

1995

In the Ditch

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Pamela J. Olúbùnmi, "In the Ditch" (1995). *Goodrich Scholarship Faculty Publications*. 23.
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IN THE DITCH

Author: Buchi Emecheta (1944-)

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Bildungsroman
Time of plot: The late 1960's

Locale: The slums of North London

First published: 1972

Principal characters:

ADAH, a young Nigerian sociology student rearing five small children by herself

THE LAND LORD, a mean-spirited and hostile man

MRS. DEVLIN, a kindly Irish woman who lives above the landlord's flat

WHOOPEY, a lonely, dependent, single mother of two children

MRS. Cox, Whoopey's mother

MRS. COOK, a Jamaican mother of five children who chooses to live without welfare assistance

THE SMALLS, a quarrelsome family consisting of Mr. Small, his wife, and his mother, Granny

CAROL, a lonely, overweight, patronizing officer employed by the Welfare Council

MR. PERSIAL, a patronizing, middle-class council clerk

Form and Content

Originally written as a collection of "observations" and published serially in *The New Statesman*, *In the Ditch*, Buchi Emecheta's first novel, is discussed almost always only in relation to *Second Class Citizen* (1974), its rightful chronological predecessor. Like its companion piece, *In the Ditch* is heavily autobiographical, following Emecheta's own descent into the "ditch" of welfare living and enforced dysfunctionality.

Adah, the protagonist of the novel, is an intelligent, hardworking woman who has to fight against considerable odds to keep from being driven insane by the degrading welfare system. The story chronicles her struggle to maintain her pride and dignity as a welfare recipient and her keen desire for independence for herself and her children. The novel begins at the point when Adah is newly separated from her husband. Alone and vulnerable, she battles the squalid conditions of the rat- and cockroach-infested room that she is forced to rent from an unethical landlord who uses his "juju" wiles to terrorize her and her children. Faced with a choice between one of two evils—enslavement and exploitation by the landlord on the one hand or a prisonlike existence of welfare living at the Pussy Cat Mansions—Adah opts for the latter, which she argues offers a qualified independence. The story concentrates on Adah's indoctrination to the slum life of the welfare system and chronicles her struggle to support and rear her children alone. Despite her desperation at the beginning of the novel, Adah is introduced as an ambitious evening-school student of

sociology and a civil service librarian at the British Museum with middle-class and creative aspirations.

The burdens of an obviously stressful financial situation, parenting five small children between the ages of eight years and four months old, and the wiles of an unsympathetic and exploitative landlord set up a predictably negative framework for the novel. The novel's gloominess is evident in the constraining alternatives open to Adah and the desperate choices that she must make. Adah is inexorably pauperized as she must give up her job at the British Museum to qualify for the dole and membership in the ditch-dwellers' community. Consequently, the focus of Adah's story becomes the inevitable acceptance and rejection of the welfare system and its devastating psychological effect, which ironically is to dominate Adah's life and education literally and figuratively as a sociology student. The welfare system of council housing comes under scrutiny in a love-hate relationship. Adah's indoctrination into the slum life of the Pussy Cat Mansions estate chronicles the descent of bright, able-bodied, capable, and otherwise productive people such as Adah into the inevitable dependency inherent in the welfare system.

Officialdom defines the Mansions by dysfunctionality, by "problem families" who are characteristically large, possibly belonging to a minority group, and often headed by single parents, usually by "failed and rejected women" living on the dole and belonging to no particular class. It is to the oppressive hierarchy of this cult of ditch-dwellers that Adah must learn to yield and play dumb in spite of her pride. Survivor that she is, she learns to play the game just well and long enough to emerge from the experience more admirable, dignified, respectable and wholesome than any of the other ditch-dweller.

Analysis

Three central issues pervade Emecheta's writing: the oppression of women (especially African women), education as the means of their emancipation, and the effects of the conflict between tradition and Western influences on their development. Her central intention is to explore and protest the roots of women's oppression. This is a personal crusade. What she has uncovered and relentlessly critiqued in all of her novels is the enslavement of women by institutions in the private and public spheres: from welfare states that pauperize and deskill women to the insidious institution of slavery, the oppressive institution of marriage, and the martyrdom of motherhood. *In the Ditch* chronicles a series of journey-flights that the protagonist makes from one form of bondage to another, from a failed marriage to the den of an exploitative landlord to the demeaning snare of a welfare system.

In the Ditch illustrates the enslaving power of poverty, the symbolic embodiment of a caste system based on race, sex, class, and property. The society depicted is menacing to the poor, the economically deprived, and the uneducated, particularly women—the single, unsupported "mums." Emecheta's purpose is to present the hierarchy of the Pussy Cat Mansion as a microcosm of the oppressive hierarchies of society at large. The culture of poverty has its own hierarchy, its own protocol for socialization, and its own value system. If the blows of the treacherous Nigerian landlord's terrorism and exploitation have merely bruised Adah's self-esteem, then the verbal lashing with which the Mansions' white plumber, Mr. Small, indoctrinates Adah to Mansions living puts black, African, and female Adah in her place.

The hierarchy plays out entrenched attitudes and expectations. Adah quickly learns the characteristics of the culture of ditch-dwelling: forced unemployment, dependency, lack of initiative, dole lines, hopelessness, and overbreeding in an unhealthy community of unloved, neglected single mums. Although a camaraderie develops—a collective of sorts—among the women

which allow them to cope with the bleakness of their situation and perhaps win some improvements here and there, the fragile basis of such group solidarity is ineffectual in the face of an indifferent, powerful welfare system. It is precisely for this reason that Adah feels compassion for the ditch-dweller mums but cannot bring herself to identify fully with them or their lot.

Steeling herself against the destructiveness of institutionalized dependency, with its inherent self-defeating inclinations of alcohol, overbreeding, and overeating, Adah reminds herself that her superior education, her goal to be a writer, her previous experience as a one-time wage earner, and her current status as a sociology student are her only guarantees to escaping the ditch-hence Emecheta's realism, her contention that the potential for choice rests ultimately with women. Where the ditch-dwellers such as Whoopey and Mrs. Cox continue to look to the system for their emancipation, Adah and perhaps the Jamaican Mrs. Cook entertain no delusions or faith in the welfare system to bring about equality or social change. Emecheta's vision of women's emancipation is fairly clear: Individual initiative, determination, and education are the liberating forces for transcending oppression and enslavement.

Adah's move to a new matchbox maisonette flat across from the famous Regent's Park, where "her own working-class council estate was cheek by jowl with expensive houses and flats belonging to successful writers and actors," symbolizes the triumph of the artistic and creative resourcefulness, empowering Adah to resist appropriating the ditch-dweller status of the welfare system. This final journey, though underscored by procrastination, chronicles Adah's emergence from the psychological ditch of dependence. Thus, despite the pervasive pessimism of Emecheta's prose, delineated by the ditch metaphor the work offers crucial hope in its simple philosophy of indestructible strength of will. Although criticized for its thinness of style and simple language, and therefore rarely discussed, *In the Ditch* and its companion piece, *Second Class Citizen*, are important because they constitute the first *Bildungsroman* by a woman writer in African literature.

Context

Along with fellow second-generation African woman writer Mariam Ba, from Senegal, Buchi Emecheta has been described as a sustained and vigorous voice of feminist protest. Emecheta has dramatized in eight novels the entire realm of African women's experience: childhood, family, marriage and arranged marriages, perpetual pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, widowhood, and polygamy. While she has pointedly disclaimed any feminist consciousness in her writing, many critics have avowed that her novels teem with a feminism more poignantly articulated than many avowed Western feminist novelists. Unlike first-generation writers of the 1960's—Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, and Rebeka Njau—Emecheta departed from the common themes of childlessness and marriage to the more complex issues of racism and sexism in a modern society in which tradition and modernization are at a crossroads. Her denial of conscious feminist writing not only has raised the issue of the genesis of African feminism but also has brought into focus the dire need for an African women's history, one which will historicize the important events in the lives of African women that colonialism has conveniently omitted.

Like her subsequent novels, *In the Ditch* provides a feminine perspective on the social issues of racism, injustice, the welfare state, and women and the culture of poverty. Compared to her predecessors' portrayal of African women, Emecheta's women characters are more profoundly sketched and better articulated. While her African women may still be marginalized by gender realities, they certainly are not depicted as the stock, stereotypic characters often found in portrayals by African male writers or the first-generation women writers. With Emecheta, characterization means not only recognizing the female stereotypes but also revealing sensitively

and clear-sightedly how her female characters are both living out and transcending these stereotypes. Characteristic of her portraiture is a sense of identification with her characters-an identification nurtured by her personal experience of marginality- which enables her to articulate Nigerian women's reality both objectively and in the context of an ever-evolving culture.

In this regard, the immediacy of her women characters' existence and the articulation of their oppression challenge the masculinist practice of dismissing women in Nigerian and other African literatures as a monolithic unit. Also, all of her novels add a holistic and humanized (as opposed to a simply feminized) dimension to Nigerian and African literatures. While Emecheta demonstrates unequivocally women's ability to choose and to execute their choices, she is aware through her own marginalization of her strong, independent characters that social changes to a patriarchal mind-set provoke a backlash. *In the Ditch* began a tradition of the female *Bildungsroman* and unapologetic protest in African literature.

Sources for Further Study

Brown, Lloyd W. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. A compilation of essays on the contribution of African women writers-the "other voices, the unheard voices"-to African literature. The introductory chapter gives a broad survey of African women writers and their articulation of the female experience. Chapter 2 offers an excellent introduction to the curious indifference to female voices of protest. Chapter 3 provides criticism of Emecheta's first five novels.

Frank, Katherine. "The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *World Literature Written in English* 21 (Fall, 1982): 476-497. An extensive critical examination of the protest tradition of Emecheta's novels, with particular attention to her fourth novel *The Slave Girl* (1977). Frank tends to argue for a strictly feminist reading of Emecheta's account of African womanhood.

Katrak, Ketu H. "Womanhood/Motherhood: Variation on a Theme in Selected Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22, no. 1 (1987): 159-170. Discusses the major theme of Emecheta's concern in her major novel especially *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Porter Abio eh M. "Second Class Citizen: The Point of Departure for Understanding Buchi Emecheta's Major Fiction." *The International Fiction Review* 15, no. 2 (Summer, 1988): 123-129. Argues against the persistent attempt by some Western scholars to read many of Emecheta's novels only within the feminist tradition. Demonstrates the danger of focusing almost exclusively on her feminist themes at the expense of the universality of her novel. Discusses *Second Class Citizen* the companion piece to *In the Ditch*, as a powerful example of the *Bildungsroman* in Africa.

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