Second Class Citizen - The Welfare State and Adah

The book Second Class Citizen by Buchi Emecheta discusses a concept that until now had never been mentioned before - the Welfare State. The Welfare State was created to help those less fortunate, like Adah in the book, with daily activities and necessary services that otherwise would be impossible to afford. In London during the 1960s, the Welfare State helped the majority of black Africans and their families while they were studying abroad in one of London’s many universities. This supports the main thesis that since Adah is a black Nigerian woman, the Welfare State proved to be very beneficial to her and in her transition to a modern woman.

Her transition into a modern woman and her use of the Welfare State can be shown through a comparison of her life in Nigeria to her life in London. One aspect of her life that the Welfare State had affected was her marriage. While in Nigeria, she was happy with her husband Francis. “Francis was a very quiet young man who was reading to be an accountant. Adah congratulated herself on the marriage. At least he was not an old baldie, neither was he a ‘made man’ then, though there was no doubt that he was going to be made one day.”¹ Adah's first priority in life wasn’t to marry, but her marriage to Francis seemed like a good match because he was a student and it would allow her to continue on with her education to become a librarian. While in Nigeria, she worked as a librarian for the American Consulates, where she earned enough money to be considered wealthy in

¹Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen. 12/10/13: 23
²Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen. 12/10/13: 39
³Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen. 12/10/13: 174
⁴Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen. 12/10/13: 60
Nigeria, and so she could save money to travel to London and start a new life there. Also in Nigeria, she gave birth to two babies- a girl Titi and a boy Vicky. She and Francis were absolutely delighted to have the babies. However, everything changed once they traveled to London. Francis had gone first to establish housing and a life so it would be easier for Adah and the babies to join him later on. But once Adah arrives in London, she notices a change in Francis. He wasn’t the Francis she knew back in Nigeria, he was a new Francis. He was gruffer to Adah than he had been in Nigeria. “Why don’t you stop wishing and face reality? It is too late now. We just have to make the best of the situation. I shouldn’t start moaning, if I were you.”

He’s more demanding and tells Adah what to do, rather than letting her do what she wants. Adah isn’t used to this type of behavior and she tells him how she feels. “Francis’s temper snapped. He lifted his hand as if to slap her, but thought better of it. There would be plenty of time for that, if Adah was going to start telling him what to do.”

In the months that separated him and Adah, he learned to be more aggressive and forceful with Adah, since that’s how men are supposed to treat their wives. Although he doesn’t hit her right at this instance, eventually he does and he continues to hit her until he almost kills her. Adah realizes that enough is enough and finds help through the Welfare State. The Welfare State helps her to get a court date in order to figure out how to handle Francis and the children. “The magistrate said the children had to be maintained, and since Adah had always been the head of the family financially she was given the custody of the children. But how much could Francis afford?” The Welfare State helped Adah go to court so they could help her get away from Francis like she wanted to.

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This helps in her transition of becoming a modern woman because she doesn’t have to deal with the traditional norms of a Nigerian woman by staying with her abusive husband. She has the ability now that she’s in a more modern nation like England to leave the problem behind and start her own life away from it. She can do this by using the Welfare State to her advantage and having them help her with financial or emotional support.

Another way that the Welfare State affected Adah’s life is through her healthcare. Since she had a well-paying job in Nigeria, she was able to afford to give birth in best hospital in Nigeria, in the best maternity ward with the best gynecologists from Europe. However, in London, she didn’t have that luxury. She had to give birth in hospitals meant for second class citizens since she couldn’t afford to be sent to the better hospitals in London. However, the Welfare State helped her to find the hospital that she could feel comfortable with despite it being for second class citizens. When her son Vicky caught viral meningitis from Trudy the babysitter, the ambulance was called to take the child to the hospital. Adah was worried what type of care her son would be receiving; “Now an ambulance is speeding her to Royal Free, just for that. Why was the name of the hospital Royal Free? Was it a hospital for poor people, for second class citizens? Why did they put the word ‘free’ in it? Fear started to shroud her then.” Although the hospital may not be up to Adah’s standards, it was set up by the Welfare State so people like her could have emergency health facilities and a safe place for them to go when they're sick.
Adah is able to effectively use the Welfare State to her advantage because not only is she a woman, but she's a second class citizen due to her Nigerian background. During this time, blacks were slightly frowned upon since they all migrated to England for education opportunities and jobs. Since they weren't British, they were given the less desirable jobs and forced to live in less than desirable homes. But the Welfare State acted as a rebound for the second class citizens because they were able to gain financial and medical assistance in addition to working and/or studying.

The story Second Class Citizen by Buchi Emecheta is important because it shows the evolution of women's rights. Adah was able to travel without her husband to a different country, she was able very good jobs as library clerks and she was able to provide for her children when her husband wouldn’t. But this book also brings in the issue of race. It had never been mentioned before in books whether a woman was white or black, but now it's becoming more of a big deal, especially since the author is of colored skin as well. The issue isn’t necessarily about being female anymore; it's more about what skin color the woman is that makes a difference in society.