

The Exploited Body: A Marxist-Feminist Reading of Gender, Labor, and Capital in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*, and Darko's *Faceless*

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Abstract— This study employs a Marxist-feminist lens to analyze the systemic marginalization and exploitation of female characters in three African novels: Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* (1975), and Amma Darko's *Faceless* (2003). Moving beyond cataloguing instances of patriarchal violence, the paper argues that these texts depict women's oppression as fundamentally intertwined with capitalist economic relations, wherein the female body and labor are commodified, and social reproduction is exploited. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study examines how structures of patriarchy and capitalism converge to relegate women to a state of "second-class" existence, extracting both productive and reproductive labor while denying autonomy. The analysis reveals a continuum of exploitation—from the domestic sphere and formal employment to the informal sexual economy—highlighting how gender subordination is materially produced and sustained. The paper concludes that a Marxist-feminist framework is essential for understanding the depth of women's oppression in these narratives and for envisioning liberation that addresses both economic and patriarchal domination.

Keywords— Marxist feminism, social reproduction, commodification, patriarchy, African literature, gender exploitation.

I. INTRODUCTION: PATRIARCHY, CAPITAL, AND THE "SECOND-CLASS" BODY

The female body in literature often becomes a site where social hierarchies are inscribed and contested. In many African societies, patriarchal norms have historically sanctioned the control, objectification, and exploitation of women, legitimizing their treatment as socially and economically subordinate. However, as feminist theorists have long argued, this subjugation cannot be fully understood in isolation from the economic systems that structure society. Patriarchy and capitalism are not parallel systems but deeply interlocking ones that together organize the exploitation of women's labor—both productive (waged) and reproductive (unwaged, domestic) (Federici, 2004; Vogel, 2013).

African literary landscapes have powerfully documented this confluence. Writers like Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, and Amma Darko offer searing portraits of female protagonists whose lives are circumscribed by both gendered violence and economic deprivation. Their works move beyond portraying women merely as victims of cultural tradition, instead revealing how traditional patriarchy adapts to and is reinforced by modern capitalist relations, neocolonial dynamics, and urban poverty.

This paper argues that a Marxist-feminist theoretical framework is particularly illuminating for analyzing three seminal novels: Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*, and Darko's *Faceless*. Marxist feminism posits that women's oppression is rooted in their role in social reproduction—the bearing and rearing of children, maintaining the household, and sustaining the labor force—which under capitalism is largely unpaid and devalued, serving as a hidden subsidy to the formal economy (Bhattacharya, 2017). This devaluation facilitates the exploitation of women's labor in the wage economy and the treatment of their bodies as commodities.

The study addresses the following core question: How do *Second Class Citizen*, *Women at Point Zero*, and *Faceless* represent the intersection of patriarchal domination and capitalist exploitation to render female characters as marginalized, “second-class” subjects? Through close textual analysis, we will trace the exploitation of social reproduction, the commodification of the female body, and the foreclosure of female autonomy. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to a materialist understanding of gender oppression in African literature, demonstrating that the personal struggles of Adah, Firdaus, and the women of *Faceless* are inextricably linked to broader political-economic structures.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MARXIST FEMINISM AND THE EXPLOITATION OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Marxist feminism provides the critical tools to analyze the dual exploitation of women under capitalist patriarchy. Its core insight is that women’s oppression is not merely a cultural or ideological superstructure but is materially grounded in the economic system. Classical Marxism, focused on the exploitation of wage labor in the public sphere, often rendered the private, domestic sphere—and women’s work within it—invisible. Marxist feminists corrected this by theorizing **social reproduction**: the daily and generational work of creating and maintaining people, which is essential for capitalism to have a workforce, yet is disproportionately performed by women for free or for low wages (Federici, 2012; Laslett & Brenner, 1989).

This framework reveals several key processes relevant to our literary analysis:

1. **The Devaluation of Reproductive Labor:** Domestic work, childcare, and emotional labor are naturalized as “women’s duty,” obscuring their economic value and trapping women in financial dependence.
2. **The Commodification of the Female Body:** When avenues for survival are narrowed, women’s bodies and sexuality can become direct commodities, as seen in prostitution. This represents an extreme point on a continuum of bodily exploitation.
3. **The Reserve Army of Labor:** Women often form a flexible, low-wage labor pool, easily hired in times of expansion and dismissed in downturns, perpetuating economic precarity.
4. **The Interlocking of Systems:** Patriarchy provides an ideology that justifies this unequal division of labor, while capitalism provides the economic structure that profits from it. This intersection creates what Mies (1986) termed “housewifization”—the social construction of women as dependent, non-productive subjects.

Applying this lens to literature shifts the focus from individual acts of misogyny to systemic patterns of exploitation. It allows us to see Adah’s double burden in London not just as a bad marriage, but as an indictment of a system that exploits her wage labor while expecting free domestic service. It frames Firdaus’s journey from unpaid domestic servant to prostitute not as a moral fall, but as a logical progression within an economy that offers women few means of independent survival. It interprets the sexual violence in *Faceless* not only as brutal patriarchy but as part of an informal urban economy built on the consumption of impoverished female bodies.

III. METHODOLOGY: LITERARY ANALYSIS THROUGH A MATERIALIST LENS

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in literary critical analysis. The primary method is **close reading** of the selected texts—*Second Class Citizen*, *Women at Point Zero*, and *Faceless*—guided by the principles of Marxist-feminist theory. The analysis is thematic and comparative, seeking patterns across the novels rather than treating them in isolation.

The process involves:

1. **Textual Engagement:** A sustained, critical examination of narrative structure, character development, and symbolic language in each novel.
2. **Thematic Coding:** Identifying and categorizing recurring instances and descriptions of labor (domestic, professional, sexual), economic exchange, bodily autonomy, and violence.
3. **Theoretical Interpretation:** Interpreting these coded themes through the core concepts of Marxist feminism: social reproduction, commodification, and patriarchal capitalism.
4. **Comparative Synthesis:** Drawing connections between the three texts to build a coherent argument about the systemic nature of women’s economic and gendered exploitation in the African contexts they depict.

This methodology allows for a deep, context-sensitive analysis that respects the literary integrity of each work while using theory to illuminate their shared critique of material and patriarchal conditions.

IV. ANALYSIS: THE CONTINUUM OF EXPLOITATION IN THREE NOVELS

4.1 The Exploitation of Social Reproduction and Domestic Labor:

The novels vividly depict how women's unpaid labor in the home forms the invisible foundation for male privilege and capital accumulation.

In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah Ofili embodies the double shift. She migrates to London with dreams of education and a career, only to be ensnared in a marriage where her reproductive labor is utterly taken for granted. Her husband, Francis, is "lazy and selfish," contributing little while Adah works a demanding job at the library to support the family. Her income is appropriated for household expenses controlled by Francis and his family's long-distance demands. Crucially, her intellectual labor—her writing—is literally destroyed by Francis when he burns her manuscript, an act symbolizing the patriarchal suppression of women's creative and non-reproductive production. Emecheta writes: "Most of the decisions about their own lives had to be referred first to Big Pa, Francis's father... before Adah was referred to. After all, she would have to pay for the plan in most cases" (p. 18). This highlights the economic core of her subjugation: she is the financier yet is excluded from decision-making, her wage labor enabling a patriarchy that renders her a "second-class citizen" in her own home.

Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero* begins her life of exploitation within the domestic sphere. After her parents' death, she lives with her uncle, where "female work was appropriated to serve masculine ends." She performs all household chores in exchange for shelter, a classic scenario of unpaid social reproductive labor. This exploitation is compounded by sexual abuse. Later, her marriage to the elderly, repulsive Sheikh Mahmoud formalizes this exploitation: she becomes a full-time, unpaid housewife and sexual servant. Her husband monitors and beats her, treating her as a domestic appliance. El Saadawi makes the economic basis clear: "I now knew that wives were not so different from prostitutes... The only difference lay in the price, and the duration of the contract" (p. 99). Firdaus recognizes that marriage, under these conditions, is merely a long-term contract for sexual and domestic services without pay, blurring the line between the private, "respectable" sphere of reproduction and the public sphere of commodified sex.

Faceless presents a grim picture of social reproduction under conditions of extreme poverty. Maa Tsuru, unable to provide for her children due to a lack of resources and support, becomes a node in a cycle of deprivation. Her relationships with men like Kpakpo and Kwei bring not security but violence and further pregnancies, increasing her burden of care. Her inability to perform the idealized role of mother-protector is not a personal failing but a consequence of her position at the bottom of economic and gendered hierarchies. The novel shows how poverty strips social reproduction of its protective function, turning the home into a dangerous space for children like Baby T and Fofo.

4.2 The Commodification of the Female Body and Sexuality:

When avenues for socially valued labor are blocked, the female body itself becomes the primary commodity for survival, a process starkly illustrated in these texts.

Firdaus's trajectory is the most explicit mapping of this commodification. After fleeing her marriage, her attempts at respectable employment are thwarted by paltry wages and sexual harassment. She realizes that her monthly salary as a clerk is less than what she could earn in a single night through prostitution. Her conscious decision to become a prostitute is, in Marxist-feminist terms, a rationalization of her labor under extreme constraint. She gains unprecedented economic independence and a sense of power by setting her own price, declaring, "My price... is my pride" (p. 99). However, this "freedom" is brutally circumscribed. A pimp soon captures her earnings, and the state eventually condemns her for murdering him. The system that pushed her body onto the market as the only viable commodity then punishes her for trying to control its terms. Her final refusal to petition for clemency is a radical rejection of a world that only values her life in terms of exchange.

In *Faceless*, the urban slum of "Sodom and Gomorrah" operates as a hyper-capitalist zone where all social relations are reduced to brutal exchange. The female body is the ultimate raw material in this economy. Baby T is raped by her mother's partner, Onko, and later by Kpakpo. Fofo narrowly escapes rape by the street lord, Poison. These are not random acts of lust but assertions of power within an economy where female bodies have been rendered consumable. Maa Tsuru's serial relationships, while seeking security, repeatedly expose her and her daughters to sexual violence. Darko portrays a world where patriarchy

and abject poverty fuse to create a market for sexual access to women and girls, with no social or legal recourse for the victims. The “facelessness” of the title speaks to the dehumanization required for such commodification.

Even in *Second Class Citizen*, Adah’s body is not her own. Her marital relationship is characterized by a lack of sexual autonomy; she must submit to Francis. Furthermore, her fertility is an economic liability, with successive pregnancies threatening her job and her health. Her body, as a site of reproduction, is tied to her economic precarity.

4.3 Education, Wage Labor, and the Limits of Liberal Escape:

The novels also critique the limited promise of education and formal employment as escapes from patriarchal exploitation.

Adah’s entire struggle begins with her fight for education in Nigeria, where her brother is prioritized because “she was so insignificant because she was born a girl” (p. 1). Her hard-won education and her job in London, however, do not liberate her; they simply make her a more efficient provider for a patriarchal family structure. She is a “second-class citizen” at work facing racial and gendered discrimination, and at home bearing the double burden. Her professional income is siphoned off to sustain the very system that oppresses her, demonstrating how women’s entry into the wage economy, without a transformation of reproductive relations, can intensify rather than alleviate their exploitation.

Firdaus’s brief stint as an office worker similarly disappoints. She is paid a “small monthly wage” and subjected to the predatory advances of her manager. The man she loves, a supposed revolutionary, ultimately chooses to marry his boss’s daughter for social and economic advancement, revealing how capitalist class interests override progressive gender politics. The formal labor market offers her not dignity or independence, but a different, poorly paid form of servitude with added sexual harassment.

In *Faceless*, education is a distant dream for characters like Fofo. The daily struggle for survival in the informal economy precludes any engagement with formal systems of advancement. The novel suggests that in contexts of extreme economic collapse, the classical Marxist or liberal feminist pathways—unionized labor or professional careers—are irrelevant. Exploitation occurs in a raw, unmediated form in the informal sexual and street economy.

V. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF OPPRESSION

Reading these three novels through a Marxist-feminist lens reveals a powerful, shared critique. The individual suffering of Adah, Firdaus, Maa Tsuru, and Fofo is not incidental but systematic, produced by the intertwined operations of patriarchy and capitalism.

Emecheta’s novel shows the exploitation of the **immigrant woman’s double labor** in the metropolitan core. El Saadawi’s work traces the logical endpoint of **patriarchal control over women’s bodies and labor** within a hybrid traditional-capitalist society, culminating in the body-as-sole-commodity. Darko’s novel depicts the **total collapse of social reproduction** under neoliberal poverty, where the female body is consumed in a desperate informal economy.

The theory illuminates how these narratives connect the private and public, the personal and economic. Francis’s control over Adah’s salary, Firdaus’s calculation of her body’s price, and the rape of Baby T in *Faceless* are all moments where economic logic and patriarchal dominance are indistinguishable. This analysis challenges readings that view the oppression in these novels as solely cultural or attitudinal. It argues that the violence is material, systematic, and economic.

Furthermore, the protagonists’ resistance—Adah’s final departure and writing, Firdaus’s murder of the pimp and her defiant silence, the community action investigation in *Faceless*—can be seen not just as personal rebellion but as fractured glimpses of resistance against an entire system of exploitation. Their actions, though often doomed or incomplete, point to the necessity of a struggle that targets both the economic base and the patriarchal superstructure.

VI. CONCLUSION

The novels *Second Class Citizen*, *Women at Point Zero*, and *Faceless* offer profound literary testimonies to the multi-layered oppression of women. By applying a Marxist-feminist framework, this study has argued that their power lies in depicting this oppression as a material condition, rooted in the exploitation of women’s reproductive and productive labor and the reduction of their bodies to commodities under patriarchal capitalism.

Adah’s struggle in London, Firdaus’s journey to the point zero of prostitution, and the harrowing survival of the women in Darko’s Accra are not merely stories of individual misfortune. They are narratives that expose the systemic logic by which

value is extracted from female lives while autonomy is denied. They show that education and wage labor, within an unchanged structure of social reproduction, are insufficient for liberation.

For literary scholarship, this analysis demonstrates the utility of Marxist feminism in moving beyond thematic catalogues of “abuse” to uncover the structural economic relations that give such abuse its force and persistence. It calls for a continued reading of African literature that takes material conditions seriously, recognizing that the fight for gender justice is inextricably linked to the fight against economic exploitation. The “second-class” status of these female citizens is, ultimately, a class status in the fullest sense of the word. Their literary narratives compel us to envision a liberation that is as economic as it is social, demanding nothing less than the reorganization of who labors, who profits, and who is valued

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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