

Effects of Gender Bigotry: A Reading of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract:

Preference or prejudice towards one gender over the other maybe manifested in many ways, both subtle and obvious. Buchi Emecheta's novels are an exploration of what it means to be a woman and a mother in the rapidly evolving societies. It also composes of the most exhaustive and a moving portrayal of African woman. The entire realm of African female experience can be found in her books, from birth to death, with all the intermediate steps of childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood. This paper examines the traditional and colonial roots of gender inequality in the African society and how motherhood creates a form of enslavement through responsibilities as a mother. She often criticises the authoritarian Ibos who take advantage of male privilege, citing it as a justification for the oppression of their wives and daughters. Ibo community views the girls as having little worth, valuable only for their bride price and they have no other worth beyond the production of the next generation. Women are often looked as a machine for producing and rearing male heirs. This paper also focuses on the two different kinds of struggle undergone by Nnu Ego in her life and how the balance of power is tilted towards men and how this affects the life of women.

Keywords:

Adolescence, Bride price, Inequality, Marriage, Male Privilege, Motherhood, Oppression and Prejudice.

Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) is one among the African women writers who talks about the conditions of women living both in their home continent and abroad. All her novels are an exploration of what it means to be a woman and a mother in the rapidly evolving societies. Some of her novels mirror her own experience. Preference or prejudice towards one gender over the other may be manifested in many ways. Emecheta's novels are an exploration of what it means to be a woman and a mother in the rapidly evolving societies. Her novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant in African woman. The entire realm of African female experience can be found in her novels, from birth to death, with all the intermediate steps of childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood. Emecheta's historical and social breadth in her novels are equally impressive, covering a period from 1910 to the present and moving from the small Nigerian village of Ibuza to a westernized, urban Lagos in almost all the novels. Only in the *Second-class Citizen* the destination is London, the promised land of Emecheta's Adah.

Apart from the largeness in scope, Emecheta's account of African womanhood is an unapologetically feminist one. She exposes and repudiates the feminine stereotypes of male writers such as Achebe, Amadi and others and reveals the dark underside of psychological and physical toll on women such as arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and

childbirth and widowhood. The female figures who are burdened with symbolic cargo in male-authored African fiction are brought centre stage by Emecheta through her novels.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta examines the traditional and colonial roots of gender inequality in the African society. The title of the novel brings the portrait of the joys and rewards of motherhood, but the novel on the other hand tells about the sufferings of Nnu Ego, the protagonist and other women in the Ibo community. In this novel motherhood creates a form of enslavement through responsibilities as a mother. Emecheta in most of her novels talks about culture called for strict regulation of women's roles and a proscribed subservience to men. In her novels, Emecheta often criticises the authoritarian Ibos who take advantage of male privilege, citing it as a justification for the oppression of their wives and daughters. In the Ibo community women can pursue only one life path; that they should produce children, preferably boys. Society views the girls as having little worth, valuable only for their bride price and they have no other worth beyond the production of the next generation. Women are looked as a machine for producing and rearing male heirs.

In the Ibo community if the children bring honour to fulfil their duty to their family, the pride goes to the father and when the children fail to do so, the society makes it as a mistake of their mother's. Nnu Ego is a traditional woman living in a rapidly changing world. She expects to become a wife and mother working right from her youth for her family, but being taken care of and honoured by her children in her old age. However, her children grow up in the city of Lagos with very different values than she expects.

As a woman, Nnu Ego has to face two different kinds of struggle. At first, she fears that she cannot get a child and later she is blessed with many children when she struggles to make both her ends meet. For Nnu Ego her life, hope and identity depend on her ability to bear children. After getting married to Amatokwu, she fails to conceive in the first month, which seriously affects the rest of her life. Thus she becomes emotionally unstable and is beaten up regularly and finally gets rejected by her husband. Nnu Ego is overjoyed when she discovers that she is capable of conceiving after getting married for the second time to Nnaife and she is able to enjoy a brief period of pregnancy and motherhood. This new ability of her not only satisfies her mental longings and social expectations, but it provides her with the only form of feminine identity and she is permitted to be called 'mother'. However in Ibo community motherhood is considered as a duty to the father and husband.

Nnu ego has long accepted the patriarchal attitude that sons are more valuable than daughters and feels ashamed when she bears twin girls. Nnu Ego too accepted, that boys should get more education than girls. She always insists her daughters that they must work to raise money in order to educate their brothers and she also describes the reward of her daughters thus: "But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you" (197).

Both Nnu Ego and her husband Nnaife spend most of their money for educating their eldest son Oshia and the remaining money is spent upon to educate their second son Adim. They never thought about their daughters and looked at them as an investment as they would bring good bride price at the time of their marriage, which would be more useful for their brother's education. As in the words of Adankwo: ". . .if you are ever in bad patch with the boys' education, don't forget that girls grow quickly; the twins' bride prices will help out" (178).

Emecheta believes that preference for a male child over a female child is a major obstacle in the way of the emancipation of the African woman. Oshia grows up with a sense of superiority knowing that he was 'worth more than ten girls according to the African people. Oshia also refuses to fetch water for his stepmother Adaku emphasizing that he is a boy. He says, "I'm not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's job" (142-43). Even when Nnaife's new wife Adaku lost her just born boy child, she feels sorry for that, and while talking with Nnu Ego she says:

'Do you remember how sad you were, senior wife, when you had the two girls? You would have been happier if they had turned out to be boys instead. Now I had a boy my only son and he did not live. O God, why did you not take one of the girls and leave me with my male child? My only man child.' 'But you still have Dumbi,' Oshia said uninvited. 'You are worth more than ten Dumbis,' Adaku snapped at the boy. (142)

Thus Emecheta shows how women unwittingly condition their sons with a sense of male superiority and helps to perpetuate male dominance. Unwittingly Nnu Ego prepares her daughters to follow her footsteps by training them in housework and discontinuing their studies and reminding them again and again that they are different from their brothers. She educates her children to follow the same pattern of miserable existence she desperately needs to escape herself. As Smith points out, "How Nnu Ego's attitude, especially towards her daughters is developed in contrast to that of Adaku, her co-wife, who was prepared to consider more radical means of securing some degree of economic freedom in order to achieve greater personal autonomy in a male-centered society" (qtd. in Muanching 84).

At last Nnu Ego's three children Oshia, Adim and Kehinde gets the benefits of education and they pursue their own life. They are not ready to help their parents who are in poverty. Nnu Ego thinks about all her sacrifices which she has made for the sake of her children. Both Nnu Ego and her mother Ona bring down in the end through their children especially boy child, for Ona dies in childbirth and Nnu Ego dies abandoned by her educated sons who are studying overseas and abandoned by her senses. As Emecheta remarks, "She dies there with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her" (253).

In the novel Emecheta also divulges how Nnu Ego suffers because of the culture of the West African society which permits their men having multiple wives. Emecheta always defends polygamy, or multiple marriages. The impact of polygamy on the women psyche is explored throughout the novel. Nnu Ego has to suppress her own feelings and sentiments and welcome Adaku, Nnaife's diseased brother's wife, whom he has inherited according to his custom. Nnaife continues to take advantage of the provision granted by tradition to men by taking more wives. For him women were there to indulge his needs. He goes to Ibuza and made Adankwo, the senior wife of Nnaife's dead brother pregnant. He returns with a new wife Okpo, a young girl of sixteen. As a senior wife, Nnu Ego is expected to endure the humiliation of Adaku. Nnu Ego is not given any respect in her family. She is expected to calmly bear all the insults and suffering given by her husband. In Ibo community the worth of a woman is judged by the number of male child she has. When there comes a clash between Nnu Ego and Adaku, Adaku calls her family friends Ubani and Nwakasour. They judge the value of a woman by the number of male child they have. It is clearly Nnu Ego's fault but the men sided with Nnu Ego because she had sons. The case is stated to them, but instead of

laying the whole blame on Nnu Ego, they make Adaku feel that since she had no son for the family she had no rights to complain about her senior's conduct. Nwaka says, "I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. Though Ibuza men admired a hardworking and rich woman, her life was nothing if she left no male children behind when she had gone to inherit the wealth, children who were her own flesh and blood" (185-86).

Nnaife's attitude towards his daughters, exemplified the inferior status of daughters in the society. When Nnu Ego gave birth to her first set of twin daughters Nnaife said that: "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better?" (141). He never paid much attention to his daughters. As Emecheta remarks, "For the first time, Nnaife really looked at Kehinde. He never had much time for his daughters. One planned for and had sleepless nights over boys: girls on the other hand, were to help in running the house and be disposed of as soon as possible, unless one was asking for trouble" (230).

When Kehinde runs away with a Yoruba man, Nnaife shifts all the blame on Nnu Ego. Thus Emecheta brings out the unfairness of the tradition and the double standard of men where, when the children were good they belonged to the father, when they were bad, they belonged to the mother. However in the new economic and social order of Lagos, both men and women's role change. Nnu Ego expects for the day when the individual woman will be given prime importance rather than the lives of sacrifice. In the Ibo community women are seen as tools that simply extent men's will. The traditional Ibo family deny the personal fulfilment and self-realisation for the woman as they are expected to do their duties.

Palmer describes Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* as: "the first work in African literature to present the female point of view in registering its disgust at male chauvinism and patriarchy's satisfaction with an unfair or oppressive system towards women" (28). Emecheta has given a realistic portrayal of the subjugation of women in her society. She portrays how the balance of power is tilted towards men and how this affects the life of women. Many African women whether they are feminist or not, cannot deny that women face mistreatment within their social context and cultural institutions. What is needed, is to redefine notions of respect for tradition, cultural loyalty etc. in ways that do not give the license to subjugate women or privilege men over women.

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