

Motherhood or Womanhood? A Closer Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *the Joys of Motherhood*

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8100214>

Received: 03 October 2024; Accepted: 12 October 2024; Published: 16 November 2024

ABSTRACT

Literary research on women has been done by various scholars; often depicting stereotypical imaginations of how a woman should behave, who should determine her worth in the society and even on the patriarchal notions on womanhood. Scholars have also concentrated on portrayal of women in male writings. However, studies on womanhood still remains an area of interest. This paper explores the concept of womanhood in African literature by focusing on what defines a woman in Africa, historical development of womanhood in Africa, the humanistic approach to women as beings with feelings and the cultural expectations of women and how they navigate through them. Through the use of black feminism theory, this paper explores Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to explore contrasting aspects of womanhood as portrayed through Nnu Ego and Adaku. The findings reveal that Adaku represents the contemporary woman whose life and beliefs are not tied to traditions that dictate how she should live her life; also, the Nnu Ego's adherence to tradition and its dictates is revealed, for instance how she remains in Nnaife's house despite how he mistreats her, because that is what is expected of her by the Igbo traditions.

Keywords: Womanhood, Black feminism, Motherhood

INTRODUCTION

Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* has become a vital reference on the theme of motherhood in African Literature, possibly due to the deceptive allure of the title itself. Several analysts have oscillated between the text's versions of motherhood on one hand, and its feminist pretensions on the other. (Lewis; 1992; Stratton, 1994; Nnoromele, 2002, Killam, 2004) The question that comes to mind is whether Emecheta addresses the segment of mothers and motherhood, or whether the issues she raises through her characterization are universal to the w(hu)oman experience. What distinctions are decipherable between our understanding of motherhood and womanhood in cultures permeated by patriarchy? As Akujobi (2011) notes, the contradiction between motherhood and womanhood defines our understanding of narratives from the Nigerian environment from where Emecheta writes. He says that;

It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the 'halo of maternity' shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define 'real' women or responsible women. This is so in the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance and many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem (p. 19).

The assertion above shows that a woman without children is not considered complete. The society in question certainly ignores intersectionality in which various factors contribute to our understanding of phenomena. Certainly, the Nigerian cultural worldview is focused more on the production of children, sometimes at the expense of the women involved or the totality of the processes of motherhood. The African society works under the notion that barren women are responsible for their barrenness. In his analysis of womanhood, Katrak (2006) observes that:

A different aspect of mothering is also commonly revealed, that is mothering as m-othering, when the experience of being a mother, or of not being one (infertility, or by choice) is alienating and destructive to a

woman's psychic state. Failure to be a biological mother exiles the woman from her body. She is regarded as a failure, not a complete woman; infertility is considered unfortunate, sometimes even as a curse. Such views persist even among educated classes in postcolonial societies (p. 21).

Katrak's definition of womanhood correlates with Akujobi's in that, womanhood is defined by whether one is a mother and the failure to be one results to both emotional and physical consequences to the woman. While growing up, girls are said to blossom into womanhood and are therefore ready for marriage, whose sole purpose is procreation and being a mother makes one a respected and honored woman in the society. Womanhood has often been defined in terms of societal expectations, historical conditions, cultural norms that expose their struggles, opinions, reaction to challenges in life, their ambitions and even their expectations in life. As a result of the evolution of the societal perception of womanhood that has shifted from previous stereotypical depictions of womanhood and the representation of women as second-class citizens, scholars have explored women in a different perspective.

Complete womanhood among the Igbo community is also defined by whether one is married. Adankwo advises Nnu Ego, 'have you ever heard of a complete woman without a husband?' (p. 198). This happens when Nnaife gets conscripted into the war and Nnu Ego decides to go back to Ibuza to see her ailing father with the hope of going back once Nnaife is back. This advice from a fellow woman shows that the elder Igbo women knew that the measure of one's womanhood was pegged on being married and therefore Nnu Ego has no place among her people in Ibuza, she has to go back to Lagos to await her husband's return from war.

A broader exploration of womanhood is necessary in order to redefine earlier misconceptions of what womanhood is in the constantly changing society. In this light, Davies (1986) argues that, 'Literature, because it mirrors or recreates social, historical and economic realities, is one of the channels through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated, even created.' (p. 75) This exposes the need for further literary research on womanhood in order to unravel its mysteries.

Historical Approach to Womanhood

In pre-colonial Africa, women were considered as important figures in the society, they had a greater influence on the social, political and economic status. For many years, they enjoyed positions of prestige and recognition for their social rules, they were conspicuous in high places and they were queen mothers, queen sisters, princesses, chiefs and holders of other offices in town and villages (Sudarkasa 1986). Sudarkasa further argues that power was based on seniority other than gender; however, elderly women were more respected than others, they had a special place and in society and could make decisions in many important issues concerning family and community. They were also seen as transmitters of oral traditions such as narratives, songs and even folktales in the community.

Colonialism brought changes in the perception of women in that they were relegated to second class citizens and denied the ability to make decisions for their families or even to occupy leadership positions. However, women sought for their freedom by attempting to write about their experiences. Kabira & Burkweyo (2016) observe that African women have been speaking for themselves through literature, and in this way, they validate the meanings of being female. Their literature can no longer be ignored, therefore their contributions started to be appreciated. For instance, Begum (2020) argues that:

African women's writings explore a cultural life for women not choked by traditional customs but laced with women's struggle for women empowerment. The contemporary African women writers further create protagonists that are self-determined, hardworking, rebellious and full of controversy (p.16).

This is the positive representation of African women by African women writers that male writers have tended to stifle down so as to portray a different and often negative image of African women. The critics above have explored the desire by African women to have a voice and to find inclusivity in a world that was previously dominated by men. Black women have glorified their female characters and accorded them strength and free will to explore and live life in their terms. The positive portrayal of women by male authors has stamped credibility to works by females. Despite the evolution in regard to representation of women, there is need for

further scholarly work on African womanhood in order to explore specific female characters and their experiences.

The use of the male pseudonym by early women writers in the world was a marker of a strong historical shift as argued by Samantha (2015), for it was a sign that women understood the necessity of role playing if they desired to participate in the mainstream of literary culture. Early women writers saw the will to write as a contrast to their status as women in the society. For these women writers, writing became a symbol of accomplishment although they felt humiliated by the condescension of male writers and critics and therefore chose to atone their willfulness to write by working in the home, by preaching submission and self-sacrifice and by denouncing female self-assertiveness. Samantha further asserts that although many female novelists punished assertive heroines, they dealt with personal ambition by projecting the ideology of success onto male characters, whose initiative, thrift, industry and perseverance came straight from the woman author's experience. This points out the desire by women writers to do the "right" thing in accordance with the patriarchal expectations placed on a woman, even as they tried to find footing in the male dominated literary world. However, there is need to address issues on women in a more practical manner and the real circumstances that result to how they behave and react towards art and life. This study addressed the issue of socio-cultural factors that shape black motherhood and analyzed how black mother characters are formed.

The emergence of women's writings in Africa enabled women to search for their place in the society, which was the beginning of strong women after years of bondage. According to Kebdi & Iamrade (2019), women found their voices in writing and their strong desire for freedom as full citizens not as a subordinate creature in their communities. African women used the pen to rebel against the harsh conditions they were living in and wanted to light their destiny and raise awareness of women by depicting the reality of their situation in a clearer manner. The strength portrayed by female characters as a result of the change in the perception of women by men, has created a need for the exploration of whether this is also applicable to black mothers as they nurture their children in a male dominated environment.

Culture and its Effect in *the Joys*

Nnu Ego's dislike for Nnaife is based on the comparison between him and her first husband Amatokwu, whom she had loved very much and whose physical features differ from those of Nnaife. Farm life in Ibuza creates men who are strong, energetic and muscular unlike the men in Lagos who are used to soft life like washing and cooking for the white man. The colonial legacy in Nigeria has created this difference and Nnu Ego lacks satisfaction in knowing that this would be her new husband. The author states:

She was used to her long wiry Amatokwu who would glide inside her when she was ready, not this short, fat, stocky man, whose body almost crushed hers. What was more, he did not smell healthy either, unlike men in Ibuza who had the healthy smell of burning wood and tobacco. This one smelt all soapy, as if he was over washed (p. 47).

In the above description of Nnaife, we are told that he smells as if he is over washed. While there is no fault in being clean, this could be symbolic of the erosion of traditional culture and the adoption of the white man's ways. Nnaife feels the extent of Nnu Ego's dislike for him. He feels that there is nothing he can do to change the way he was made, and the knowledge of other people who have been in worse situations than his give him comfort that all will be well. Nnaife also feels that the women are expecting too much from the men, as they desire to come to Lagos where they would not have to work too hard, and expect to find a handsome, strong figure of a husband into the bargain. Nnu Ego on her part feels that despite her obvious dislike for her new husband, she would rather die than in Lagos than go back home to tell her father that she dislikes the man he has chosen for her. The feelings of women are not put into consideration as to whether she likes the man she is marrying or not, so long as she satisfies the expectation of her father and of the society. Crenshaw (2013) contends that the experiences of black women cannot be understood by only looking at the intersection of race, class and gender but by also analyzing how these systems reinforce each other. In Nnu Ego's case, her dislike for Nnaife and her inability to appreciate the work he does as a washerman for the Meers is as a result of how colonialism has brought a change in the gender roles, which were previously deeply rooted in African culture. Therefore, an understanding of the contexts that shape black women is important so as to appreciate their

reactions towards the happenings in their lives.

Nnu Ego goes through a lot of pain when Nnaife becomes polygamous through the inheritance of his dead brother's wives as culture dictates. It is common knowledge to her neighbors that Nnu Ego dislikes her husband's younger wife, Adaku. However, Nnu Ego feels the need for peace in her home and promises herself that she will be patient with her. The author states:

She hurried in and, to take her mind off herself, busied herself entertaining people who came throughout the evening to see the new wife. Nnu Ego fought back tears as she prepared her own bed for Nnaife and Adaku. It was a good thing she was determined to play the role of mature senior wife... (p. 152).

Nnu Ego bears the pain of sharing her husband with another woman bravely although this affects her in the long run as she feels neglected by Nnaife. Not even the name, 'senior wife' can comfort her paining heart from the betrayal by her husband Nnaife. Although polygamy is a cultural aspect, it hurts the feelings of women like Nnu Ego who have to bear the pain of watching as their matrimonial beds are occupied by other women. Nnu Ego however, bears the emotional pain bravely and remains at Nnaife's home despite the challenges that she faces.

Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father also practices polygamy and through this he disregards the feelings of the women in his life. He has four wives, three slaves and two mistresses, 'two of Agbadi's wives came from Ibuza, two from his own village of Ogboli, three were slaves he had captured during his wanderings; and he also had two mistresses' (p. 9). 'Agbadi would get bored whenever his wives and mistresses either sank into domesticity and motherhood and would look for some other exciting, tall and proud female' (p.8). Emecheta points out the insensitivity of Agbadi further through the case of his mistress Ona. He sleeps with her in the same homestead that he shares with his other wives,

'...she melted and could say no more. She wept and the sobs she was trying to suppress shook her whole being. He felt it, chuckled, and remarked thickly 'please Ona, do not wake up the whole household' (p. 18). Ona's passionate cries wakes the whole household and people come to Agbadi's door to inquire whether about his welfare, and without caring about Ona's feelings, he leaves her abruptly and unsatiated and hurts her on purpose to wound her pride as a woman (p. 18). Agbadi is selfish in his sexual act with Ona as he does not want her to get satiated like he does, he leaves her yearning for more. Additionally, he does not care about the feelings of his elder wife Agunwa, even as he sleeps with his mistress in the same household. The way Agbadi treats Ona reflects the views of Wallace (1999) who argues that black women's bodies are sites of male dominance and that cultural norms curtail sexual feelings of African women. This implies that despite the lack of emotional and sexual satisfaction, Ona is not expected to complain. This portrays the insensitivity of men towards the feelings of the women in their lives as the culture does not allow for women to act upon their sexual desires, they suffer silently. Any attempt made is received sourly for men are brought out as conquerors in sexual matters. Just like Agbadi, they seek the next exciting female that catches their attention and then moves on to the next.

When she gets a son, Nnu Ego feels happy as it is a confirmation of her womanhood in accordance with the dictates of the society. "I know what you mean. Girls are love babies. But, you see, only now with this son am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman and a mother. So why should I hate him now?" (p. 58) Nnu Ego develops love for her husband because he has turned her into a 'real' woman according to the societal expectations. According to Igbo society, womanhood is only defined through motherhood as seen in Nnu Ego's case. Nnu Ego further comforts her friend Cordelia that one day she will have a boy, as she only has daughters. The intersection of gender and cultural expectations unravel through Nnu Ego when she gets a son because her identity and worth as a woman are pegged on her ability to bear sons. This is a form of oppression on black women that black feminists seek to address. Jorgensen (2018) observes that:

The Joys of Motherhood begins as a confrontation with oppression when the author introduces the protagonist, Nnu Ego, who has lost her only child and that she is faced with her co-dependence on socially constructed roles (which she has subconsciously accepted as her own) and desires to commit suicide (p. 62).

This means that the society has held women captive through its definition of womanhood and even gone mute

on the pain that women go through in order to fulfill what is expected of them. The co-dependence felt by Nnu

Ego is as a result of fear that she harbors to what the society will think of her now that she has lost her only child. Lorde (2021) highlights how the fact that women's worth is tied to their reproductive roles therefore limiting womanhood to the confines of motherhood, which denies barren women the joy of having fulfilling lives outside of motherhood, like in the case of Nnu Ego.

Nnu Ego feels sexually neglected by Amatokwu when he marries another wife to bear him children. She confronts him regarding the matter, 'Amatokwu, remember when I first came to your house? Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? What happened to us, Amatokwu?' (p. 33) One can feel Nnu Ego's pain as a woman who feels that her husband no longer desires her sexually. Amatokwu is not touched by his wife's plight, he only cares about his young wife who is pregnant for him. He responds, 'I have no time to waste my precious seed on a woman who is infertile.' (p. 33) This behavior is perhaps because of the culturally ingrained idea in men that women should not make sexual advances on their men. However, this hurts women like Nnu Ego but she has to bear with the pain as she is a representation of women in the novel who are not ready to initiate change, unlike her cowife Adaku who rebels against such cultural expectations that do not consider the feelings of women.

Adaku is labelled as an immoral woman because she leaves Nnaife's house when she realizes that she needs to seek a better life for her daughters. When Nnu Ego visits her at her market stall, Adaku tells her of her plan to abandon selling of beans and pepper so she can begin selling lappas, a business that is more lucrative than selling beans. Further, she tells her cowife of the plan to lease the place so she can use the money to pay for her rent. She confirms to Nnu Ego of her decision to be a dignified single mother but also that she will need a male companion because men have their uses too. Adaku's rebellion symbolizes the modern woman who is in search of freedom from the traditions that belittle women and deny them of the right to live their lives within their terms. Adaku is not a conformist like Nnu Ego, and this ultimately gives her the desired money to take care of her children. Although the society castigates her, she ignores the remarks and is able to provide for her children and to educate them. Adaku presents a type of character that Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) writes about when she observes that sexuality, like identity, is not a static site of oppression and that women characters in novels by women writers contest and reject the subjugation and commodification of women's bodies by men and sometimes, by other women. Nfah-Abbenyi further shows how women's bodies can be written into the cultural text for mass consumption, and brings out how women's bodies and sexuality then, become sites of power struggles where multiple discourses of pleasure, domination and exploitation converge. This is evident in the manner in which Adaku embraces her sexuality and resists oppression by the societal expectations of how a married woman should act. She chooses not to be stifled by a marriage that is not working, because her husband Nnaife does not appreciate her as she does not have a male child.

CONCLUSION

The paper argues for the need to shift attention in our understanding of the multiplicity of issues surrounding representation of women in literature, especially within the African context. Nnu Ego and Adaku have been contrasted in the way they react to challenges in their lives and how they handle them, not just as mothers but women and humans. Nnu Ego conforms to traditional expectations of womanhood while Adaku rebels and charts a new path for herself and her daughters by educating them and being a single mother. Additionally, the feelings of women are addressed, for instance how they react to painful situations like polygamy, their feeling when denied their sexual rights by their husbands when they are pregnant or nursing and even the castigation for being portrayed as lesser women because they do not have sons, like in Adaku's case.

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