

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*: A Study of Marginalized Women in Patriarchal Society

RINKI KUMARI

Abstract: This research article examines Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) as a sustained literary critique of the marginalization of women within a patriarchal Igbo society reshaped by the pressures of British colonialism and urban migration. The study is positioned within the broader tradition of African women's literature, which since the mid-twentieth century has interrogated the intersection of gender, culture, and colonial modernity in ways that frequently diverge from Euro-American feminist paradigms. The aim of the paper is to investigate how Emecheta constructs motherhood as simultaneously a source of social identity and an instrument of female subjugation, and to analyze the structures of patriarchal authority, economic dependency, and communal expectation that confine the novel's protagonist, Nnu Ego. The paper adopts a qualitative, text-based methodology, combining close reading of the primary text with a theoretical framework drawn from Western feminist literary theory and, more centrally, African feminist theory as articulated by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Womanism, and Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism. The study concludes that Emecheta's text constitutes a powerful, culturally embedded feminist intervention that exposes the human costs of the institution of motherhood without entirely abandoning the value of communal and maternal bonds, thereby enriching contemporary discourse on gender and African womanhood.

Keywords: African feminism; patriarchy; motherhood; marginalisation; Igbo society.

Introduction

African women's literature emerged as an important literary tradition in the twentieth century, giving voice to women's experiences that had often been overlooked in colonial and male-dominated narratives. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Zaynab Alkali focused on themes of marriage, motherhood, domestic life, and women's struggles within

society. Unlike many Western feminist texts that emphasize individual resistance, African women's writing often highlights community, cooperation, and motherhood. At the same time, it critically examines patriarchy, a system in which men hold greater social, economic, and political power. In Emecheta's works, particularly, Igbo women are portrayed as living under social structures that limit their autonomy and reinforce their subordinate status, revealing the gender inequalities embedded in traditional society.

Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) occupies a foundational position in the canon of African women's writing and is widely regarded by critics as one of the continent's most significant feminist novelists, notwithstanding her own complicated relationship with the label. Born in Lagos to an Igbo family, Emecheta endured an early life marked by limited educational opportunity for girls, an abusive marriage that began when she was a teenager, and a difficult immigration to London, where she raised five children largely on her own while writing in the early mornings before work (BlackPast.org, n.d.). She would later recount in her 1986 autobiography, *Head above Water*, that her first husband destroyed the manuscript of her debut novel, *The Bride Price*, an act of literary suppression that she transformed into the generative material of her writing career (Wasafiri 2017). Out of these experiences emerged a body of fiction, including *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), that consistently addresses what one retrospective tribute summarises "as the marginalization of women and girls, patriarchal oppression, racism, poverty, and social exclusion" (*African Feminist Forum*). Critics in Europe and North America came to regard Emecheta as one of Africa's most eloquent feminist voices (BlackPast.org, n.d.), even though Emecheta herself resisted any straightforward alignment with Western feminist movements, famously describing herself in an oft-cited remark as a feminist with a small 'f' because, as she put it, she saw things through an African woman's eyes and chronicled the lives of the African women she knew without "initially intending to advance any particular ideological programme" (Kohzadi, Azizmohammadi, & Afrougheh 155).

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) narrates the life of Nnu Ego, an Igbo woman whose identity and social value are deeply tied to motherhood in a patriarchal society. Set in colonial Nigeria, the novel traces her journey from a childless first marriage to her marriage

with Nnaife, through which she becomes the mother of several children. Despite dedicating her life to raising them, Nnu Ego experiences poverty, hardship, neglect, and loneliness in old age. The title is highly ironic, as Emecheta challenges the traditional belief that motherhood brings fulfillment and happiness, revealing instead the sacrifices and suffering it often entails, "The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children." (*The Joys of Motherhood* 224)

Under this system, a mother's happiness is twisted into a demand for total self-erasure. For Nnu Ego, "giving all" means sacrificing her health, identity, and economic freedom for her children. Instead of bringing true joy, this cultural expectation turns motherhood into an institution of complete exhaustion and psychological imprisonment, leaving the woman with nothing for herself, "She had been built up with the fact that without children, common dirty pebbles were better than she; now she had the children, but what else did she have? An empty shell, a morning without sun." (224)

This details her social conditioning: the community socializes women to believe they have zero intrinsic value unless they bear children, framing childlessness as worse than being "dirty pebbles." The second half reveals the stark reality - after fulfilling this cultural demand, Nnu Ego is left emotionally destitute, lonely, and financially broken. By using the metaphors of an "empty shell" and a "morning without sun," Emecheta demonstrates that conforming to patriarchal expectations does not guarantee security or happiness; instead, it strips women of their autonomous selfhood, leaving them hollowed out by their own sacrifices. Through Nnu Ego's tragic life, the novel critiques patriarchal expectations that define women's worth solely through childbearing and exposes the emotional, social, and economic marginalisation of women within traditional African society.

Major Thrust Area

The major thrust area of this study is the exploration of the interconnected relationship between motherhood, patriarchy, and women's marginalisation in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Through an African feminist perspective, the study examines how patriarchal norms construct motherhood as the primary measure of female worth, while simultaneously subjecting women to social, economic, and emotional oppression. It

highlights the experiences of Nnu Ego as a representative of marginalised African women whose identities are shaped by marriage, childbearing.

This study employs Feminist Literary Theory to examine the themes of patriarchy, gender inequality, female subordination, and women's agency in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Patriarchy in the novel is reflected through male dominance in social, economic, and family structures, while gender inequality is evident in the unequal value attached to men and women. Female subordination is portrayed through the restrictions placed on women's roles and opportunities. At the same time, the concept of women's agency highlights how Nnu Ego attempts to make choices and exercise influence despite these limitations. This framework helps analyze the ways in which oppression and resistance coexist in the lives of women characters, "I am a feminist with a small 'f'. I do not believe in the kind of feminism that cuts off men completely. My stories are about the reality of African women's lives, not an imported ideology." (175).

By claiming the label of a "feminist with a small 'f'," Emecheta distances herself from mainstream Euro-American ("Western") feminism, which she critiqued as being overly individualistic and adversarial toward men. Instead, she anchors her worldview in African social realities, where the liberation of women cannot be detached from their families, children, or communities. Her focus is not on promoting gender warfare or "cutting off men completely," but on realistically chronicling how indigenous patriarchy, colonial capitalism, and poverty intersect to shape the everyday lives and survival strategies of African women.

African Feminism provides a culturally grounded perspective for understanding the experiences of women in the novel. Unlike Western feminist approaches, it emphasizes the importance of African history, traditions, and social realities. The theory views motherhood as a communal institution closely linked to family, lineage, and social responsibility. It also recognizes that African women often resist patriarchal constraints through negotiation, adaptation, and compromise rather than direct confrontation. These ideas are particularly relevant to Nnu Ego's experiences as she navigates the challenges of motherhood, poverty, and gender expectations within both traditional Igbo society and colonial Lagos, "A woman with children is a woman who has fulfilled

her primary obligation to the ancestors and to the community; she secures the continuity of the lineage.” (25)

In this worldview, bearing children is not a personal choice, but a sacred and binding contract with the community and the spirit world. By framing reproduction as a “primary obligation to the ancestors,” the text shows how a woman’s body is effectively institutionalized to ensure “the continuity of the lineage.” While this structure grants a mother high social status and validation, it simultaneously strips her of individual agency. Her worth is entirely conditional: she is valued not for who she is as a human being, but for her functional role as a biological vessel for the patriarchal family line.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s concept of Womanism emphasises the survival and well-being of the entire community, including both men and women. Rather than promoting conflict between genders, Womanism advocates cooperation, motherhood, and communal harmony. This perspective is useful in understanding *The Joys of Motherhood*, where motherhood remains central to both the identity and struggles of the female characters :

The African woman writer is not an isolationist; she does not advocate a war of the sexes. Her grievance is not with the African man alone, but with the systemic structures of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy that marginalize them both. Cooperation, not confrontation, is the key to our collective healing.” (65)

Ogunyemi rejects an individualist, adversarial model that pits women against men (“a war of the sexes”), arguing instead that African women must contend with multiple, interlocking systems of oppression: traditional patriarchy, foreign colonialism, and structural racism. Because African men are also subjugated and marginalized by these same historical forces, the womanist framework views them as partners in survival rather than automatic enemies. Ultimately, this quote highlights that true liberation requires interdependent healing and gender cooperation, aiming to restore balance and dignity to the entire community rather than achieving individualistic female isolation. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie developed

Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) to highlight the need for women's inclusion in social, political, and economic transformation. She argued that African women's liberation must be understood within African realities rather than through Western feminist models. Her theory helps explain the structural nature of women's oppression in the novel and the need for broader social change :

God, when will you create a woman who
will be fulfilled in herself, a whole
human being, not anybody's appendage?
... Why should I be used like this? Why
must I suffer so that my sons can have
an education while my daughters are sold
to pay for it? (186)

The first half is a direct philosophical challenge to both divine and societal order, where Nnu Ego explicitly identifies the root of her suffering - patriarchy denies women an intrinsic, independent identity, reducing them instead to a subhuman "appendage" whose worth is entirely dependent on others (husbands and sons).

The second half exposes the cruel, transactional reality of the patriarchal family structure under the pressures of colonial modernity. Nnu Ego recognizes that she is being "used" as a mechanical tool of reproduction and labor, and that her daughters are treated as mere commodities ("sold" through bride price) to fund the advancement of her sons. By questioning this cycle, Emecheta uses her protagonist's voice to shatter the myth of maternal contentment, demanding that women be recognized as autonomous, complete human beings.

Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism, or the feminism of negotiation, emphasizes compromise, dialogue, and strategic resistance. Instead of directly confronting patriarchal systems, women often negotiate with existing structures to improve their circumstances. This theory is particularly relevant to Nnu Ego, whose resilience and survival depend on continuous negotiation with her husband, co-wives, family, and society. Nego-Feminism thus provides an important lens for understanding the subtle forms of resistance portrayed in the novel :

The two women soon realized that their
enemy was not each other, but the hunger
of their children and the empty pockets

of their husband. They stood side by side
in the market, driving a harder bargain
together than apart. (162)

In a traditional polygamous setup, the patriarchal structure is designed to pit co-wives against each other as they compete for a husband's limited resources and favor. However, Nnu Ego and Adaku experience a shared awakening: they realize that their true antagonist is not the other woman, but the systemic pressures of poverty ("empty pockets") and colonial economic neglect ("hunger of their children").

By choosing to stand "side by side in the market," they reject division and form an economic alliance. This shift proves that their resilience and power are found in solidarity, compromise, and collective bargaining. Instead of staging an overt, individualistic rebellion against their husband, they strategically negotiate their harsh reality together, ensuring the literal survival of their community.

Nnu Ego's marginalisation is rooted in the social expectations imposed upon her as a woman in Igbo society. From childhood, her worth is linked to marriage and motherhood, particularly the ability to bear sons. Her failure to conceive in her first marriage results in rejection and social humiliation, demonstrating that a woman's identity is measured primarily through her reproductive role. Even after becoming a mother, Nnu Ego remains dependent on her husband and family, with little control over the direction of her own life. Through her experiences, Emecheta portrays marginalization as a continuous social condition rather than an isolated event.

The novel challenges the traditional belief that motherhood is the greatest source of female fulfilment. Although motherhood brings Nnu Ego social recognition, it also demands endless sacrifice, physical labor, and emotional suffering. She works tirelessly to provide for her children while receiving little support in return. By exposing the gap between the cultural glorification of motherhood and its lived reality, Emecheta reveals motherhood as both a source of identity and a burden that ultimately contributes to Nnu Ego's isolation and disappointment.

Patriarchal authority shapes every aspect of Nnu Ego's life. Major decisions concerning marriage, family structure, and household affairs remain under male control. Economic dependence further

strengthens male dominance, while the practice of polygamy intensifies competition among women for resources and recognition. The preference for sons over daughters also reflects the deep-rooted gender discrimination embedded in society. Through these conditions, the novel demonstrates how patriarchy systematically restricts women's freedom and opportunities, "A man is never ugly and a man is never old. He can always marry a young girl, especially if he has money." (71)

Economic hardship is a persistent feature of Nnu Ego's life in colonial Lagos. Despite her constant labor as a trader, mother, and homemaker, she remains financially insecure and socially undervalued. Her contributions sustain the family, yet they bring neither economic independence nor social recognition. Emecheta highlights how women's unpaid and invisible labor supports both family and society while leaving them vulnerable to poverty, dependence, and neglect, "Nnu Ego had to work twenty hours out of the twenty-four to keep her children fed. Yet her husband, Nnaife, thought she did nothing but sit down and eat his money." (154)

The brutal physical reality of Nnu Ego's life – her day is consumed by twenty hours of relentless, unpaid labor—combining petty market trading, domestic housework, and childcare—just to keep her family from starving. This highlights the patriarchy's complete blindness to this contribution. Because Nnu Ego's work takes place in the informal sector and within the home, Nnaife views it as completely invisible. He dismisses her monumental effort with the insulting claim that she does nothing but "sit down and eat his money." By contrasting Nnu Ego's exhausting lived reality with Nnaife's arrogant ignorance, Emecheta critiques how patriarchal societies systematically devalue, exploit, and erase women's economic contributions, rendering them financially dependent and socially unappreciated even as their labor keeps the entire family alive.

Despite the constraints imposed upon her, Nnu Ego demonstrates remarkable resilience. She continually adapts to difficult circumstances and works tirelessly to secure a better future for her children. Other female characters, such as Adaku, adopt more independent strategies by pursuing economic self-sufficiency. These forms of endurance, negotiation, and self-reliance reflect the principles of African feminism, which often emphasises survival and strategic resistance rather than direct confrontation.

Through the tragic story of Nnu Ego, Emecheta offers a powerful critique of patriarchal society. The novel dismantles the myth that motherhood automatically guarantees happiness and security, exposing instead the inequalities that shape women's lives. By highlighting women's sacrifices, struggles, and unrecognized contributions, Emecheta calls for greater dignity, autonomy, and social recognition for women. Her work ultimately challenges cultural traditions that define female worth solely through marriage and motherhood :

The joy of being a mother was the joy of
giving all to your children... Nnu Ego
told herself that she was a prisoner of
her own flesh and blood. Was it right
for a woman to be so helpless? (224)

This delivers the crushing irony of her life - the "joy" promised by her culture is revealed to be a demand for total self-erasure ("giving all"). By realizing that she has become a "prisoner of her own flesh and blood," Nnu Ego recognizes that the very children she suffered to bear have become the biological bars of her confinement, chaining her to a lifetime of unrequited sacrifice.

Her closing question—"Was it right for a woman to be so helpless?"—is a profound moment of critical awakening. It shatters her lifelong acceptance of patriarchal destiny, openly interrogating a social structure that strips women of their agency, denies them independent personhood, and leaves them utterly vulnerable once their reproductive utility has been completely exhausted. The preceding analysis yields five principal findings.

First, motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* functions simultaneously as a source of female identity and as a mechanism of oppression, a duality that several scholars examining matrescence and maternal identity formation in the novel have likewise identified, noting that "traditional gender roles both restrict women's independence and create the only socially sanctioned avenues through which women in this context can exercise meaning and influence" (Ogbeide-Ihama 89).

Second, patriarchal norms, operating through male decision-making authority, polygamous family structure, and entrenched son-preference, systematically limit women's autonomy across every major

decision point in Nnu Ego's life, from her first marriage's dissolution to her husband's unilateral decision to take a second wife.

Third, economic dependency, intensified rather than alleviated by the disruptions of colonial urban life in Lagos, compounds and intensifies this marginalization, since women's extensive informal labour "generates household survival without generating independent economic security or formal recognition". (Mohanty & Torres 33)

Fourth, women's sacrifices, whether expressed through unpaid domestic and market labor or through the broader emotional and psychological investment that motherhood demands, remain largely unrecognized and uncompensated within the novel's social economy, a pattern that culminates in Nnu Ego's largely unhonored death.

Fifth, and most significantly for the overarching argument of this study, Emecheta presents a powerful and culturally embedded critique of patriarchal society, one that operates not through direct authorial polemic but through the accumulated ironic weight of her narrative structure and that aligns closely with the African feminist theoretical commitments to negotiation, communal welfare, and the restoration of female dignity articulated by Ogunyemi, Ogundipe-Leslie, and Nnaemeka.

Taken together, these findings substantiate the study's central claim that motherhood, marginalization, and patriarchy in the novel constitute an interconnected system rather than three discrete themes, with each element reinforcing the others to produce the protagonist's tragic trajectory.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to read these themes, motherhood, marginalization, and patriarchy, as an interconnected analytical system rather than as separate concerns to be addressed in isolation, a synthesis that addresses a notable gap in the existing secondary literature on the novel, much of which has tended to specialize in one of these three dimensions at the expense of full attention to the others. By grounding this synthesis in African feminist theory specifically, drawing on Ogunyemi's womanism, Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, and Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, the study has sought to honor the cultural specificity of the novel's setting and concerns, rather than imposing an interpretive framework developed primarily in response to Western social and political conditions.

The relevance of this study to contemporary gender discourse extends beyond the immediate context of mid-twentieth-century colonial Lagos. Debates concerning the unpaid and undervalued character of women's domestic and reproductive labor, the persistence of son-preference and gender-based discrimination in various global contexts, and the tension between communal expectation and individual autonomy that many women continue to navigate remain pressing concerns well into the twenty-first century. Emecheta's novel, in dramatizing these tensions through the specific historical and cultural circumstances of one woman's life, offers a literary resource for thinking through gender inequality that retains its force precisely because it resists easy moralizing or simple prescriptions, presenting instead the full, often contradictory, texture of lived experience under patriarchal constraint.

Conclusion

This study has examined Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* as a sustained literary investigation into the marginalisation of women within a patriarchal society reconfigured by the economic and social pressures of British colonialism. The major arguments developed across this analysis can be summarised as follows – that Nnu Ego's identity is constructed almost entirely through marriage and motherhood, foreclosing any space for autonomous selfhood; that motherhood, glorified by the surrounding culture as the pinnacle of female achievement, in practice demands sacrifice and suffering disproportionate to the security and recognition it is promised to confer; that patriarchal oppression operates through multiple, mutually reinforcing mechanisms, including male economic and decision-making authority, polygamous family structure, and pervasive son-preference; that economic and social marginalisation, intensified by the disruptions of colonial urban life, compounds these patriarchal pressures and renders women's extensive labour largely invisible and unrewarded; that resistance and resilience nonetheless persist within the novel, taking the culturally coherent forms of endurance, negotiation and, in the case of Adaku, economic self-assertion rather than outright confrontation; and that Emecheta, through the careful ironic construction of her novel's title and narrative art, articulates a powerful critique of the patriarchal valorization of motherhood without entirely repudiating the value of maternal and communal bonds themselves.

Finally, this study affirms Buchi Emecheta's substantial and enduring contribution to African feminist literature. Emecheta's insistence on writing from the specific vantage point of an African woman's experience, her refusal of any simple alignment with Western feminist movements even as her fiction powerfully indicts patriarchal oppression, and her willingness to depict the costs of motherhood without flinching from their full emotional and material weight, together secure her place as one of the foundational voices in the canon of African women's writing. As subsequent generations of African women writers and critics, including those who have continued to develop the theoretical frameworks of Stiwanism, womanism, and nego-feminism in new directions, attest, Emecheta's work continues to provide indispensable material for thinking through the complex, situated, and still-unresolved questions of gender, motherhood, and patriarchal power in African societies and beyond.

Rinki Kumari

Research Scholar

P.G. Department of English & Research Centre

Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

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