

THE PORTRAYAL OF THE SUBJUGATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S NOVEL "THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD"

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Abstract

"The Joys of Motherhood" is among most portal works, as it offers critical commentary on colonization, tradition, capitalism, and woman's roles as they come to affect one woman, Nnu Ego and her family. It is first published by Allison and Busby in 1979 and it is reprinted in Heinemann's African writers' series in 2008. It is set in a time of great political and economic change for Nigeria. In this novel Emecheta's main character defines validity of her womanhood solely by of success of her children. The chapter titles, "The Mother", "The Mother's mother", "The Mother's Early Life", "First shock of Motherhood", etc., follow the highs and lows of the heroine, Nnu Ego's destiny. Nnu Ego's whole destiny is centered on her as a Mother. Nnu Ego places all her hope for happiness and prosperity in her children, yet she is constantly disappointed. The basis of the novel is "necessity for a woman to be fertile and above all to give birth to sons". As a result, Nnu Ego finds no joy in her grown children.

Key Words: Subjugation, Oppression and Infertility.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta portrays, "The portrayal of the subjugation of motherhood" in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. The researcher tries to point out this in the following. The Protagonist Nnu Ego, is a traditional woman living in a rapidly changing world. The life that she grew up expecting for herself does not come to pass. She expects to become a wife and mother, working hard in her youth for her family. Nnu ego is a young Ibo woman who dreams of a living a traditional life as a mother of many children. The hope she puts in having many children turns out to be misplaced; her entire life is simply a struggle for survival, with no reward in old age. Nnu Ego is over joyed when she discovers she is capable of conceiving after all and she is able to enjoy for a brief period pregnancy and motherhood.

After her son,s birth, she feels like a "real woman" and is gratified that there will be somebody left behind to refer her as "mother" (54).

Nnu Ego becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son Ngozi, whom she later finds dead. Shocked and devoid of hope, she rushes to the waterfront to throw herself off Cater

Bridge where she can confront her Chi-her personal God-who has been tormenting her. Nwakusor, an Ibo man and the villager draws her back and comforts her. The action shifts to twenty-five years previous to this moment, in the village of Ogboli in the Ibuza homeland. Nnu Ego married to Amatokwu. After several months with no sign of fruitfulness, she consults several herbalists and is told that the slave woman who is her Chi will not give he a child. On seeing her barrenness, she is soon moved to another hut to make a room for a new wife. She is relegated to working in the fields and taking care of the new wife's infant son. When Amatokwu catches Nnu Ego breast feeding the hungry child, he beats her. Nnu Ego returns to her father to rest and recover.

Agbadi finds a better match to his daughter. Agbadi arranges a marriage between Nnu Ego and Naife, who lives in faraway Lagos. Nnu Ego does not like her new husband but prays that if she can have a child with him, she will love him. Nnu Ego becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son Ngozi, whom she later finds dead. Shocked and devoid of hope, she rushes to the waterfront to throw herself off Cater Bridge where she can confront her Chi-her personal God-who has

been tormenting her. Nwakusor, an Ibo man and the villager draws her back and comforts her. Recovering from Ngozi's death is a slow and painful process. Months later, Nnu Ego becomes pregnant again and gives birth to Oshia. She decides to focus on raising her child instead of making her extra income by selling cigarettes and matches on the roadside. Her husband laundry man for the white man is drafted into the army, when peers return to England. Nnu Ego resumes her local trade in cigarettes. Nnu Ego takes a rented room in another part of the town, where she gives birth to another son, Admin. The family slowly succumbs to malnutrition. Neighbors step into help them Naife has returned, flush with money. Nnu Ego secures a permanent stall in the market place. Then she gives birth to twin girls; Taiwo and Kehinde. Naife has forced to join the army and is shipped off to India and then Burma to fight in World War II. Nnu Ego takes her family to Iboza to see her father who is in deathbed. After his funeral, Nnu Ego is not willing to return to Lagos. Nnu Ego's health goes downhill. Though her daughters send her money from time to time, she never hears from Oshia in America and Admin who later goes to Canada. It breaks her heart. She hears that Oshia has got married to a white woman.

One day she dies alone by the roadside in her homeland. After her death her children all come to home and are sorry they were in a position to her a better life. Oshia honor her with a costly funeral. They throw her the second-most expensive funeral that Iboza had ever seen, and they build a shrine. By making this, her grand children could appeal to her for their fertility. When all her children are unable to have off spring the oracle reveals that this is because Nnu Ego is angry with them. Stories say that she is wicked woman even in death. Still, they agree that she has given all to her children and that this is joy of being a mother.

Nnu Ego assumes that her sons will come home to live and will care for her as she ages. Finally, "Nnu Ego realized that part of the pride of motherhood was to look little unfashionable and be able to drawl with joy" (80). Throughout the text, as in *Emecheta's* other work, marriage and motherhood are constructed as modern allegories for slavery.

Motherhood is the completion of womanhood. Woman is an integral part of human civilization. Nnu Ego represents the ideal of womanhood. Unfortunately, the idealistic vision of motherhood fails encompass any challenges

women often experience. The ill-fortuned woman deals with the highs and lows of womanhood and motherhood. Nonetheless she is blessed with nine beautiful children. But her financial resources are scarce and the living conditions in Lagos are difficult. The protagonist's self-reliance heightens and she aptly manages to educate her sons and daughters. She compares her life as a mother as that of a slave, in which the "love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery" (186).

When her baby Ngozi passes away suddenly, it causes Nnu Ego to be suicidal. Her attempt to jump off a bridge is described by *Stephen Robolin* as an attempt to 'terminate the excruciating pain that accompanies her long successive of failed attempts of motherhood' (76). When the crowd who had gathered around her heard her story, 'they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman'.

This novel emphasise the value of fertility. Fertility is extremely important aspect of any society. Children are not only an important social security system, but are also an important source of labor power. Children are supposed to represent a woman's highest achievement. But we learn that children are a double-edged sword. The woman without children is deemed a failed woman. Yet once she as children, her life becomes an unending drudgery. So, children represent joy and happiness, yet also pain and sorrow. Even though, Nnu Ego was blessed with nine children she suffers a lot in her life. *Emecheta* depicts not only the extreme suffering of Nnu Ego but also the strength and courage. Thus African fiction displays a wide spectrum of human behavior.

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. She explicitly denounces the patriarchal ideologies of subjugate and suppress woman. *Cynthia Ward* rightly observes that *Emecheta's* works provide 'a veritable goldmine for literacy critics seeking on authentic representatives of the African woman' (83). Her writing style can be contrasted with another prominent Nigerian writer, *Chinua Achebe*. Achebe's sentences are soaked with idioms and rich cultural details, while *Emecheta's* style is simpler and direct. The plot and characters inform the readers about

cultural information and the character's feelings.

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.

Eustace palmer describes "*The Joys of Motherhood*" as the first work in African literature to present the female point of view in registering its disgust at male chauvinism and patriarchy's satisfaction with an unfair or oppressive system towards women (157). The oppressive of women is located in the Traditional Nigerian society and *Emecheta* has given a realistic portrayal of the subjugation of women in her society.

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