

“The Joys of Motherhood” of an African Woman: A Mirage

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Article History: Received: 11 January 2021; Accepted: 27 February 2021; Published online: 5 April 2021

Abstract: Quest for identity is one phenomenon of postcolonialism that led way for the emergence of Women writers portraying the indigenous women of their society who were denied the authorial voice in the male-dominated society. Africa African woman literature has always been discussed elaborately not only among ‘White’ but also among fellow African women writers and critics across the globe. Emecheta was one such writer whose work has been criticized for writing after settled in the western country, UK (the colonizer). The readers from third world nations may agree with Emecheta’s call for the necessity to redefine Women’s identity under the African identity. Buchi Emecheta to that reverence has always through her strong woman characters never failed to express the state of the African women and their limitations in social life. Emecheta has always recorded her protagonists’ struggle for equality in a male-dominated society. Through the study of her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, an attempt is made to explore her perception of Motherhood and explain how she portrays it to the African context where traditions and communal ties are deeply rooted in the Nigerian Ibo society.

Keywords: Africa, Buchi, Nigeria, Ibo, Motherhood

1. Introduction

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta finds a place among the eminent female writers of postcolonial Africa. She novelized the effects of colonization and the oppression faced by women in the African society. Her novels in general represent the changing scenario where women stand on their own terms for gender equality and oppression in contrast to the images of African women illustrated by African male writers. The Novel “*The Joys of Motherhood*” reveals not only how women exist and live their lives in the past and present but also the struggles women faced in post-colonial Africa and native Nigeria. The Novel cannot be simply read as a story of Nnu Ego’s the protagonist struggle in the African patriarchal society it should be read with its colonial context which was introduced by the colonizers to understand ‘How’ women are treated and to what extent they were given importance in the African society. As one reads “*Joys of Motherhood*”, one will understand that the protagonist Nnu Ego’s problems are not simply because of the native patriarchal society but because of the grudging colonial structure created by the colonizer rule, in which she lives. To understand the author’s perspective the reader must read the novel with certain degree of postcolonialism. The Novel uniquely examines the story of the woman who is caught between the traditional Ibo culture and colonization. Buchi addresses the issue of marriage and motherhood by concentrating on women discrimination in traditional Nigerian Ibo culture and society. According to Marie A. Umeh, “*The Joys of Motherhood* is a study of victimization and enslavement of traditional Ibo women to the dictates of traditional Ibo Culture.” [4]

2. Motherhood in the Novel

Buchi Emecheta establishes in *The Joys of Motherhood* that the love that binds a mother to her child is a form of bondage from which the mother cannot escape till her death and that bond shall keep her in a situation that excludes any freedom or self-development. Throughout the novel the reader will read dialogues where women discuss about “*The Joys of Motherhood*” and the word motherhood comes across very often in the novel as motherhood is seen as the most important thing in their social beliefs and customs. The reader while reading could surely construct an image about Women of Nigerian Ibo culture that in Nigeria, a woman without children is one way or another incomplete and the only available way a woman can claim her individuality is by begetting children and enjoying the “*Motherhood*”. Though the reader learns from the very opening of the novel that Nnu Ego the protagonist is severely dependent and determined, Emecheta tenderloins that opinion in the novel by conflicting it with her complete belief that in Africa woman without children is incomplete. Emecheta even strike at the foundations of the understanding of the protagonist by narrating us of her fights throughout her motherliness and her struggles in the city after marriage. The title stands ironic when the women’s ultimate signifier continues to remain to achieve “*motherhood*” rather than enjoying motherhood. In fact, the irony involved in the novel in narration is unequivocally essential for understanding the novel and the impression of “*Joys of Motherhood*”. The closing lines of the novel finally elucidates the irony that the title of the novel carries in it: “She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building her joys as a mother. (224)”

According to the belief Nnu Ego's motherhood should have brought her happiness but then in reality her motherhood that was intended to give her "Joy" did not ripe and only at the end in her death the protagonist receive some 'recognition', "She [was given] the noisiest and most costly second burial", (224). As Semenya says "In Joys of Motherhood Emecheta strives to sensitise the readers to the exploitation of mothers. With increased mastery of structure and irony, she describes the humiliation and small joys of a poor, unappreciated Ibo mother. Emecheta analyses the state of mind of women valued for biology rather than their individuality." [6]

Nnu Ego while living with her parents she at least "enjoyed" and had some affiliation to her ancestral patronage. She was literally protected by her culture and she had the protection of her family and was given right to her father's protection and patronage. The term "brothers" is common in the traditional rural life where everyone shall sense the feeling of being protected by the patriarchal system, though the traditional patriarchy enslaves women in one form or the other it also provides protection and privilege. After the marriage, Nnu Ego's shift to the city breaks these connections and patronage, the marriage and move to the city had extracted her entire existence instead of joining her to a democratic public sphere. Until marriage the protagonist had not come into contact with any men who worked for the "White" this made her to change her perceptions toward her husband worked for "white people". Her husband, Nnaife, seems less than a man to her when she comes to know that her husband works to a 'White'. The native people's hatred attitude towards the colonizer and for the people who work for them is clearly evident from the text: "If you had dared come to my father's compound to ask for me, my brothers would have thrown you out. My people only let me come to you here because they thought you were like your brother [a man], not like this.... I would have not left the house of Amatokwu to come and live with a man who washes women's underwear" (49). This statement is very important in understanding the substantial impact of colonization and the creation of colonized identities in the whole of the Ibo culture. According to Raja, "Nnu Ego realizes that all these men working in the white man's city were not really men anymore, but rather something different, something deformed by their subjugation". [8] From the novel one shall understand that the colonizers place in not safe to any worker. The masters don't have any ethics to care for the servants and their family. The workers can not expect any obligation from their masters in order to raise their family. The protagonist Nnu Ego, had to work hard to survive and educate her children as her husband's income is insufficient, she managed the expenses through her trading business. Its only her activities that made possible to raise her children and send them to school.

The novel is definitely a critique of the colonial and native Ibo culture. It clearly picturizes the life of women in both native and colonial spheres. The women never sense the freedom neither in African patriarchal society nor in the "democratic" colonial society. The novel which shows the affiliation of a woman to her ancestral patronage denies her affiliation after her marriage. Buchi has mastered in narrating the pathetic situation of African women who neither have access to their native community nor the "safety" of the colonizer.

Though the women work hard and come across many hardships to raise their children, the success of the children doesn't bring any accomplishment to them. In Nnu Ego's case, even though two of her children have successful life after settling in abroad they are confronting her during her last days by not giving any comfort her. In native communities it is believed that the mother would receive some kind of comfort during their last for raising her children but after invasion of colonizers the tradition of taking care of the aged parents has been weakened. In the novel "Joys of Motherhood" the protagonist Nnu Ego's children fails to give back the love and care which she expects in her lonely world. The story of Nnu Egos can be seen as representation of the native people's life. In fact, the native people don't realize that when the woman doesn't receive the comfort during the last days the deceased spirit cannot be considered as a happy spirit

3. Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta rather than portraying women simply as a mother who lives in secure Africa, she portrayed women ignored by or inaccessible by African male writers. According to Marie "Male writers lack the empathy, sympathy, and consciousness of their female psyche. They do not know what it means to be an African woman in African society" [1]. The reader can feel Nnu Ego the protagonist's longing for motherhood in the beginning when she was denied by her first husband for not conceiving later, after begetting seven children she doesn't enjoy the "motherhood" she was longing during her last days. Buchi describes the predicaments of motherhood and the heart-rending death of the protagonist. Nnu Ego faces all sorts of obstacles at all stages of her life, she strongly believed in one thing that the joy of motherhood is to give everything to the children so that during her old age the children give back joy and love. In contrast, Buchi presents the darker side, or we shall say the bitter truth, despite all the hardships the protagonist faces she is neglected by her husband, children and the society. Katherine Frank, "beautifully" condemns the act of her children as ".....millstones around the mother's neck, or as greedy insects who suck out and drain her life's blood".[2]

Buchi Emecheta presented the novel from the female point of view that definitely outfits the theme and keeps the reader aware of the condition of African woman. She elaborately presents the dishonored position of the woman in the patriarchal African society and succeeds in that through the characterization. As Ernest N. Emenyonu comments, "The Joys of Motherhood is not only an ironic commentary, on the destinies of African womanhood, it is also a parable on the misplaced values of life in general, in Africa as elsewhere".[3] Buchi Emecheta through her novel teaches us a lot about the perilous life of native people in the colonized context and the novel Joys of Motherhood let the readers to know about such experiences of the African women.

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