



Importance of Motherhood in Buchi Emerchetta's *Joys of Motherhood*

Dr Shalini Prakash

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

Ramgarh College Ramgarh (V.B.U)

Abstract

This study aims at examining the relevance of Emecheta's themes of Motherhood in her work Joys of Motherhood. It is centred on issues of gender and sexuality to the extent that ideological implications in her fiction have almost been ignored. Buchi Emecheta's novel The Joys of Motherhood (1979) is the story of a woman's struggle in a rapidly changing African society. This novel besides being based on racism and oppression also recognizes the fragmented nature of racial and gendered identity. Nnu Ego, a Nigerian woman, the daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi, a rich local chief meets the reversal of fortune when she leaves her former husband and moves to Lagos to marry Nnaji. This article will try to depict the tumultuous life of Nnu Ego as she is caught in the traversing space between the external and the internal, symbolizing a cultural experience of conflict in the face of a wretched life of the new colonial society. It will try to address the conflict situation of a woman exiled from the pristine land where she is born.

Keywords: Motherhood, Patriarchal Dogmas, Cultural Barrier, Polygamy Marriage.

INTRODUCTION:

The reading of African novels primarily explores the issues and themes of motherhood, Cultural identification and women's self expression within the institutions of family, community and nation. The influx of colonization places the criticism of the texts in



a wider problematic study of migration, dislocation, discrimination and marginalization. Africa is known for its long history of slavery and colonization and the victimization of the African women by the clutches of patriarchy and capitalism.

One of Buchi Emecheta's most acclaimed novels is *The Joys of Motherhood*. Published in 1979, the novel is about a traditional Igbo woman who in 1934 finds herself in colonial Lagos, Nigeria. The main character, Nnu Ego, battles with accepting the new culture, Lagos, without abandoning her native culture. Her Igbo background is a patriarchal one where marriage and having children are the most important goals for a woman. A sense of community is highly valued, and people are seen for what they can add to their compound. On the other hand, the culture of Lagos stresses money and individual success. Having many children in Lagos is not valued as it can cause financial burdens. Communities cease to exist as each person is not valued as part of a whole. Men compete for jobs and families compete for housing. Nnu Ego thus becomes trapped between two separate belief systems. Throughout her journey within these cultures she ultimately fails to cope with the changing environments. Due to her upbringing and the operating forces in Lagos, she proves to be a limited character lacking the tools needed to thrive. Buchi Emecheta is considered as one of the most prolific and dexterous women writers of Africa today. Different interpretations have been made on the ambiguous conveyance of her thoughts in her novels. She expresses the live experiences of African women.

The title "*The Joys of Motherhood*" is also ironical in nature. In this novel Emecheta achieves her best writing tactics. The title is ironical in that the romantic illusions of fulfillment and satisfaction associated with motherhood. It is proved to be a force in the light of the demands mental, physical and economical on the mother. '*The Joys of motherhood*' is a novel that gives the impression that it might well appeal to western



feminists. With motherhood as its theme, and the irony of its title, it appears to be a part of the significant body of feminist literature. It is concerned with women's experience of motherhood in patriarchal cultures.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, polygamy and child-bearing are central to the discourse. The essence is to influence the other interlocutor's cognition and consciousness. This tussle to take charge of the discourse shows in the difference in social standing among individuals or characters. This means that in social interactions, there is almost always a predominance of one voice or consciousness over another. This can be seen in the hegemonic relationship between the character, Nnaife and the other members of his polygamous family. This hegemonic arrangement influences the feature of discourse in the work under review which is also depicted in the interpersonal relationship between Agbadi and the members of the other Ibuza men and women, and also between the colonialists and the colonized in pre-independent Nigeria – Lagos.

Main Thrust:

As we all know that *Motherism* is a term which has been coined by *Catherine Obianuja Acholonu* in her book "*Motherism- An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*". In this book she discusses the importance of Motherhood, NAurture, respect and care of African Women. It is part of African Womanhood which should be considered, especially for the working class women. Buchi Emecheta portrays, "The portrayal of the subjugation of motherhood" in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta presents the plight of women in the Igbo patriarchal society of Ibuza where women are seen as the appendage and property of the male. Tragically, most women yield to such ugly practice and even strive to uphold it. For instance, Ona, the mother of Nnu Ego is torn between two men – her father and her lover.



There are also several operating forces at play within the novel that affect Nnu Ego in a way that make it difficult to critique her character. The degrading work force, World War II and the Christian concept of heaven play major roles in exacerbating her subjugation. These forces along with motherhood and the mentioned contradictions open a window into Emecheta's intentions in writing such a limited character as Nnu Ego. When her second and somewhat autobiographical novel, *Second Class Citizen*, is considered, and the main character Adah is juxtaposed with Nnu Ego, a new platform to evaluate the character and Emecheta's purpose emerges. It becomes evident that Buchi Emecheta is purposely writing Nnu Ego as a limited character that plays a role in her own oppression while simultaneously relinquishing her of blame.

At this juncture, we make some assumptions. The first is that in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the near-total patriarchal domination of females and children is vividly portrayed in the syntactic and lexical manipulation of language which ends up in the emphatic presentation of masculine ideology. In other words, the dominant patriarchal Igbo (Ibuza) traditional values are depicted in the linguistic social interaction between Nnaife and the members of his polygamous household, on one hand, and on another, between the female characters like Ona, Adankwo and so on, and the different male oriented African traditional and cultural bottlenecks that infringe upon their rights as humans. Lastly, linking the above two assumptions is the third which is that there is in existence, dissenting voices that refuse to accept impositions, restrictions and control. This can be seen in the dissenting consciousness and voice of Oshia that challenges Nnaife's viewpoint. Others include the likes of Adaku that pull out of marriage thereby questioning the patriarchal value system.

Emecheta is a committed writer who holds very strong views concerning the evils of patriarchal institutions and conventions that hold women down in Igbo society.



Her justified attack on these evils can be very uncompromising, leading her to neglect to use her power as a creative artist also to highlight the positive aspects of tradition, the strengths, resilience and triumphs of women in traditional society. Because Nnu Ego fails in both her Igbo village and in Lagos, Emecheta implies that there is more than social and political oppression at play. It then becomes arguable that Nnu Ego's decisions play a major role in her life's outcome.

In turn, her character cannot be overlooked as a determinant of her oppression. Obviously, this double sword is planted on purpose. It is Emecheta's choice to write such a character that needs to be examined along with how Nnu Ego arrives at a place where she is incapable of making wise decisions. It must be kept in mind that the decisions are made from the viewpoint of a limited character: a character lacking the tools to overcome her circumstances. In contemplating the reasons behind Nnu Ego's limited character, it is helpful to consider other factors outside of the novel itself.

Buchi Emecheta's second novel *Second Class Citizen*, 1974, portrays a character almost the complete opposite of Nnu Ego, a character who overcomes various forces of oppression. Because the main character, Adah, is said to be based on Emecheta herself, the novel offers a window into how Emecheta views such issues as patriarchy, capitalism, and her native Igbo tradition. This along with other operating oppressive factors, illustrated in *The Joys of Motherhood*, will be examined to shed more light on exactly why and how Nnu Ego failed at life. The first operating factor is Nnu Ego's second husband Nnaife and how a lack of an Igbo identity affects their marriage. The next factor is World War II and how it exacerbates Nnu Ego's and Nnaife's lack of education. Another factor is Christianity and the ways it fills Nnu Ego with false hope and complacency. Additionally, her chi or African life force, believed to be that of a slave woman, is an operating force that



shapes her life negatively and is a bad influence on her decisions. The final force operating is the devastation of failed motherhood and how it robs Nnu Ego of the life she desired.

Between Adaku and Nnu Ego are two women that respond to their patriarchal society differently. Whereas Adaku is the realist, Nnu Ego is the deceived one who realises her delusion too late and is unable to amend anything thereby losing out and losing her precious life as well. It is not surprising that Nnu Ego's shrine refuses to honour the fertility prayers offered to it by barren women as she decides to requite her society which she conceives deceives and betrays her without remedy. In *Ibuza*, the shrines erected in the names of other productively fertile women like Nnu Ego are famed for granting the petitions of their barren supplicants but Nnu Ego's "never did" however passionately "people appealed to her to make women fertile" (224). In other words, Nnu Ego elects to visit punishment on the society for what she considers to be its crime against her.

Conclusion:

The Joys of Motherhood, shows the dangers of patriarchy without the redeemable characteristics. Here, Emecheta chooses to portray a more realistic view of an Igbo woman. She is making a statement that her experience along with Adah's is rare. Unfortunately, Nnu Ego is tragic and much more typical. By incorporating into the novels the contradictions and negative operating forces mentioned, Emecheta presents Nnu Ego as a character not to be judged harshly. Instead, she purposely portrays a limited heroine and thereby critiques patriarchal societies. These novels represent two different strategies for critiquing the oppression of women by men. *The Joys of Motherhood* documents the protagonist's multilayered yet intersecting identities: the woman in an African patriarchal society, the exiled woman, the woman in the grim urban and colonial realities and the woman amidst the whirlwind of myths and traditions in conflict with modernization. Nnu



Ego is always devoted to her husband and children but is deprived of enjoy in her life. Her status is that of the subaltern woman within her own race and in the larger society. This novel may be termed as the tour the force of the African women experience Thus in the novel women and conflict are interrelated as are salt of which they are in aperpetual and vigorous struggle against the negativities of life. The woman protagonist of the discussed text is constantly in the quest of recovery of an effective relationship with herself and the place where she lives or where she is born.

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