

Motherhood as a Double-Edged Sword : The Dilemmas and Disappointments of Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract. Buchi Emecheta's fictions explore the diverse experiences of motherhood in various socio-cultural contexts, ranging from the pre-colonial Ibuza to the post-colonial Lagos and London. Her female characters face the existential challenges of being Nigerian women in a patriarchal society undergoing rapid changes, where motherhood often exacerbates their predicament. In African culture, motherhood is a highly valued and respected role for women, and this is reflected in the literary representations of African women by African writers. Two main images of the African woman as mother emerge in African creative writing. The first is the African mother as a sublime symbol while the second image is as a victim of suffering and sacrifice. This article explores the intrinsic dilemmas and disappointments of Nnu Ego as a Nigerian mother in *The Joys of Motherhood*. It explores what it means to be mother in Nigeria where traditions and customs are changing, as well as marriage, colonialism and women's roles in society.

Keywords : Motherhood; trauma; womanism; colonialism; alienation; subversion; resistance.

Motherhood: All love begins and ends
there. –Robert Browning

Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, challenges the idealized images of the Nigerian Mother in African literature. Emecheta, as a writer committed to social change, subverts the conventional representations of motherhood as a noble and sacred role. She depicts the realities and hardships of mothers who are often neglected and abandoned by their children in adulthood. She articulates in her novel, "...the joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children".(224) The book's complexity stems from the portrayal of motherhood in Igbo society. Emecheta creates a realistic and nuanced character, highlighting the challenges that a woman faces due to her unquestioning loyalty to tradition:

She had been a good mother to her children. She had brought them up well, and they had all done well in school. She had taught them to respect their father, even though he had deserted them long ago. She had taught them to love their country, even though it had given them nothing but hardship. She had taught them to be proud of their culture, even though it had been trampled upon by foreigners. She had taught them to be strong, even though they had suffered so much. (Aidoo, 83)

The author is especially concerned with the issues of polygamy (such as jealousy among co-wives and unfairness of some husbands), the plight of the infertile wife in a culture that values fertility, the difficulties of women married to weak men, and the hardships of widows. Emecheta once stated, “I work toward the liberation of women but I’m not feminist. I’m just a woman”. (Baraza, 1) Despite her rejection of the feminist label, her works interrogate the issues of gender inequality, oppression, and violence that shape her narratives. She is a woman who seeks to understand and liberate herself through writing, and in doing so, she also contributes to the empowerment of many others. Emecheta does not idealize the mother. Rather, she depicts lively individuals, who have their own flaws:

Motherhood is a complex and contradictory experience. It’s not one thing or another. It’s different for every woman and every child. It’s shaped by personal, historical, and cultural factors. It’s both rewarding and challenging, both empowering and limiting. (Davies, 221)

The Joys of Motherhood presents the mother figure in various scenarios. The reader observes the mother sacrificing herself for her children, arguing with her husband to secure financial support for the children, shielding her children from their father’s anger, disciplining her children and grieving for their absence, their rebellion against traditional norms, and their demands. She was a woman who had been brought up to believe that the only honourable occupation for a woman was to bear children and that the only way to keep a man was to give him sons.

Main Thrust

The title of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is ironical because women find nothing in the process of motherhood. Nnu Ego, daughter of Agbadi is married to Amatokwu fails to conceive and her community titles her as barren and juiceless. Amatokwu is free to remarry while Nnu Ego returns to Agbadi. She is remarried to Nnaife Owulum regardless of her hatred towards him the very first night. Nnaife Owulum finds her the right person for his sexual gratification and brutally rapes her at night. Fortunately, he impregnates her but the first born does not survive. Later she becomes proud mother of seven children- three boys and four girls. Nnu Ego feels happy when she has many children. She says, I am nothing. I am only a mother. I have no life of my own. I have no happiness of my own. I have no money of my own. I have nothing but children, children, children. (46)

However, raising and feeding them is the biggest challenge of her life. It reveals a paradoxical aspect of African culture. An African woman is mocked and scorned if she is infertile and praised when she has several children, even if their care or education is beyond her ability. In *Single Women: On the Margins?* the author remarks :

Single women who are mothers face a double stigma: they are seen as deviant both as women and as mothers. They are often blamed for their own situation and for the social problems associated with single parenthood. They are also subject to economic and emotional hardships that affect their well-being and their mothering. (Gordon, 78)

At the end of the novel, however, she is alienated as none of her children care to return to her. Nnu Ego's whole life was nothing but with consistent poverty and the cradle of children. She expresses her grief and disappointment :

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? I was born alone and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? And if I am

lucky enough to die in peace. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 186)

In the Nigerian Ibo society the shackles of tradition and culture confine the women to grow family tree and to prove that she is a good wife and mother, she continues to live with Nnaife, the most hateful person since the first night. Her identity is the negation of motherhood. When Nnu Ego fails to follow the traditional rules of women (motherhood), her father Agbadialso rejects her. Emecheta points, "It is in Ibuza that a childless marriage is not recognized. When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive". (30-31)

Contrary to the most of the African male writers who portrayed their mothers as most compassionate care givers in their autobiographies, Buchi Emecheta depicts the troublesome lives of mother with never ending thankless job. Two distinct images of women have been represented by African writers. The first is the sublime being who is always a nurturing figure. This image has been presented by Chinua Achebe (a Nigerian male writer) in his novel *Things Fall Apart* where the motherland is the ultimate source of solace and comfort for a man in times of distress and despair, "But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme". (134)

The second image of the African woman as mother presents her as a victim of suffering and sacrifice. Mariama Ba (a Senegalese author) in her *So Long a Letter* represents a mother's unconditional love and protection for her children even in the face of adversity and sorrow :

And also, one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightening streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end. (Ba, 26)

Unlike most African male writers who revere their mothers in autobiographies, recalling their mothers' affection, Buchi Emecheta records the troubled and chaotic moments in a mother's life. After relocating to Lagos, Nnu Ego relied on her traditional business skills to

initiate a trade and supplement the scant income of her laundryman husband. However, as she continues to have more children over the years and with her husband unemployed or absent most of the time, the sole burden of raising her children rests on her. Nnu Ego almost loses her second child, Oshia, when he has a high fever. But the yam stew given by IyawoItsekiri restores Oshia's spirit. Nnu Ego then says, "So hunger was the cause of my son's illness." (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 105). Nnaife's frequent absence in search of a job makes her restless. She is torn between living in poverty's edge or returning to Ibuza with her children, where she is always unwanted at her father's house. In addition to providing food and clothing for her children, she also has to organize and deal with their education alone.

The Colonial system imposed an additional responsibility on the mother to ensure the education of her children for their success. She questions the unfairness of this arrangement, where the white man's social system requires a submissive woman, and even though Nnaife adopts Christianity and its worldview, Nnu Ego has to be the main breadwinner in their household. She also strongly resents the injustice of the expectation placed on her, where, she without the assistance of the older women of the family as in Ibuza, who cared for the children as the mother pursued her trade, is expected to labour both at home and outside. She attributes the death of her first son to neglect the baby suffered due to her absence and overwork for her business, "... she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child". (81)

Nnu Ego, who aspires to be a better future for her children, faces a double burden under the colonial system. She works tirelessly and resists the hardships with great courage, clinging to the hope that her old age would be peaceful. Her children, especially her sons, are her security and her source of pride. Along with this hope of a comfortable future, Nnu Ego also longs to return to Ibuza, her ancestral home. Her dreams have been voiced as:

She would go back to Ibuza, where she would be a queen. Her sons would build her a house with a zinc roof, and she would be able to give orders to a lot of young wives. Her daughters would come to visit her with their husbands and

children, and she would be surrounded by love and respect. She would be able to afford the most expensive clothes and jewelry, and she would be envied by all the other women in the village. She would be happy and fulfilled, and she would die peacefully, knowing that her children would give her a befitting burial and continue her lineage. (118)

She had thought the joys of motherhood were very much like the warmth of the sun, that they would come naturally. But they had not. Her reality speaks in the following lines:

I have suffered. I have worked like a slave. I have prayed like a saint. I have done everything for my children. But what have they done for me? They have left me. They have betrayed me. They have forgotten me. (212)

This shows how Nnu Ego's expectations of motherhood were shattered by the harsh realities of her life. For example, in explaining her temporary nervous breakdown following the loss of her first son, Ngozi, Nnu Ego laments,

...but I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. The child is there, dead on the mat. My chi (the personal god, in her case a slave woman killed by her father), has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her...

(62)

Here nnu Ego puts forth traditional Igbo ideas as well as role of one's chi in the psyche of an Igbo person. But gradually a chain of disasters in Nnu Ego's life awakens her to the reality of her unrewarding years of suffering and sacrificing for her children. Nnu Ego says:

I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after

them. I have to give them my all. All if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: it will be hailed a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free? (186-187)

Apart from the positive aspects of motherhood, author Emecheta records the turmoil and anguish of women who long for children and of mothers who worry about their children. Emecheta portrays two of her characters- Nnu Ego and Adaku- as advocates of radical feminist views in their pursuit of a prosperous life. Nnu Ego, after going through the pleasures and sorrows of motherhood, realizes that children are not always a source of satisfaction. She reflects, God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being not anybody's appendage? (186) What Emecheta does is to present an African woman's reaction to a universal problem: children often fail to honour their parents :

She had been a mother to all of them, but none of them was prepared to be a child to her. They had all grown up and gone their own ways, leaving her alone and lonely. They had all forgotten her, except when they needed money or advice. They had all taken her for granted, as if she owed them everything and they owed her nothing. (112)

As her sons abandon the Igbo culture she raised them in, Nnu Ego collapses and her old stable world crumbles. Aware of the contradiction in her situation, she remarks, "...a woman with many children could face a lonely old age and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman". (224)

Nnu Ego's suffering is aggravated by her husband's behaviour. She devoted her prime years to her husband and children, but now she is old and neglected in the village. When her husband comes out of prison

after only three months, he chooses to live with his new wife, Okpo, instead of her. Naturally, Nnu Ego starts to question her entire life:

Nnu Ego had allowed herself to wonder where it was she had gone wrong. She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman. She had had children, nine in all, and luckily seven were alive, much more than many women of that period could boast of. Most of her friends and colleagues had buried more children than they had alive; but her god had been merciful to her. Still, how was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? (219)

The late realization leads Nnu Ego to a state of mental breakdown. She is a woman who cares only about “building up her joys as a mother” (Emecheta 224), neglecting other dimensions of her life. She abruptly discovers that motherhood is not sufficient. And it is certainly too late for her to start cultivating the bonds of friendship she never formed in her youth. Her regrets become a kind of obituary :

Nnu Ego told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship: but she had never had the time... she had shield away from friendship, telling herself she did not need any friends, she had enough in her family. But had she been right? ...many of the Ibiza people in general, blamed her for bringing up her children badly. There was Oshia in America, not caring at all, and though Adim was keen on having a footstool in Nigeria Nnu Ego suspected that he too would prefer to leave his family and go abroad... (219)

Here Emecheta constructs a wholly different set of economic, socio-political and cultural imperatives which diverge from the existing literary models.

Similarly, Flora Nwapa's novel, *Efuru*, is significant and ironic in this context. The theme of motherhood is central to the novel and poses a major challenge for Efuru. Her society expects and demands that she becomes a mother. When Efuru divorces her first husband, Adizua, who is impotent, she is blamed and pitied by the people, who say, "She is a good woman, but what is a woman without a child? She is like a well without water". (40) She expresses her hope and faith when she says, "I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood." (24). Flora Nwapa shows how Efuru is neglected and marginalized by her society for being childless, despite her other achievements and qualities and suggests that women can have alternative paths and roles in society.

The novel explores the complex and contradictory identities of the protagonist: the woman in a male-dominated African culture, the woman in exile, the woman in the harsh urban and colonial environment, and the woman caught between the clash of tradition and modernity. Nnu Ego is loyal to her husband and children, but she finds no happiness in her life. She is a marginalized woman within her own community and in the wider society. This novel can be seen as a powerful expression of the African women's experience. Nnu Ego's two sons, Oshia and Adim, achieve success in their careers, thanks to their mother's enduring efforts. They live abroad and their mother eagerly expects that they will support her in her old age. However, her 'joys of motherhood' disappear when they do not contact her. She eventually returns to Ibuza to reconnect with her roots, but she does not find solace there either. She is overwhelmed by psychological turmoil and gradually develops a modern neurotic disorder, "She became vague and people pointed out that she had never been strong emotionally". (224) Stephane Robolin writes :

The Joys of Motherhood has been one of the most persuasive, compelling, and relevant conveyors of the importance of African women's experiences. The novel's attention to the views, roles, and destinies of African women shows Emecheta's affirmation of African feminism. (6)

Therefore, the novel shows how women and conflict are intertwined, as they face the challenges and difficulties of life. The main character of the novel is always in search of a meaningful relationship with herself and the place where she belongs or where she was born.

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