

Women, Conflict and Culture in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

Deepanjali Baruah

Introduction :

The reading of African novels primarily explores the issues and themes of motherhood, cultural identification and women's self expression within the institutions of family, community and nation. The influx of colonization places the criticism of these texts in a wider problematic study of migration, dislocation, discrimination and marginalization. Africa is known for its long history of slavery and colonization and the victimization of the African women by the clutches of patriarchy and capitalism. Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) is the story of a woman's struggle in a rapidly changing African society. This novel besides being based on racism and oppression also recognizes the fragmented nature of racial and gendered identity. Nnu Ego, a Nigerian woman, the daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi, a rich local chief meets the reversal of fortune when she leaves her former husband and moves to Lagos to marry Nnaife. This article will try to depict the tumultuous life of Nnu Ego as she is caught in the traversing space between the external and the internal, symbolizing a cultural experience of conflict in the face of a wretched life of the new colonial society. It will try to address the conflict situation of a woman exiled from the pristine land where she is born.

African Women and Culture :

Nnu Ego is the apple of her father Agbadi's eyes. Agbadi, as the narrator opines is an intelligent man with a skill of oratory. He becomes the leader of his people for his immense physical prowess which is recognized to be an important quality in a man in the African society. He shows his great skill in hunting and once while hunting an elephant he is fatally wounded but is fortunately saved by the utmost care taken by his mistress Ona, the mother of Nnu Ego. Agbadi's senior wife Agunwa dies unable to bear Agbadi's painful condition and according to the African tradition she has to be buried in her husband's compound with all the essentials and the slave will also go with her as the "burial of the chief's wife is not a small thing in Ibuza." (Emecheta 22) The text represents the barbarity of African practices as part of a larger state

of cultural constriction. The beautiful slave is forcefully pushed into the grave and a big blow on her head silences her forever. The gruesome expression of the situation reveals the African culture which disregards the value of women as the passion and desire of the woman for survival is stolen, denied and ignored. Thus The Joys of Motherhood "epitomizes the historically brutal realities of patriarchal control through which African women have survived." (Hedrick, King 63) The text breaks a cultural silence, a taboo about black on black abuse and also encourages the reader to examine the ways black women and men struggle against one another. The first marriage of Nnu Ego with Amatokwu is laden with "seven goats, baskets and baskets of yams, yards and yards of white man's cloth, twenty four home spun lappas and rows and rows of Hausa trinkets and coral beads." (Emecheta 30) Like the Indian dowry system the African society also believes in it and the bride is packed with all and sundry to the in-laws' home. Bride price is also equally prevalent in this society. Agbadi accepts the bride price offered by Amatokwu. Aifi Amadiume commenting on the bride price says: "Bride wealth is usually in the form of money, essential goods or cattle that are transferred from the groom's kin to the bride's. It is not a one-off complete transaction, since according to Igbo, this payment is never completed." (Amadiume 364)

In the African society a good wife is she who can be a mother. As Nnu Ego is unable to bear any child Amatokwu marries again which is allowed by the society. In the African culture plural and complex marriage system is quite prevalent. Polygyny is one such marriage system in which a man can marry as many women as he likes. "Polygyny, which is when one man is married to more than one woman, is the most common form of plural marriage and accounts for an average of more than a third of all marriages in African societies, with over 40 percent in West Africa, 30 percent in East Africa, and 20 percent in Southern Africa." (Amadiume 365) Nnu Ego is desperate to have a child and to regain the respectable position of the 'senior wife' but in vain. All she can do is to secretly breastfeed one of the infants of the junior wife. She gets caught and the consequence is that she gets 'double blow from behind.' The trauma she encounters forces her to leave the place of her husband and move to her father's home. Agbadi fears that his daughter might face hostility and suspicion in his own home so he sends her to Lagos to marry again. This is the time when Nnu Ego's real struggle of life begins. In Lagos she realizes that she is the subaltern and is surprised to find out the oppression and exploitation of the whites against the blacks. Therefore Henry Louis Gates, JR observes that "Black literature came to be seen as a cultural artefact (the product of unique historical forces) or as a document that bore witness to the political and emotional tendencies of the Negro victim of white racism." (Gates JR 48) A woman who is brought up with immense care and love by her father is stunned at the wretched situation of the blacks in Lagos. She detests her potbellied husband but has to remain content as she receives 'the joy of motherhood' through him. But the first taste of motherhood fades away with the death of her first born. An exhausted and devastated Nnu Ego attempts suicide at the suddenness of the situation but is saved by a relative. Emecheta's fiction like other post colonial

texts is deeply rooted in the contrasting senses of place and displacement. The protagonist has been caught between two worlds to neither of which she really belongs. Nnu Ego after the death of her first child gives birth to several children and has to struggle hard to meet her ends with the meagre amount of money Nnaife earns as a washerman from the white family. The novel functions as a powerful indictment of Britain's colonialism and imperialism and challenges the concept that colonialism had a civilizing mission. The so called civilizing method did nothing to improve the condition of women in Africa. Nnu Ego is ashamed of the fact that her husband washes and irons the underclothes of the white woman. Therefore she reacts, "I wouldn't have left the house and Amatokwu to come and live with a man who washes women's underwear. A man indeed!" The text thus manifests the African man hell-bent on keeping women in their place, though at the same time capable of gladly performing the meanest task for the whites as they come into contact with them. The whites do not consider the blacks as humans but as animals. Dr. Meers calls Nnaife a 'baboon' but this way of addressing does not demoralize Nnaife and he just remarks, "We work for them and they pay us. His calling me a baboon does not make me one." (Emecheta 42) In the colonial period of Africa, as reflected in the novel, the blacks share a self betrayal, consummated and endorsed by a white dominating system which had circumscribed the boundaries of the lives of the blacks. The text examines how the black men and women struggle against one another. In this struggle the male gets the upper hand and proves to be a barrier on the way of his wife's/wives' and children's experiencing the wholeness of life.

Conflict and Gender :

Nnu Ego is exiled from her home to live with a non compassionate husband. She is mentally abused by her husband and is completely deprived of the love she badly needs to develop a positive outlook in her. Her spirit is ripped away or stolen by never ending poverty. Nnaife knows that his wife hates him and endures him only because she has become a mother through him. Ubani, Nnaife's friend consoles him thus: "How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and dignifies." (Emecheta 71) The female protagonists of Emecheta's fiction challenge the masculinist assumption that they should be defined as domestic properties whose value resides in their ability to bear children and in their willingness to remain confined at home. Emecheta tries to delineate men as lazy and passive in nature. Conflict arises in the novel out of the disagreement and disharmony between Nnu Ego and her husband. The conflict is shaped by the author by creating opposition between the main characters and the action of the novel. According to Ludwig Gumplowicz, states are organized around the domination of one group: masters and slaves and eventually a complex caste system develops. Human potential is suppressed by conditions of exploitation and oppression which are necessary in society with an unequal division of labour. The text undoubtedly reflects this society of racial discrimination and exploitation and the ironical fact is that the woman is the worst sufferer in such a condition.

Nnu Ego apparently is quite blissful when she gives birth to babies one after another. But to rear and feed them is the greatest challenge of her life. It shows a contradictory sense of African culture. An African woman is teased and taunted if she cannot give birth to children and is lauded when she gives birth to several babies although their nurturing or upbringing is beyond her capacity. Nnu Ego is on the verge of losing her second child Oshia too when he suffers from high fever. But with the Yam stew given by Iyawo Itsekiri the spirit of Oshia is revived. Nnu Ego thereafter exclaims, "So it is hunger that was taking my son away from me." (Emecheta 105) Nnaife's continuous absence in search of a job makes her impatient. She is in constant conflict whether to live in the 'short edge of poverty' or to go back to Ibuza with her children as 'she would never lack in her father's house.' The inheritance of the diseased brother's wife by Nnaife doubles the problem. "The African institution of polygyny, same sex marriage and levirate (a brother or son taken the place of a diseased husband inherits his wife) represent a creative subversion of orthodox European assumption that the natural family is constituted between a man and a woman," opines Ifi Amadiume. The presence of Adaku (the second wife of Nnaife) makes the situation even more complicated as Nnu Ego has to face emotional abuse, intimidation and threats from her husband. Adaku eventually moves out of the house and embraces prostitution for a 'better life.' Nnu Ego is crippled both mentally and physically with the burden of her eight children. But unlike Adaku she remains a 'good' woman and she accepts suffering as a virtual requirement in order to be the kind of an ideal African woman. What the character of Nnu Ego summons up is an image which becomes a sort of touchstone for the entire text: the image of a cycle of pain, loyalty and rejection which is all in a relationship the colonial Nigerian state has to offer. Nnu Ego learns to be self employed by selling cigarettes in front of her house. Most of her women neighbours are into such petty professions and they help her out in managing the trade which she learns from them. Thus according to Tace Hedrick and Debra Walker King, "Women of colour understanding that their needs different from passive participants work in unison to fend for themselves." (Hedrick, King 58) Initiative and determination become the distinguishing marks of Emecheta's women. They are resourceful and turn adverse conditions into their triumph, yet men are characterized as lazy and passive.

Conflict can be seen between the new Nigerian modernity and a multi-ethnic Lagos when Kehinde, the daughter of Nnu Ego decides to marry a Yoruba man against the choice of Nnaife. Out of anger Nnaife injures a man belonging to the Yoruba community which eventually pushes Nnaife into the prison. Nnaife refuses to accept the onslaught of changes in the new urban society whereas he himself leaves his birthplace unwilling to restrict himself in the traditional occupation of agriculture.

Nnu Ego's two sons Oshia and Adim come out to be successful in their lives definitely due to the lifelong struggle of their mother. They are settled abroad and the proud mother desperately hopes that her sons will be her last resort in her old age. But 'joys of motherhood' vanish when there is no response from them. Finally she goes to Ibuza in search of her roots

but does not find peace even there. Psychological conflict engulfs her and she slowly starts suffering from modern day neurotic disorder. "She became vague and people pointed out that she had been never strong emotionally." (Emecheta 224)

Emecheta's novel is dominated by sarcastic comments mostly targeted towards the societal functioning and the cruelty of its members. Social structures are created through conflict between people with differing interests and resources. Individuals and resources, in turn, are influenced by these structures and by the unequal distribution of power and resources in the society. Nnu Ego is not only deceived by her society but also by her own children. She dies quietly one day on the roadside alone nobody to care for.

The pitiable condition of Nnu Ego's life does not allow her cope up with either Lagos or Ibadan. She has been abused all throughout her life. Her sense of self has been challenged by dislocation from migration, yet the return to the homeland is seen as an emotional crisis in double. Emecheta's own life is a struggle for survival which finds reflection in the character of Nnu Ego.

Conclusion :

The Joys of Motherhood documents the protagonist's multilayered yet intersecting identities: the woman in an African patriarchal society, the exiled woman, the woman in the grim urban and colonial realities and the woman amidst the whirlwind of myths and traditions in conflict with modernization. Nnu Ego is always devoted to her husband and children but is deprived of any joy in her life. Her status is that of the subaltern woman within her own race and in the larger society. This novel may be termed as the tour de force of the African women experience. According to Stephane Robolin, "*The Joys of Motherhood* has been among the most adamant, forceful, and timely conveyors of the centrality of African women experiences. The novel's focus on the perspectives, contributions, and fates of African women testifies to Emecheta's embrace of African feminism." (Robolin 6) Thus in the novel women and conflict are interrelated as a result of which they are in a perpetual and vigorous struggle against the negativities of life. The woman protagonist of the discussed text is constantly in the quest of recovery of an effective relationship with her self and the place where she lives or where she is born.

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