

Motherhood Without Joy: Patriarchy, Sacrifice, and Female Dispossession in the Joys of Motherhood

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Abstract:

In *The Joys of Motherhood* through Nnu Ego's journey, Emecheta highlights the subjugation of women's identity in disguise of being a careful mother and an ideal wife. Nnu Ego in the novel is a daughter of the tribal leader of Ibuza, who never leaves her home. Yet, in the later part of the novel she moves to the farthest land to be a mother, distorted by the loss of her child, she travelled and suffered of hunger and endured endless sacrifices, but her worth is not measured by her identity and perseverance, but only through her capacity of being an ideal mother of her sons.

In the novel, Nnu Ego's tragedy is quieter. She sacrifices all and gets the forgetfulness in return as a reward. When her children go away and the world passes away, she passes on all by herself. Her women are in the same breath living in patriarchy and the colonial aftermath, and there is no easy way out there but simply a survival.

African feminism is significant in this context not because of western patterns of liberation but because it is experienced in real-life situations. The feminism of Emecheta is developed on the basis of kitchens, crammed flats, and worn-out bodies. It is not anti-mothers, but poses an unpleasant question of who gains by it.

Thus, this study looks at one of her most significant novels, *The Joys of Motherhood*, not just as a clean feminist text, but rather as a lived reality of a black African woman, their subjugation, struggle, and the aftermath of their ignorance towards their own resistance and rights.

Keywords: Feminist Texts, Subjugation, Resistance and rights

Buchi Emecheta, the name rings loud in African literature. One of the most well-known authors of the modern era. Her name popped up first in *Macbeth's Diary* back in 1976, just a small mention, a Nigerian voice that people were finally starting to notice. Critics didn't miss her. Bernth Lindfors ranked her high in *Big Shots* and *Little Shots* in the Anglophone Literary Canon. Not just another writer, but one of the big ones.

Keith M. Booker placed her right beside the giants Achebe, Armah, Aidoo, Gordimer, La Guma, Ngũgĩ, and Dangarembga. She was born in Nigeria, with Midwest roots from an Igbo bloodline. But she moved to North London in 1962 and has been there ever since. Over thirty years of writing and raising five kids, keeping a life afloat alone, but not broken. Supported herself through words. Words became her bread, her survival, and her power. Her work, spanning fourteen languages, has carried her voice across continents, thirteen novels, three autobiographies, and four children's books, a handful of plays, and even a book of

photographs. Her early books, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), were later reissued as *Adah's Story*. Then her autobiography *Head Above Water* (1986), her fight, her struggles, her voice. The latter works rolled in too. *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1979), *Double Yoke* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), *Gwendolen* (1979), *Kehinde* (1994), *The New Tribe* (2000). Some titles are harder, darker, some tender, but all hers and for children, she gave *Titch the Cat* (1979), *Nowhere to Play* (1980), *The Wrestling Match* (1980), always writing and speaking. She didn't just stop at books; she wrote plays too: *Juju Landlord* (1975), *A Kind of Marriage* (1986), and *The Family Bargain* (1987). And her essays, stories, and voices spread across anthologies, journals, magazines, from Africa to Europe to America to Australia. She was born on July 21, 1944, in Lagos, in a modest home to parents Jeremy Nwabudike and Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta. From there, her story grew into hardships. Having a difficult husband, a culture that clipped women's wings. Then England, another struggle with racism and isolation. But she didn't stay down as she carved out her space, fought for equality, not just for herself but for women everywhere. Her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, tells it all. The fights, the wounds, the survival, the slow rising confidence. London was her home for over 43 years. And she lived off her art, writing paid the bills, Writing fed her family. Writing made her what she is, i.e, Buchi Emecheta, not just an author, a force, a woman who turned her life into literature.

She's listed alongside eight other big names in Keith M. Booker's *The African Novel in English* (1998). Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, and then there's Buchi Emecheta, born in the Midwest of Nigeria, an Igbo writer. She's been living in North London since 1962. Working, writing, building her story. For over thirty years now, London hasn't been easy, never for a girl from Nigeria with big dreams. She faced cold streets, odd jobs, a world that barely noticed her, but she wrote letters, essays, stories, and anything to get the voice out, and slowly, it came. Recognition, respect, and readers who listened, characters that mattered with every page that whispered her journey of pain, hope, and resilience. The city carried on, bustling and unaware. And there she was, quietly shaping African literature, one word at a time.

Throughout her artistic endeavours, she has received praise and acclaim on a global scale, supported herself, and raised her five children alone. So far, fourteen languages have translated her works. Thirteen novels, three autobiographies, four children's books, and a set of photos are among them. Her first two books, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) (later reissued combined as *Adah's Story*), and *Head Above Water: An Autobiography* (1986), are examples of her autobiographical writings.

Her later books are a whole lineup. *Gwendolen* (1989), also called *The Family in America*. *Kehinde* (1994), *The New Tribe* (2000). Then the classics: *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Double Yoke* (1982), *Naira Power* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) and *A Kind of Marriage* (1986). She didn't stop there. Black women's photos in *Our Own Freedom* (1982), and the kids, she had them covered, too. *Titch the Cat* (1979), *Nowhere to Play* (1980), *The Moonlight Bride* (1980), *The Wrestling Match* (1980). But these are not the end there's much more. Anthologies, academic journals, newspapers, magazines based on Africa, Australia, Europe, the US and thus her words travelled everywhere. Plays too such as *Juju Landlord* (1975), *A Kind of Marriage* (1986), *The Family Bargain* (1987) has been penned down by her. She didn't just write. She built worlds that mattered and voices that couldn't be ignored.

The concept of "Motherhood" in *The Joys of Motherhood* is not just glorified but nearly idolized and consequently employed as a trap. The title in the novel is ironic where the women in the novel enjoy motherhood least and survive the most. These women in the novel neither scream nor write manifestos;

instead, they talk about surviving. The lead character in the novel, Nnu Ego sacrifices all her life for her children and gets the forgetfulness as her reward.

When all her children go away around her, she falls into a state of misery and loneliness, and at the end died all by herself. Emecheta in her stories never ridicules her women; instead, she laments them and in the process redeems their pride. This is not an African subaltern feminism nor spectacle rebellion, but rather a resistance through endurance, work and love that refuse to fade away.

Emecheta is an author who writes on patriarchy that has long disregarded women such as herself. Her fiction transforms silence into language, suffering into knowledge, and ordinary women into the subjection of history.

Motherhood and womanhood sound entire and complete but in most African cultures, especially in the Igbo culture, a woman is posed with a single question of whether she would be able to produce children or not and in case she does not, she is considered incomplete or wasteful.

Such logic is splintered open in with the help of the womanist theory. *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrate that this much praise and glory associated with motherhood can be a quiet kind of oppression where women's identity is often neglected, voices not properly heard, and are hardly ever asked the way they want to get themselves recognised. Emecheta thus writes this, not as a theory, but rather as a lived experience. In African and diasporic writings of Mariama B, Ama Ada Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, the same image is repeated and the woman who gives always suffers extremely.

Womanism, first named by Alice Walker, grows out of Black women's lives not just as a white feminism, or a separatist rage but comes from the memory, of survival and from holding things together when everything is falling apart. It does not ask women to leave men behind; rather, it asks a harder question of why must women abandon themselves?

Unlike mainstream feminism, which often centres on white, middle-class freedom, womanism keeps room for race, class, culture, hunger, and their shared struggle. Because Nnu Ego is not fighting for slogans; rather, she is fighting for survival, to keep her children alive, and to remain human in its dignity.

In the novel Ego is an obedient and traditional soul, deeply trapped in patriarchy. Her life moves forward without pause in the form of being a responsible daughter, an enduring wife, and a caring mother having no breathing space and not any choice of her own.

In her first marriage, she cannot conceive and that is enough to make her disposable, beaten, humiliated, and replaced. Her entire worth collapses into one failure that is a womb that does not produce. In her second marriage, she finally conceived and for a brief moment, she believed that a real womanhood had arrived to her. But the joy does not stay for her too long, and her first son dies. The novel opens there not with birth but with grief so heavy that she walks to Carter Bridge, ready to jump. Thus, Emecheta begins her novel not in celebration but in despair as Motherhood, not as a bliss, rather it's a pressure, a fear of a constant threat of loss.

In the novel, after her second marriage when she left Iboza for Lagos, and she realised that tradition does not protect women here. Nnaife, her husband, earns little, and cleans for white people, washes their floors, their clothes, and even their underwear. Colonial humiliation follows him home, sits in their room, and settles into their marriage, giving rise to humiliation, conflicts, and disapproval.

Further, when Nnaif loses his job, when his colonial master's left for abroad, Nnu Ego worked and managed her family by working, selling, peddling, and sacrificing. She feeds her children before herself,

sells her own clothes to buy pepper soup, carries pregnancy after pregnancy like an undenied fate, and nine children were born which were still then not enough.

Her household has the same sort of patriarchy, she experienced everywhere else in her life; her sons are educated and daughters are ignored. Girls are considered future dowries and boys are investments. This is perceived not as cruelty to her, rather a normal domestic routine, and that is what makes it tragic.

Nnu Ego lives only as a mother and with no other identity, as her identity is continuously postponed and deferred to a future moment when the children will grow up and succeed.

"She was sure now as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband that her old age would be happy, that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as mother..." (Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood* 59)

Nnu Ego waits and waits and at the end dies alone by the roadside with no child holding her hand or neither any reward for her endurance; only in death does she receive honour, a grand burial, a shrine, public praise, which was of course too late.

Thus, with the incident the readers continuously need to ponder if the hood in womanhood is the same as the hood in motherhood, and to this Buchi Emecheta's answer is clear. Motherhood, as defined by patriarchy, does not complete women; it rather consumes them. Nnu Ego's life proves this painfully. She does everything right and in return gains nothing. Her last question reverberates out of *The Joys of Motherhood*: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full being, not anybody's appendage?" (218)

Therefore, this paper presents a shift in the concept of motherhood, an ideal requirement for being a complete woman. As even in the absence of the children, a woman is able to live a life fully with joy and fulfillment, build meaning, and make a difference to society.

However, Motherhood is not something that Emecheta denies. She rather rejects its tyranny and this way, she provides African women with things that are not often in literature, neither in romance, nor in consolation, but in bitter truths. Here motherhood is not satisfaction, but it is a toil, which is labour, without reward.

Moreover, even decolonization did not mean that women should pursue the ambitions of their men and nation first and ignore their own selfhood. Emecheta rejects this myth slowly and painstakingly. *The Joys of Motherhood*, unlike *Things Fall Apart* considers gender imbalance as a cultural order and reveals its price. The cultural oppression never proclaims itself. It rather operates silently by means of social position and religion.

The identity of a woman is never left behind. It is connected with a man, father, husband, or son. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is first Agbadi's daughter and even after his death, that ownership lingers. Women, the novel suggests, always belong to someone. If not in life, then in memory.

Education is withheld and girls are paused, postponed and sacrificed so that boys may move forward. Ego accepts this legacy without any question. Thus, with times it feels natural to her but Adaku does not. She refuses the script. She educates her daughters and in doing so, interrupts the cycle.

"I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons... The more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves, that we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own." (Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood* 196-197)

Thus, through feminist frameworks, *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes how Nigerian women are doubly colonized both by empire and by patriarchy. Nnu Ego and Adaku stand as two responses: endurance and

refusal, unequal and uneven in different ways. Nnu Ego builds the men's world brick by brick, with her sacrifices and by hard work, but Adaku walks away from it.

By the end, Nnu Ego understands something bitter and late: women help sustain the very system that confines them. Until they stop, it remains a man's world full of brutality towards the opposite sex. Thus, at the end, Adaku flees and Nnu Ego does not. She dedicates all of her time to the motherhood and nothing returns to her before her death. Here, Buchi Emecheta does not provide solace but rather she provides illumination, and at times, light is more perilous than hope.

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