



Representation Of The Sorrow Of Motherhood In Buchi Emecheta's The Joys Of Motherhood

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APA Citation:

Sindhu, T., & Frederick, S., (2021). Representation of the Sorrow of Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2308-2313.

Submission Date:08/10/2021

Acceptance Date:22/12/2021

Abstract

In African societies, the most significant role of women is parturition. A woman must produce and fosterage children. Women as mothers are highly valued in traditional African societies. Mothers are the essential building blocks of social relationships, identities, and society. Like mothers symbolise familial ties, unconditional love and loyalty, motherhood defines womanhood. Motherhood is crucial to a woman's status in society. Especially bearing a male child ennobles a woman into being worthier among her husband's kinsman. Buchi Emecheta is a writer who speaks for African women. Emecheta's works invoke the voice and perspective of African women. Emecheta's fiction focuses on the plight of African women who struggle against patriarchal family structures, unfair gender stereotypes, and contradictory social values in contemporary Africa. Emecheta looks at motherhood as a reality. The actual condition of motherhood is enslaved in them, similar to the case of Nnu Ego in 'The Joys of Motherhood'.

Keywords: motherhood, womanhood, child bearing, child rearing, unconditional love.

1. Introduction

Motherhood engages a unique place in African culture and society. Filomina Chioma Steady states, "The importance of motherhood and the valuation of the childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between African women and western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women" (29).

2. Review of Literature

Buchi Emecheta's works and contributions to literature are remarkable. Many writers and scholars have made critical reviews of Buchi Emecheta's works. I chose only a few of them that are relevant to the author's *The Joys of Motherhood*. Ketu H.Katrak's article *Womanhood / Motherhood: Variations on a Theme in Selected Novels of Buchi Emecheta* explores the varying definition of womanhood and motherhood as experienced by her women protagonists in Nigerian society. In her article titled *The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta*, Katherine Frank applies the concept of African female experiences from birth to death and childhood to motherhood. Dolly V.

Muanching's work, *Narrativising the Female Experience: An Analyses of Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood*, explores how Emecheta, with great authenticity, recreates and redefines the difficulties and feelings of women in Africa.

The novel's title is ironic. The novel begins with the following chapter, 'To all mothers'. Emecheta comes across a detailed examination that institutes marriage and counters the accustomed male views regarding 'Motherhood'. She depicts and focuses on the problems of women such as victimisation. According to Marie A. Umeh, "*The Joys of Motherhood* is a study of victimisation and enslavement of traditional Igbo women to the dictates of traditional Igbo culture".

Emecheta exhibits great psychological vision in the incursion of her character's thoughts. The novel gives a detailed account of the protagonist's intense desire for motherhood, later the unspeakable plight of motherhood, and then her tragic death. The protagonist of the novel Nnu Ego faces encumbrance of all sorts at every moment of her life. She squirms throughout her life in order to be a perfect mother. She wholeheartedly believes, "The Joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children" (24). Children are supposed to give joy to their mothers, but the novel portrays motherhood's negative side. Despite her distress, Nnu Ego rewards upon nothing but relinquishment, disgrace, and fault. Eventually, her life ends with dismal failure.

At the age of sixteen, Nnu Ego marries Amatokwua, a farmer becoming a responsible wife in a tradition-bound African family. Nnu Ego fails to conceive for a couple of years. She worships her Chi in agony; however, all her prayers are in vain. Amatokwu becomes hot-tempered with her inability to procreate. He reflects that he is also the product of the traditional Igbo society where people believe that "when a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive" (31). According to Ibuza tradition, she is a failure amidst the womenfolk. Her husband harshly tells her, "I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line" (32).

He forces Nnu Ego to work in the fields if she cannot be productive bearing children. Katherine Frank remarks that "The only power a woman possesses is her procreative power, and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable in her own eyes and those of her children". He eventually asks her to vacate her room to move to an outer hut to arrange a room for his second wife.

Neglecting Nnu Ego's feelings and emotions Amatokwu marries another woman who gets pregnant in the very first month of their married life. This adds much more distress and bad luck to her life. When he discovers Nnu Ego is breastfeeding his second wife's son, Amatokwu fails to understand her motherly feelings and beats her, resulting in their eventual divorce. Nnu Ego is filled with fear and shame. She returns to her father in disgrace, then to take rest, to recover after the marriage ties are broken up.

This time Agbadi chooses Nnaife as a second husband for his daughter, who lives far away in Lagos. She is sent to Lagos to join Nnaife and lead a life with a man she has never seen before. Before leaving for Lagos, she assures her father that "she shall come with a string of children" (39). Nnu Ego's dream comes true, her pregnancy is supposed to reconcile her to her new situation which in turn makes her ecstatic. Nnu Ego feels fulfilled for the first time in her life when she gives birth to a 'clean looking boy'. She names him Ngozi. Her husband tells her that he has given her everything a woman wants. After the birth of Ngozi, Nnu Ego herself agrees, and in her mood of gratitude, she thinks, "He has made me into a real woman all I want to be, a woman and a mother, so why should I hate him now?"(53).

Nnu Ego's happiness is short-lived. Nnu Ego's little bundle of joy, Ngozi dies. The loss of her baby almost drives her insane as it symbolises the loss of her motherhood. Without her child, she feels no relation with her kith and kin. Nnu Ego, barren in her first marriage, now feels that she will never have a child that lives and never be a successful mother. Her grief drives her to attempt suicide, but fortunately, she is saved by a friend of Nnaife arrives, who comfort and console her. Nnu Ego regains her worry, she goes on trading.

Nnu Ego has two dreams about babies - first, the firstborn, 'a clean-looking boy', suddenly dies, another, a strange dream in which Nnu Ego tries to get across the stream to take the baby in her arms, and the stream starts to swell and rise, while her Chi mocks her. Then she looks at the slave woman, her Chi (personal God), who says to her, "Yes, take the dirty, chubby babies. You can have as many of those as you want. Take them!"(77). Nnu Ego picks him up, thinking she will clean it in the stream. This time, her Chi tells her to take a baby. On the contrary indiscriminate reference by the slave woman to the dirty, chubby babies could be significant because of further development. According to her Chi, Nnu Ego gets as many of the dirty babies as she likes. Then her Chi laughs and disappears.

In such an urbanised place like Lagos, a woman has to take up the job of supporting her family when the husband's earnings are inadequate. It is crucial for women like Nnu Ego who get husbands like Nnaife, absent farsightedness in handling their family problems and are complacent.

This time Nnu Ego gets pregnant and is very careful of her pregnancy. She decides to give up trading, thinking that money and children do not go together. She prays to God, "please God, let this child stay with me and fulfil all these my future hopes and joys" (79). When the boy is born, she names him Oshia. Her neighbours assure her that "... he will grow soon and clothe you and farm for you, so that your old age will be sweet" (80).

Nnu Ego plans to earn extra income for her child and family. So she commences a trading business in the marketplace. In the meantime, their economic condition worsens when the Meers return to England, and Nnaife is unfortunately out of a job. Nnu Ego begins her local trade - selling the cigarettes again.

Nnu Ego has incorporated the charter of a modern African housewife, making the household her proper department and her position therein as a subordinate. The economic denunciations of a male-controlled economy and Nnu Ego's own effort to play as per the rules of her newly encompassed modern setting enslave her in a role in which she is excluded from forming valuable relationships with the women around her.

Now Nnu Ego is delighted with joy because she is expecting her third child. In the meantime, Nnaife relinquishes his job because Dr. Meers has left for his country. It becomes a difficult situation for them. Nnu Ego's trivial earnings are insufficient to satisfy their everyday needs. Nnaife eventually secures a position that takes him far from home, working for a group of Englishmen. Nnu Ego has to shoulder the entire responsibility. She worries about the condition of her family and feels more inadequate when a boy is born at this time of hardship. She puts all her bones together at work, but she fails to make both ends meet.

Additionally, Oshia gets affected by malnutrition, which makes him look like a skeleton. The timely help of her neighbours Mama Abbey and Iyawo saves her and Oshia from such a pitiable state. Troubled Nnu Ego cries to Oshia: "Please stay and be my joy, be my father and my brother, and my husband... please don't die and go away too" (104). Left on their own, the family slowly moves to another compound.

Nnaife returns from her job with money, and they return to their everyday life. Nnu Ego feels a little safe. At once, the grand celebration of the naming ceremony of the newborn and the lavishness of Nnaife add more complications to their financial situation. Nnu Ego urges Nnaife to look for another and better job. Even though she develops a little squabble with Nnaife, she continues to love and respect him since he is the man who made her a complete woman.

In this novel, Buchi Emecheta describes another controversial issue of polygamy that African men and women acknowledge. Men take pride in the belief that women are dependent on them. As per Ibo custom, a man inherits his brother's wives and children on the latter's death. In a nutshell, a similar thing happens with Nnu Ego and Nnaife. Nnu Ego gets another contuse in the form of the death of Nnaife's elder brother, and Nnaife inherits his brother's family according to custom. Adaku travels to Lagos to

assert her right as Nnaife's newly acquired wife. Adaku's interference in the family leads to economic pitfall and misery.

On the contrary, Nnaife is willing to accept her. The tension between Nnu Ego and Adaku undergoes traditional practices that clash with the modern lifestyle of living in one room in an apartment. So many people cannot be fed on Nnaife's salary or live in the same house. The westernised contraction of living space makes traditional polygamy practices unbearable.

Emecheta presents the tension and rivalry between the two women in a small space well. Nnaife implores his rights as a husband and has sexual relations with Adaku, much to the annoyance of Nnu Ego.

In a polygamous marriage in African society, the co-wives of a common husband are ranked according to their seniority. The first wife generally referred to as the "senior wife", is given special privileges and responsibilities associated with her status as the primary wife. As a senior wife, Nnu Ego's responsibilities are expanded. She now gives birth to twin girls, Taiwo and Kehinde. On the whole, she is now a mother of five children. At the same time, Adaku gives birth to a boy, who unfortunately dies immediately, pushing her into a deep depression.

Nnaife acquires a new job which is cutting grass for the railroad. Adaku and Nnu Ego are unable to manage such a meagre amount; in an attempt to force Nnaife to give all the money to his starving family, she decides to stop preparing food for their husband until Nnaife increases their housekeeping allowance. Later, Nnu Ego stops the strike for the sake of her children. Nnaife is not ready to face the problem, so he forcefully joins the army. They start their individual trades when he sends money to Nnu Ego and Adaku. As a mother of five children, it becomes a difficult task for her to feed and educate her children. She feels as if she is imprisoned by the love and responsibilities she has over her children: "...it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was imprisoned by her love for children. Imprisoned in her role as the senior wife she was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position" (137).

Nnu Ego asks her husband for more money to shoulder the whole responsibility of her children. Nnaife says harshly, "it's your responsibility of feeding your children..."(136), and this was "...the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility actually to enslave her"(137).

During Nnaife's absence, Adaku begins her own business of selling clothes in the market, and she abandons tradition and decides to go and live as an independent woman. She leaves the household and adopts herself into prostitution not only to fulfil the basic material needs but also to educate her female children, a chance at increased opportunities and more independent futures.

When Nnu Ego tells Adaku that no Ibo man will marry girls brought up by prostitution, Adaku bluffly argues: "As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in the world. I am not prepared to stay here to be the mad woman, just because I have no sons"(169). As Adaku poignantly tells her towards the end of the novel, "You believe in the tradition. You have changed a little, but stood firm by your beliefs" (218). As a result, Nnu Ego struggles with poverty all her life, her husband Nnaife eating up the profits she earns, while Adaku enjoys her independently gained wealth. Nnu Ego lives because she undertakes what society anticipates from her. Nnu Ego lives the same life her mother did, fulfilling a traditional definition of femininity.

Nnu Ego compares her life as a mother to that of enslaved people, stating, "Her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery" (186). As per the traditional vision, children are a source of joy and wealth who amply repay the trouble of their upbringing the children. In '*Joys of Motherhood*', children are portrayed as milestones around the mother's neck or as greedy insects who suck out and drain her life's blood. This time Nnu Ego's second set of twins are born, and the condition of Nnu Ego is more pathetic because she has been bled dry by her long years of motherhood. Nnu Ego prays, "After all , I was born alone, and I shall die alone... Yes, I have many children, But what do I have to feed

them on?... And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul ...when will I be free?" (186-187)

Pressure is placed on African women to produce male children. As a woman gives birth to a male child, she secures more respect from her husband's kinsmen. Kristen Holst Peterson says that the wishes for bearing male children will make them bless a pregnant woman in the following way: "You will be safely delivered of a bouncing baby boy, a real man-child that we can and make jolly with whisky and beer" (179). In African societies, the birth of male children is vital. At the same time, they treat the girl-child as if she must do all the household chores and help her mother cook, clean, fetch water and look after her siblings. This is the pathetic condition of girl children.

In this novel, we know that Nnu Ego is an inheritor of traditional male brainwashing. As a mother, Nnu Ego is always thinking about her male children. At the same time, she is investing in her future by giving to her children's education. Nnu Ego and her husband desist everything to their male children. On the other hand, they never think of educating their girl children. As a parent of girl children, they treat daughters only as commodities who would fetch a reasonable bride price. Nnu Ego's belief about her sons that they would return home to take care of her proves to be false as everything goes wrong, which she realises so lately. From the beginning, Nnu Ego believes that her old age will be prosperous as her son will grow and clothe her and farm for her so that her old age will be happy and comfortable.

Nnu Ego's sons Oshia and Adim go away from Nigeria to the United States and Canada to obtain better education and greater economic opportunities. Nnaife is punished, with imprisonment, because he cannot accept his daughter Kehinde breaking the tradition of marrying into a Yoruba family. Mercilessly, Nnaife throws unkind words toward Nnu Ego and incriminates her for their daughter's behaviour. In African society, "When the children were good, they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother. Every woman knew this" (206). Nnaife discontinues the relationship with Nnu Ego.

It is depicted in this novel as the "umbilical" bond with her father, husband, and sons. On the other hand, it keenly makes aware the hardships of numerous girl children like hers, who become much distressed, knowing clearly about their slavery towards the end of the novel, which is only for all her acceptance of the traditional yoke.

Finally, Nnu Ego understands that her death will engender her eternal praise, but she will never be free even in death. Despite her unconditional love and incredible sacrifice, everything in the name of being a good mother, Nnu Ego dies on the road, alone, with none of her children by her side and no friends to talk of her sacrifices and sufferings that she underwent. Nnu Ego believes that her final years in the company of her grandchildren disappear before she turns forty, and she dies at the side of a road, alone and unnoticed.

3. Conclusion

The Joys of Motherhood turn out to be the sorrow of motherhood for Nnu Ego. She achieves little fulfilment, too, only in the choices that she makes. Nnu Ego chooses to be silent after her death, refusing to answer the prayers of women who ask her for children. The women who ask her for children do not realise the consequences of their prayers. In her life, Nnu Ego learns well that motherhood does not always bring happiness but results in women having the right to choose their destiny, which is primarily a dreadful and unnoticed death. A woman must learn to be fulfilled in herself, no matter who she is.

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