing that book was therapy, and from the hundreds of letters I have received from women all over the world, I am equally glad to know that it has helped many women.

I did not start as a feminist. I do not think I am one now. Most of my readers would take this to be the statement of a coward. But it is not. I

thought before that I would like to be one, but after my recent visit to the United States, when I talked to real 'Feminists' with a capital 'F', I think that we women of African background still have a very very long way to go before we can really rub shoulders with such women. Their ideas are so far ahead. For example, I met a group of women in California who wanted their state to make legal the idea of two women living together. I begged them not to come to Nigeria or to many parts of Africa with such a message. The men would not throw them out, the women would.

What I am doing is writing social documentary novels, based upon what I have seen and experienced in my part of Africa. If the men folk think this is Feminism, then I am a Feminist. But whatever they think, would not deter me from writing about what I see, and how I feel — that marriage should not be the only career left to women, it should be one of the careers; and that if it fails, the woman should not be labelled a social failure and be rejected by her people and his people; that in marriage, no one has the right to own the other to such an extent that one becomes the nodding shadow of the head of the family; that I would like to see social services developed, and that mothers should be given what is called 'Family Allowance' in Britain. I don't know if I could have raised my children without the little social benefit I received. I also felt that women should be economically independent so that they do not have to choke their growing children with responsibility, so much so that the children are not able to develop to their full potentiality.

I know the men would say 'what of us?' Well, this may be so. But most of Africa is a man's kingdom, with the exception of parts of Southern Africa where women have to own the land because the men are busy working in the mines. Such men are still busy fighting for their freedom, and the women there cannot talk of real freedom until the men are free, or so they say. But I am beginning to see South African women who are fighting at the same time for their own liberation.

I still think it is a mistake to suppress half the population of a country just because the other half wants to remain supreme all the time. It is such a waste, and if all human beings are allowed to achieve their full potential, in all walks of life, the country would not lose, but gain by it. India's Indira Gandhi, Britain's Margaret Thatcher are two examples of women who have reached the highest offices in their countries. So, my sisters in America, I am not shunning your advanced help, in fact I still think women of Africa need your contribution, and at the same time we need our men. Only we have to stay within the system and fight or nag from within it. I still think that there is nothing as beautiful as a very compatible marriage. Some lucky women's closest friends are their

husbands. I have seen this as well, in the 1980s. In short, my novels cover most of the above-mentioned social topics. They may progress to a more political level, but for the moment, I keep to the day-to-day problems of the community life of women in the villages and the cities of Africa south of the Sahara.

After *Second Class Citizen*, I told myself that I would write a completely imaginative work. I went back to my ancestral home in Ibusa and set up a love story which I thought was going to be a master-piece. I thought this was going to be the best work I had ever produced. I was very sentimental about this book because it was the first one I had written, but it had been burnt by my husband because he thought it would be an embarrassment to his family, because my bride price had not been paid then. Incidentally, his mother paid my bride price five years after I had left him. Poor kind lady, she thought that would bring me back and 'settle' me down, because our people thought that there must be something wrong with my head to keep living the way I did. A well-meaning aunt said to me once when she came to visit me in London, 'Have you ever heard a woman say «no» to her husband, «I do not want you»? It is an abomination. Never say a thing like that. Only men have the right to say «no, I do not want you» to their wives. So, Buchi, stop saying that, and stop pouring sand into the eyes of us, your relatives.' As usual I agreed with her, but when she had gone, Buchi went on being Buchi. I just can't help it. Maybe there is something really wrong, but whatever it is, I am happy to live with it.

So back to *The Bride Price*. It was romantic. I put in all the romance my life lacked. And because I felt I was having life too easily, I had to kill Akunna, the heroine, just as I felt I should have died for marrying someone who did not pay my bride price, because I was being modern and a Christian. Again, like *Second Class Citizen*, after this book I stopped yearning for romance in real life. I seemed to have captured it all and poured it into that book, just as I have poured all my anger into *Second Class Citizen*. And to think I started writing *The Bride Price* as an imaginative piece of work. Come to think of it, is there anything like a completely imaginative work?

The first chapter of *The Bride Price* was my father's burial. We lived in that street, all the people even retain their real names. My first visit to Ibusa was like that, but I omitted the most painful experience, the clitorisation. In fact it is the first time I am bringing that into any book, because it is autobiographical in a much closer sort of way. The rest of the book are bits of things that happened here and there, but which I brought together. I do not always agree with the way my people treat

those whose ancestors happened to be slaves and who in some cases have lived with us for many generations. And during my school holidays I used sometimes to go and live with my kind relative and his family, the Halims at Ughelli Government College. That gave me the scene of Akunna's death.

Funnily enough, I wrote this book thinking that, apart from it being my best, it would be my first published in Africa, Nigeria. But the book did not bring me the accolade I thought it would. It just goes to show that public opinion is such a difficult horse to back. When you think they'll go this way, it's then that they go the other way. One critic said, 'This book is Romeo and Juliet African style.' I hope this proves to be so in the future. But what I know is that all African teenagers who have read all my books, or most of them, think that *The Bride Price* is still my best. What do I think of it now? I sometimes feel like throwing up after reading it. I hate the sight of it, and *In the Ditch* as well. I don't know why. I am happy I wrote those books when I did, because I could not imagine myself ever being so stupidly romantic. Have I grown harder? I don't know. All I know is that I have become very pragmatic.

Some of the subject matter of *The Bride Price* spilled over into a play I wrote for BBC Television. But by the time *A Kind of Marriage* appeared, I had had time to read *The Bride Price* in full, and I saw how romantic and girlish my thoughts had been. So the heroine in this play wanted her individuality in her marriage. And she got it, because she contributed equally to the family purse. She did not have to die because she failed her husband in not having many sons.

From then on, I think I started becoming an adult. My style was still unadorned, and though I keep telling myself that I shall really make it sophisticated one day, by now I have learnt that I never will. That type of racing, no nonsense, chatty style is now me, I talk that way, and I write that way.

That play for the BBC, coupled with another one I wrote for British Commercial Television, and the accumulated royalties from the other three books, gave me enough money to put down-payment on a fairly large terrace house in London. This was a psychological boost, even though it was like a white elephant that first year. Luckily, people began to realize that my writing and speech were identical, racy, sardonic and trenchant; in other words, I could lecture as well as write. A little income started to trickle in that way, too. It paid many a bill, and still does.

After *The Bride Price*, I did *The Slave Girl*. This was then the most tortuous. For the first time, I wrote without having seen the setting of the book. For the first time, I had to research my location, and for the first

time I had to recall the story my mother told me of her life. Then I included an idea I had thought out about Victorian Christianity being a double yoke for the African woman. Before the arrival of the colonial masters, she was not treated as an equal, but she had a place of respect in her family, and if she happened to be the head wife, her position was very prestigious. Readers of Chinua Achebe will remember in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo's senior wife was invited to drink the palm wine her husband has left. She accepted this gratefully and on bended knees. The younger wives did not qualify to drink the husband's leftovers. It was a great honour accorded the senior wife. But Christianity, the Victorian version, took this little prestige away from the African woman. So in *The Slave Girl*, the African woman around 1902 was better off in slavery than in some kind of Christian marriage.

This book, which was almost all imaginative, was the most difficult one to write and therefore, I had thought, would be the most difficult one to read. Even one of my publishers had moaned, 'There is not much story line in this book,' and I agreed with him. Well, it won me two awards, the Jock Campbell and the Caribbean. By coincidence, the Jock Campbell Award was given by *The New Statesman*, the very magazine with which I had served my apprentice days. But by this time, they were a different set of people. Things do change so fast. None of them even remembered who I was when the award was given.

Chronologically speaking, *The Slave Girl* is the earliest book I have written. I decided that I would not write a story so far back again until I had visited Nigeria and spoken to the old people still living. So I came nearer to my own lifetime; that was the war years. The grass cutter in *Joy's of Motherhood* was a distant uncle I used to know, but apart from that and some of the scenes in the loco-yard, the rest of the book was imaginative. But you know my kind of imagination — mostly based on places I have seen, or heard of.

My own children are now approaching adulthood, and as a warning to myself to practise what I preach and not to be the type of parent who would say 'After all I have done for you' I warn parents, mothers in particular, that the joy of being a parent is just the joy of having children and looking after them. If a parent expects reward as our grand-parents did, then they are asking too much. Things have changed. It now takes years of education to make a modern adult. Not like before when a lad of sixteen would shoulder his family's responsibilities. But if one is lucky to have a child that remembers and is grateful, then that is an added bonus. The joy of motherhood is the joy of giving all to one's children. The moral for the modern woman is that whilst giving all, one should

keep something, some self-respect, preferably a career, or a business. It is unfair to expect young people to give up their lives and come to look after their old people. Having said that, I don't mean that Africa should give up the idealistic community life we have so perfected, so much so that it has now become the envy of many parts of the world. Wherever possible the old person or parent should live with her family, as a member of the extended family, and contribute to the richness of her family.

I now notice that whilst writing this, another type of granny is creeping into our social scene. This is the granny who is too busy with her social group and her church duties to have any time for her grand-children.

Well, I don't write to change the world, nor to preach. I write about the world I know and the way I see it, so that others can read about it. I may not be one hundred percent right, nor even right at all, but above all things I know I must always be true to myself. If this type of independent modern old people are going to be the grannies of the future, well, who am I to change things? All I know and pray for is that the African medical sphere should develop enough to give adequate care to these people, care that perhaps my own generation will be needing. But in *Joy of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego died alone, whilst her children were still abroad, still working to become modern people.

The four children's books I have written follow the lines outlined above about my adult works, but simplified. *Titch the Cat*, a book for twelve to thirteen-year-olds, is based on the observations of my eleven-year-old daughter about our family pet, Titch. Some African critics have said that this is a highly Westernised book, because Titch does not eat mice, but is fed on commercial cat food. But, as I said earlier, I write about things as I see them. As I have never looked after a cat that feeds on mice, I can't write about one that does. *Nowhere to play* is again based on the observations of my twelve-year-old daughter, Christy. This is a problem for children living in some council flats in London — the problem of having nowhere to play. The other two books, *The Wrestling Match* and *The Moonlight Bride*, are very imaginative. The location of *The Wrestling Match* is fictitious. The place Akpei never existed, but I used this book to show young people that in any war or friendly fight that goes sour, nobody wins. This brings in the subject of my post-graduate research in London, the Youth Problem. People might say that Nigerian youth do not present problems, but many of them who could not get university places would not go back to the farms. They become big problems to their people until they accept their places and settle down in different kinds of apprenticeships. This book is for older children. *The Moonlight Bride* is a village tale, almost like *The Bride Price*, but with

no soppy romance. The heroine, an albino, is accepted as a bride because she is warm and cheerful, so much so that people forget her colour and call her 'Alatiriki' (electricity that has brought light to her husband's village, Odanta). I tried to touch the beauty of community life, and I hope I succeeded. These two books for young adults were commissioned especially by Oxford University Press for young African school children.

Most of my books are written about things and places I have known as a child. And thank goodness, I have a very good memory and can remember embarrassing details about things. But the danger was that I should start being nostalgic about events, so much so that I would start to romanticise them.

Because I was still not able to go to Africa and write from there, I started writing a war novel, *Destination Biafra*, which has now been published. The story is based on the civil war in Nigeria. I was here at the time but, funnily enough, those of us in London knew so much more about the war than many Nigerians living there. We had the comprehensive coverage by the British media, we demonstrated several times at Trafalgar Square, we collected money, and helped in so many ways. And when it was over, we talked to many people, and of course our families supplied their own versions. I remember an aunt gasping when I told her all I knew about the war. She said, 'I thought the war was only fought between the Ibos and the rest of Nigeria. How come you know about the massacre in Ibusa and Asaba? We never thought the news could reach you.' The news did reach us, and it still makes my heart bleed to realize that the financial sacrifices most of us Ibos, both eastern and western Ibos, made, have never reached the people for whom they were intended. To even know that some people grew rich out of that war! Maybe that was a lesson Nigeria needed to learn.

By now, I have become an established writer. *The Guardian* described me some time ago as a first-generation immigrant writing in London. And in America they say I am a Nigerian writer living in London. Nigerian papers still call me a Nigerian writer. I do not dispute all these categorizations, I do not even mind being called an African writer, even though many of my colleagues reject this because they claim it has a patronising ring. Well, maybe it has. All I know is that I am doing my work the best way I know how. But when people start disputing whether to regard me as an English writer writing about Africa, or to regard me as an African writing in English, I then know it is time to go home, or, if this is not possible, it is time to pay a long visit to Africa. Maybe my ideas are becoming too Europeanised.

I could stay here and not travel or visit Africa and specialise in writing about the black problem in England. But I don't want to. I feel more at home writing about the clear sand of the mid-western Ibo land, the plaintive voice of the evening announcer and the emptiness of the Eke markets after the people and the dancers have gone.

I shall for ever be a Nigerian writer working in Britain, for after all who can sniff eighteen years of one's life as nothing. And of course where one's family is and where they are happy, there will be, for ever, one's Shangri-La.

But as a child I have washed in the Atakpo stream. I have eaten the bitter crabs from Iyabi, I have eaten the Ukpa during the Ine festival, and have danced my fathers' burial dance in the Eke market. These are my roots. And I feel I must go back there, live there, and tell the world through my books about the way we do our things.

Editor's note: Since writing this, Buchi Emecheta spent a year at Calabar. She has now returned to London.



Buchi Emecheta. Photo: Kirsten Holst Petersen.