

Motherhood is Womanhood: Myth or Reality?
A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

African culture has a strong belief in the supremacy of motherhood. African male writers have also glorified the image of an African mother. Certain phrases such as 'mother is supreme', 'mother is gold' and 'Mother Africa' have been created to valorize motherhood. Being creator, no doubt, a mother is next to God, but motherhood should not be considered as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. If womanhood is defined in terms of motherhood, then we can imagine the condition of a woman who fails to be a mother. Earlier African male writers have portrayed bright side of motherhood showing the ideal image of mothers. The real image of motherhood has been presented by African female writers. Their image is quite different from that which has been depicted by their male counterparts. Buchi Emecheta is one of them. She interrogates prevailing myths related to African motherhood. She delineates what it means to be a mother in Igbo society and how social expectations make an infertile woman feel herself as useless and failed one. The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* deals with the pathetic story of mother Nnu Ego. She is ill-treated, despised by her husband, family, and society when she fails to bear a child. She suffers a lot when she cannot conceive but her problems double when she becomes the mother of many children. Emecheta seems to support what Adrienne Rich writes about motherhood. According to Rich, the institute of motherhood defines a mother as an object, not as an individual.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Burden, Myth, Stigma, Object, Igbo community, Sacrifice, Self-effacement.

Introduction

The importance of motherhood in the life of women is one of those values which is shared by every society irrespective of cultural differences. Motherhood is a significant part of

African culture. John S. Mbiti writes that motherhood is a central concept of African philosophy. The theme of motherhood has been of central importance in the twentieth century's African literature. Many proverbs related to motherhood have been mentioned in the literature. Andrea Benton Rushing mentions an important African proverb, "Mother is gold." Camara Laye and Senghor emphasize that the mother is the symbol of Africa. Mother Africa trope has depicted Africa as a mother. This theme has been exploited in the works of anti-colonial nationalists in Africa. African mother has also been transformed into a mythical figure by poets and writers. The mother has been eulogized by the male authors. But women writers or some critics have questioned such exalted images and presented the reality of a mother in society. D'Almeida comments that such images are far removed from the reality of women's daily existence (91).

The title of the novel hints that motherhood is a central theme in it. Buchi Emecheta has named chapters as 'The Mother', 'The Mother's Mother', 'The Mother's Early Life', and 'First Shock of Motherhood' etc. to portray the story of a mother. The novel highlights how an Igbo woman, Nnu Ego, is victimized due to myths and stereotypes related to motherhood. Buchi Emecheta delineates how various myths and mores are nourished by an Igbo culture to maintain patriarchal system to control women. Women like Nun Ego internalize such myths and mores to such an extent that they get ready to sacrifice their freedom, identity, and even life for them. Fertility, self-sacrifice and selfless love for family are considered jewels for a woman.

African culture and literature propagate the romantic image of a mother. Consequently, girls start thinking that motherhood is the ultimate goal of life. Only some writers have shown that a mother like the earth is battered, wounded and exploited in a patriarchal society. In such a society, a mother identifies her pain with the pain of the earth. Buchi Emecheta depicts the pathetic situation of a mother and tries to dismantle the myth i.e. motherhood is womanhood through the character of Nun Ego. Through the novel, she presents that the Igbo community has a dual attitude towards women. Generally, daughters are considered curse and burden but when these daughters become mothers, they are suddenly propelled to a central position. Fertile women are honored particularly those who bear male children in the Igbo community. The study of the novel makes it clear how Igbo people treat a woman who cannot become a mother and how they accord importance to a mother of sons. An ordinary woman aspires to gain a highly respected position. A woman's status rises if she bears sons she believes that motherhood is a joyful and privileged state as she can receive respect and special treatment during pregnancy. Motherhood is defined as a sacred role that every woman wants to experience it. Marriage and motherhood are treated as the ultimate goal of a woman. The talent of a woman does not matter if she cannot become a mother. That's why feminists interrogate obligatory motherhood. Buchi Emecheta also exposes that motherhood has not only joys but also its sorrows. The high esteem given by society to a mother has negative effects along with positive ones. The end of the novel

explains the fate of women who adhere to the traditional image of motherhood and consider motherhood as a synonym of womanhood.

Nnu Ego's condition tells us that there is no worse bad luck for a woman than being a barren woman. A childless woman is considered a waste to herself, to family and society. Motherhood is the main criterion by which a woman's worth is measured in the Igbo community. Mbiti describes that a barren woman in Africa is considered "the dead end of human life not only for the genealogical level but also for herself" (144). Children play an important role in Igbo marriage. Every man wants to be father of many children. A woman's marriage is considered secure only after the birth of a child specially son. Emecheta who is herself a Nigerian focuses on the condition of a woman in Nigerian patriarchal society and criticizes the way in which women are befooled in the name of myths and mores. The paper evaluates the helpless position of Nnu Ego in her society. She is a victim of constant valorization of motherhood. Her first marriage fails because she fails to conceive as she belongs to a society where a woman's ability to bear children secures her marriage. A childless marriage leads to the next marriage of the husband. In such a situation, Nnu Ego, a daughter of great Chief, craves for support and sympathy from her husband:

Amatokwu, remember when I first come to your house? Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? What happened to us, Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? Do you think I do not suffer too? (32)

The above lines present not only the pain of Nnu Ego but of every childless woman. Amatokwu takes a new wife and proves his ability to impregnate a woman. The second wife's pregnancy also confirms Nnu Ego's infertility. Amatokwu showers his love on the pregnant wife and denies Nnu Ego's conjugal rights. Even, he does not come to spend a night with her as he derisively explains:

I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you do not appeal to me anymore (32-33).

The way Emecheta presents Nnu Ego's thoughts proves her psychological insight in displaying the mental condition of a character. Nnu Ego is full of self scorn and thinks, "How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed" (31). The thought that she brought shame to her people by not becoming a mother tortures her continuously. The reason behind such thinking is traditional upbringing.

After the birth of the second wife's baby, Nnu Ego secretly starts nursing the new baby. She whispers to the baby, "Why did not you come to me? I cried in the nights and longed for a child like you? (34) Overwhelmed and obsessed with the desire of becoming a mother, she even tries to feed the baby. When milk begins to drip from her breasts, she realizes that she is not barren and she has 'juice' in her. She complains to the effigy of her *Chi*, "Why don't you let me have my own children? Look I am full of milk. (34) Amatokwu beats her severely when he watches her feeding the baby. Consequently, she is sent back to her father's home. He feels no sympathy, no regret but relaxes himself by saying, "Let her go, she is as barren as a desert" (39).

Her father chooses second husband for her. Helpless and powerless Nnu Ego is married second time for the honor of her family. She moves to Lagos with her new husband, Niafe. She is appalled to see her new husband the first time as she finds him an unattractive man having a bulged stomach like a pregnant cow. His personality does not match to the traditional physique of an African man. Her disgust gets more intense when she finds that he works as a domestic servant and washes white woman's undergarments. Ironically, she starts loving that ugly and fat man when he makes her pregnant. She changes her outlook towards Niafe. Shivaji Sengupta comments about their relationship that Nnu Ego receives Niafe's hyper sexuality not only without complaint but also with hope. She wants nothing but to become a mother. (237)She accepts Niafe not out of love, but out of hunger for motherhood as she says, "with this son I am going to start loving this man. He has made me a real woman- all I want to be a woman and a mother. So, why should I hate him now? (53). The above lines make a reader feel sympathy with Nnu Ego. She is very grateful to Niafe. She hopes that she will enjoy respectable status which her first husband could not give her.

Unfortunately, her joy of being a mother is ended with the death of the first child. The novel starts from this moment. The first page describes how she hysterically runs towards the river to commit suicide. She appears as a madwoman but when we read more pages, we understand the reason for madness. In her society, the concept of motherhood is etched in mind so firmly that a woman cannot imagine life without children. The crowd stops her to take such a big step. Her first attempt to kill herself fails but the end of the novel reveals that the burden of motherhood finally kills her. Buchi Emecheta very convincingly portrays her mental agony, "I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. The child is dead..." (62). The above statement highlights how certain myths act as victimizers for an ordinary woman. Such myths get fixed in mind that it becomes impossible to free from their clutches. Nnu Ego has internalized such myths to such an extent that she considers that the production of a child is only the proof of her existence as a woman. Without a child, she is a non-existent.

Nnu Ego, a desperate woman, hopes for the next baby. Her cherished desire is fulfilled. Later, she becomes the mother of seven children. She devotes her time to fulfill her responsibility as a mother. According to tradition, caring and nurturing children is a mother's duty. She copes with a growing family and increasing financial burdens. She starts doing petty business of selling cigarettes and matches. Naife loses her job and all members depend upon Nnu Ego's tiny income from trading. She struggles a lot to make both ends meet having a hope that she would achieve her reward in old age. Her growing sons will become rich persons and take care of her. On the other side, Naife behaves as an irresponsible father. He thinks like a typical male chauvinist and remains busy in claiming his rights on his dead brothers' wives and producing more children. In spite of supporting family, he creates financial burdens for Nnu Ego. Surprisingly, he blames her when their children misbehave.

Despite being labeled as a lucky and proud mother of seven children, she never enjoys the joys of motherhood. She lives alone as her sons abandon her and go abroad. She complains to God:

God when will you create a woman
who will be fulfilled in herself, a full
human being, not anybody's appendage... (186-87).

Through the above lines, she not only expresses her pain but also of every woman. One night, she dies alone on the road-side like a childless woman.

Conclusion

The end of the novel is ironic as her sons come home and give her a grand funeral by making a shrine for her. Women worship her to get children, but Nnu Ego never answers the prayers. After death, she understands that motherhood does not assure happiness and fulfillment for a woman. Through Nnu Ego's rejection, Emecheta wants to show that she is not in favor of the imposition of motherhood. Thus, the novel conveys an important message to all women that motherhood should not be considered a synonym of womanhood. It suggests that a woman must be valued as an individual, not as an object. A woman must be aware of her life and resist those values which demand self-effacement. In this way, the paper proposes a rethinking of the notion of motherhood.

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