

THE DEPICTION OF SUBJUGATION BASED ON RACE AND GENDER IN JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

Disha Mondal

Visva-Bharati University

West Bengal,India



Abstract:

In The Joys of Motherhood the story is not only that of Nnu Ego but by extension that of the problems all women encounter when they experience delays in giving birth to children, the real joys of motherhood. In this novel, Emecheta shows that a woman should not only submit to the wishes of a man as a father, but she also owes the obligation to do so to him as a husband. We also see that the woman's permanent subordination and her being silenced by the patriarchal culture of her community. Actually, she acknowledges the existence of this oppression and how it prevents the woman's blossoming. In the real sense of the term joys of motherhood does not exist.

Key Words: subjugation, oppression, race, gender, sexuality, womanism.

This is, arguably Buchi Emecheta's most popular and most successful novel dwells on the socio-cultural and economic problems facing the Nigerian woman in the rural and urban settings. The main theme explored in the novel includes the subjugation of women based on race and gender. The work is a graphical representation of the ordeal of women and women related issues, as it obtains in a patriarchal society. The novel centers on the myriad of problems besetting women in a male-dominated society. The story captures the pathetic and grim condition of a woman who, in spite of her struggles and determination to survive in life, ends up dying in ignominy. Her efforts, hopes, and aspirations come to naught.

The heroine of the novel, Nnu Ego, is the product of the lone relationship between Chief Nwokocha Agbadi, a wealthy, influential local chief in Ibiza town, and Ona, the only surviving child of Obi Umunna. As a remarkably beautiful girl, Nnu Ego captures the interest of many men in Ibiza town while growing up. She is married off to Amatokwu in an elaborate wedding ceremony. Her inability to conceive ruins the marriage. She later marries Nnaife Owulum, a washerman of the European couple, Dr. and Mrs. Meers in Lagos.

African women's position is a pathetic and a problematic one in the patriarchal society.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* the story is not only that of Nnu Ego but by extension that of the problems all women encounter when they experience delays in giving birth to children, the real joys of motherhood. When this happens, the African man is quick to involve himself in the practice of polygamy in his bid to procreate and prove to the world that he is a man. This is where the problems of women begin. The problem of having to hold one's own when the sustaining interest of the husband is divided not only among his wives, those he personally married and those he inherited, but also among his relatives and friends.

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In many African communities gender and racial conflicts are crucial issues to address. The woman is given a second class position whereas man plays the role of the mase, the bread earner. In Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* this dialectic is so recurrent and skilfully articulates in the narrative that it deserves scrutiny. In fact, while the story deploys, it reveals what appears at first sight as an ordinary and natural situation in African tradition societies: man's domination over the woman. Yet, this representation influences gender relations as opposed to man's desire to preserve his privileged position inherited from the tradition of his community.

Nuevo in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Efuru in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* go through pains because they are unable to bear children. The two writers present a society that places child-bearing above companionship and happiness. With the least love, Amatokwu

(Nnuego's first husband) speaks to her when she is unable to conceive, 'I am a busy man. I've no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me any more...' (p38). In a patriarchal society, the woman is responsible for whatever goes wrong in her family. Nnu Ego's inability to bear children is not actually her fault, but the fault of her "chi" who denies her children.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta protests against the humiliation and sexual denial of wives, mothers and barren women in the characters of Agunwa, Adaku, and Nnu Ego. The woman must not only bear children but must also bear sons. She is seen as equally barren if she has only daughters. For instance, Nnu Ego's co-wife in her second marriage, Adaku is labeled as being barren simply because she has only daughters. At a time, she reports her altercation with Nnu Ego, who is then blessed with three sons and four daughters, to the Ibuza elders in Lagos.

The spokesman of the group, Nwakusor does not give her a fair hearing but scolds her: " I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband, you make her unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. If I were in your shoes, I would go home and consult my chi to find out why male offspring have been denied me". (p.166)

Married to Nnaife, Nnuego, to her dismay starts having daughters, but is joyful when she starts having sons. She bears children—and males are among them—but she lives in pains, anguish and regrets, and in longing for her sons whose education she has strived for and who, while they are abroad, fail to write to her. Eventually, she dies a heart-broken woman

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego and her husband Nnaife renounce everything to educate first their eldest son Oshia, and then they think of educating their second son Adam, with the leftover money. But they never think of educating their daughters. The parents treat daughters only as commodities who would bring in good bride price to invest further in the study of their brothers. Nnu Ego's expectation that her sons would return home to take care of her goes wrong and this she realizes much later. Nnu Ego realized that part of the pride of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable and be able to draw with joy. She could not afford another outfit because she was nursing him.

So she could not go anywhere to sell anything. However, Nnu Ego is hopeful that her old age would be comfortable as he would grow soon and clothe her and farm for her so that her old age would be sweet.

In this novel, Emecheta shows the woman's permanent subordination and her being silenced by the patriarchal culture of her community.

The intention beyond her self-effacement is not so much to emphasize her refusal to combat the patriarchal system that silences her and her gender as a group if one reads the text from a feminist perspective.

The objective is not to condemn this society and its practices but to sensitize, as a writer, on the prescription of the woman. To the writer, it seems, the female being is castrated and her confinement can only end with the abolition of this oppression and the destabilization of Igbo cultural organization.

Buchi Emecheta's text helps to understand how Igbo culture victimizes the woman through procreation and makes her evolve behind the scene, in the shadow of a man, as a second class citizen.

Finally, it turns out to be the woman's identity marker. From a cultural point of view, Emecheta's approach is not so much lay criticism on the oppressive system of her tradition. Actually, she acknowledges the existence of this oppression and how it prevents the woman's blossoming. Emecheta feels that Nigeria and African women, in general, need to bind together to support each other. She is frank enough to declare that in Nigeria women are riddled with hypocrisy. They learn to say what they don't feel. They learn to laugh or not to laugh too loudly.

Writing about women Emecheta wonders- why are women as they are? Why are they so pathetic? The Joys of Motherhood ends with a note: Nnu Ego had it all yet still did not answer prayers for children. Nnu Ego in her prayer asks God when He would create a woman with fulfillment as a complete human being and not as any body's appendage. When talking to Ubani, Nnu Ego says that the money may be small and the work as slave labor, but least his wife's mind is at rest knowing that at the end of the month she gets some money to feed her children and him. She asks what more a woman wants.

And we approve of Nnu Ego's belief in her fulfillment as a woman. Her attitude towards change strains her familial relationship. She is a slave owned by her husband. But she faces the world boldly as a feminist. Nnu Ego condemned by the society as an unsuccessful mother revolts against society for the injustice done to her and justifies her stand.

The tragedy of Nnu Ego goes beyond her death to suggest that Emecheta is critical also about the behaviour of her protagonist. Emecheta does not remain a silent observer. She seems to suggest a remedial solution to Nnu Ego's problem by which she would have been more comfortable in life. Nnu Ego who is portrayed as a traditional and submissive woman accepting all the norms of the society becomes rebellious against the social conventions.

References:

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