

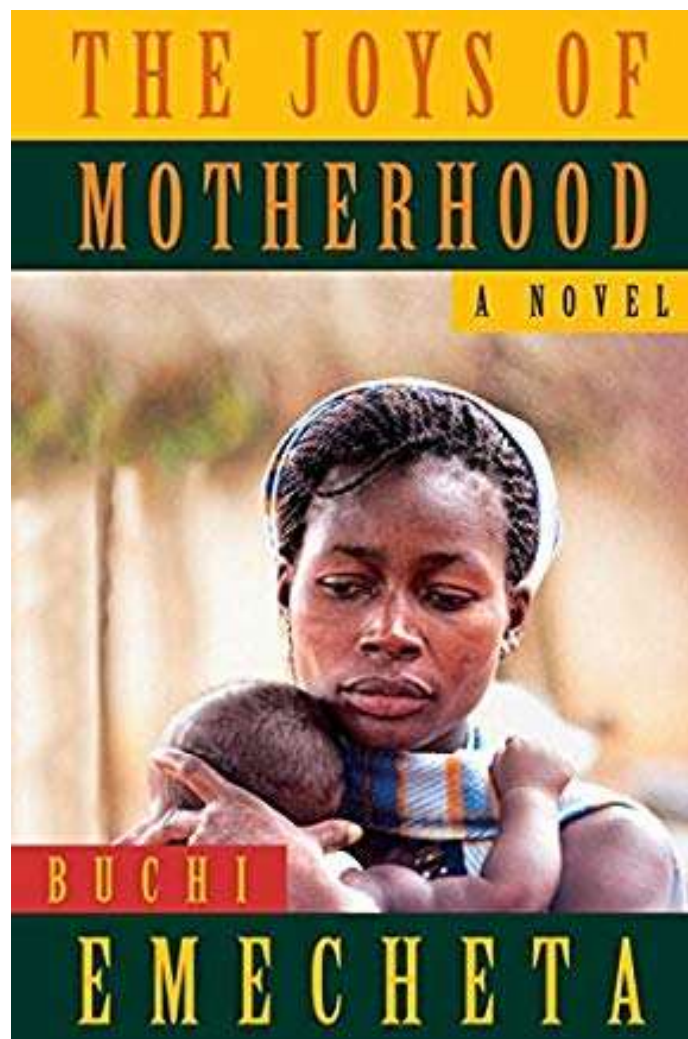
**The Paradox of Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's**  
*The Joys of Motherhood*

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## Abstract

The present paper aims to discuss *womenism* which plays significant feature because of its substitute principle system. Women become the essential element of society, because they run their life by depending on the others, they are fictional worlds and hence the women writers make them to enter into “real” world. Buchi Emecheta was one among the familiar writers. It is said that the child labour and female domination happens, as a simple, everyday occurrence. Emecheta attempts to make an ironic point with the title of her novel. She points out that there is no joy to life or motherhood for a woman who chooses to live an isolated, anachronistic life in a changing world. Even unemployment leads to poverty of nation, people begging for food and shelter, and wandering without it, but still surviving as a vagabond.

**Keywords:** Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Paradox, Motherhood, womenism, marriage and sufferings.

## Introduction

The title of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is taken from Flora Nwapa's pioneering novel *Efuru* (1966). The closing sentences of Nwapa's book raise a paradox about the much-consulted childless river goddess, Uhamiri: “She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?” (*Efuru* , 221). *The Joys of Motherhood* is Emecheta's hauntingly ironic elaboration on those venerated, so-called joys.

Nwapa's tribute to women's independence notwithstanding, the narrative manifests a blind spot about the ideology of motherhood. Although the novel moves towards a celebration of *Efuru*'s independence, economic success and goodness, there is a constant undercurrent of doubt about the ability of a childless woman to be happy. Nwapa through the life of an individual woman shows, how sublimation of natural instincts take place and how ancient pre-colonial African society uses religion to reconcile her to which she cannot fulfill the conventional one. Literary critic Susan Andrade understands “Emecheta's explicit link between the novels as an effort to forge

and join a canon of Nigerian - and, more broadly, African-women writers” (JM 6).

Nnu Ego, protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood*, is a quintessential African woman whose experiences and responses are perceived as ideal representations of African women's existence and as an indictment of a culture in which women have little control over their lives. The African practices of polygamy and bride price degrade women to the status of goods and chattel and husbands dominate their wives and fathers dominate their daughters. The system ensures perpetual subjugation of women, and do not let them have same opportunities as men because they are valued solely for the money that they bring to their fathers through their bride price. The girls have no choice to marry because fathers sell daughters to the highest bidder. Emecheta introduces the issue of women's double colonization here in a conversation with her neighbor Cordelia.

In their conversation, between Nnu Ego and Cordelia restate the condition of double oppression of women of Africa. Their men are ruled over by the whites and the men rule over their women. Emecheta illustrates the tribal condition, the extent to which women co-operate in and encourage their own subordination, and the enslavement and domination which come to their lives as a brutal continuation of white slave-making from other periods of history.

Lagos has its own set of corrupting influence and the city corrupts Nnu Ego's marital life in a number of ways. Her marriage becomes fragmented as the old tribal rituals give way to day-to-day exigencies in Lagos. The Lagos' wife had to provide for the family unlike the traditional wife. Nnu Ego found some help from other Ibuza wives whom she met at monthly meetings. These women lent money to start own market business selling tins of cigarettes and packets of matches, so that they would have money to buy more than one outfit and save a few shillings for the coming child. Nnu Ego even learns to tolerate her husband:

Nnaife as the father of her child, and the fact that this child was a son gave her a sense of fulfillment for the first time in her life. She was now sure, 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”. (JM, 54)

Coming back to the present, Nnu Ego finds her son Ngozi, dead and does not have another option but suicide. She decides to throw herself over a bridge because the death of her child has robbed her of the only title that legitimizes her motherhood. Nnu Ego is saved by her childhood friend, Ato. Contemplating Nnu Ego's surroundings, untidy and disorderly, Ato asks, “Nnu Ego, the daughter of Agbadi, what has gone wrong with you? All because you lost a child?”(JM 74) Ato rescues her, claiming that her life is not her own to take, and it belongs to the community “a thing like that is not permitted in Nigeria; you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, because everyone is responsible for the other person... He must interfere, he must stop it happening” (JM, 60). The first born, a clean-looking boy, suddenly dies. Then Nnu Ego gets another, accompanied by a strange dream. She picks up a baby boy left by a stream. She sees the slave woman her CHI (personal god), who says to her: Yes, take the dirty, chubby babies. She can have as many of those as she wants take them. The rather indiscriminate reference by the slave woman to the dirty, chubby babies could be significant in view of the further development.

Nnu Ego becomes pregnant after returning home and again rather quickly with Oshia. The happiness of Nnu Ego's and Nnaife was interfered by the World War II. The Meers return to Europe, and Nnaife is out of work for months while Nnu Ego chains the family in the course of little trade. Nnaife ultimately gets work on a ship, which means he is disappeared for months at a time. Nnu Ego resists making ends meet while he's disappeared. When he finally returns, it's only to be greeted by the news that his elder brother has died and Nnaife has inherited all his brother's wives and children.

Meanwhile Nnu Ego continues to dream of the joys of motherhood, even in the midst of abject poverty and Nnaife's unemployment. In an ironic twist, this woman whose first husband found her “barren as a desert” (Chand, 122) begins a phase of perpetual fecundity and gives birth to a second son, Adim meaning ‘now I am two,’ then

the twin daughters, Taiwo and Kehinde, followed by a third son, Nnamdio; and second set of twin daughters, Obiageli and Malchi, making seven children in all.

Nnaife inherits Adaku after his brother's death, willingly comes to Lagos to be his wife. Adaku joins the family in Lagos and soon starts a thriving and lucrative business in the marketplace. "Adaku turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like" (JM, 124). Nnu Ego sees Adaku as a woman who is independent in her way of thinking, something she is not ready to appreciate. When Nnu Ego brings forth twin girls and Adaku, by way of congratulating her says, "Your first set of twin girls, senior wife," Nnu Ego says, "Hm, I know, but I doubt if our husband will like them very much. One can hardly afford to have one girl in a town like this, to say nothing of two." To this, Adaku replies: "Oh, senior wife, I think you are sometimes more traditional than people at home in Ibuza. You worry too much to please our husband." To this, Nnu Ego laughs and says: "I think it's due to my father's influence. I can see him in my mind's eye weighing it up and down, then chuckling over it, and asking his friend Idayi whether it's right for my CHI to send me two girls instead of just one." Adaku tries to convince Nnu Ego that though they are girls they have a role to play, which is captured in these words: "It's a man's world this. Still, senior wife, these girls when they grow up will be great helpers to you in looking after the boys.

Emecheta attempts to make an ironic point with the title of the novel. She points out that there is no joy in the life or motherhood for a woman who chooses to live an isolated, anachronistic life in the changing world. What is finally at stake is the very meaning of the joys of motherhood and more specifically the equation between joy and motherhood and the unthinking identification that the community makes between the two.

The paradoxical end to the novel is the traditional belief that 'a decent burial' is the joy of motherhood. Perhaps this is "why Nnu Ego chose to be silent after her death", (Hunter, 219) refusing to answer the prayers of women who ask her for children. Obviously, the women asking for her children do not realize the consequences of their prayers. Having lived through such a life, Nnu Ego knows that motherhood does not

always bring happiness and that, ultimately, women have the right to choose their own destiny. A woman must learn to be fulfilled in herself.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:6 June 2019

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25