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Gift of Motherhood: A Critical Perusal of Mrs. Thurlow in H.E.Bates'

Ox and Adah Obi in Buchi Emecheta's Second Class Citizen

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Abstract: Herbert Ernest Bates' depiction of Mrs. Thurlow is a peculiar portrait- a mother who like a dumb sufferer toiled hard with an eye to securing her sons' future. Her daily drudgery is certainly tantamount to the dull, painstaking and strenuous effort of an ox drawing a loaded cart or working at a mill. But her endless pain coupled with her endurance remains unrewarded; her sacrifice and her gift of motherhood to some extent are relegated to the background. On the other hand, Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is inundated with Adah's struggle only to abut her success to schooling as Emecheta herself struggled a lot to gain education. Thorned by her struggle, she remains stout and resolute not only for herself but also for her children and her first novel (*The Bride Price*), her 'brainchild'. This paper seeks to explore Mrs. Thurlow's unswerving motherhood for the amelioration of her sons' future and Adah's undaunted motherhood for her children and her 'brainchild'. This paper also manifests whether both Mrs. Thurlow and Adah are worthy enough of being rewarded and gifted for their motherhood.

Keywords: Motherhood, Phallic control, Endless pain, Brainchild, Hidden possibilities.

Expounds Henry Miller in his Preface of *Seven by Five*; *Stories* by H.E.Bates-

"...I find –an obsession with pain. Pain stretched to the breaking point, pain prolonged beyond all seeming endurance .This element is usually called forth in connection with heroic behaviour. Perhaps it is the supreme mark of the hero ,this ability to endure pain.With Mr. Bates I feel that it goes beyond the point of the heroic ;it carries us into some other dimension .Pain takes on the aspects of space and time ,a continuum or perpetuum which one finally questions no longer."

(*Seven by Five*, Preface)



The aforesaid lines are preponderant for Mrs.Thurlow's life- a life of continuous drudgery and complete dutifulness. Daily drudgery, muses she, is the very linchpin of her existence. Sine any question and complaint from the very early morning to the late night, she toils and toils making herself an embodiment of an Ox. Bates has rightly pointed out- "She did not think of going beyond the four lines which made up the square of her life." (Seven by Five, 120). Henry Miller is of the notion- "There is another virtue...that is the author's feeling for women. With a few deft strokes-like a painter again -we are given their peculiar grace, character and utter femininity." (Seven by Five, Preface) Mrs.Thurlow with a strong and laborious soul is destined to be tormented and tortured endlessly, bristling with 'peculiar grace, character and utter femininity'. Her endless pain becomes 'continuum or perpetuum', going beyond her ephemeral entity.

Mrs.Thurlow's dream is to bedight the future for her sons and her only ambition is to set them up in some decent occupations, in a situation that would be much beyond her poor, hard and dull world. As H.E. Bates construes, "Yet many a good short story has characters who never open their lips." (The Modern Short Story, 19), Mrs.Thurlow is a calm ,impassive ,extremely hardy and steady worker who does not do anything for her own self -for her personal interest or gain, convenience or comfort and pleasure. She never opens her 'lips'to give expressions to her pangs but the toughness of her nerves speaks volume of her pangs and pain.

"There was a division in herself, the one part stolid and uncomplaining in perpetual labour, the other fretful and almost desperate in an anxiety to establish a world beyond her own." (Seven by Five, 122). A mother is desperate to build the future of her sons; a mother is anxious for her sons' career and to decorate a world where her sons can gain fame.To cap it all, this 'world' here is only for her sons. But she has reaped only the harvest of frustration. Having drudged continuously, she has saved something for her offspring but her husband has stolen her money and died under the sentence of the court on the charge of a murder. Still she tries to dream big for her sons. She sends them to her brother's house so that they may shun and avert scandal involving their father. This is how a mother can protect her offspring from the impending disaster.



However, the loss of her hard-earned money and the demise of her husband hardly irk Mrs. Thurlow. She can withstand the blow and wreck caused by her tipsy husband but how can she tolerate the fatal blow hurled to her by her sons? How can she withstand the destruction of her Utopian World built for her sons? She still remains calm and does not open her 'lips'. Moreover she does not exert any pressure on her sons when they want to stop permanently with their uncle.

'You (Mrs. Thurlow's sons) want to go'? The carpenter (Mrs. Thurlow's brother) said. 'Or do you want to stay here?' 'Here,' the elder boy said. 'We want to stop here'. 'You're sure o' that'? 'Yes,' the other said. Mrs. Thurlow stood silent. She could think of nothing to say in protest or argument or persuasion. Nothing she could say would, she felt, give expression to the inner part of herself. (*Seven by Five*, 136)

Henry Miller observed-"But no matter how much one is made to suffer, one closes his books with a lasting sensation of beauty .And this sense of beauty, it seems to me, is evoked by the author's unswerving acceptance of life."(*Seven by Five*, Preface).Mrs. Thurlow perhaps realizes this beauty –she has accepted the denial of her sons and she "had seemed to be pushing forward into the future, she now felt as if were pushing forward into nowhere."(*Seven by Five*, 137).Miss Elizabeth Bowen opines-"The first definition of the short story, at the set out, is necessariness.

The story, that is to say, must spring from an impression or perception pressing enough, acute enough ,to have made the writer write"(*The Modern Short Story* ,16). Mrs. Thurlow's unswerving motherhood perhaps has made Bates to write this story full of agony and pathos.

Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is based on the struggle of Adah who aspires to be a writer and her aspiration confronts the forces of her egotistical and stubborn husband and that of a European white society.

However, in Nigeria, women are not equal to their male counterparts because a man can promptly act economically without consulting his wife in most family affairs. Women's suggestions are traditionally taken into consideration, but sometimes neglected. These women in Nigeria with other African women mostly housewives are disrespected, discriminated, and are victims of violence based on gender. (Nwankwo & Ibe,2013)



Keeping the aforementioned lines in view, it can be averred that Buchi Emecheta through her protagonist Adah has depicted the subjugation of Igbo women in this novel. Adah is a disappointment to her parents and no one felt the need of recording her birth only because she was girl---“She was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant”. (Second Class Citizen, chapter.1)

Her dauntless spirit and her vigilant “Presence” (Second Class Citizen, chapter.1) helped her lot to go to school although “Boys were usually given preference. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still discussions 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.”(Second Class Citizen, chapter.1). Adah subverts the so-called image of ‘fragile women’ mentioned by Peter Okoro Nwankwo & Patrick Ikechukwu Ibe (“Traditionally, women are considered sacred and fragile, and are respected mostly on the grounds of their gender and housekeeping duties”) by dint of her constant urge of being a writer and to study in United Kingdom.

Adah’s hasty marriage with Francis, all on a sudden, acts like a blessing in disguise since she ponders over the fact that marriage is the only way for her to get a good job and to save money for her study in United Kingdom. But Francis becomes a large part of her onus and in England he remains unemployed only to father four children in rapid succession as proof of his vim and vitality .Remi Akujobi has rightly explicated—“Motherhood in Africa is seen as a God-giving role and for this reason it is sacred. In this sense, Ngcobo believes that generally Africans take

motherhood to be all about children, as she puts it: ‘every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman’s fertility to the husband’s family group’.”(Akujobi, 2011)

For Francis “marriage was sex and lots of it, nothing more” (Second Class Citizen, chapter.3). When Adah was expecting her third one, she had to undergo a medical examination for her job since no pregnant woman could come by this coveted job (thereby negating and denigrating the motherhood).But Adah cheated the doctor by hiding her pregnancy and thus she valued her motherhood, deconstructing



the norms of the society. Francis “blamed her for the baby and was sure she would lose the job because there was to be a medical examination. Adah was scared about this, but she was determined to get that job” (Second Class Citizen, chapter.3). On the other hand, she herself fought for her termination of pregnancy since she wants to control her productivity. Her denial of the motherhood here symbolizes her own individual who can think and act freely, pulverizing the so-called norms and customs.”It is traditional religion, customs, norms and folkways that take precedence” (Nwankwo & Ibe, 2013). Francis thoroughly opposes the decision of birth– control saying that men know how to control themselves and started blaming her for having affairs behind his back .His negation inwardly hints at the fear of losing the Phallic Control over motherhood .Keeping it in mind, one can assume that motherhood is determined by the patriarchal society and it uses motherhood as a tool to dictate womanhood.

In hospital Adah “thought and thought again. Why Francis had never given her a present .After all, she had given him this Mohammed Ali of a son .After all, the son was going to carry his name, not hers, even though she was to carry the ugly Caesarean scars all her life .And what of the pain she was still going through? Yes, she deserved a present from Francis”(Second Class Citizen, chapter 9). Her gift of motherhood is gainsaid; only endless pain remains. Francis had given nothing to Adah save her children and when he was asked by the Magistrate for the maintenance of the children, he uttered—“I do not mind their being sent for adoption” (Second Class Citizen, chapter 13). But Adah affirms –“Do not worry sir. The children are mine, and that is enough .I shall never let them down as long as I am alive” (Second Class Citizen, chapter 13). Francis’ fatherhood is here a perfect foil to Adah’s motherhood.

“The more she (Adah) wrote, the more she knew she could write and the more she enjoyed writing. She was feeling this urge: Write; go on and do it, you can write”(Second Class Citizen, chapter 13). Her ‘brainchild,’ The Bride Price, was one of her children. Motherhood can be viewed here as a process where women are metamorphosed into a new being to comprehend her dormant soul and to give impetus to her hidden possibilities.

But Francis castigates and thoroughly nullifies her ‘brainchild’. He couldn’t but burn the manuscript of her novel by avowing –“You (Adah) keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black .The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast-feed her baby”(Second Class Citizen, chapter 13). For



Francis, women are born to be good mothers.

To put it in a nutshell, both Mrs. Thurlow and Adah are poor and dumb creatures who are destined to suffer and endure pain. Adah is deemed as a lone fighter who combats for her motherhood though “It is noteworthy to point out that interest in women’s equality in Nigeria is always constrained, perverse and archaic. The problems of women in Nigeria are viewed as inconsequential and attention to them is upsetting to the social order, resulting adversely with a chilling effect on women” (Nwankwo & Ibe, 2013). Both Adah and Mrs. Thurlow epitomize the sublime entity of a mother who can muffle her soul within at the cost of her sons but her gift is gainsaid.

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