Stories of Struggle and Strength: Women's Epistemic Resistance in *Second Class Citizen* and *When I Hit You*

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Abstract

This research article examines the portrayal of women's conditions in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*. Through a feminist lens, it explores themes such as patriarchal control, silencing, resilience, sexual abuse, and epistemology. The analysis highlights the struggles of the protagonists, revealing how their lived experiences reflect the universal and enduring relevance of gender-based oppression across diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of recognizing women's voices and knowledge as critical tools of resistance against patriarchal power structures.

Keywords

Patriarchy, Feminism ,Gender-based oppression, Women's resilience, Epistemology

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Introduction

Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (2017) explore the intersecting themes of patriarchal oppression, domestic violence, and women's resilience. Both novels portray the lived realities of women navigating deeply entrenched gender-based inequalities. This comparative study highlights the universal nature of women's oppression, despite the cultural and temporal differences between mid-20th century Nigeria and contemporary India.

By employing a feminist epistemological framework, this analysis examines how Emecheta and Kandasamy center women's voices and experiences to critique patriarchal norms. Feminist epistemology underscores the role of lived experience as a legitimate

source of knowledge (Code, 1991). Both protagonists—Adah in *Second Class Citizen* and the unnamed narrator in *When I Hit You*—challenge societal norms that silence and marginalize women, thereby asserting their agency and resistance through acts of writing and self-determination.

Patriarchal Control and Oppression

The pervasive control of patriarchal structures is a central theme in both novels. In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah suffers under her husband Francis's oppressive worldview, exemplified by his belief that "a woman is like a goat—she has to be beaten from time to time" (Emecheta, 1974, p. 49). This dehumanizing metaphor highlights the normalization of violence within the marital relationship. Francis's domination extends to every aspect of Adah's life, enforcing societal norms that reduce women to subservient roles.

Similarly, Kandasamy's (2017) narrator in *When I Hit You* experiences brutal physical and emotional abuse. She describes her husband's violence as "pure animal fury" (p. 34), underscoring the primal and dehumanizing nature of domestic violence. Kandasamy critiques the societal complicity in enabling such abuse, which she links to deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes.

Both authors use these narratives to expose how systemic oppression, rooted in patriarchal ideologies, perpetuates gender inequality. According to hooks (1984), such structures thrive on the normalization of violence and the subjugation of women, which both Emecheta and Kandasamy critique through their protagonists' experiences.

Silencing and Isolation

In both novels, silencing and isolation function as tools of control. Adah in *Second Class Citizen* experiences profound isolation after emigrating to London, where her ambitions and independence are systematically curtailed by Francis (Emecheta, 1974). He uses her immigrant status and limited social connections to consolidate his dominance.

Similarly, in *When I Hit You*, the narrator is severed from her support network as her husband isolates her to maintain control. He seeks to suppress her voice and creativity, exemplified by his attempts to prevent her from writing: "The more I write, the more he tries to take it away from me" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 59). Silencing, as observed by Spivak (1988), is a critical mechanism of patriarchal domination, erasing women's narratives and denying them autonomy.

Resilience and the Struggle for Identity

Despite these oppressive conditions, both protagonists exhibit resilience and embark on journeys to reclaim their identities. Adah's determination to provide for her children and pursue education reflects her refusal to accept her status as a "second class citizen" (Emecheta, 1974, p. 127). Her resilience, rooted in her aspirations, serves as an act of defiance against Francis's control.

In contrast, Kandasamy's narrator finds resistance in her writing. She declares, "I write because I cannot remain silent" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 84), framing her creative work as an act of survival and self-assertion. Writing becomes a means of reclaiming her voice and resisting her husband's erasure of her identity.

As Beauvoir (1949/2010) asserts, women's agency often emerges through acts of defiance against oppressive conditions. Both authors affirm this perspective by portraying their protagonists as active agents in their struggles for self-determination.

Exploration of Sexual Abuse and Marital Rape

Both novels address the grim realities of marital rape and sexual abuse, emphasizing their devastating effects on women's autonomy. In *Second Class Citizen*, marital rape is normalized within Adah's marriage. Francis demands sex without consent, reducing Adah to a body devoid of agency: "Francis would always want to sleep with her whenever he liked, and he would not care whether she wanted it or not" (Emecheta, 1974, p. 76).

In *When I Hit You*, Kandasamy depicts sexual violence as a deliberate tool of domination. The narrator reflects, "He rapes me with his hands, with his mouth, with his words. I am his wife. I am his property. I am nothing" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 102). This harrowing depiction aligns with Ahmed's (2017) analysis of how patriarchal societies weaponize women's bodies to enforce submission.

Feminist Epistemology: Reclaiming Voice and Knowledge

Emecheta and Kandasamy engage with feminist epistemology by foregrounding the protagonists' lived experiences as sources of knowledge. Adah's assertion, "She knew she was just as intelligent as any boy" (Emecheta, 1974, p. 127), challenges societal perceptions that undervalue women's intellectual capabilities. Similarly, Kandasamy's narrator emphasizes, "When I write, I own my story. I become the narrator, the creator, the definer of my world" (Kandasamy, 2017, p. 134).

These narratives align with feminist epistemological frameworks, which advocate for the recognition of marginalized voices as legitimate contributors to knowledge (Harding, 1991). Writing, in particular, becomes an act of resistance and a means of reclaiming agency for both protagonists.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* illuminate the pervasive impact of patriarchal oppression on women's identities and experiences. By depicting themes of silencing, resilience, and epistemic resistance, both authors critique the systems that perpetuate gender inequality.

Through their protagonists' struggles, Emecheta and Kandasamy emphasize the power of women's voices and narratives as tools of resistance. Their works affirm the need for societal transformation to address gender-based violence and validate women's experiences as central to feminist discourses.

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