When I first came across fiction by Buchi Emecheta, I was already an undergraduate student of black literature at the University of East London in 1989. I was familiar with the works of Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, and Bessie Head and eager to advance my knowledge of postcolonial discourse from the African diaspora. Although I had studied works by contemporary writers of Caribbean parentage living in London (e.g., Joan Riley and Caryl Phillips), I had yet to enjoy the work of an African-born writer who wrote about the London experience.

Indeed, Buchi Emecheta has been writing in and about London, England, for almost thirty years. She has published fourteen novels as well as children’s books. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1944, she is of Ibuza parentage. She studied at a colonial Methodist high school for girls before becoming pregnant and moving with her then husband to London in 1962. She received an honours degree in Sociology from the University of London in 1974 and worked subsequently as a teacher, librarian, and community worker. She began to write with some success after her marriage ended. Her first novel, *In the Ditch*, was published in 1972; her second, *Second Class Citizen*, in 1974. Both novels are semi-autobiographical and depict the life of Adah, a Nigerian-born, single mother living in North London during the early 1960s.

What interests me about Emecheta, apart from her prolific literary output, is the sociopolitical dimension of her fiction. Much of Emecheta’s fiction directly concerns the lives of women in or from West Africa. These women suffer tragic struggles against neo-colonialism—a
particularized economic exploitation—and the patriarchy that is firmly entrenched in West African religious and ontological traditions. Emecheta’s fiction maps the social trajectories of West African women on the continent and in Britain and reveals the political nature of mores and communities that shape a woman’s destiny wherever she may live. Both *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* are studies of the exploitation and displacement of African women who, like their Caribbean contemporaries, migrated for economic reasons to Britain in the postwar era.

The most significant migrant influx from the Caribbean (now known as the “Windrush generation”) had occurred earlier, in the late 1940s. By the early 1960s the succeeding masses were no more “clued up” on what was to happen to them once they touched Britain’s shores than the earlier arrivants had been. As was the case with Emecheta’s protagonist Adah, their knowledge of their adopted society was prescriptive and, to a certain extent, atavistic. Caribbean and African notions about social positioning were obfuscated by Britain’s inherited color and class codes as well as by what V. S. Naipaul has referred to as “the Enigma of Arrival” (Donnell and Welsh 1996: 207, 261–262).

The title of Emecheta’s first novel is metonymical and instructive: the ditch is the situation that Adah finds herself in after her marriage breaks up. Her husband denies his family in a court of law and burns her passport, wedding certificate, and the manuscript that she has been working on. She is forced to live with her children in the rat-infested room provided by an African landlord. The ditch is also Pussy Cat Mansions, the filthy tenements Adah and her family inhabit after they relocate to escape the first landlord’s harassment. When eventually Adah lives on welfare, the ditch appears in many additional forms and symbols, most notably in terms of the continuum of political and social discontent with which Adah becomes familiar. We learn from the author’s narrative that Adah is a determined woman whose initial confidence in her new home is nullified by the economic and cultural realities that inform her life.

The ditch itself is a feminized space, inhabited by Adah and the other women living at the Mansions. Their discontent is associated with their gender; Adah and the white women “in the ditch” battle within similar social constraints, which are, in the main, patriarchal, and encounter parallel discourtesies that inform their dialectic as women. Adah’s gaze remains that of the Other among a group of unwaged, working-class white women and welfare officers. While not being quite the equivalent of the nineteenth-century hysterical (Kahane 1995), Adah is depicted as either enacting verbal asides to herself (1994: 8) or being passive within conversations with other women in her new surroundings. Throughout