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Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*: African Feminism in Context

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Abstract:

Buchi Emecheta views her writing as, “the release of all my anger, all my bitterness, my disappointments, my questions and also my joys.” She uses her stories to teach morals, to entertain and to instruct she also brings to her writings the Igbo qualities of vividness, economy and directness. She speaks for the marginalized woman. Strong and conscientious, she is a woman who has never forgotten her roots and this she clearly portrays in her novels.

In her fiction, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980), Buchi Emecheta like other female writers writes about how to resist the male dominance by revealing the male characters of irresponsible husbands, exploitative in-laws, women oppression, and unnecessary dominance of the husband over his wife and all other sexist issues relevant to men's world. Emecheta shows her concern for the condition of African women within the African Social, Political, Economic and Cultural spheres to reveal the over dominance of men. She does this, not only using Western ideas of feminism but by employing also the African traditions. In the present paper I attempt to focus on how Emecheta has raised a distinct voice in the African canon by exploring the pain and sorrow of an African woman and mother.

Keywords: marginalized woman, male dominance, African women, feminism.

Feminism as an ideology, found a fertile ground in Africa in the 1960's as it provided the opportunity of re-evaluating attitudes and disbelieves about women in the African Community. African Feminism is a move away from the Western feminism; it has an accomodationist perception which assents that both men and women have roles to play in the society. Feminism in Africa has undergone a lot of metamorphosis and has assumed variegated forms and no-men-clatures such as feminism, womanish, motherism, sexism, stiwanism, etc. With regards to their womanist theory Joseph (2003) cites ModupeKolawole (1998), thus: “Womanism is not a solipsistic theory but one that recognizes and responds to the yearnings of many women who have problems with appropriating feminism in spite of the diversities. It increases black women's options of self-conceptualization”. However, according to Alice Walker (1983), Womanism means mature, responsible, courageous behaviour of adult females, as opposed to the frivolous behaviour of the gender.

However, in Africa today especially Nigeria, women have gone into professions that have once been regarded as exclusively for men unlike initially, when the literary scene was dominated for decade by male writers like Amos Tutoola, Chinua Achebe etc. until Florence Nwapa made a sudden break. In Nigeria feminism, is viewed from various angles, for

example when examined from the view of religion, it preaches gender equality which is considered to be unnatural judging from the fact that God pronounced the man as head over his wife which pre-supposes that women are expected to be subservient to men. The present paper seeks to study the eminent African author Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* as a feminist text exploring and interrogating the voice of female gender at different levels in the society and the way their male counterpart treat them.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* deals with the portrayal of the African woman focusing more in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The main characters in her novels show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. Her major concern in her works is the plight of the rural and urban women whose efforts to satisfy the man are trivialized. The oppression and rigours of motherhood of the female folk clearly portrayed in Buchi Emecheta shows how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way by which to define femininity. Other themes of *The Joys of Motherhood* include marriage, polygamy, superstition, exploitation, discrimination, childless marriage etc. The author attempts to raise the status of the African women from just being baby producing machine/factory and housewife, to an independent happy woman. *The Joys of Motherhood* is set in a time of great political and economic change in Nigeria. It is in this novel that Emecheta's main character defines validity of her womanhood solely by the success of her children. The chapters' titles, "the mother", "the mother's mother", "the mother's early life", "first shock of motherhood", follow the highs and lows of the heroine, Nnu Ego's destiny. The novel focuses on Nnu Ego's journey of life which is centred on her as a mother. Buchi Emecheta also shows movement of women from traditional African world to a very different westernized world. This is seen in the dehumanization of women in a male-dominated society. In the first place, Ona, the daughter of Obi Umunna, is used as an animal of sacrifice by her father to bring back the honour, her father Obi Umunna has suffered as a result of his inability to have a male child to continue his lineage. The young woman is therefore denied the honour of being a married woman because her father desires to get a son through her. No wonder Ona at her death bed urges Agbadi to ensure that Nnu Ego should marry a man of her choice. Agbadi does not stick to his promise to Ona. He still sticks to the tradition of finding a husband for Nnu Ego even after her failure to get children for Amatokwu.

Agbadi goes ahead to choose another man for her, a man she has not set her eyes on. This nearly breaks down her second marriage but for the fact that she desperately needs a child. Nnaife loses his job and abdicates his responsibility to the family in the hand of his wife who ultimately sacrifices her life for this responsibility. Nnaife abandons the keep of the children to his wife and goes about drinking wine. Even when he returns from Fernandopo, instead of concentrating on the upbringing of the children, he continues to multiply the number of his woman and consequently begets more children. Adaku stays in the system but soon gets dissatisfied with it and absconds. Nnu ego, for the sake of tradition submits herself for the exploitation, of her body and soul, receives blames of her husband for their ill-behaviour, denies communication by her sons, condemns by the Ibuza society and dies without any male associate nor does she enjoy any serious association with her female folk except the casual acquaintance with Cordelia, Mama abbey and Iyawo Itsekiri. Another

example is the use of the black man's cheap labour for the luxury of the white man. Dr.Meers is exploitative; it is equally exploitative to use force to recruit the African labourers into the British Army and sent them to far away Indies with just a large amount of money.

The society cherishes and welcomes the arrival of male children and practices preferential treatment in favour of the boys. A woman who continues to have female children is denied her role as a woman in the family. We witness this in the Amatokwu's family when Nnu Ego becomes relegated as a mere house maid. She takes care of the son of the second wife while the new wife goes to sleep with her husband. Adaku remains unhappy throughout her days with Nnaife because she has two daughters. Above that she receives series of insults from male folks for not bearing sons for Nnaife. Nnaife abandons and neglects all the female children of both Nnu ego and Adaku, he does not even give them names as he does to the boys. This accounts for the reason why the first twins' names are in Yoruba names given them by their mother. Ironically enough, he desires to have the bride price as their father. They send the boys to study in better schools. Adaku realizes this on time and sends her daughters to good school. Nnu Ego realizes this very late and cannot remedy the situation. She laments that "my only regret is that I did not have enough money to let the girls stay at school" (213-214).

Nnu Ego's hardship begins from the time Nnaife loses his job. He lacks foresight to look for another job when Ubani and others have been searching for alternative Jobs. Thus the families' responsibility falls on Nnu Ego. She begins to wander from Yaba to Marina in Lagos to look for sailors where she can buy cartons of cigarette at a cheaper price. Nnaife goes to Fernandopo, she falls into hardship catering for her pregnancy and the little boy Oshia. She suffers malnutrition and subsequently kwashiorkor. Nnaife's forced recruitment into the military spell serious doom on Nnu Ego who suffers loneliness and deprivation in the upbringing of her children. The decision of offering family men the casual job of cutting grass without making them permanent staff and with a meagre income of five pounds a month is a measure of hardship. This is seen in the effort Nnu Ego makes to bring up her children to please her husband. The father of these children receives praises when they are brought up properly while the mother is blamed for their wrong doing. Again the sons decision to stay away in the white men's country without any effort to remember their mother the sufferer even in writing for, she does not need their money, frustrates Nnu Ego and consequently leads to her untimely death. There is also frustration on the part of a mother of many children whose sons refuse to write to. It is the fathers who choose husbands for their daughters. Agbadi chose Amatokwu for Nnu Ego when that marriage failed, he chose Nnaife. The marriage is by proxy: Nnu Ego had never seen the man, but a good daughter would not reject the man chosen by her father. Like a good daughter Nnu Ego acquiescence to domesticity and wifehood to please her father, living with a man she loathes. When Nnaife tries to exercise the same right over Kehinde, he reasons with her:

You don't have to like your husband ... you don't even have to know him in advance you just marry him. You are lucky you know what job he is in. Things have changed before you might not have known him at all (204).

Emecheta attacks polygamy as a cultural practice. Agbadi shows insensitivity to the plight of his wives, who had anxiously watched him during his dangerous illness by dallying with his mistress immediately he showed sign of recovery. It is this irresponsibility that leads to the death of his first wife, Agunwa, Amataokwu is more callous than Agbadi. When he discovers Nnu Ego's barrenness, he tells her brutally to make way for a new wife and demeans her to the level of an unpaid labourer. When the new wife gives birth to a son, he prefers her to Nnu Ego and denies her the later of her conjugal rights. Even the undignified Nnaife inherits his brother's widow and brings her to share the one room accommodation where he is with his wife and many children. When Adaku found the condition unbearable and left, he salvages his masculine ego by inheriting Adankwo and marrying Okpo a sixteen year-old girl even though he does not have the means to cater for such a large family. It appears that society condones any misbehaviour by the male, but when children misbehave, it is their mother's fault.

Not to have a child in marriage is considered the greatest calamity that can befall a woman. She is supposed to be a virgin to guarantee fertility: "When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive" (31). Childlessness is considered, the woman's problem and hers alone. Amataokwu vindicates his manhood by marrying another wife. Her conception and delivery are testimonies of his fertility and his marriage to Nnu Ego collapsed because she was considered barren.

The Joys of Motherhood treats the theme of marriage in the contemporary Nigerian society as seen from the point of view of a woman brought up to accept the values and norms of a traditional society in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It explores the experiences of all the female characters in the novel focusing more on Nnu Ego as regarding marriage and the aspect of giving birth to children: the major role of married women in a typical African society. Polygamy also shows the vulnerability of women and their dependence on men as portrayed by Nwokacha Agbadi's wives. The Igbo tradition condones the use and practice of polygamy. A man is free to marry as many wives as he can take care of (and as many concubines as he wants) and they are all expected to remain faithful to the man, as dictated by the tenets of the Igbo religious beliefs. Many men abuse this injunction; they only marry women just to assert their superiority over them. Polygamy takes into consideration little of the women's inner most feelings. Furthermore, the social situation confirms what Catherine O. Acholonu describes as "the traditional taboos and nest that mostly and eventually help to propel male chauvinism (7)." The female character like Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* is made dynamic; conscious of her personal and communal responsibilities but her dreams is what will pave the way towards self-fulfilment. It is noted that traditional education of women in Africa teaches a girl to consider herself primarily as a wife and a mother. Her social significance can only be gained through the fulfilment of her role as a good daughter and also as a good wife, to obey her, the one carrying the responsibility of the man. Nnu Ego enjoys the joys of her motherhood in poverty with a husband fighting at the war front and with little money to sustain her and her five children. But she still derived joy from seeing her children and having hoped and believed that the children will soon grow up and be able to take proper care of her.

Buchi Emecheta's message is not for women alone but for the society at large. *The Joys of Motherhood* is a story of fluctuating fortunes, of changes, of unfulfilled dreams and woman's determination to survive in the tidal waves of misfortunes and uncertainties. Through her protagonist Emecheta highlights the condition of women in the traditional African setting in relation to the modern Africa. She depicts the way African women are victimized, segregated, marginalized and discriminated against and by their male counterpart. She reveals the handicap nature of the rural women towards self-actualization.

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