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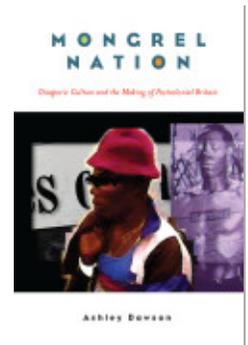
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## Beyond Imperial Feminism

### Buchi Emecheta's London Novels and Black British Women's Emancipation

IN 1979, THE YEAR THAT MARGARET THATCHER became prime minister of a demoralized and fractious nation, a groundbreaking national feminist group was formed at a conference in London. The Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) held a series of important annual conferences and generated a great deal of energy among activists before it split apart in 1983 over the group's failure to adopt an inclusive stance towards its lesbian members. Despite the brevity of OWAAD's life and its significant shortcomings, many black feminists now regard the group as a decisive formative influence because of its high profile as the first autonomous national organization for women of color in Britain. Among the organization's resonant position statements was the call for unity between women of African and Asian descent. While embracing expansive notions of solidarity derived from the Black Power movement in Britain, OWAAD nonetheless challenged the oppressive aspects of patriarchal black cultural traditions. In addition to interrogating sexism within the ranks of the antiracist movement, OWAAD activists also mounted a searing critique of the failure on the part of white feminists to address the forms of race and class oppression endured by black women in Britain.<sup>1</sup> The multifaceted nature of OWAAD's criticism angered many within both the antiracist and feminist movements, who believed the organization was creating

dangerous divisions that undermined the struggle against racism and sexism at a particularly trying time.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding such opposition, OWAAD and affiliated organizations such as Southall Black Sisters (SBS) made a strong impact not only on the feminist movement but also on progressive politics in general in Britain during the 1980s. Essays like Hazel Carby's "White Woman Listen!" offered a galvanizing challenge to both liberal and socialist feminists in Britain, pointing to the ethnocentrism of analytical terms such as *patriarchy* and to the consequent marginalization of black women's experience.<sup>3</sup> Carby's ringing call for autonomous organizing by black women emerged from and helped legitimate forums like OWAAD. In addition, Stuart Hall's important essay "New Ethnicities," which outlines the "end of the innocent black subject," similarly reflects the rise of black feminism.<sup>4</sup> Hall's response to groups such as OWAAD acknowledges the need for a new theoretical take on the nature of both subjectivity and political movements. Rather than seeing identity, black and otherwise, as a fixed category, Hall's work emphasizes the process of articulation through which diverse elements such as race, class, gender, and sexuality cohered to create composite but continuously evolving selves and political formations. This analytical perspective played an important role in challenging exclusionary definitions of citizenship popularized by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, suggesting that national identity had to be redefined in terms of cultural difference rather than insular stability.

Yet despite Hall's theoretical recognition of the implications of black feminism and Carby's clarion call for independent organizing, there have been few attempts to engage with the historical lineaments and legacy of the black British feminist movement until very recently. White historians and activists typically worried about why black women were alienated by mainstream feminism rather than concentrating on the autonomous achievements of women's groups like OWAAD.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis reflects the pervasive ethnocentrism that helped spark independent black feminist organizing in the first place. Even less attention has been devoted to the everyday life experiences of black women in Britain that contributed to the formation of feminist groups. If historians have now begun to document the legacy of groups like OWAAD and SBS, what is the prehistory to such organizations of autonomous collective mobilization? What barriers prevented black women from coming together in collective forums prior to the formation of OWAAD

and similar groups in the 1970s? Similarly, what links might be traced between the culture of political activism that developed among black women in the 1970s and 1980s and the efforts to discover individual voice and collective solidarity that preceded such activism?

Buchi Emecheta's London novels offer a particularly powerful point of departure to investigate such questions.<sup>6</sup> These novels are explicitly conceptualized as a form of documentary fiction that records the travails and coming-to-voice of a black woman in the metropolis during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her novels *Second-Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* and in the memoir *Head Above Water*, Emecheta offers a detailed portrait of everyday life in Britain prior to the emergence of the black feminist movement. Her work should not, however, be taken to represent the experience of all black women in Britain. Of course, there is always a temptation to place a burden of representation on a pioneer such as Emecheta, and to castigate her for depictions that may seem to affirm racist stereotypes of black identity. Some critics have, for instance, attacked this early work of Emecheta's, suggesting that its withering representation of African masculinity is a form of pandering to Western feminism.<sup>7</sup> While it is of course important to acknowledge that the black family is often an important site for refuge from a racist society, such objections tend to ignore the central burden of Emecheta's work—to reject images of black women as passive victims—and impose a homogeneous model of communal solidarity. This reaction foreshadows the nationalist response to black feminist attacks on inequality and gender power within the black community.<sup>8</sup> Emecheta's work and its reception thus anticipates one of the central conflicts faced by black feminism in the following decades.

In addition to challenging the oppressive aspects of certain African traditions, Emecheta is also unsparingly critical of the racism that characterized public life in Britain. Her work therefore offers an important record of the multiple forms of marginalization to which black women in the postcolonial metropolis were subjected. However, this double colonization was effected not simply through encounters with specific individuals, but also through the raced and gendered character of social citizenship in Britain. As the London trilogy documents, the British state sought to regulate poor women through the provision of social welfare benefits in ways that exacerbated gender- and race-based inequalities. As feminist critics were to argue subsequently, the post-1945 welfare state has a two-tiered character, treating men as workers

entitled to social insurance and women as “mothers” entitled to welfare benefits.<sup>9</sup> This bifurcated structure reinscribes the dominant organization of gender relations, as well as the public-private split, in family, community, and workforce. In an analogous way, welfare racism splits society along racial lines, denying black families access to even the meager protection offered by the social safety net.<sup>10</sup> Black and Asian women bear the brunt of both of these forms of institutional discrimination, lending extremely concrete definition to the concept of double colonization.

If, in other words, part of the aim of Emecheta’s London novels is to depict the efforts of her protagonist Adah to escape victimization within her marriage, an equally significant goal of the trilogy is to indict the institutional structure of social citizenship in Britain. The novels of the London trilogy do this by documenting the inequalities of access to welfare rights experienced by diasporic subjects. In addition, Emecheta’s work also depicts the dependency that the paternalistic British welfare state imposes on poor black women such as Adah when they do manage to gain access to benefits. Therefore, although Adah does not participate in any organized social movement, the fictional record of her experience includes a critique of key institutions such as the family and the state that were to figure prominently as targets of black feminist theory and activism in subsequent decades. Buchi Emecheta’s documentary fiction thus offers important insights into the way in which the political and theoretical priorities of black feminism emerged from the quotidian concerns of diasporic women in Britain. Implicit in the novels of Emecheta’s London trilogy is a critique that calls not simply for a more inclusive model of the imagined community of the nation, but also for the wholesale reformulation of social citizenship in a manner that intended to transform the institutional character of British identity.

#### *SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN: THE STRUGGLE TO ESCAPE EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY*

Although the bulk of *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta’s second novel, is set in Britain, the narrative begins with the birth of Adah Ofili in the growing postcolonial metropolis of Lagos, Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> Almost immediately, Emecheta’s narrator Adah informs us that she is not sure of her age. Adah calmly explains on the first page of her narrative that her fam-

ily had been expecting a boy; their disillusionment was so profound when a girl materialized instead that they failed to record the date of her birth (7). Emecheta uses this striking initial note to convey the sexist character of the Ofili clan's values, which are predicated on thoroughgoing male domination. But the iniquities that Adah endures as she grows up are not simply the product of African patriarchy, as the ideologues of colonialism tended to suggest as they sought to pulverize traditional kinship systems.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, the meritocracy established by the new postcolonial state, in which preference is given to those educated according to European standards, exacerbates the gender-based inequalities of the traditions that Adah's family brings with it when her parents migrate from rural Ibuza to Lagos. As a result, the family mobilizes its relatively scarce resources in order to educate Adah's brother rather than her, since it is assumed that, upon reaching maturity, she will be married off to another family (9). Any economic benefits that might accrue from Adah's education, Emecheta explains, will enrich her husband's family rather than the Ofili clan. Adah's travails therefore offer a postcolonial update of "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin's classic account of the structural logic behind marriage and the commodification of women's reproductive labor in traditional patriarchal kinship structures.<sup>13</sup> Emecheta's narrative demonstrates that, within the terms established by the conjunction of traditional patriarchal kinship patterns and a modernizing postcolonial state, there was an ironclad economic rationale behind women's subordination.

The experiences depicted in *Second-Class Citizen* suggest that structures of gender asymmetry are culturally specific, predicated on specific collisions between local kinship patterns and particular colonial and postcolonial states. It follows, then, that there can be no universal model of women's identity and oppression; Adah's experiences would not necessarily have been the same in another postcolonial country, or even in another part of Africa. This element of *Second-Class Citizen* underlines the distortions created by universalizing categories of women's identity. Dismantling the unitary category of "woman" was one of the central concerns of black feminism in Britain, for this model of identity allowed middle-class, white feminists to purport to speak for their oppressed "sisters" around the world. As Hazel Carby has remarked, such well-intentioned notions of solidarity were an ironic expression of the Enlightenment model of the universal human subject. Though supposedly liberatory, in practice this model of subjectivity

legitimated the suppression of all those aspects of culture and identity that did not conform to the norms established by the colonial power.<sup>14</sup> The different varieties of feminism that developed in Britain during the 1960s and 1970 inherited these attitudes, leading many white, middle-class feminists to adopt positions that mimicked colonial discourse. For example, mainstream feminist discourse tended to pathologize the black family in ways that evoked the eugenic discourses of imperial culture. This stance moved dominant feminism disturbingly close to the rhetoric of the right wing during the 1970s. In challenging such imperial feminism, writers like Emecheta and Carby underlined the differential impact of gender- and class-inequality on black and white women.

Imperial feminist models of universal sisterhood obscure the vastly different priorities not simply of affluent women in the developed nations and of poor women in developing countries, but of black and white women in Britain. Such issues are particularly important in the context of quasi-autobiographical work such as Emecheta's London novels since the genre was initially treated as a transparent vehicle for articulating an undifferentiated feminine identity.<sup>15</sup> Yet if Emecheta's depiction of postcolonial African sexism indicts the unified model of subjectivity that undergirded white, middle-class Western feminist models of sisterhood during the 1970s, *Second-Class Citizen* also challenges romantic representations of precolonial African tradition such as those cultivated by prominent advocates of negritude like Léopold Sédar Senghor. During the era of decolonization, Senghor and other male intellectuals advanced an idealized representation of precolonial Africa, one in which women, seen as repositories of inviolable cultural tradition, were consigned to the role of fecund mothers of the nation.<sup>16</sup> Emecheta's depiction of the oppression encountered by Adah lays bare the costs of negritude's ideological subordination of women. In challenging such depictions, Emecheta anticipates the critiques that black feminists were to articulate a decade later when they began to contest representations of their identity not simply in racist discourse but also in the patriarchal traditions of the black community.

The opening chapters of *Second-Class Citizen* offer a veritable pilgrim's progress of obstacles and setbacks. However, while describing the structures of subordination Adah encounters, the novel refuses to represent her purely as a victim. Instead, from the novel's first page, Adah speaks of a mysterious sense of Presence that directs her actions and often inspires her to engage in acts of defiance. We learn later that

Adah's father perceives her as the returned spirit of his beloved mother (13). The Presence that guides her throughout her life can thus be read as a link to previous generations of African women. This sense of a guiding presence prevents Adah from suffering the complete loss of self we witness in a novel such as Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*, in which the protagonist migrates to Britain as a young woman and, once there, crumbles under the weight of racism and sexism.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Riley's protagonist, whose identity crisis leaves her disoriented and paralyzed, Adah struggles endlessly to assert herself against great odds.

Foremost in the years of her youth is her determination to acquire an education. As a child, she absconds from home, walks to a local school, and defiantly informs the teacher that she's decided to attend classes (11). After her father dies, Adah's mother is inherited by her father's brother—a common practice among Ibos at the time—and Adah herself is sent to live in the household of her mother's elder brother. Here she must work to earn her keep, waking at 4:30 A.M. to fetch water from the public pump. Despite such obstacles, she keeps up her studies, permitted to do so by her uncle since her education will increase the dowry she fetches when she's eventually married off (17). Nevertheless, Adah must still defy authority in order to progress to higher levels of study. By drawing on the religious narratives to which she has been exposed while attending missionary schools, Adah is able to invert her sense of culpability for such defiance into a feeling of heroic martyrdom. Adah's pattern of steadfast striving amid tremendous suffering as a young girl is one that will characterize her experience throughout the novel. In spite of her later assertion that the Bible teaches women passivity and thereby exacerbates patriarchal African traditions (28), Christian tradition can evidently be appropriated in order to license acts of defiance. Adah's self-figuration as a heroic martyr parallels the transformation of biblical narratives that takes place within activist black religious traditions such as Rastafarianism, but this time with an expressly feminist twist.<sup>18</sup>

Adah's inversion of the dominant narrative of womanly submission is also exemplified in her marriage. Once she reaches adolescence, she must endure a barrage of elderly, overweight suitors as a result of the relatively high bride price her greedy family has set. Although they have done nothing to further her education, they now wish to capitalize on her accomplishments by collecting a fat dowry (23). In addition to limning the difficulty of escaping the grip of patriarchal tradition,

Emecheta's depiction of Adah also challenges notions of facile access to an autochthonous African feminism. Although her sense of an abiding Presence that guides her rebellion seems to suggest a link to such a feminist essence, it must be remembered that Adah gains this bond through her father. Similarly, in much of the rest of the novel, we see Adah struggling ceaselessly against structures of male supremacy while nevertheless identifying with and placing her trust in individual men. Indeed, so deeply does Adah internalize notions of male supremacy that she ends up directing much of her anger at the women who surround her rather than at the men who benefit most from the patriarchal structures of the extended Ibo family. This is due in part to the fact that, among extended kin groups, it is older women who are charged with social reproduction, which includes preparing their daughter for lives of domestic servitude.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Adah's rebellion against her allotted place in life initially targets her mother, whom she sees as complicit in perpetuating her subordination. "If it were not for Ma," Adah says, "Pa would have seen to it that I started school with Boy" (9). She evinces a surprising degree of satisfaction when the police, whom her mother has notified after Adah runs off to school, physically abuse her mother and berate her for her lax parenting. This incident may seem simply to exemplify Adah's growing sense of her own power and ability to effect change in the world. However, her animosity toward her mother is an attitude that is repeated frequently in *Second-Class Citizen*, contributing to a pattern of hostility toward other women that leaves Adah isolated and, consequently, far more easily subjected to the whims of her increasingly tyrannical husband. Emecheta's depiction of Adah thus grates against idealistic notions of women's inherent orientation toward community and solidarity with other women.<sup>20</sup> The bonds that Adah forges with women outside her immediate family in *Second-Class Citizen* are tenuous and extremely hard won.

Adah's isolation is evident as soon as she sets foot in Britain.<sup>21</sup> While living in Lagos, she has grown used to the life of an elite, educated woman, with many servants and a great deal of social status, despite her subordination within the Obi clan. When she arrives in London, however, Adah learns from her husband that British racism has flattened out the Nigerian class system, and that all postcolonial Africans are thrown together as second-class citizens in the motherland. Adah is appalled not simply at the squalid apartment block Francis has found for them to live in, but also at the fact that she must share these accommodations

with working-class Nigerians. This theme in *Second-Class Citizen* challenges the tendency among some black feminists to treat the black community as undifferentiated in terms of class, and thereby to create a monolithic representation of oppression.<sup>22</sup> Although Francis nearly hits her when she scolds him for not finding a better situation, demonstrating to Adah that, free of the restraints exercised by the extended family, there is little to rein in Francis's abusive behavior, she finds no surrogate kin to turn to for support. Yet if her classism forces her into a self-imposed exile from the working-class Nigerians in proximity to whom she is forced to live by the racism of British landlords, her refusal to internalize racist British attitudes is also a crucial factor in her solitude. If other black Britons are willing to settle for second-class citizenship, Adah kicks valiantly against this designation. For instance, when Francis presses her to seek work in a factory like other Nigerian women, she obstinately refuses and instead applies for jobs in which she can employ her university education. Since there were precious few other educated black people occupying such professional positions in Britain at the time, however, Adah's successful application ironically leaves her isolated from other black women both at home and at work.

Adah's relationship with her husband decays precipitously once she arrives in Britain. Despite her refusal to be subordinated in virtually every other walk of life, she demonstrates a virtually masochistic propensity to put up with the humiliation and abuse meted out by Francis.<sup>23</sup> The night after their stormy reunion, for example, Francis forces Adah to have sex with him in "an attack, as savage as that of any animal" (40). When she becomes pregnant as a result of this marital rape, Francis blames her for the baby and sends her off to a doctor to deal with her "frigidity." Although Adah quickly realizes that for Francis, "marriage was sex and lots of it, nothing more" (41), she not only remains in the marriage, but declares that she has discovered that she loves Francis and wants him to succeed in life (42). Dissatisfied with Adah's failure to service him sexually, Francis begins shopping around for other women to take as lovers; rather than challenging this behavior, Adah encourages it since, she says, in an act of spectacular denial, it means she will have some peace at night. So abject is her subordination that she is quite aware that her husband remains with her simply because she keeps "laying golden eggs" as a result of her qualifications and the well-paying jobs they help her land. Thus, her fierce ambition to escape the oppressive confines of her extended family in Nigeria

becomes a vehicle to salvage a hollow and exploitative marriage in Britain.

Despite her apparent strength in other walks of life, Adah conforms to many of the characteristics of the abused woman who clings to her batterer. Women like Adah often remain within abusive relationships because their identity is defined through their attachment to an apparently stronger—but also deeply needy—partner.<sup>24</sup> For example, Adah continues to hand over her pay packet to Francis long after it becomes obvious that he has no real intention of helping to support the family. In addition, despite his blatant philandering, which extends even to an affair with the child-minder Adah hires to help care for their children while she's out working, Emecheta's heroine stays glued in a marriage that she herself admits offers her nothing other than the affection of her children. She represses this knowledge, which comes to her during cyclical explosive crisis points such as the confrontation over the child-minder, continuing her slavish submission to Francis in the grooves of everyday oppression that separate the occasional beatings. When Francis becomes a Jehovah's Witness, he finds a perfect excuse to cut his wife off from contact with the mass media, where she might find examples of women who refuse to endure such subordination. Emecheta writes that Adah "simply accepted her role as defined for her by her husband" (95). Finally, Adah submits to Francis's jealous behavior, internalizing his irrational attacks on her character. When, for instance, she attempts to control the frequent pregnancies for which he blames her by getting access to contraception, Francis attacks her, saying that since she's gone behind his back to get a cervical cap she'll now also find ways to have sex with other men without his knowledge. Despite the injustice of this accusation and the savage beating that follows it, Adah stays with Francis. Indeed, she apathetically resigns herself to the loneliness that follows after Francis writes to his family about her behavior. Like many women in abusive relationships, in other words, Adah's individual passivity is partially a product of the stigma attached to perceptions of inadequate comportment by married women, who are often perceived as upholders of community honor.<sup>25</sup> So defeated is she by Francis's accusations that Adah submits herself to yet another pregnancy when her husband refuses to use the contraceptive devices she has procured (149). It is only when she goes to the hospital to deliver her baby and, while there, begins comparing her situation with that of other women, that Adah begins to adopt a more critical and autonomous attitude towards Francis.

Adah's dependency on Francis is never, however, a purely psychological affair, for their relationship does not occur in a vacuum. As she did when representing the articulation of masculinist African traditions with those brought to Nigeria by the British, Emecheta is at pains to demonstrate the ways in which patriarchal institutions in Britain augment Francis's abusive behavior. For example, from the moment she sets foot on British soil, Adah is aware that the legal system makes her an appendage of her husband (40). The racially inflected changes in British immigration laws during the 1960s thus had a particularly adverse impact on women, who became dependent on their husbands for continued residence in Britain.<sup>26</sup> To leave Francis would mean possible deportation, a risk Adah is not willing to take; as a result, she remains trapped by the state in her abusive relationship. This issue, identified so early by Emecheta, remains a cardinal point in antiracist feminist campaigns.<sup>27</sup> The extent of her legal dependency on her husband is brought home to Adah when she attempts, near the end of the novel, to gain access to birth control. To her consternation, she finds out that she must have her husband's signature on a consent form before she is given the materials. This apparently bizarre state practice is a product of the long-standing British legal principle of coverture, which specifies that women legally owe both their domestic and their reproductive labor to men.<sup>28</sup> If Adah is unable to control her body, in other words, it is not simply because Francis refuses to use birth control, but also because the state legislates that he controls his wife's body. Emecheta's emphasis on basic issues of access to marital and reproductive choice remains highly salient around the world today and should therefore be a primary concern of feminists interested in building transnational coalitions.<sup>29</sup>

The institutional sexism Adah confronts is augmented by the racism of individual Britons. Although Adah is fortunate to have extremely supportive colleagues during her stint as a librarian, her search for housing exposes her to the fear and bigotry with which many Britons reacted to postcolonial immigrants. In a tragicomic scene, Adah disguises her voice while speaking on the phone to a potential landlady in order to arrange an initial interview. When Adah and Francis eventually turn up outside the dilapidated building in a run-down part of town to make their application as tenants, the landlady takes one look at them and has what looks to Adah like an epileptic fit (77). Adah's hopes to salvage her marriage by orchestrating a move into better digs are thereby scuttled. Of course, when she eventually decides to leave Fran-

cis, the difficulty of finding accommodation is a significant impediment. As a result of her isolation, Adah is ignorant not simply of her right to state income support for her children, but also of the state's provision of public housing to those in need.<sup>30</sup> Once she is aware of these resources, Adah feels far more empowered to leave Francis, suggesting that her dependency on him is not a function of purely psychological factors but also has a pragmatic material component: poverty.

Adah's ultimate emancipation comes not as a result of the intervention of any beneficent outside forces. Instead, she engineers her own liberation through the rediscovery of her voice. While staying at home to care for her recently born fourth child, Adah writes a novel, which she regards as a literal brainchild (166). Francis of course refuses to read the novel and tells her scornfully that she will never succeed as a writer because she is an African woman. Although Adah once again demonstrates her subordination to Francis by accepting his criticism, she is pushed out of her thralldom when Francis maliciously destroys her manuscript. When he burns Adah's book, Francis seeks to immolate what he perceives as a threatening expression of her autonomy. His perception is quite accurate. Adah's writing is an important site through which she can reengage with the independent identity—her Presence—that was so prominent during the years of her childhood. As feminist theories of women's writing have long stressed, narratives, particularly autobiographical ones, offer a space for self-discovery through which women—traditionally marginalized from the public sphere—may stake claims as speaking subjects.<sup>31</sup> For Adah, however, this process of emancipation is defined not simply as the discovery of an autonomous, sovereign self. Instead, since her conception of writing explicitly parallels the act of intellectual creation to childbirth, her self-discovery takes place through development of her caring powers. By emphasizing this maternal creativity, Emecheta's protagonist explicitly repudiates the denigration of black women's life-giving capacity that characterizes social relations in contemporary Britain.<sup>32</sup> In subsequent writing, Emecheta has questioned not simply the moral panic over single black mothers, but also the distaste of many affluent white feminists for women's caring work.<sup>33</sup> As Eva Kittay has written, Western political theorists have largely failed to acknowledge dependency and the care of dependents in their conceptions of equality and justice.<sup>34</sup> When he burns her manuscript, Francis attempts to destroy this fundamental aspect of Adah's identity as an African woman. If she is willing to forgive

Francis all his other forms of soul-killing behavior, Adah will not condone this attack on the nurturing role through which she defines herself. One page after narrating this incident, Adah describes her departure from her husband's life with nothing but her four children, a box of clothes, and a broken finger.

*IN THE DITCH: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY  
AND THE WELFARE STATE*

Published two years before *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta's novel *In the Ditch* first appeared in serial form in the leftist monthly *New Statesman*.<sup>35</sup> This success came after years of failure for Emecheta, who tirelessly submitted fiction based on her African experience to British publishers with nothing to show for her efforts. At the time, Emecheta later wrote, mainstream British publishers felt there was no market for narratives set in Africa, and by a woman to boot.<sup>36</sup> Among members of the New Left, however, the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson's landmark history of British working-class formation, had opened avenues for exploration of the everyday life experience of the nonelite segments of British society.<sup>37</sup> Groups such as the History Workshop at Oxford's Ruskin College began pioneering new nonhierarchical educational practices based on the recording of history by members of the working class themselves.<sup>38</sup> When Buchi Emecheta decided to begin documenting her own life experience among the British lumpen following her escape from her marriage, radical groups such as History Workshop had prepared the ground for the publication of her work by drawing attention to the many silences in the official historical record. Emecheta's work may therefore be seen as intimately linked to the tradition that bore fruit in postcolonial initiatives such as the Subaltern Studies Group in India.<sup>39</sup>

Emecheta's *In the Ditch* was particularly groundbreaking, however, in its focus on the lives of poor women. If *Second-Class Citizen* documented the forms of control exerted within the context of a patriarchal marriage, Emecheta's first-published novel records her struggle to retain a sense of dignity and autonomy as a single parent subjected to the ministrations of the welfare state. This focus on institutional issues is an important supplement to the apparently personal problems highlighted in *Second-Class Citizen*, for it underlines the need to tackle the

articulation of patriarchal family patterns with the discriminatory state structures that help consign black women to second-class citizenship in Britain. Furthermore, *In the Ditch* highlights the extent to which the struggles of significant numbers of black women in Britain take place not through organized political groups but around issues of family and social reproduction. The attempts of Emecheta's protagonist Adah to carve out a sense of autonomy and to establish community in the midst of great poverty offer important insights into the regulatory maneuvers of the British welfare state.

*In the Ditch's* documentation of poor women's experience opened important new lines of feminist inquiry. Even as feminists in Britain began to recuperate the life histories of important foremothers such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Rosa Luxemburg, scant attention was paid to the plight of less illustrious women. Ironically, at precisely the moment when the neoliberal onslaught on the post-1945 social contract was being prepared, the experience of poor women at the hands of the welfare state was highly underrepresented and ill understood. The predominantly middle-class, white leaders of the feminist movement were relatively unaware of such issues, despite their heavily socialist orientation in Britain.<sup>40</sup> The struggle of poor women for entitlement remains underacknowledged by mainstream (middle class) feminism, which, having insisted on women's autonomy, continues to have difficulty engaging the issue of women's dependency on the state. Welfare "reform" and the attendant war on poor women over the last twenty years has consequently been largely ignored by mainstream feminist organizations and theorists in both Britain and North America.<sup>41</sup>

This lack of solidarity helps perpetuate the enduring preoccupation among policymakers and other elites with the family ethic.<sup>42</sup> According to the precepts of this sacrosanct ethic, women's proper role was to marry and have children while being supported by and subordinated to a male breadwinner. If social welfare policy dictated to men that their proper place was in the labor market, regardless of the prevailing wages and work conditions, it sequestered women in the domestic sphere irrespective of their safety there and punished those who threatened to disrupt the nuclear family.<sup>43</sup> Although feminists subjected the family ethic to withering critique, their predominantly middle-class origins led them to largely ignore the role of the family ethic and social welfare policy in regulating the lives of poor women. As a result, little attention was devoted to the oppressive aspects of the welfare state, and an opportu-

nity for solidarity with those subjected to its disciplinary mechanisms was lost. The history of the everyday struggle for survival recorded by *In the Ditch* therefore offers an important record of poor women's resistance to the family ethic and to the welfare state's attempts at oppressive regulation. As the social safety net is ruthlessly cut back, women's autonomy from abusive relationships and domestic violence is increasingly curtailed, a point that Buchi Emecheta's documentary fiction drives home with great force.

*In the Ditch* begins with a scene of squalor, as Adah struggles to protect her newborn baby from a huge rat who boldly reconnoiters near the infant's cot. Having fled her husband's oppressive behavior, Adah is subjected to yet another tyrannical male figure: her Nigerian landlord. Taking advantage of her weak position as a single parent, her landlord has doubled the rent he charges normally, berates Adah for even the slightest noises made by her children, and even switches off her electricity when he learns she has applied for public housing.<sup>44</sup> Although Emecheta relates in a comic vein her landlord's ultimate turn to magical incantations in the middle of the night in order to expel her from his building, her underlying point is a serious one. Without access to state housing resources, Adah, pregnant again after Francis breaks into her apartment and rapes her, stands little chance of establishing her autonomy. As a result of the racism of most British property owners, a single parent such as Adah is cast back on the untender mercies of landlords such as her juju-practicing compatriot.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, when the local council eventually finds her an apartment in the run-down Pussy Cat Mansions, Adah says that, though the place looks like a prison, it brought her three essential things: independence, freedom, and peace of mind (15).

But Adah quickly learns that Britain's socialized housing schemes come with strings attached, particularly for single parents. Pussy Cat Mansions, Adah finds out shortly after moving in, is reserved for "problem" families (17). This categorization implies that women engaged in single parenting are aberrant, a thorn in the foot of the social order that needs to be plucked out as soon as possible. Such autonomous women represent a danger to any society that predicates its smooth functioning on the subordination of women to a family ethic. In the course of the twentieth century, however, conflicting demands for women's home and market work led to the creation of government programs that shifted the locus of patriarchal authority from the male head-of-house-

hold to the state. As it gained control of efforts to mediate women's reproductive and market labor, the state developed a panoply of regulatory mechanisms that intervened in the lives of women who challenged the family ethic.<sup>46</sup> Such women were subjected to social stigmatization as well as strict government supervision of their lives and sexuality. These trends came to a head during the 1970s, when broader preoccupations caused by the social crises of the previous decade and by the faltering of Britain's economy led to the emergence of a moral panic over child abuse.<sup>47</sup> Deep anxieties about the decline of the traditional family and the crisis of conventional morality fostered a creeping state paternalism, which took the explicit form of strong child protection legislation that encouraged social workers to intervene actively in the parenting practices of poor women.

As the head of just such a "problem" family, Adah is subjected to many of the disciplinary controls of the regulatory paternal state. Thus, in short order after her arrival at Pussy Cat Mansions, the complex's "family adviser," Carol, pays a visit to Adah. "People here," Carol informs Adah, "say that your children make too much noise, and that you leave them all by themselves in the evenings" (24). Adah immediately understands that her aggressively racist neighbors have reported her to Carol. Assuming the worst, Adah replies to Carol's accusation, "So you come to take them away from me, lady?" (24). Faced with Carol's probing questions, Adah caves in completely, wondering with resignation whether the social worker is going to take her to jail. Carol's behavior, however, is more difficult to predict than Adah initially suspects. Rather than punishing her, Carol adopts a conciliatory if patronizing attitude towards Adah. After establishing her role as a minatory authority, Carol adopts the guise of state aid worker and offers to help find sitters to look after Adah's children during the evenings. Adah is well aware of the disciplinary role inherent in this apparently beneficent stance.<sup>48</sup> She therefore observes of Carol that "the lady was a true diplomat, a trained and experienced social worker, one of a race of women whom one was never sure whether to treat as friends or as members of the social police" (25).

For Adah, Carol's offers of aid are a poisoned chalice. Despite her difficult economic circumstances, Adah is determined to avoid the dole, the state aid provided in Britain to women with children. This resistance to state charity is partially a result of Adah's internalization of classist stereotypes concerning those who are forced to accept state aid. When

she first arrives in Pussy Cat Mansions, where almost all the women are on the dole, Adah initially views those who depend on state aid as lazy and parasitic (33). Yet this is not the sole reason for her resistance. Having only just escaped a crippling dependency on her husband, Adah is loath to lean on anyone else, the welfare state included. Such dependency of course exacerbates perceptions of poor women as problems, subjected to the state's remedial programs, thereby shifting attention away from the discriminatory behavior and structures that marginalize poor women in the first place. While Adah may not be aware of this political background, the condescension with which Carol speaks to her and her ability to strip Adah of her children make the power dynamic inherent in her relation with Carol quite clear. As a result, like many women, Adah views dependency on either a man or state benefits as equally damaging to her prospects for self-actualization.<sup>49</sup> Despite her determination to remain autonomous, however, Adah cannot keep up the "double shift" called for by waged and domestic labor.<sup>50</sup> Scolded again by Carol for leaving her kids early at school so that she has time to get to work, Adah gives up her job and resigns herself to life "in the ditch."

Adah learns quickly that staying alive while on the dole is a full-time occupation. Although the welfare state helps poor women avoid unsafe and insecure jobs and marriages, in other words, aid programs are implemented in a manner designed to minimize the social costs of such women. This makes survival on the dole extremely arduous. After queuing for her first payment, for instance, Adah goes shopping, only to find that the weekly allowance for groceries does not cover the items she's placed in her shopping basket during this single excursion. The money to pay for her groceries, she decides, will have to come from the allotment given her for heating (38). The indignities to which the dole's inadequate payments reduce poor women had hardly figured in Adah's views of dole recipients as lazy parasites. As she settles into dependency, however, Adah learns first hand about the daily doses of humiliation dispensed by Britain's welfare state. Since there is no fixed allotment, women like Adah have to beg ministry officers for funds to adequately clothe their children. On one such occasion, Adah sits at home all day waiting for the officials to visit her to see about a shoe allowance for her children. While she waits, Adah explains that her children frequently wet their beds since it's too cold to get up and go to the bathroom. Adah has been buying paraffin on credit and cannot afford to heat her kids'

rooms. In addition, although her children are fed at school, Adah herself is not so lucky. By ten o'clock, she is experiencing pangs of hunger as she waits for the officials, and decides to cook the ration of rice that she had been saving for dinner. "Blast balanced meals! You can think of balancing meals when you have enough food," she comments bitterly (51). Finally, Adah has been allowing herself only three baths per week in order to save money on gas. In order to be presentable before the ministry officials arrive, she takes one of these carefully rationed baths. When her friend Whoopey arrives to find her getting dressed up for the officials' visit, she advises Adah that this is precisely the wrong course of action: "We are poor, and the bastards want us to look poor" (53). As Whoopey explains, the dole requires poor women to abandon their aspirations not simply for material comforts, but also for the forms of dignity that are taken for granted among less poverty stricken people. Not only does the dole drain poor women of all their energy as they carefully ration themselves and struggle to make ends meet on an inadequate social wage. In addition, it also systematically robs them of their dignity and enforces an infantilizing form of dependency on the stern authority of the usually middle-class, male state officials who supervise aid programs.

Adah also finds out that the dole is intended to keep women trapped in this humiliating dependency. Emecheta's protagonist initially articulates criticism of state aid that anticipates the arguments frequently heard from conservative quarters during the subsequent neoliberal era: the dole robs people of their dignity by encouraging them not to work (47). This criticism offers little sense that the dole is a kind of social wage that puts a floor below wages, a Keynesian welfare state strategy calculated to tighten labor markets and thereby generate higher wages for those who are employed.<sup>51</sup> In such a reading, assaults on the welfare state over the last two decades are not so much an attempt to reconnect poor people with the ennobling effect of work as they are ploys to loosen labor markets and depress wages. Emecheta is not, however, concerned with these structural economic issues so much as she is with the psychological and emotional impact of dependency on women. As a result, it is the shame and despair that life in the ditch encourages that is the principal focus of her attention.

The strength of Emecheta's depiction of life on the dole therefore lies in its challenge to the pathologizing representations of the poor that have gained hegemony in discussions of urban poverty. According to

such perspectives, the behavior of the poor is a product of an “underclass” mentality rooted in dependency on welfare.<sup>52</sup> The key to social transformation is not, then, an attack on the structural inequality that encourages dependency on welfare, but a tough-love approach that forces the poor to stand on their own feet regardless of the vicissitudes of the labor market. Against such pathologizing portraits of the poor, Emecheta’s rendering of life on the dole demonstrates the tremendous initiative necessary to survive with a modicum of dignity. As Adah points out after a cheap paraffin heater nearly torches her apartment and her sleeping children, the dole keeps poor women on the edge of survival. Although Emecheta’s writing acknowledges the demoralizing impact of welfare, it does not support an “underclass” view of poor neighborhoods as isolated, dysfunctional social enclaves, but instead focuses criticism on the inequalities and suffering that the inadequacies of the welfare state help perpetuate.

*In the Ditch* also dramatizes the hollowness of contemporary rhetoric concerning employment-based self-sufficiency for those relegated to the low-wage sector of the labor force. Desperate to earn some money in order to buy Christmas presents for her children, Adah interviews for a part-time job as a cleaner in a factory. Although she’s offered a wage of six pounds a week by the manager who interviews her, Adah is desperately afraid of having her benefits cut if it’s discovered that she’s working for more than the amount stipulated by Social Security. Of course, if she’s booted off the dole, she’ll be in far worse economic straits as a result of the inadequacy of the rate initially offered by the manager. Instead of chancing this, she offers to work for two pounds a week. After a month or so of work, however, the physical toll of the labor begins to affect her health and Adah suffers a breakdown. As a result, she’s forced to quit the job and return to eking out an existence on the dole alone. Adah’s experience with unskilled labor thus demonstrates the fallacy of assuming that jobs for poor people offer a living wage or the economic security necessary to constitute a viable alternative to dependency on state aid.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, Adah’s narrative also highlights the anger generated among poor women by the state’s paternalistic regulations. As if the supplicatory pose that life in the ditch imposes were not enough, welfare authorities also prohibit women such as Adah from engaging in an active sexual and emotional life. As Adah quickly learns, “The women not only had to be poor, but they had to be sex-starved too” (60). The

regulation of poor women's sexuality is not, however, simply grounded on an economic rationale. In addition, the proscription of "fancy men" also has an underlying eugenic consideration: the state intends to prevent poor women from reproducing. As Adah points out, such regulations are absurd given the widespread availability of birth control and abortion in contemporary Britain (61). Faced with this seemingly gratuitous discipline, poor women rebel in a variety of ways:

Living in the ditch had its own consolations and advantages. There were always warm and natural friends. Friends who took delight in flouting society's laws. Some women indulged in having more and more children, a way of making the society that forced them into the ditch suffer. Some enjoyed taking it out on the welfare officers of the Ministry of Social Security, others took to drink. (54)

The state's transparently classist and racist proscriptions on poor women's sexuality turns childbearing into a right to be struggled for rather than a burden to be avoided, as the pro-choice rhetoric of middle-class feminism tends to imply. Emecheta's explanation of women's rebellion highlights the extent to which forms of behavior that are perceived by state authorities as dysfunctional are instead a rebellion against oppressive regulation and social marginalization. The forms of putative ghetto pathology singled out by conservative critics are, in other words, often insurrectionary acts by women whom society keeps in an immiserated state and whose lives the state attempts to regulate down to the most intimate details.

As Emecheta suggests in the preceding quotation, poor women also cultivate strong bonds of solidarity despite their social marginalization. Women like her gregarious neighbor Mrs. Cox remind Adah of "African matrons" who "have that sense of mutual aid that is ingrained in people who have known a communal rather than an individualistic way of life" (65).<sup>54</sup> This sense of solidarity is expressed not simply in the bonds of affection that develop among the women living at Pussy Cat Mansions. In addition, mutual aid extends to collective action against the bullying bureaucrats of the welfare state. In one particularly powerful scene, Adah's friend Whoopey rallies her when she's scolded for rent arrears. Adah's long-standing insecurity emerges in her exchange with the official, whose attempts to extract rent lead her to reflect, "It is a curse to be an orphan, a double curse to be a black one in a white coun-

try, an unforgivable calamity to be a woman with five kids but without a husband” (71). Just as Adah is about to cave in and hand over the money, however, Whoopey and another neighbor intervene and demand that the council clean up her apartment before she pays rent. While class solidarity does not overcome racism among all her neighbors, the bonds forged through resistance to poverty and oppression teach Adah a great deal about the need to challenge authority. Adah is frequently encouraged by her neighbors to engage in rent strikes in response to the appalling conditions she must endure in public housing. In addition, she participates as the women organize a protest march in response to the supercilious behavior of Carol, the complex’s social worker. As Adah comments, “Women in the ditch were always too ignorant or too frightened to ask for what they were entitled to. People like Carol were employed to let them know their rights, but the trouble was that Carol handed them their rights, as if she was giving out charity” (98).<sup>55</sup> The solidarity Adah witnesses in response to this sort of condescending behavior has a dramatic impact on the hobbling insecurity that she carried with her following her childhood as an orphan and her damaging marriage to Francis.

Adah’s increasing strength is most apparent in her reaction to expressions of racism from some of her neighbors in the ditch. When she first arrives at Pussy Cat Mansions, she attempts to placate her aggressively bigoted neighbors by playing dumb. Her assumption is that British people all believe that Africans are ignorant savages, and that the path of least resistance is to play along with this stereotype in order to solicit their condescending aid (18). This strategy is self-defeating, however, for it simply leads to expressions of weakness that encourage increasing abuse. Yet by the end of her stint at Pussy Cat Mansions, Adah has developed the strength to stand up to such bigotry. When a crabby woman tells her to go back to her own country during a conflict in the washroom, for example, Adah shoots back that she doesn’t look English herself (110). The woman sputters racist attacks in response, but is defeated and humiliated by Adah’s quick comeback.

The gradual development of Adah from insecurity to strength logically culminates in her departure from Pussy Cat Mansions. Yet this transition is by no means an easy one. Adah ironically fails to apply for rehousing for quite some time as a result of her fear of losing the forms of friendship and solidarity that life in the ditch helps foster (91). Paradoxically, then, Adah’s life among what she initially perceives as the

degraded recipients of state aid becomes highly attractive because of the comradeship it affords in the midst of material deprivation. One final encounter with Carol nevertheless convinces Adah that she is being used by the social worker rather than vice versa. This perception, augmented by Adah's gradually increasing strength, leads her to ultimately overcome her fear of isolation and climb out of the ditch. The novel concludes with Adah relocating to an apartment in a new complex situated in an affluent London neighborhood. As Emecheta documents in her autobiography, this was the beginning of the transition that led to her degree in sociology and to her successful career as an author. From this increasingly autonomous and fulfilled perspective, Adah is able to regard with suitable skepticism her apparently strong friend Whoopey's pipe dreams for social mobility through the arrival of a wealthy suitor (131). *In the Ditch* thus traces Adah's journey not only from poverty to increasing economic self-sufficiency, but also from emotional insecurity to growing autonomy and resiliency in the face of the systemic racism and classism that characterized British society during the 1960s.

## CONCLUSION

In the powerful introduction to her collection of essays by black British women authors, then-exiled South African author Loretta Ngcobo writes:

White Britons want to forget this [imperialist] past, to forget that we once lived in close proximity with them, in their kitchens, caring for their children, being raped by their men and then bearing those tainted babies. It is not surprising that our appearance in the front garden of Britain causes embarrassment. We bring back to life forgotten crimes and immense guilt. This amnesia is the unacknowledged admission that British society still has not come to terms with our presence. We linger in a kind of social limbo and consequently suffer a state of invisibility.<sup>56</sup>

If Ngcobo's analysis of Britain's imperial amnesia suggests that the invisibility of black women was no accident, the last thirty years have witnessed a sustained battle by such women to escape the forms of invisibility to which they were consigned. Such activism led to the artic-

ulation of stinging critiques of racism. The feminist movement in Britain was not spared from these critical salvos. Indeed, a great deal of the energy of black British feminism during its initial period of efflorescence was consumed with carving out a space for black women within the broader feminist movement. In works such as Hazel Carby's "White Women Listen!" black feminists drew attention to the myopia of the dominant traditions of feminism, which called for universal solidarity between women while ignoring the very real inequalities fostered by class and race difference. Carby's work, like that of other black feminists, introduced important traditions of transnational cultural and political practice to Britain.

Take the feminist discussion of the family ethic. During the post-1945 period, the terms of debate about women's labor hinged on the impact of work outside the home on British family life. Yet, as Carby points out, little attention was devoted to the effect of large-scale labor force participation among colonized women throughout the century.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, black women were employed in great numbers in Britain's reserve army of labor in the colonies with absolutely no consideration of the impact on the families of colonized subjects. When black women migrated to Britain, these traditions of working a double shift under highly exploitative conditions traveled with them. Rather than striving to protect black families, the state reproduced commonsense beliefs about their inherent pathology. "Black women," Carby argues, "were seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers."<sup>58</sup> Thus, the pathologization of black families by the state in Britain during the postimperial period has a strong colonial genealogy. For many black feminists, as a result, discussions of women's emancipation unfolded under dramatically different terms from those adopted by the mainstream feminist movement. The consensus view among many white, middle-class feminists that the family was purely a site of oppression could not be adopted by many black women, who had to fight for the right to have children and who often turned to their families for shelter from racist hostility.

As the first successful black woman novelist living in Britain after 1948, Buchi Emecheta clearly is a pioneering figure in overcoming the invisibility to which black British women were relegated. The autobiographically based documentary fiction of her London novels, the first works she published, encompasses three important stages that are often cited as the classic path toward women's empowerment: discovering

voice; establishing forms of collective solidarity; and engaging in political activism. Yet the progress of Emecheta's protagonist Adah along this path is marked by significant differences from those which would obtain for the majority of British women. She must, for example, navigate an extended kin system as an orphan, her identity reduced essentially to that of a commodity. Her marriage continues this relation. Yet when she finally breaks out of her suffocating subordination to her husband, she finds herself, as a poor black woman, locked in another form of dependency. Emecheta's depiction of her struggle to survive in the ditch offers a powerful instance of the pathologization discussed by Hazel Carby, even if her portrait of Adah's dependency on Francis in *Second-Class Citizen* seems to challenge some of Carby's assertions about the distinctions between black and white feminism. In her London trilogy, Emecheta thus evokes many of the central issues around black women's struggle to forge and maintain identity in Britain that would concern groups like OWAAD in subsequent years.

In addition to anticipating many of the important issues for black feminist organizing, Buchi Emecheta's London trilogy offers important historical perspective on the present. Far from improving, the sexist and racist devaluation of black women's identity and labor depicted by Emecheta intensified in the last decades of the century. If black workers were recruited to facilitate white upward mobility while accepting wages at a level unpalatable to the indigenous working class, the end of the postwar economic boom and the imposition of spiraling rounds of austerity after the 1970s has disproportionately affected black people. High unemployment and the downsizing of the Keynesian welfare state made jobs attractive to white workers who previously regarded such labor as beneath them. As Amina Mama explains, black women are predominantly concentrated in those areas of the British economy that have been most affected by post-Fordist downsizing, including caring professions such as nursing, teaching, community and social work, and service labor.<sup>59</sup> Consigned to such roles by oppressive notions of "femininity" and by racist practices in education and elsewhere, black women have borne the brunt of neoliberal downsizing policies in these areas. In addition, since they are more often heads of families and are more likely to have unemployed domestic partners, assaults on black woman's wages have a disproportionately damaging impact on the black community as a whole. As neoliberal structural adjustment policies have ripped through the British economy over the last decades, the plight of

poor black women such as the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's London novels can only have worsened.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, from the vantage point of the present, Adah's heroic effort to pull herself first out of her abusive marriage and then out of the ditch of welfare dependency is particularly poignant. Tragically, the story of Adah's journey toward autonomy is even harder to imagine today than when it was originally told.

