

Women in Chains and Tears in the Shadow of Motherhood: An Appraisal of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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ABSTRACT

Women and suffering are still unsolvable topics across the globe. Since the dawn of time, patriarchal society has suppressed, silenced, and victimized women for a variety of reasons, leaving them entirely dependent on men in all walks of life. Despite the world's excellence in many sectors, women are shunned, ignored, and oppressed which lead them on the periphery of society because of male dominance. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to bring out the harsh realities of black women's lives and their encounters with the brutal exercise of control over them in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The voices of repressed women and their bleak experiences in an autocratic male society have been manifested by numerous writers. In that respect, Buchi Emecheta is a skillful novelist who captures the unpleasant position of black women through her creative writing. The tragic and painful narrative of the novel sheds light on many oppressions and sufferings through the darker side of patriarchy. Women's repression is a long-standing practice in Africa, and therefore, the biased treatment leads men to use women as tools and commodities in daily life. Hence, Buchi Emecheta's fictional work is a true reflection of African womanhood and illuminates the issues and experiences of women in a skillful way.

Keywords: Culture, Victims, Sufferings, Authoritative, Oppression, Womanhood.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most distinguished women writers in Nigerian literature. She uses her writings as a strong tool to screen the status of black women and their economic conditions in a male-dominated African society. Many African writers give voices to women's issues, and one such woman writer is Buchi Emecheta. Readers could find out about the cultures, traditions, and insignificant place of the women's community in Africa, especially in Nigeria, through the novels of Emecheta. Besides her remarkable position on the literary map of Africa, she is well-praised worldwide, especially in British literature. She holds a significant place in the British literary sphere due to her creative acumen, and in addition to that, Emecheta is the first black woman writer to gain a literary reputation and critical attention. Her African ancestry provides her with a different way of thinking from that of westerners. Her work is appreciated, which has lifted her as an eminent woman writer worldwide. Her works focus on female subjectivity, which is explored in the light of African womanism. The present study follows the theory of Africana womanism in order to illuminate the harsh realities and struggles of African women. Ntiri mentions as, "Africana womanism represents an ideology which focuses on the experiences, realities, struggles, and needs of all African women"(166). With the help of Africana womanism, the study looks at the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* for analysis.

Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is a notable, celebrated, and well-received fictional work among readers. The novel was published in 1979 and received huge attention across the globe. The central character of the novel is Nun Ego, who suffers throughout the novel because her own culture and tradition are against her and trap her under male hegemonic society. Through the lens of Igbo society, the writer clearly expresses the marginalized position of women both in the domestic and social arenas of Nigeria. Generally, patriarchal societies expect women to be puppets and slaves, and they also use them only as objects of pleasure, so that the men's society bottles up and marginalizes the basic rights of the women's community. The male society thought that having more children and a slave-like attitude looked upon women as human beings in the minds of men. Otherwise, women are ill-treated by men in all aspects of life. Meanwhile, motherhood holds a significant role in African women's lives, and as a result, they are easily trapped and caged under the control of men. Through the fictional work, one could easily

discern the worm- like life of the central character, Nnu Ego, because the societal norms of marriage and motherhood take all her freedom and deny her rights completely. Thus, Emecheta is well aware of the patriarchal dynamics of her own region and nation, which makes her a legendary literary icon in the history of African literature.

The Joys of Motherhood is a substantial work with eighteen sections that depicts the challenges faced by mothers in conventional Nigerian society. As a way to keep women under its control, patriarchy establishes a numerous set of rules, and one of the criteria for a noble woman in African civilization is motherhood. Gender narratives are a cause of the patriarchal construction of the maternal stereotype. Despite widespread praise for the nurturing and child-producing roles played by women, they are looked upon as inferior in society. Emecheta amply depicts the denigration and oppression of black women caused by the ancient practices and superstitious beliefs of Africa. She presents a compelling argument for how tradition and obsolete, false beliefs demean women's lives, bringing them to the status of nothing.

This article explores the role of women community and their dependent position on men in African society, which makes them lead a caged life. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* speaks about the ironic results of pursuing motherhood and the ultimate feminine to the extreme. The novel revolves around a black woman, Nnu Ego, who is the only daughter of a local chief, Agabadi. Her mother, Ona, dies within a year of Nnu Ego's birth, and this tragic circumstance makes her a slave throughout her life. When she reaches puberty, she is forced to marry a man named Amatokwu. After months passed, she failed to conceive, which turned her life upside down.

Many writers have described motherhood as having various meanings and presumptions. In the patriarchal societies of Africa, motherhood has a different meaning. A woman is only deemed to be a complete woman, in accordance with the traditional and cultural context of the community, after giving birth to a male child. In Africa, if the child is a male, her motherhood is cherished and honoured. In his work *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe discusses the importance of motherhood in African culture as, "a woman's crowning glory" (61). When Nnu Ego fails to produce children

in her first marriage, Marie Umeh explains her psychological state in "Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Maman in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*." The masculinity of Igbo society is shown in Marie Umeh. She asserts: "[The] glory of a woman is a man; a woman without a son is a failure; marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband's lineage; and a complete mother is a mother healthy sons" (192). According to Nigerian researcher Remi Akujobi, "motherhood is an essential part of being a woman, outside of which the woman is empty." This notion occurs in African nations and cultures. Moreover, the scholar expresses as:

It no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the 'halo of maternity' shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define 'real' women or responsible women. This is so in the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance, many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. (4)

Therefore, for the woman, being barren is a matter of subjectivity and suffering. Nnu Ego is persuaded that becoming a mother is central to a woman's existence. Her husband treats her badly and ignores her in all his activities. He does not give her enough space to express her inner feelings and emotions related to reproduction, which makes her to feel inferior in male society. Amatokwu says, "I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile.... You are so dry and jumpy" (31). From the aforementioned lines, a reader can understand the ill-treatment of women by men, culture, and society.

Nnu Ego's husband marries another woman to prove his manhood, and he wants to be viewed as a man by his community and his fellow friends. His new spouse delivers a child and satisfies the needs of patriarchal society. Amatokwu spends the majority of his time with his new wife and leaving her child under Nnu Ego's care. Most of the time, when the baby cries for mother's milk, Nnu Ego shams to feed the infant with her virgin breasts because she does not want to disturb the couple. As a result of continued stimulation, her dry breast changes into a juicy bosom. So she feeds her

younger wife's child with her juicy breasts. By seeing this act, her husband gets teed off and beats her badly. Her father supports the act done by his son-in-law and says, "Amatokwu, I don't blame you for beating her so badly" (34). Her father is also against her and represses her emotions because he thinks that Nnu Ego is a fruitless woman.

During her first marriage, Nnu Ego is barren, and this failure results in ghastly treatment by her husband, her relegation beneath lesser wives, and finally her deportation and return to her father, who hastily marries her off to another man named Nnaife, who resides in Lagos, a city in Nigeria. With her second husband, Nnaife, she is able to become pregnant, but when her first son dies in infancy, the horror of her renewed childlessness overwhelms her, and she attempts to kill herself. She says, "... I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. The child is there, dead on the mat"(65). Generally, a woman without children is clearly better off dead, and she has no intrinsic value of her own. The only quality of a woman is her reproduction capability, and if she fails in it, she is looked upon as worthless and unessential both in her family and in society. Therefore, she suffers a lot for the loss of her son and bemoans her worm-like position in domestic space. However, Nnaife's friend Ubani supports and consoles him: "A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified" (75). Hence, a prejudiced society cannot blame men for being barren but always hurts, blames, and subjugates the inner feelings of women.

Meanwhile, Nnu Ego knows her husband, Nnaife, will take over his newly deceased brother's wife according to her culture. His brother's wife, Adaku, and her daughter arrive at his home, which brings chaos into the home and creates tension between the two ladies. Nnu Ego says, "All men are selfish. That's why they are men" (156). An African man's wealth and reputation are determined by the number of wives he possesses and the number of wives who live together in a definite pecking order of seniority that naturally leads to competition and envy. Both Nnu Ego and Adaku deliver children to Nnaife, and as Nnu Ego heals from the pain of her first son's death, she produces another child and decides to stay home and look after him because rearing children is meant for women alone in society. It is this vision of women as a solely utilitarian adjunct to male existence that also lies behind polygamy. Emecheta is one of the few writers

to portray the polygamous family through a woman's lens for which she is praised by the readers. Women who share a husband have two grounds for anxiety: the insecurity of their economic position and also that of their children. NnuEgo does not demonstrate her emotion to the outside, but her inner burning, as follows:

She tied to block her eyes, yet could still hear Adaku's exaggerated carrying on. Nnu Ego tossed in agony and anger all night, going through her imagination what was taking place behind the curtained bed. Not that she had to do much imagining, because even when she tried to ignore what was going on, Adaku would not let her. She giggled, she squeaked, she cried and she laughed in turn, until Nnu Ego was quite convinced that it was all for her benefitNnu Ego bit her teeth into her baby's night clothes to prevent herself from screaming. (139)

Gender inequality is another major issue in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Mothers with many girls are valued far less than mothers of just one son. Because it is embarrassing for Igbo men to pass away without male heir so they desert their spouses when the wife only produces female offspring. As a result, they will marry another woman in pursuit of a male offspring. Additionally, a woman is unable to prove her sexiness unless she enjoys parenthood. In Igbo society, where it is traditional for females to be coerced into early marriage and their bride money was used to send boys to school. Emecheta explores gender inequity and the significance of the male offspring through the female character, Adaku. She is Nnaife's inherited wife served as a potent lesson in the value of fatherhood; because she was unable to provide her husband with a son, she was viewed as unsuccessful and a worthless woman who was shunned and isolated by both her husband and her community. Adaku had no right to speak up or express her concerns about her condition because she delivers girl children. Women without male children may experience physical or emotional assault in African communities. In this case, Adaku experienced assault by her husband Nnaife since she has no male children. Thus, a woman bearing no male children lives on the periphery of society and is compared to a tree with no fruits.

Moreover, financial pressure and her husband's sudden loss of employment at the white man's house force her to sell cigarettes on the street. Nnaife loses his job to the white man, and by the force of immediate circumstances, he participates and involves himself involuntarily in World War II. Both Nnu Ego and Adaku believe that they do not have the power to provide sufficient money to feed and care for their children. Like Nnu Ego, Adaku, the newlywed wife, decides to move out with her twin daughters due to the harsh realities and poverty that encircle her and decides to become a prostitute. She markets her body to other men because of her economic pressure and poor condition. These cruel circumstances make her a whore in public. Thus, these two women are trivialized, oppressed, and have undergone various sufferings heaped upon them by men.

Another woman character Agunwa, The novelist effectively portrays the poignant position of polygynous women in the Ibuza community in Africa. Agunwa, the chief woman of the Agbadi's tribe, laments and cries because of her husband's sleeping with another woman, Ona, who is Agbadi's junior wife. Agunwa's burning heart is described as: "Agbadi and Ona were still sleeping the following morning when the alarm was raised by one of the children. 'Wakeup, father, wake up! Our mother is having a seizure'"(18). Agbadi's male dominance demonstrates how the Ibuza tradition supports polygamy and views women as mindless objects. In Africa, women are required to silently endure all of their husbands' wrong doing while also making an effort to meet his demands. Therefore, males in the Ibuza society are despotic in nature and unreliable to their wives. Agbadi is an example of a stereotypical Ibuza man who disrespects and ignores his chief wife and makes affectionate contact with Ona in the same shack. Through the hegemonic activities of Chief Agabadi, his wife Agunwa leads a tearful life under him.

Later, Nnu Ego delivers a son named Oshia and entirely takes responsibility for the child, which is considered the main duty of motherhood as prescribed by her society, which causes her life to turn upside down. Her husband, Nnaife, believes that she is incapable of providing for the child's needs because of the demise of his first child. He wants her to reside within four walls and look after his child. He says, "I'm not an ideal husband, I am not like your father, I am not like your farmer husband. Oh, I know all about that. But, woman, you have to look after your child. That at least is a

woman's job"(94). From these lines, one can discern that motherhood is a burden rather than a root of happiness for women. Nnu Ego pronounces: "I can't afford another outfit, because I am nursing him, so you see I can't go anywhere to sell anything"(87). Here, the idea of motherhood seeks to limit women to household tasks, depriving them of the chance to go out and succeed at work. Nnu Ego fell into deep despair as a result of these bad practices and was unable to communicate with her husband. She quietly endures, accepts her suffering, and submits herself to the norms of her society. In African culture, a woman is deemed a witch if she lifts her voice in public. Therefore, she controls her suppressed feelings. Through her tears only, she bursts the suppressed emotions and unfulfilled dreams because she is controlled by the rigid rules of patriarchy.

In the climax of the novel, the protagonist, Nnu Ego, moves to her village, Ibuza, due to her extreme poverty and physical illness. She dies alone by the roadside, and nobody cares for her despite the large number of children she had at the end of her life. Her tragic death points to Emecheta's criticism of the ever-sacrificial mother and wife. She is a direct victim in various ways; she pursues the ideals of motherhood and wifehood in excess but fails as a successful woman in front of male society. The struggles of traditional African women are akin to the struggles of present-day African women, who are products of both globalization and African cultural traditions. Nnu Ego is a typical traditional African woman who celebrates her sons and ignores her daughters, which she learns from patriarchal society. Nnu Ego's relationship with her daughters is one of avoidance and indifference. She lives mentally and physically in the stuffy room of female passivity. Thus, Nnu Ego cares about her sons and hopes for the ways they will provide for her in the future, but her hope is shattered into pieces. She, therefore, succumbs to societal pressure that associates a woman's worth with her childbearing abilities, especially when she delivers a male child.

Nun Ego is certainly the most oppressed and powerless of all Emecheta's female characters because she is denied the education that leads her to embrace a tragic end. The cruel cultural and traditional practices that govern Nnu Ego's life are polygamy and the stigma of barrenness. The traditional woman's main function is to bear male children who will bring about her husband's name, and Nnu Ego is remarkable among Emecheta's heroines because she is never

questioning the blind belief of male society and her culture, much less defying the justice of this pre-determined female destiny. Emecheta captures the challenges and experiences of voiceless women and their victimization in a male-dominated society. She uses her fiction as a more accessible tool to talk clearly about important societal issues. Her works highlight the marginal position of black women and how they are treated by men in a biased society.

Challenging the traditional vision of motherhood as a spring of joy and wealth for women, Emecheta displays it as a troublesome one in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The protagonist, Nnu Ego's children and husband, are portrayed as greedy insects that suck out her life's blood and drain her completely. The male society expects women to produce more male children than females, and Nnu Ego views:

She felt more inadequate than ever. Men- all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going. But did not a woman have to bear the women –child who would later bear the sons? God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? She prayed desperately. After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? ... My dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free? But even in her confusion she knew the answer: Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and bloodThe men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband-and now I have to include my sons.... Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (209- 10)

Nnu Ego is never free from the sufferings of men, and she has little to show off from her protected years of maternal servitude. She is particularly disappointed by her male children because her two sons, after receiving a good education in Lagos, go abroad to study and never bother their mother's health. In fact, Nnu Ego learns that her eldest son married a white woman in America without informing her.

Katherine Frank, a critic, expresses the view of male children in *The Joys of Motherhood* as, "...greedy insects who suck out and drain her life's blood" (490). It shows the trivial place of Nnu Ego, though she sacrifices herself for the welfare of her children. The complete futility of motherhood that one can find in *The Joys of Motherhood* is the most heretical and radical aspect of Emecheta's vision of the black woman. Nnu Ego's children first exploit her, betray her, and finally deny her the most basic of African responsibilities: the care of their mother in old age. Nnu Ego dies alone on the side of the road, "with no child hold her hand and no friend to talk to her....She has been building up her joys as a motherPoor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace!"(253-54).

Like Nnu Ego, a number of women in the society lived and sacrificed for others because the tradition and culture taught them to lead an inferior life under men. Here, Nnu Ego's loyalty to her traditional role and identity and her fate are inevitable. Nnu Ego brings out the struggles of women in male- dominated African society in a brilliant way. In this regard, Emecheta could be considered the most influential voice of the Nigerian society. Her loud voice can be heard through her creative writings, which are strong evidence of women's rights, freedom, equality, and self-respect. The central character, Nnu Ego, is a slave and is caged from the moment she is born until the moment she dies. Nnu Ego's existence is confined by each stage of her life through her culture and customs, which control her ultimate destiny. The author challenges the notion that a woman will be happier if she has numerous children; on the contrary, it will drag her into an eternity of sorrow. Therefore, women in Africa are encircled by patriarchal chains of norms, which cause them to experience eternal grief and tears. They become voiceless; their plights and tears are unheard by the biased culture of Africa.

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