Chapter 1

Our Mothers: A study of motherhood and its relevance in the Ibo society
Motherhood has been interpreted severally in the Ibo culture. There has been a constant engagement by both male and female authors to discuss the importance and relevance of the mother in the society. The concept of motherhood is far more complex than mere female reproductivity. It takes on much larger dimensions where it translates into the determining factor of the woman’s position in the society. Motherhood and mothering are also woven into the emerging feminist rubric of Black Africa as the African woman is said to be what she is because of her children and not in spite of them. The mother enjoys a privileged social position particularly if she is the mother of sons. Though discriminated against both as a daughter and a wife, as a mother she gains a certain privileging and therefore motherhood becomes aspirational.

In the queer reverse sexism that afflicts all patrilineal societies, the woman who is neglected and abused all her life is suddenly accorded some value when she begets sons. So much so that she is known by her son’s patronym. The woman’s position is very complex- she is said to be complete only when she performs the holiest of her marital duties by begetting the heir to her husband. In spite of its strong patrilineal base, the mother culture of the Ibos is seen in every walk of life. The mother tells stories which are the base of the parallel oral culture which has existed since time immemorial. Even Achebe, in his otherwise masculine discourse in *Things Fall Apart* mentions the stories told by the women though he does not develop the theme further. Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* concentrates on what Achebe leaves out and therefore hers is a story of the women, told in their own voices. Another interesting phenomenon lies in the multiplicity of motherhood and mothering. A woman living in the same compound or belonging to the same age group as the child’s biological mother is likely to be addressed as ‘mother’ by the child. In fact, if a woman has no children of her own but is devoted to the children in her husband’s compound, she is said to be a good woman. A very common Ibo name is “Nneka” or the mother is “supreme”.

Motherhood therefore takes on much larger dimensions where it has often been collated with the Mother Africa image. In the process of nation building and instilling pride in one’s nation, the poets and writers have often created a picture of the earth as mother. It
is the very essence of the Negritude movement. The embodiment of Africa as a female and a mother is seen in male authored writing. She is often stereotyped as a beautiful and strong woman ready to sacrifice her all for her children. This trope has been used by writers of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Wole Soyinka’s stature and it features in prose and poetry alike. Although the idealization of African women is another phenomenon that occurs in much of the male-authored literary tradition, it is particularly evident in Negritude literature. Since the end of World War II, the collective efforts and creative output of the colonized world’s most aspiring male writers have been applauded. Although the term Negritude has yielded multiple definitions, it is commonly described as the acknowledgement of one’s African ancestry, and is associated with a tremendous sense of pride and renewed self-respect. Leopold Sedar Senghor- one of its chief pioneers- defines Negritude as the “sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world” (Stratton 40). Sparked by both the Harlem Renaissance and the “literary activities in the Antilles,” the Negritude poets anchored their works in issues concerning colonization, slavery, self-awareness, and religious institutions such as Christianity. (Schipper 28) Although this “cultural and intellectual movement” mainly provided a means of deconstructing the colonial images of the “dark continent” and its “savage natives,” another element of this movement did indeed exist. Unfortunately, the Negritude author’s seemingly positive portrayal of African women “operated against the [latter’s] interests” (Stratton 40).

One such depiction would be that of “Mother Africa”- a trope that is largely definitive of Negritude poetry. According to Irene D’Almeida, author of *Francophone African Women Writers*, this image is one in which “Africa is compared to a nurturing mother and the African mother is given the proportion of the whole continent” (91). Consequently, African women and their experiences are idealized- transforming them into “mythical and symbolic figures” (D’Almeida 8). Ba strongly opposes this element of the male-authored tradition declaring, “We can no longer be satisfied with the nostalgic songs dedicated to the African mother, and confused by men in their anxieties with Mother Africa” (D’Almeida 8). Although the exaltation of African women may have been the original intention fueling the creation of this image, the Negritude poets and other writers
who have evoked these images in their works, are being criticized for placing African women on fictional pedestals. For as D’Almeida suggests, “this notion. is far removed from the reality of women’s daily existence” (91). Nevertheless, the African continent is continually feminized—the female body likened to the African landscape—and as a result, women are disparaged once again. Stratton submits that the “Mother Africa” image must be examined within the context of female/male power relations. Her description of the elements of Negritude literature is as follows:

“The speaker is invariably male, a western-educated intellectual. The addressee is always a woman. He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio-political visions; her status is that of an aesthetic/sexual object. She takes the form either of a girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund, nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect at the same time as it pays tribute to her body.” (41).

**The importance of the mother in the Ibo society**

In traditional Ibo society, motherhood was greatly respected. Women were respectfully called “the trees that bear fruit,” because the tribe knew that without women to bear children, there would be no future for the clan. New mothers were greatly pampered, enjoying a month totally devoid of work after the birth of their child. The ideal number of children was seven, because seven meant completeness or perfection in the tribal culture. If a woman had more children she was considered exceptional. If a woman had ten children a celebratory ritual was held in her honour. After this ceremony, called igbu ewu ukwu, the woman was considered one of the blessed “queens of mothers” and gained great respect and status in the tribe.

“Nne” is mother. She emerges for the first time at the birth of her first child and her mother identity is tied to that experience. Conception establishes a state of possibility that is actualized upon the safe delivery of the child. Safe delivery is a requirement to women on the path of being a mother. The mother’s entire identity changes upon delivery. She is no longer called by her name but as the “mother of x,” where x is the name of her child. The birth of a child transforms the status of a wife. She moves from the subordinate
position of wife to the respected position of mother. Unlike in the nuclear family context, this exalted position is not juxtaposed to any other role but stands on its own. None of what fathers do approximate or can displace the status of mothers because motherhood is a very public experience and is an institution of unification.

All mothers have an usokwu. Every usokwu is a nodal point of power that derives not from the spiritual ofo (authority) of a mother’s husband but from her own natal family. It is the center of a child’s socialization activities. Motherhood is the core of usokwu formation and the seat of mothers’ power. The principle function of mothers is to grow the lineage. Children of the same mother bond together and define themselves as members of their mother’s usokwu. Being from ofu afo (literally, one womb) they are bound by ties of loyalty. Mother’s blood provides the cohesive glue that binds siblings.

The basis of a mother’s power is her provision of the critical organ that housed all children during their most vulnerable state of life. She willed them into being and sustained them through the gestational period. She ate for them, breathed for them, expelled their waste, and deployed her blood to work for them, all the while preserving their distinct identity. Regardless of whom they would later become in life (monarch or pauper), everyone traveled through the birth canal and was expelled through a mother’s vagina. For this reason, no one could be superior to mothers given that they were born by a mother. Indeed, everyone is a child before the mother and all other mothers. (Nzegwu, 15).

The ideology of motherhood constituted the basis for compelling obedience from everyone who gestated in the womb. The power of motherhood covered a range of activities that continued after birth of which the most important is feeding. Breast milk provides the first nourishment in life. Without it, no newborn child would survive into adulthood even though there may be an abundance of food in the community. Because early human life is tied to lactation milk, the mothers is said to possess the exclusive power of life and death over children. The fundamental nature of these tasks constituted the basis on which the mothers command allegiance from their children. The life-giving responsibilities established the moral parameters for belongingness and loyalty.
The core of the mother's power was oma (the maternal force or spirit in the shrine of mothers). Oma, encoded the maternal ideology and preserved omumu, the principle of reproduction. Omumu (reproductive power) belonged to daughters who activated the force by means of sacrificial offerings when they become wives or idigbe, or decided to procreate. Because omumu was based in the bloodline of mothers, and derived from their maternal line, it was outside the purview and control of husbands and/or fathers. Further reinforcing the genetic dominance of mothers is the oma that sets the terms of the deeper relational ties among siblings of the same mother. Possession of oma (the spirit of mothers) and the associated principle of omumu ensured that mothers have complete control of the psychic and physical conditions of their usokwu. On this reading, oma is a sacramental power, a force of unity that defines the boundary of humanness. Morality begins in our awareness of our relationship to the mother. This relationship coordinates the formation of interpersonal experiences that helps the child define him or herself in relation to others. Morality begins with the formation of an ego. Disloyalty to the mother or the breakage of the uterine ties of kinship is tantamount to destroying the last covenant that makes the Ibo community human. Mother’s force works by binding together umunne (children of the mother) on a moral scheme that compels them to act together to further the interest of their usokwu within the maximal lineage. (Nzegwu 16)

Influenced by the underlying patriarchal values of their epistemic scheme, British colonial anthropologists underemphasized the importance of mothers and the mother line of descent within so-called patrilineal families. Given their interpretive scheme they did not conceive that mothers had any powers over their children and conjugal unit, or that they could marry wives. Consequently, they failed to acknowledge the institution of motherhood and the fact that some umuada had their own autonomous marital units either within their own lineages or within a male husband’s lineage, and that they had full custody of the children of the union. These children may become full members of her own natal family or be assimilated by her marital family. The maternal line of descent added the kind of textured layers and wrinkles that made the attribution of patriliny to Ibo families very problematic. Unlike the European epistemic scheme that traces life back to the father and the first semen, the Igbo epistemic scheme traces life back to the womb.
This appeal to maternal cohesiveness alerts us to the pre-eminence of mothers over fathers in family formation. (Nzegwu 16)

However, because of the importance accorded to mothers, the society discriminated against women who could not become mothers. Motherhood was seen as aspirational for all women and very often women were chained to their children owing to their all sacrificing image as mothers. Motherhood, thus becomes a study of feminist concern as most women writers argue for obligatory motherhood while most male authors eulogize motherhood very often collating it with the Mother Africa image.

**The Gendered Perspective**

Motherhood or the role of the mother has been a site of feminist concern. In the introduction, it is discussed at length how African Womanism seeks to differentiate itself from the western concept of Feminism. The mother has been eulogized by the male authors and often subjected to stereotyping, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa argue for obligatory motherhood. Through their novels they show that to be a mother merely to fulfil a social obligation, the woman continues to remain unfulfilled mentally and physically.

The Negritude poetry celebrates the sexual female body as Africa becomes the sensual geographic span being mapped by the superior male gaze and poetically decoded by the male intellect. Nowhere in this is the woman shown to be fulfilled sexually or otherwise. Both Nwapa and Emecheta make a plea for the woman’s sexual fulfilment. Here, Emecheta borrows extensively from Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and shows the female body as the site of contention for power. According to Marie Umeh,

> Besides the novel’s (*The Joys of Motherhood*) preoccupation with Ibo societies making the female body a fetish for begetting sons, it is my contention that the book is also about female sexuality among the Ibuza Delta Ibo and by extension African women generally. Female sexual expressivity is taboo in Ibo society. Hence the author cloaks issues of female erotic and hedonistic experiences, and
their attendant sexual deprivation, in a number of semiotic codes. *The Joys of Motherhood* as a result is laced with cultural codes and feminist messages protesting the cultures outer oppression of women which results in their inner repressions and denial of female sexual desire, passion and fulfillment. (1996 190)

The Ibo society, like all patrilineal societies effaces female sexual desires and has devised several methods to control the female libido to prevent female rebellion, which is seen as complete aberration to traditional social rubric, there are several taboos for women. She is supposed to carry a moral albatross around her neck where indulgence in a sexual act is seen to be merely for the purpose of procreation. The traditional Ibo society has been known to practice cliterodectomy. Besides this women have been victims of rape, incest sexual deprivation, ostracisation, fear, humiliation and the psychological sexual binding of women. As Marie Umeh rightly sums it up, “Generally speaking, the only time a woman is regarded as being chaste and pure is when the sex act is performed by her husband for his recreation and for her procreation. The wife’s joy does not figure in the equation.” (1996 191)

Chastity and fertility are considered to be jewels possessed by a girl as Nnu Ego’s in-laws in *The Joys of Motherhood* come to thank her father because she is found to be “an unspoilt virgin”. (124). A barren woman is likened to a man and the village women single her out as the incomplete one.

The sexual codes by which the lives of Ibo women are governed are listed in order of importance: the glory of a woman is a man; a woman without a son is a failure; marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband’s lineage and the complete woman is the mother of healthy sons. These codes give voice to the historical repression of female sexuality in an African society. (Umeh 1996 190)

It is no doubt therefore that for women ‘plaisir’ to borrow Julia Kristeva’s term, is achieved only through happiness in marriage and motherhood. Both Emecheta and
Nwapa challenge this notion as both Nnu Ego and Efuru become mothers but it fails to provide them with mental and physical well-being. In Nnu Ego’s case, she is forced to live in abject penury because she has numerous children to support. Emecheta makes a case for the woman’s satisfaction mentally and physically. As Florence Stratton argues,

Who says mothers do not need plaisir? Who says sons and not Jouissance, make women complete? Who says children, not loving partners bring happiness to women? And who says the glory of a woman is a callous insensitive partner? More African writers need to delineate the pain and suffering of our women. If they do not or worse, if they are not allowed to, we will continue to live in a society where the odds are stacked against women, where one group will be allowed to explore life to the fullest and the “other” forced to pretend that sexual fulfilment is unimportant and sinful. In short there would be more “mad women in the attic”. It is therefore significant that madness, sickness and premature death are the metaphors for Emecheta’s mothers. (193)

To emphasise her point, Emecheta paints two very different kinds of women- Nnu Ego and her mother Ona. Ona is the quintessential pre colonial woman trying to assert her independence and trying to carve out a niche for herself in the essentially patriarchal world. Compared to her daughter, Ona seems to live on her own terms but she too succumbs to the pressure of patriarchy as all her life she has to be the boy her father never had. Though she loves Agbadi dearly she can not live with him as her father has not taken a bride price from him. While Ona is shown to be independent, Nnu Ego remains subservient to her husband’s and the society’s wishes. In the famous love scene between Ona and Agbadi, there is a long description of Agbadi’s pleasuring and Ona’s sheer enjoyment of the foreplay. Their mutual pleasure knows no bounds. Ona and Agbadi’s cries keep the whole compound awake. Interestingly Ona conceives on that very night while Agbadi’s senior wife breathes her last. Seeing Ona accepting Agbadi’s pleasuring as the most natural thing ever, his eldest wife realizes the futility of her existence. She who has known what it is to be a mother but has never known that the act...
is meant to be enjoyed. It is this insult to her feminine self that she takes to heart and which eventually results in her death.

Yet another interesting character in the *Joys of Motherhood* is Adaku, Nnu Ego’s co-wife. Eustace Palmer calls her “forerunner of women’s liberation in African literature”. (Stratton 198). Adaku, who is the mother of two daughters, is chided constantly for her inability to produce male heirs for her husband. Tired of being cloistered in their one room tenement, she opts out. She becomes a prostitute in order to be able to lead a better life and provide education to her daughters. Thus Adaku goes against the dictates of the society and provides for her daughters what Emecheta terms as the crux of female emancipation- education.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta delineates the pains of marital rape as Nnu Ego is subjected to her husband’s animal like passion but such is her desperation for a child, she chooses to give in and suffer, if it enables her to be a mother.

The mothers through their sacrifices build the sturdy bridges their daughters walk on. There is a dichotomy in the depiction of the village and the city life. The village provides for a more traditional base where the mother’s position is revered. Emecheta’s depiction of Ona as the emancipated one is partly grounded in reality and partly imaginary. Ona represents a certain kind of freedom which women in pre-colonial Nigeria enjoyed. Nwapa’s Efuru and Idu though living in the colonial period enjoy the love and respect accorded to women in traditional societies. But Emecheta’s Nnu Ego, trapped in the city life of Lagos suffers the double burden of colonialism and her baggage of the traditional values which she has grown up with. While Motherhood is accorded immense importance in the traditional societies, it is not the only thing women aspire for. Women are respected for their ability to trade and make money. Idu and Efuru, though childless, are respected in their societies for their goodness and their trading capabilities. Trapped in the brutal town of Lagos, Nnu Ego is bereft of the cushioning traditional societies provide. She dies a loner trapped in her obsessive desire for motherhood and the abject poverty she lives in. Nwapa’s writing is situated outside the conventional male narrative
history. She does not engage with public displays of patriarchal authority described by the male writers. On the contrary, her narrative looks inwards, concentrating on the domestic and commenting on the politics of intimacy. It would be reductive to say that Nwapa writes merely about women. Her narrative is indeed “a highly verbalized collective women’s biography.” (Nasta 200) But it is not just about women and their “small talk” that she talks about. Her women perform several roles- they are actors, commentators, decision makers and unofficial jurors in their communities. The multiplicity of female voices which creates the narrative renders Efuru and Idu in the literary map of Iboland. According to Boehmer, “what distinguishes her (Nwapa’s) writing from others in the Ibo school are the ways in which she has used choric language to enable and empower her representation, creating the effect of a woman’s verbal presence within her text while bringing home her subject matter by evoking the vocality of women’s everyday existence”. (Nasta 200)

*Efuru* and *Idu* have a common theme- they both discuss the importance of motherhood in the traditional society. The novels are named after the central women protagonists. By empowering her women characters, Nwapa crafts “her story” as opposed to the masculine world depicted by her contemporary Ibo writers, Achebe and Amadi. Both the novels are set in the traditional Ibo village. The White man’s language and his religion have made inroads into the village world but the village life continues unabated with the age old traditional values co-existing with the White man’s school and his teachings. It is a world where the dibia and the doctor co-exist. Unlike Achebe, the clash of cultures is not the focal point here. Nwapa’s novels give more importance to the daily trajectories of the everyday lives of the Ibo women. The narrative is constructed of dialogues. It is through these voices of women that the plot is unfolded. This verbal representation of the women underlines the female bonding and accentuates their power as the doer and not merely an observer in the world they inhabit. There is an acceptance and acquiescence of the patriarchal values and discourse but now and then the female autonomy is asserted. This is evident in the theme as well, as both the central protagonists Efuru and Idu are childless. They aspire and agonise for a child. Eventually they do conceive but their worth in the society is not judged by their mere ability to be mothers. They stand out as
exemplary women who function from within the patriarchal confines but are respected for being good human beings. Nwapa’s heroines live and function within the patriarchal parameters, yet they are seen to inhabit a world which is outside this domain. It is when women take on religious powers they transgress their sexual roles and redefine a space for themselves. Efuru dreams of the water goddess Uhamiri. In her dreams she becomes one with the goddess in sense it renders her childlessness fruitful as all Uhamiri’s devotees are infertile. It is also a great honour to be chosen as her devotee.

Therefore it can be argued that Nwapa creates a matrifocal standpoint in the otherwise male rendition of the Nationalist discourse. In the saga of colonialism and the ensuing freedom movements, women have often been relegated to the background. Stereotyped in the mother country image, the story of the real woman and her travails has been lost.

Through recreating a sense of fullness of the Ibo women’s lives during the time of colonization, Nwapa begins to chart out the neglected gender dimension in the grand narrative of Nationalist historical literature as told by the male writers. She questions, if only implicitly the gender bound space-time coordinates of that narrative. More specifically even than this, she delivers her riposte to a male dominated Nationalist tradition and its iconography of womanhood by making available for her woman characters roles and symbols of identity which diverge from the mother stereotype. Nwapa’s women characters are concerned about bearing children and being good mothers, yet their lives are not defined solely through their maternal function. (Nasta 18)

In the discourse of Nationalism Nwapa deliberately chooses to ignore the “big” political imbroglios. The mothers of Africa are not mere caricatures. They are real. They have voices, aspirations, anger and a zest for life. They are as much the subjects of communal history as their nationalist sons. Colonialism is doubly harsh on the women.
Motherism

Catherine Obianuju Acholonu has coined the term “Motherism” to provide an African alternative to Western feminism. She writes:

An Afrocentric feminist theory, therefore, must be anchored on the matrix of motherhood which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa’s role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature (especially women's writing), African culture, African psychology, oral traditions, and empirical philosophy. Africa’s alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture.

According to Acholonu, Motherism is a multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavour. Cooperation with Nature is paramount to Motherism and the task of the Motherist is that of healing and protecting the natural cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society, and the environment. Therefore the Motherist must be a humanist, a healer, a co-creator with God and nature, and an environmentalist. Motherism comes across as an essentialist theory which encompasses Ecofeminism with a humanistic approach. Acholonu’s humanism encompasses all men and women. She pleads for the case of women, arguing for female leadership in Africa. According to her, the continent has failed to make the required progress as women have been denied their chance to be at the helm of affairs. According to Acholonu,

No nation can survive without the full participation of its womenfolk at every level of life and in all areas of human endeavor. It is time for every African nation, indeed every nation of the world, to make full use of its women potentials.
The woman is the spiritual base of every family, community and nation. When women and men work together in partnership and mutual respect the equation of life is balanced and order is the result. Africa's leadership as seen from many African nations has been one-legged. A nation that excludes one vital half of its population, namely the women potentials, from its leadership, is a motherless nation, an amputee, a one-eyed being, an untamed horse. Because of the absence of women at the highest levels of leadership in Africa, democracy has continuously been still-born in all African nations, because the all-men (non-motherist) leadership has gone down the pages of history as colossal failures. African nations are waiting for the women presidents, vice-presidents and women prime ministers working together with Motherist men to steer them into a purposeful leadership devoid of tyranny. A Motherist leader must see to it that the natural balance of opposites, of male/female cooperation, is established at all levels of leadership in every African nation. This is a challenge for African men, who must realize the need to work together with women rather than force them into opposition and encourage gender warfare.

Motherism as a concept seems flawed as it is too utopic. It does not deal with the real lives of women. It does not even address the issues common to most women. Both Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta look at motherhood as a lived reality. Their concern stems from the fact that while motherhood promises to elevate the status of women, in real life it enslaves them, as is the case of Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nwapa's world explores motherhood as a social concern. Interestingly, her protagonists suffer the pangs of childlessness but instead of giving in to social pressures, they emerge stronger for it. Both Idu and Efuru are not known because of their children but because of who they are. Nwapa's novels are in keeping with the Ugwuta tradition of having strong women figures who redefine the traditional concept of womanhood.
The Ugwuta women

The Ugwuta women were known for their privileged position in the society. Nwapa’s women characterize the spirit of the Ugwuta women. Ugwuta is the setting of four of Nwapa’s novels – *Efuru, Idu, Never Again* and *The Lake Goddess*. It is among the few towns of Iboland where the women are at the helm of affairs. According to Marie Umeh, “It is only in Ugwuta that Nigerian women will break and share the prestigious kola nut and the men will eat.” (1998 45) The prominent place accorded to women stems from the women’s role in the palm produce state of the United African Company (UAC) which was established by the British in 1889. Ugwuta women were the first group of people to buy and sell the British products such as biscuits, pots, clothes and tobacco along with palm kernels. The Ugwuta men, primarily farmers were wary of trading with the British. The women were more self reliant. Nwapa’s women are therefore characterized by their ability to make money and be self reliant and strong. Commenting on the formidable Ugwuta women Umeh writes,

Before the advent of Christianity/ Westernization in Iboland, Ugwuta women made their mark in the society as verbal wordsmiths as well as wealthy traders. The local artists were notable for telling moonlight stories, educating children, and entertaining the community through the medium of proverbs, riddles, folktales, songs, chants and dance, as well as singing praise songs at traditional marriage, birth and burial ceremonies. In interviews with countless journalists an scholars, Flora Nwapa insists that her literary imagination and creativity were sparked by the women in her grandparent’s village, where she often spent her holidays and for the first time heard the story of Mammywater. Additionally in some interviews she says that as a child she was an avid listener to a lot of moonlight stories told in Ugwuta. (1998 46)

It is this extremely positive attitude to womanhood that Nwapa chooses to celebrate. She couples it with her vision of Mammywater – the invincible lake Goddess to give her
women that extra edge. Gay Willetnz celebrates her vision as Afracentrist. She defines Afracentrism as:

Afracentrism as a women centered affective theory is grounded in the socio historical realities of women’s experience, hinging on women’s major role in orally transmitting the values and traditions of their cultures to future generations. By examining the dailyness and specificity of women’s lives, it resists some of the totalizing notions encoded in Afrocentricity. As a critical perspective, Afracentrism clarifies women’s role in the creation of a diaspora culture and what commonalities exist in female modes of production. (Umeh 1998 144)

Nwapa’s ouvre is multidimensional. She recreates the oral literary tradition through the speech patterns of her characters. While celebrating womanhood, she raises valid questions on the traditional roles relegated to the women. In Efuru, the childless Efuru sleeps soundly dreaming of the Lake Goddess. In Idu, the central protagonist chooses to die rather than live for her child. She prioritizes her love for her husband over her child. It is one of the many instances where Nwapa challenges the basic tenets of women’s role in the Ibo society by privileging the role of husband – wife over mother – child. Idu also defies the social norm of marrying her husband’s brother. She finds his overtures intolerable and finally chooses death to be with her husband rather than suffer the overtures of her insufferable brother in law. Nwapa encouraged women to think, read and write like women. She strove to ennoble and liberate women’s latent potentialities. In Nigeria, she saw the need to break long prevailing traditions, beliefs and practices requiring women to have wealth and happiness vicariously through their husbands. Her hope for the future is that women should have a rejuvenated sense of self – worth as human beings.

The Mother Africa trope

A common stereotyping of women in male writing is the figure of the Mother, which at times takes on larger dimensions as she is seen in the mould of the Nation. A favourite
trope of all Negritude poets is the Mother Africa trope where the virgin lands of Africa is likened to the woman’s body. One can argue that in trying to resurrect and recreate an Africa which is opposed to the colonizer’s view of the land, the male authors fall into yet another mode - of that of eulogizing the female form in the garb of the motherland and analyzing her anatomy with the male gaze which makes this kind of poetry sexually alluring.

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed in your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
And now, high up on the sun baked pass, at the heart of summer,
At the heart of noon, I come upon you my promised land.
And your beauty strikes me to the heart like a flash of an eagle. (Senghor 220)

This trope is deeply entrenched in the more visible literary tradition as is seen in the poetry and prose of Leopold Sedar Sanghor, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Here, Africa is read as Mother Africa - her body described in overtly sexual imagery which the male writer lovingly describes. The trope functions within several different dialogical systems. One of the major functions of this kind of writing has been to create a positive image of Africa as opposed to the negative myths perpetrated by the colonizers. As Senghor defines it “Negritude is the sum total of values of the civilization of the African world.” (Senghor 221). Senghor’s treatment of the Mother Africa trope counters the myth of the inherent inferiority of the Black race – a myth which provided the ideological rationale for European imperialism. Senghorian Negritude celebrates African culture, defining it as the heritage of African values, a pre colonial African essence as yet uncontaminated by Western culture. In Kofi Awonoo’s words “The chief celebrant of this heritage or the essence is the Black woman, the Earth Mother, the anthropomorphic symbol of primal sensuality.” (Stratton 40)
This kind of poetry is conventionally patriarchal. The speaker is invariably male, a Western educated intellectual. The addressee is a woman. She is pure physicality, always beautiful and often naked. According to Florence Stratton,

He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio political vision; her status is that of an aesthetic/ sexual object. She takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic or of a fecund nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect as the same time as it pays tribute to her body which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover. As embodying mother she gives the trope a name: the Mother Africa Trope. (41)

Stratton further categorizes the stereotypes found in this type of poetry. One strand of writing analogizes woman to the heritage of African values, an unchanging African essence. She calls it the 'pot of culture' strand. Examples of this kind are to be found in Okot P Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* and Ayi Kwey Armah’s *An African Fable*. The other kind tends to revise the Senghorian analogy, for woman now serves as an index of the state of the nation. This she calls “the sweep of history” strand to be seen in Ousmane Sembene’s ‘*La noire de*...’ Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* and Mongo Beti’s *Perpetua and the habit of unhappiness*. Wole soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* and Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* are text which incorporate both these strands. Frederick Jameson calls them “national allegories”. (46)

The neo colonial Africa is metaphorized as the ravished mother- raped and devastated. In Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*, Mother Africa is seen as a whore. A similar motif is seen in Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* and Mongo Beti’s *Perpetua and the habit of unhappiness*. Beti’s text too deals with the degradation of Africa and explores the male quest motif. On the literal level the protagonist Essola tries to explore the causes for his sister’s death, Perpetua. On a metaphoric level Essola’s quest is to discover what happened to his nation during the first decade after independence. Perpetua’s story is an allegory of that history.
Ngugi’s treatment of the Mother Africa trope has been much lauded by the feminists. His women are strong yet feminine, rural, with a strong scent of the Earth in them and forerunners in the struggle for freedom. In *Petals of Blood* we see the severest critique of the society where Wanja, through her story enacts the post colonial history of the nation. A schoolgirl during the Mau Mau struggle Wanja looks forward to a bright future. But that is not to be. She is seduced and impregnated by her father’s friend, a colonial sympathizer and left to fend for herself. Wanja delivers a dead child symptomatic of a mirthless independence for the nation. Post child birth Wanja inhabits two worlds- one as a prostitute where she is abused over and over again and the other in the rural countryside, where she dreams of a new beginning. The woman is identified with the nation and is ravaged, raped and looted. Her portrayal is larger than life and she is interpreted in obvious sexual terms. In Wanja’s own words, “If you have a cunt...instead of it being a source of pride, you are doomed to either marrying someone or else being a whore”. (Wa Thiong’o 146)

Whether it is Senghor’s Negritude or Ngugi’s Socialism- the Mother Africa trope seems to repeat itself. The woman is of the highest importance metaphorically but practically she is nothing. The woman bears the writer’s interpretation of history. In each case her pregnancy underlines a political allegory- the birth of Somalia, Cameroon or Kenya, as the case may be. It also exploits the male female power relation of domination and subordination. It also remains unclear whether the writers are concerned about the women’s position and the injustices they suffer or the metaphor remains limited to the fate of the nation which concerns these authors. Moreover, it also seems to perpetrate the myth created by the colonizers- of that of Africa being a stretch of dark virgin land, ripe and ready to be exploited by the enlightened foreigner. The female authors repudiate this argument completely as it is summed up in the words of Mariama Ba:

> The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice...in the family, in the institutions, in societies, in the street, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme...As women, we must work for our own future, we
must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women...room we will fight for with all our might. (James 66)

Mariama Ba summarises what Nwapa and Emecheta set out to do- to deglamorise motherhood and to contextualize it in terms of social norms and practices. To view motherhood as not merely a concept but a lived reality which the woman lives out with all her physical and mental self.

**Chinua Achebe’s delineation of women in *Things Fall Apart***

Motherhood as a theme has been dealt extensively by most African authors. One of the seminal Ibo writers, Achebe, in his much acclaimed text, *Things Fall Apart* discusses the role of the mother. Achebe concentrates purely on the male principle as he deals with his chief protagonist Okonkwo. But even in his seemingly masculine world, he does mention the feminine world although very often it remains in the realms of tokenism.

The reason for this discussion on Achebe’s depiction of mothers is to carry forward the argument that women may take a back seat in everything but as mothers they receive a certain privileging. It also throws into relief the male writers’ perspective on motherhood and mothering. In fact it has often been argued that Nwapa writes into Efuru what Achebe leaves out in *Things Fall Apart*. The reason for using Achebe is because he is considered to be one of the greatest African writers. Moreover he is an Ibo writing in English, a similarity he shares with both Nwapa and Emecheta. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is probably the most important piece of fiction to be created by an African writer. Over five million copies of the book have sold and it has been translated into thirty languages. C.L.Innes calls him “the father of the African novel in English”. (Stratton 226)

Achebe is a second generation Christian born to a father who was a catechist for the Church Missionary Society. His English education had exposed him to colonial fiction of which he is justifiably critical. So in a sense Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* consciously
sets out to answer the likes of Conrad and John Cary. He is consciously creating a new
medium in which he re-interprets the insider’s view of the culture he inhabits. Achebe
emphatically decries Conrad’s text when he says: “Conrad was a bloody racist. That this
simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism
against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely
undetected. Students of Heart of darkness will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not
so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude
and sickness…”(Ezenwa-Ohaeto 67)

However, interestingly, Achebe’s novel remains a saga of the man’s world concentrating
purely on Okonkwo’s achievements and his angst as his familiar world crumbles under
the colonial pressures. In describing the rise and fall of Okonkwo, Achebe traces the rich
culture of the Ibos but his women continue to remain in the fringes.

Part 1 of Things Fall Apart depicts the pre-colonial Ibo culture. Its aim is to restore
humanity to the colonized Iboland by depicting the rich cultural heritage of the Ibos. The
text begins with a description of Okonkwo and his bravery. In the second paragraph his
family is mentioned:

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time
Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush fire in the harmattan. He was
tall and huge, and his bushy eye brows and wide nose gave him a very
severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept,
he wives and children in the outhouses could hear him breathe. (3)

The physical distancing of the wives is evident right at the outset. Okonkwo did not start
off well in life as his father could barely provide for his family.

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have a start in life which
many young men had. He nether inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a
young wife. (13)
The wife therefore becomes a matter of possession which Okonkwo never allows his wives to forget.

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. (13)

Failure and weaknesses are likened by Okonkwo to be feminine traits which he despises. The first scene which depicts women is when the young Okonkwo, having inherited nothing from his father has come to borrow seed yams from his rich clansman Nwakibie. Before they settle down to business, the palm wine that Okonkwo has brought is shared among the men present. Nwakibie then calls in his wives:

Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the women folk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband’s titles which the first wife alone could wear. She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order and went away. (18 -19)

Eustace Palmer chooses this excerpt as a passage he particularly admires. He says, “...the reader gets a sense of the alien, but nevertheless strong, self assured and civilized society”. (Palmer 20) But where is the gendered African reader to locate herself? The servitude of the women is a given just as wives are treated as part of a man’s property. The richer a man is, the more wives he keeps. She can be passed from the older brother to the younger or from the father to the son. The text very definitely marginalizes the women so much so that Okonkwo’s wives do not even have names and are merely counted as part of his acquisition.
Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but had earned fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter tribal wars. (7)

It is only in chapter 4 that we get to know that his first wife is called Nwoye’s mother and the third Oijigo. Nwoye’s mother enjoys a privileged position because she is the mother of Okonkwo’s eldest son but her importance is undermined because Nwoye is considered effeminate. She is terrified of her husband and though horrified at what she knows is Ikemefuna’s impending death, is unable to prevent it. She is forced to send him with Okonkwo knowing fully well that she will never see the boy again. She loved Ikemefuna as a son but she is forced to bear his death stoically as it has been ordained by the village elders.

Ekwefi and Ezinma are two women who enjoy a somewhat privileged position in the novel. Their role is confined to revealing to the readers that though Okonkwo appears to be high handed and brusque, somewhere inside, he does harbour tender feelings. In effect, Ekwefi and Ezinma’s characters work towards redeeming Okonkwo in the eyes of the readers. Okonkwo realizes that Nwoye is effeminate but in Ezinma he is satisfied. In keeping with the social standards however he tries to make his children conform to their gender roles. Thus Nwoye is encouraged to be with men and listen to their violent stories while Ezinma is asked to sit properly “like a woman”. (40) Ekwefi’s character however is not developed- she runs away from her first husband because she is mesmerized by Okonkwo’s prowess in wrestling. But subsequently he almost beats her to death, which she now quietly accepts. Probably her inability to become a mother, as all her children die one after another kills her spirit but the text chooses to remain silent on the issue.

The only example of female potency is Chielo, the high priestess of Agbala. Chielo is said to be living two lives- as a widow who goes to the market and trades with Ekwefi and calls Ezinma her daughter; and as the high priestess of the very potent Agbala. Chielo is cast in the femme fatale mode as when she speaks or acts, she is in complete control. In
the Chielo - Ekwefi episode, when Cheilo carries Ezinma on her shoulders, all Okonkwo can do is to follow her. Okonkwo is rendered helpless and almost impotent as he can do nothing to prevent the divine role. Stratton argues that in order to restore Okonkwo’s virility at the end of this chapter, Ekwefi is shown to recall her first meeting with Okonkwo. “He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth.” (94) Shortly after that Achebe has no use for Chielo and she is never mentioned again. One can argue that where Okonkwo is rendered helpless, it is Ekwefi’s moment in the novel. The mother in her becomes all powerful and is ready to take on Chielo and fight to save her only offspring.

However, the final tribute to the mother comes from Uchendu, the oldest living member of Okonkwo’s mother’s family. The text celebrates it as an important event as it is a piece of advice coming from the wise old man from the clan. But as far as Okonkwo is concerned, it falls on deaf ears as he can treat his life in his “motherland” only as a life in exile.

“Then listen to me,” he said and cleared his throat. ‘It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (123)

In doing so he explains the meaning of a common Ibo name- “Nneka” or ‘Mother is supreme’.

Thus we see that inspite of the short tribute paid to the mother, Achebe’s text essentially remains a man’s text about the man’s world- the woman is treated as the other. She is shown to play multiple roles but in all the roles she remains subservient to the man. Her only moment of glory is as a mother of sons where the society accords her some respect. Both Nwapa and Emecheta decry this notion as they try to show through their text that a
woman is worth much more than her role as a mother. She plays very significant roles, which the essentially patriarchal society and male writing conveniently choose to ignore.

**Efuru**

Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* was the first novel authored by a woman to be published by Heinemann in 1966. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* was the first title published as early as 1958. Eight years and twenty five titles later Nwapa’s text is published. The reason for this disregard to women authored texts is obvious given the male bias in education and the odds women have to overcome before their work is considered worthy of publication. The critical appreciation of such texts is yet another complex factor which women writers are forced to grapple with.

Nwapa’s text is named after the chief protagonist of the novel *Efuru*. Right from the outset, she concentrates on the women’s world- the stories told in the compound, the camaraderie shared by the women, their trade and their men. It is the saga of the woman which Achebe chooses to ignore. However, this shift in focus from the man’s world to the woman’s has met with its share of criticism. Eldred Jones and Eustace Palmer are very critical of Nwapa in their reviews in The *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* publication in 1966, 1967 and 1968 respectively. They compare *Efuru* to Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* published by Heinemann in 1966. The grounds for comparison being that both these texts have a Ibo setting and a woman as a central protagonist. But while *The Concubine* is praised, Nwapa’s text is considered ‘derogatory’.

Nwapa is charged with a litany of “deficiencies” in her novel. The theme, character, plot, setting and language are all said to have been mishandled by Nwapa. According to Eldred Jones,

> Flora Nwapa’s novel informs about Ibo village life while Amadi’s informs about human nature. The gap is wide indeed. What Flora Nwapa’s novel lacks is a strong overall conception apart from the obvious urge to show how Ibo’s live. (Stratton 89)
Florence Stratton argues that for Jones “human nature” is akin to male. For Amadi’s hero is praised but because Nwapa depicts women, her world is said to be narrow and limited only to the Ibos in a very limited way. Jones critiques Nwapa accusing her of creating a feminine world. He writes: “Flora Nwapa’s world is predominantly a feminine world...It reads like a manual on how young brides are treated in an Ibo village”. (Stratton 82) Nwapa’s greatest contribution lies in her delineation of the oral culture which defined the Ibo culture of yore. The mothers in their compounds narrating stories to the young ones which would be passed down from one generation to the other. The oral tradition suffered a severe blow during colonization as the written word gained predominance. The women’s world of story telling was relegated to the margins. The scepticism is reflected in Jones’s critique as he says “Nwapa fails because her novel is full of small talk”. (Stratton 88) The multiplicity of feminine voices in Efuru is belittled and termed as “small talk”.

Commenting on the unflattering criticism from the male critics, Nwapa comments:

...the critics? I won’t say they have been too kind. A friend of mine, Ama Ata Aidoo brought this out very clearly in a paper she presented at one time. She said some male critics don’t even acknowledge female writers. Every artist thrives on controversy, so you are killing the writer if you don’t even talk about her. Being ignored is worse then when you are writing trash about her. (James 198)

Like Things Fall Apart, Efuru is set in rural Iboland in a town Nwapa calls Ugwuta. The time of the novel is 1940s and early 1950s- about half a century later than that of Achebe’s novel. However, while Achebe’s novel centres on Okonkwo and his male world, Nwapa tells the story of Efuru and reconstructs the Ibo history through the eyes of the women.

Efuru, interestingly begins with a resistance to the traditional patriarchal system when Efuru falls in love with Adizua and agrees to elope with him. Only she does not realize at this stage that in effect she runs away from one patriarchal set up to the other. The
elopement is not considered a crime but the inability to pay the bride price is what is seen as an affront to Efuru's family. But Efuru remains rock steady as she advises her husband on how to go about it. Right from the outset, Nwapa creates Efuru in the mode of a strong and remarkable woman known throughout the village for her beauty.

They saw each other fairly often and after a fortnight's courting she agreed to marry him. But the man had no money for the dowry. He had just a few pounds for the farm and could not part with that. When the woman saw that he was unable to pay anything, she told him not to bother about the dowry. They were going to proclaim themselves married and that was that.

Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself. Her husband was not known and people wondered why she married him. (1)

_Efuru_ comes alive with a multiplicity of voices which perform a choric role in the novel. It is the voice of the women who live in Ugwuta but in reality these voices can be interpreted as the voice of the society, the voice of wisdom. But interestingly enough, away from the grand judgement of Achebe's Egwugwu in _Things Fall Apart_ and the meeting of the village elders, these multiple voices of women have an authority of their own. What is termed dismissively as "small talk" by Jones, actually becomes the voice of the society. At times, these women are not even named, but in their exchange of gossip by the riverside, they provide the society's views on the central protagonists and set the mood for the novel. Spacks terms gossip as "the symbolic function as the voice of the world" (Stratton 95) Gossip therefore becomes the instrument of social control and very often the mouthpiece of the patriarchal norms. When Efuru fails to conceive in the first year of marriage to Adizua, the women feel he should marry again.

Neighbours talked as they are bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them, two men did not live together. (24)
When she marries Gilbert and is unable to conceive once again, the same gossip is repeated:

One day (Efuru and Gilbert) went to the stream and while they were swimming the people in the stream began to gossip...

‘Husband and wife, they are swimming together’, one woman began. ‘They come to the stream everyday,’ another said. ‘Nonsense, why should they swim together? Are they the only happy couple in town? I see them every time I come to the stream. It is disgusting. Can’t anybody talk to them?’ ‘They are simply showing off. I bet they are not as happy as they look. You give them two years, and we shall see what will happen.’ ‘Seeing them together is not the important thing,’ another said. ‘The important thing is that nothing has happened since the marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful.

Efuru shows a healthy disregard towards gossip and chooses to go on with her life but somewhere she feels pressured to conform and that is where her anxiety regarding child bearing begins. She craves for the “joys of motherhood”. She feels fulfilled as a woman when Ogonim is born and when the child dies, she is bereft of everything and cries out “my only child has killed me”. (173) Efuru’s desperation to bear children takes her to a dibia. The dibia predicts that if she follows his instructions, she will become a mother. But her womb is not going to carry many children.

I am sorry about your daughter Nwashike, but you have come in good time. Your daughter is not barren. She will have a baby next year if she will only do what I am going to ask her to do. Again she has not got too many children in her womb. Some women are like that. It is not their fault. It’s not God’s fault either. (25)

Efuru becomes a mother only once. She never has a son and her only daughter dies when she is still a child. Yet, Efuru is known by one and all to be a good woman. When Adizua deserts her for an “unworthy” woman, his aunt Ajanupu begs Efuru not to curse him:
“Don’t say that my child. Don’t call on God’s name. Adizua will not see the light of day if you call on God to judge him. Everybody in this town my child, knows that you have been a faithful wife. Everybody knows that you are a good woman and they love and respect you.” (178)

Efuru is a motherless girl. Her initiation into adulthood in the traditionally Ibo way seems to have been delayed because she does not have a mother. In a sense her quest can be likened to her search for her mother. Though she is motherless, the Ibo community of women provides her with surrogate mothers who counsel and love her like her own mother. Nwapa presents a wholesome picture of community mothering in Efuru. The mother-daughter lineage is a treasured lineage as the words of wisdom are passed down from one generation to the next. Efuru has two surrogate mothers- her mother in law Ossai and Ajanupu who present two different sides of Ibo womanhood. The two women are juxtaposed to each other as one forms a negative and the other a positive role model for Efuru. This concept of surrogate mothers is peculiar only to this culture. Both Ossai and Ajanupu love Efuru as their own daughter and instruct her in the ways of the world. Their closeness is seen in all spheres as they share their joys and sorrows together. Ossai has led her life in strict conformity to the traditional way of life so much so that she chooses to wait for her errant husband. And when her son Adizua deserts Efuru, he deserts her too and she pines for him endlessly bringing closer her untimely and painful death. Ossai’s story is a reminder that too much adherence to the traditional norms might be harmful.

Ajanupu, on the contrary, is a self reliant woman. She is seen in the role of instructor for the young, a spirited trader and provider for her family. She guides Efuru on all walks of life and even instructs her on how to deal with debtors. Her strong support for Efuru comes at the time when Gilbert accuses Efuru of adultery. Nwapa depicts a strong picture of sisterhood as both Ajanupu and Ogea stand up for Efuru. Ajanupu goes as far as physically assaulting Gilbert when he abuses her for speaking the truth.

Ajanupu, this is what I am hearing. I don’t know whether you have heard. My wife is guilty of adultery. The God’s are angry with her and will kill her if she
does not confess... Ajanupu says, 'My God what did you say that Efuru the 
daughter of Nwashike Ogene, the good is an adulterous woman. Ewoo I am 
afraid, my people, I am afraid. Eneberi who are you? Who is your father? Who is 
your mother? What have you got to be proud of? You went to school, eh? If your 
own brand of education is the only brand, then I am glad I did not go to school... 
You don’t know that we know you were jailed. And here you are accusing 
Efuru...’

Gilbert gave Ajanupu a slap which made her fall down. She got up quickly for she 
was a strong woman, got hold of a mortar pestle and broke it on Gilbert’s head. 
Blood filled Gilbert’s eyes. (275-276)

Just as both Ossai and Ajanupu act as mothers to Efuru, she in trun becomes a surrogate 
mother to Ogea. Ogea belongs to a poor family which is unable to feed its numerous 
children. She finds refuge in Efuru’s house as baby Ogonim’s nurse. Ogea becomes 
indispensable to Efuru as she can carry on her trade as Ogea takes care of the baby. Ogea, 
soon becomes an integral part of Efuru’s family.

Ogea was very useful to her. The little girl had grown to love her mistress. She 
regarded her as her mother and called her mother. She defended her anywhere 
she heard people say ill about her. She did all she was asked to do and 
respected and admired her mistress. (111)

In Efuru, Nwapa, like Achebe, recreates traditional social practices and describes them at 
great length. Unlike Achebe, however, Nwapa’s text revolves around women so the 
ceremonies recreated are those that women undergo or participate in. Efuru’s formal 
education is marked by a series of ceremonies designed to prepare a young woman for 
the usual roles of mother and wife. There is the rite of cliterodectomy through which she 
is initiated into womanhood, the fertility rites when she fails to conceive and purification 
rites when the child dies in infancy. Out of all these ceremonies, the rite of 
cliterodectomy is described in the fullest detail. Efuru is told by her mother in law that it 
is essential for her to “have a bath” in order to have a safe delivery of a child. Ossai tells 
her “a young woman must have her bath before she has a baby.” (6) After a very painful
Circumcision, Ajanupu consoles her saying “Gbonu, my daughter. It is what every woman undergoes. So don’t worry.” (12) A month of feasting follows the circumcision allowing the wound to heal. The importance given to this ritual and the women’s acceptance of their lot speaks volumes about their position in the society. It reinforces the fact that a woman’s role is confined merely to reproducing and the excruciating pain is a small price to pay for the joys of motherhood. Nwapa’s views on circumcision of women remain ambivalent. Unlike Nawal El Saadawi who comes down heavily on the practice, Nwapa chooses to treat it as yet another oppressive and painful practice women are forced to undergo. Just as she concentrates on the immense pain inflicted on the woman, she also describes at length the one month of confinement where Efuru’s wounds are tended to and she is fed the choicest of foods. It is a very beautiful and well rounded Efuru who goes back to the market place. Her mother in law is congratulated for having taken such good care of Efuru.

In her retelling of the Ibo history, Nwapa is very clear sighted about how money has flown into the coffers of the rich men. Men are cast in the role of collaborators. When Efuru’s father dies, canons are fired as the people of Ugwuta have chosen to forget how he made his money.

It was the death of a great man. No poor man could afford to fire seven rounds of canon in a day. Nwosu and the fisherman could now vaguely remember the story of the canons told them by their fathers. The white slave dealers gave the people the canons in exchange of slaves. The white slave dealers were the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English or the French. The people regarded them as white men, their nationality did not make any difference, they were all the same. The white slave dealers gave them the canons, the guns and hot drinks. The hot drinks did what the Indian hemp is doing in politics today. The only difference was that the hot drinks were legal and the Indian hemp illegal…. Now the shooting of the canon did not only announce the death of a great man, but also announced that the great man’s ancestors had dealings with the white men who dealt in slaves. (258)
Efuru also introduces the theme of western education. However, this theme is treated more fully in Nwapa’s later works. Education is considered unnecessary for women as even Gilbert, who has received some education himself, seems to feel so. He says, “It is a waste sending girls to school. They get married before the end of their training and the money is wasted” (191). In yet another instance Omirima is seen complaining to Amede about her daughter in law’s behaviour.

‘She went to school and so she thinks she knows everything. She is so lazy. Have you ever known a woman brought up in our town who sleeps until the sun is up?’
‘No impossible. Who sleeps until the sun is up?’ Amede asked unbelievingly.
‘She learnt it from the white woman. That’s what I told her. I said to her, you are not an idle white woman. Women of our town are very industrious. They rise when the cock crows. Husbands of white women are rich, so the wives can afford to be lazy. An idle woman is dangerous. I told her to her face.’(111)

The strain of thought is carried forward in Emecheta’s The Joys of motherhood where the white woman is seen to be idle and over pampered as opposed to the self reliant black woman.

Interestingly Efuru gains her unique independent status from within the traditional confines of the society. She defies the patriarchal order time and again and charts out an independent space for herself. In a sense she defines the very essence of Black feminism which is not about fierce individualism but about creating a space for oneself co-existing with the men, children and the broader social norms. Her first defiance comes in the form of her marriage to Adizua. Later she refuses to go to the farm with him in order to carry on her trade. She also keeps Ogea to look after her child so that she can carry on with her trade with greater ease. Even though she is advised by both Ossai and Ajanupu against leaving her husband, Efuru feels she has waited enough and moves on with her life. In her own way she also makes peace with the western education which is seen as corrupting the Ibo society. She befriends the doctor whom she visits time and again to discuss her own life and to get Ogea’s father treated.
Efuru’s long quest for the lost mother finds herself looking inwards. Her realization of self is complete when she dreams of Uhamiri, the water Goddess. “The suppression of the discourse of matriarchy is symbolically related to the theme of the missing mother which runs through Efuru... the absence of the mother signifies a break in the line of succession to female power,” Argues Florence Stratton. (121) The matriarchal tradition is dwarfed by the traditional patriarchal might but it is a very strong presence and cannot be ignored. Therefore, Efuru finally finds peace when she dreams of Uhamiri or Mami Wata. Nwapa describes the Goddess as “an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb”. (131)

Uhamiri is described as a very beautiful woman of the lake. She is known for her striking beauty and her abundance of wealth. Uhamiri in all her beauty and elegance can also cause harm. She is a spirit of dual nature. There are two images of the Goddess- one in which she is visualized as a mermaid, combing her long hair and beckoning to the viewer with the other hand; and the other in which she is painted in black and deep red signifying her ominous nature. Umeh 1998 78) An instance of her ominous influence can be seen in the text when Efuru remembers a woman possessed who claimed to be one of Uhamiri’s worshippers.

That night Efuru was deep in thought. She had heard when she was a little girl about women who were called worshippers of Uhamiri, the goddess of the blue lake. One particular woman came vividly to her... The woman was sitting on the bare floor with her legs crossed and was dressed in white from head to toe. She had rubbed white chalk on her body... Will I rub white chalk, dress in white, sit on the floor and swing from side to side? No I am not going to behave like that. (184)

But Efuru, like always makes up her mind, she would not be like these women. In her dream Uhamiri takes her under the sea to show her treasures. Efuru realizes that whenever she dreams of Uhamiri, her trade prospers and debtors come of their own accord to pay her money back. It is only when she talks to her father; the enormity of the
significance of the dream is revealed to her. Efuru’s mother too had been a worshiper of Uhamiri.

You see your mother had similar dreams. Now that you are here, I recall these dreams of your mother. Your mother prospered in her trade. She was so good that whatever she put her hand to, money flowed in. When she sold pepper, she made huge profits; when she sold yams or fish, she made profits also. She was so rich that she became the head of her age-group. She spent a lot of money for her age-group then she took titles. She was about to take the title of “ogbue-efi” when she died. (Umeh 1998 33)

Efuru’s life comes a full circle. She comes back to her father’s house a wiser woman-free from the dependent status of being a mother and a wife. Her quest for the lost mother ends with her realization of the spirit of Uhamiri which authenticates a woman’s existence as the person she is, rather than her social roles as mother or wife. After a very long time Efuru’s mind is at peace and she sleeps soundly.

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (281)

Chimalum Nwankwo argues that when one reads Flora Nwapa’s first two novels, one sees how the charm and the so-called goodness of her leading female characters stultify male power and superiority. The world of Nwapa’s characters is a world in which the best woman is matched against the best man. She conceals her barbs in the roles and distributions that mark the cultural dynamics of Igbo society. Nwankwo argues:

The rhetoric of her social criticism is: If men are so great and powerful, why are they so callous, so irresponsible, and so culturally licentious that they are downright demonic in their evil tendencies and wickedness? The underlying
criticism is so superb that sometimes cursory reading misses the point. In this novel world's modus operandi and modus vivendi, the typical female protagonist from Efuru and Idu, which I call the foundational texts of Nwapa's world, is saying the following: I will be chaste and demure. I will even accept the brutality of circumcision: I will even allow you, man, to have more women or wives as long as you are gracious enough not to lie about it. I will cook and clean. I will obey all the unequal and baseless idiocies of all patriarchal structures. What do I get from you, man, in return? Nothing. (Nwankwo 67)

Uhamiri blesses both men and women. Uhamiri is a sublimate of the great Igbo deity Ala, or Ani, in an aquatic habitat. She creates and protects equally. She gives benevolently. She does not discriminate. Her demands from man and woman are as severe as they are generous. She is selfless. The spirit of Uhamiri represents Nwapa's Afracentrism and her holistic vision of shared empathy between man and woman. Chimalum Nwankwo argues:

Beyond the serenity that Uhamiri wins by her control over the desire for children, which rules the patriarchal world, she really has nothing. Her pleasure comes from simply giving. Nothing in the Igbo male pantheon matches this Spirit. Nothing is more appealing than the beauty and grace and majestic fluidity associated with this divinity. And of course, men and women worship her. No one even contests the fact that her priestesses are mostly women. Divinity in Nwapa's world enjoys the great distinction that most African writers eschew in their wrestling with gender crises. Divinity is not slain. It is not confronted or affronted. It is not considered ineffectual, nor is it situated in a troubling nihilistic and existential landscape. One of the fine strategies in the politics of Efuru is presenting women who are flawed in their deleterious visions of man and woman, visions that undercut their dreams of happiness. (Nwankwo 68)
Idu

*Idu* opens with a conversation. Right at the outset the reader is made privy to a conversation among the women at the stream. The women discuss their household problems and it is this tone of domestic intimacy that pervades through the novel.

‘Our Uzoechi, did you come to the stream?’

‘Yes, our Nwasobi, I came to the stream. Are you well?’

‘I am well. I have come to wash my children’s dirty clothes. You know I have nobody to help me with the house work.’

‘You had a maid, what happened to her?’

‘She has gone. Her people came for her one day, and she went with them; I did not even know. She took all the dresses I made for her, and left my youngest daughter crying.’ (1)

This conversational tone, often critiqued as small talk does much more than merely cataloguing the events. Very often it is these voices which inform of an event after it has taken place. Several important events are reported by the women and the readers learn of them through these conversations. By making the anonymous women the chronicler of the society, Nwapa emphasizes the importance of the women’s world. The women can be likened to the Greek chorus in their roles as reporters and social commentators.

‘Come have you heard?’ Uzoechi asked Nwasobi several months later.

‘what is it? What has happened? Has anybody died?’

‘Nobody has died, it is good news. They say that Idu is pregnant.

‘God, our ancestors, and the woman of the lake thank you. When a woman is good you look at her stomach, not her head’.(42)

Similarly Adiewere’s second marriage is made known to the readers through the women’s gossip by the riverside.

‘Adiewere married a girl about three months ago’, said Uzoechi.
‘Truly?’
‘As truly as I am standing before you now.’
‘Whose child is this girl?’
‘She is a beautiful girl’, explained Uzoechi, ‘the eldest daughter of Ojuzu Madagwu’. (43)

The central theme of *Idu* is motherhood. Idu, a happily married woman is childless. She longs for the joys of motherhood. Unlike Efuru, Idu is blessed in a marriage. Her husband is extremely fond of her and does not wish to marry again for the sake of children. Adiewere is a moneyed man and can therefore afford the bride price for another wife but he chooses to remain loyal to his wife till the very end.

‘It was the third year of their marriage and nothing had happened. Idu was not pregnant, she had not even miscarried. It had worried her husband in the first year but he was in love with his wife and did not want to marry another wife. Many people had advised him to marry another, but he had refused. He was not at heart a polygamist.’ (16)

However, the verdict of the society is given by the women who discuss Idu Adiewere’s relationship. As a couple they are praised for being good people but the concern for childlessness remains. The myths of the land are also articulated by these women. It is believed that if a man dies childless he has not completed his work on earth as his ancestors will not be worshipped anymore. Jealous of Idu’s trading capabilities, the women express yet another popular belief that if a woman concentrates too much on making money, children are denied to her.

‘If Idu can’t have a child, let her allow her husband to marry another wife. That is what our people do,’ explained Onyemuru.
When Nwoji could not have a child her husband married other wives and now they have many children. How can a man live without children? Wasn’t it a woman who bore him in her womb? No, you must tell Idu to find another wife.’ (34)

The Ibo society is equally harsh to the man who is incapable of fathering the child. In a rare insight into the man’s suffering, Nwapa tells the story of Ojiugo Idu’s friend and her husband Amarajeme. Ojiugo had been unfortunate in her first marriage. Her husband had died of smallpox and though she was a prosperous woman, suitors did not come to her because of her husband’s dreaded disease. Amarajeme had led a reckless life at the Great River but when he came back to the village he was a changed man. Initially sceptical of the match, the villagers slowly settled out as Amarajeme and Ojiugo seemed to be a happy couple. For a long time, Ojiugo is unable to conceive. Though she celebrates her friend Idu’s motherhood, in her heart of hearts her longing for a child continues to increase. Finally she leaves her husband for his friend who gives her a child. In her inimitable style Nwapa reports this incident through the discussion of the women. They not only discuss the event, they pass judgement on it and put forward the society’s viewpoint in the matter.

‘Come come, do you know? Do you know that Ojiugo has left her husband?’ Nwasobi asked her friend Uzoechi.
‘Who said so? It’s a lie. It can not happen. Ojiugo can not have left her husband.’
‘Who has she gone to, that’s what I am asking?’
‘To Obukodi. Don’t you know him?’
‘I don’t know what Ojiugo wants in Obokudi’s house. Is it because she has no child by Amarajeme?’
‘Of course. What else?’
‘Will Obukudi give her a child then?’
‘It is possible,’ said Uzoechi. (105)

Amarajeme is heartbroken. He mourns his wife’s desertion and keeps hoping that she will come back. His friends find his behaviour strange. If a man’s wife left him for another
man, he would be expected to go to his father and ask for his bride price. He was then free to marry another girl. But Amarajeme does neither. He continues to bemoan his wife. When Idu and Adiewere go to visit him, he tells them about his love for his wife.

‘What Ojiugo, my wife did is childish. She will come back to me. Mark my words. The devil tempted her. She will see reason. What did I do to her? I did not ill treat her. She was my wife as well as my sister... We lived together peacefully. She was so pleasing to my eyes that I liked the dust she trod on.’ (108)

The reason for Ojiugo’s desertion becomes clear when Idu tells Adiewere that her friend left Amarajeme as she was with child by Obokudi. Adiewere is appalled as Ojiugo has committed adultery which is an unpardonable offence in the Ibo community. But Idu stands by her friend and says that her action is justified as she did it for a child.

Adiewere you know why Ojiugo left Amarajeme?’ Asked Idu.
‘I don’t know.’
‘Ojiugo is pregnant by Obokudi.’
‘Is it true?’
‘It is true. She told me. You know that she does not hide anything from me.’
‘That was why she left?’
‘Yes. That was why she left.’
‘But she is Amarajeme’s wife. She was committing adultery?’ protested Adiewere.
‘That is what it is. Nobody disputes that. (109)

In spite of having committed adultery, Ojiugo retains the public sympathy as her husband is impotent. While she gains credence in the public eye as Obokudi’s wife and the mother of his son, Amarajeme becomes an object of ridicule. His predicament becomes clear to him when Ojiugo’s child is born.
Slowly it was dawning on him now that he was impotent; that he was not like other men; that he would die without a baby girl or boy to answer his name. The years he had with his wife Ojiugo were fruitless years, unproductive years, and he was the cause of it. The medical treatments, the dibias consulted, were all wasted efforts. He was the one who was sick. He should have been treated not his wife. So, people had been laughing at him, so people knew all the while. (129)

Unable to reconcile with the fact that his impotence was known to all, Amarajeme commits suicide. In the Ibo society, a man who has taken his own life is treated as a sinner. He is accused of having committed the worst possible crime against mother earth. He is denied a decent burial. It is probably the worst possible insult to any soul alive or dead. The atrocities met out to the body are etched to the last detail in order to evoke disgust at the social practices which makes children the be all and end all of a human being’s existence.

Amarajeme had hanged himself. He had polluted the goddess of the land so the goddess of the land would have to be propitiated.... The following morning Amarajeme was still hanging from the thatched roof of his hut, with his tongue sticking out. Nobody from the town would touch him. He had been there all night. His brother went in search of people from up-country. They were given some money and they cut the rope down. The body fell on the bare floor. Quickly, unceremoniously, without reverence, they wrapped him up in the old mat they had brought with them. He was not carried out through the door, to avoid polluting the compound. A hole was made on the thatched roof. Some people were in the room while others were outside. Those in the room threw the body up through the hole. Those outside caught it, and hurried to the forest where they threw it away. (147)

Ojiugo blames herself for what has happened but again it is the women who stand by her. Obokudi’s eldest wife takes charge of the situation and absolves Ojiugo of all blame. She says:
‘This thing is bad. Amarajeme hated himself. He was not pleasing to himself. That’s why, Ojiugo, so wipe your tears and lets go home, your son is crying’, she said.

...lets go home my daughter. Idu let me take her home. Evil is evil. What could make a man hang himself.’ (146)

Children are considered to be the biggest assets in the Ibo society. In a society which is primarily agricultural, all male hands would be required to plough the fields. A girl child was welcome as well as she would fetch a bride price for her father. But it is the boy child who is the cynosure of all eyes as it is he who will give his forefathers a burial and carry their name forward. In Uzoechi’s words, ‘what we are all praying for is children. What else do we want if we have children?’ (150)

The social belief is that a good woman is bound to be blessed with children. But the women are surprised when a prostitute is blessed with children. Prostitution is considered to be a heinous social disease. Time and again the women discuss prostitutes and how these women have strayed from the accepted diktats of the society. But interestingly rather than blaming the women for taking to prostitution the village women look at the causes.

‘It is true that Nwakuma is now married’, Ojiugo said.

‘She hasn’t only married; she has given birth to a boy, a good boy full of life. When you see him it makes you want a child of your own.’

‘I hadn’t heard that’, said Ojiugo. ‘When? Nwakuma who was a prostitute? When? Idu, we mustn’t lose hope.’

‘You were not in this town at the time. It was nearly a year ago now. Whatever you say, I like Nwakuma, said Idu.

‘I like her also. A bad husband made her what she was. But I am happy that she didn’t continue with her old ways.’

‘Prostitution is bad for our women’, said Idu. ‘Our woman of the Lake frowns at it, and that’s why prostitutes of our town never profit by it’. (39)
However, there are women who are lured into this profitable profession which was introduced to the Ibo society by the colonisers. There is an example of a woman who runs away from her husband to become a prostitute. She goes as far as returning his bride price. What the village women find appalling is the fact that she had also been blessed with children. This woman stands condemned as she is said to be indulging in the worst form of prostitution as she was going out with white people. Inspite of her wretched past, Ogbenyanu, the prostitute is re-instated into the social fold as her trade prospers and she is blessed with children. Being a mother absolves her of all sins.

While being mothers of sons empowered women, it is also through her ability to trade, that the Ibo woman earned respect in the society. Trading is an integral part of the Ibo woman’s life. A good trader who made money also took titles and gained importance in the society. Like Efuru, Idu, too is a good trader. Her hands make money. Some market days are even considered sacred as the Lady of the Lake herself is said to be visiting the market place that day. The woman who cannot trade is looked down upon and treated with scorn.

‘No she does not know how to trade that is why we say she has no sense. A woman who does not know how to trade in our town is a senseless woman. She is not a woman at all.’(39)

Idu, on the contrary is a great trader. Her trading has made her a rich woman and she, like Efuru is a very generous woman. In fact the women by the riverside say that it is Idu who has made her husband the generous man that he is now.

Orature finds a special place in Nwapa’s writing. Women and children sit in their compounds and narrate stories to each other. The oral culture was wiped off when the coloniser’s written word gained precedence. Women are also seen in interesting roles of care givers as Nwasobi rushes to Idu’s help in the middle of the night. Between the two of them, they nurse the ailing Adiewere back to health.
The novel ends with Adiewere’s death and Idu refusing to conform to her widowhood roles. She refuses to wear mourning, neither does she allow her hair to be cut. She talks to her husband as if he were alive. She reminds him of the marital vows where he had promised to be with her all her life. Finally, with immense calm Idu eats her last meal and goes to sleep never to get up again. She had gone to join Adiewere leaving behind her son Ijoma, who is the apple of her eye. This rather melodramatic ending further accentuates the fact that a child may be important but it is not the sole reason of a woman’s existence. Idu and Adiewere had always been very much in love. Adiewere’s new wife feels so much of an outsider in their company that she chooses to leave him. Their marriage was so perfect that Idu chose to die with her husband rather than live for her son. Moreover in the clannish life of the Ibo’s Idu can be sure that Ijoma would be cared for even if his biological mother was no more. The other women of the compound would bring him up as their own.

Thus Idu, though thematically close to Efuru tells an interesting tale of the woman charting out her life in the complex patriarchal world of the Ibos. Though the women function within the patriarchal rubric, they are seen in their multiple roles conversing in their multiple voices and creating a historical niche for the woman which had been hitherto overlooked by the male writer.

**The Joys of Motherhood**

*The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta’s magnum opus is the story of Nnu Ego, the central mother protagonist. Through this treatise on motherhood, Emecheta firmly grounds herself in the literacy map of African women authors. She acknowledges her debt to her literacy precursor- Flora Nwapa by borrowing her title from the ending lines of *Efuru*.

Thematically, too, Emecheta remains close to Nwapa. The same concerns are articulated and the same fears voiced, but the world of *The Joys of Motherhood* is darker than the world of *Efuru*. Whereas Efuru stands vindicated at the end of the novel, Nnu Ego remains a failed woman in birth and in death.
In an interview, when asked about her relationship with other women authors, Emecheta calls herself, “their new sister” (James 44) thus locating herself within the canon of female writing from the African subcontinent. She has also been one of the most prolific writers and now she earns her livelihood through writing which is no mean feat for a Black women writing in London.

*The Joys of Motherhood* is the story of Nnu Ego, situated in an It spans the entire colonial period. Unlike Efuru, Nnu Ego gra the society brought about by the colonial onslaught. Her pc colonized woman. The domination is at the same time brutal as colonial masters have made slaves of the Ibo men who in tur The face of the self sufficient village life has changed. A bruta slowly taking over displacing the old lifestyle. Nnu Ego finds h with her the values of her father’s compound, so even in the life, Nnu Ego concentrates on being a good daughter, a good mc

*The Joys of Motherhood* depicts how motherhood in the coloniz the combined and uneven penetration of colonial and modern fi to what extent a colonized woman’s maternal experience l colonial status but also in what her “colonial” experience is subjectivity. It can be argued that mothering, a seemingly ahisto for women, serves the colonized mothers as a crucial chat experience and actively come to terms with the modern mor: collective history.

The text is characterized by an absent father figure in the depicted as an apology of a man when compared with men like friend. Moreover, Nnaife is forced to stay away from his famil front by his colonial masters. The enslaved or the colonized f with the colonial destiny of their race or nation. The colonized mother’s space takes place under a racial hierarchy, in which
castrated while the foreign father has political dominance and cultural hegemony. The mother figures are initially insulated from the public sphere and also from the direct impact of the colonial rule; their sense of their colonial identity is brought home to them by the crises in their husbands' role as men. The crisis in colonized men’s manhood and fatherhood is thus crucial to an understanding of the colonized mothers’ intense maternal investment as well as their becoming conscious of the oppressive reality of colonialism.

_The Joys of Motherhood_ as the title suggests, essentially deals with motherhood. The text is dedicated to all mothers. The first chapter is titled “The Mother” and the chapter which relates Ona’s story is called “The mother’s mother”. The last chapter of the text is ironically titled “The canonized mother”. _The Joys of Motherhood_ is essentially the story of Nnu Ego and her struggle with life. Nnu Ego’s chi is said to be the slave woman who was forced to die _with_ Agunwa, Agbadi’s eldest wife. The young and pretty girl had refused to jump into the grave of her mistress as all good slaves are supposed to do. She received a blow on her head and blood spluttered out a she finally keeled over and fell into the grave. This horrific description of female enslavement becomes the reality of Nnu Ego’s life. She lives and dies like a slave—chained to old traditional values, enslaved by her husband and chained by her love for her children.

Nnu Ego is Agbadi and Ona’s love child. On her death bed Ona had made one request to Agbadi, “allow her to be a woman” (23) but unfortunately Nnu Ego becomes exactly the kind of woman her mother did not want her to be. She inherits her mother’s beauty but that is where the similarity ends. Over the years, as she grows up she is taught how to be a good wife and mother. Soon a groom is found for her and a bride price fixed. Nnu Ego makes her father proud by proving to be an “unspoiled virgin”. There is a great celebration in her father’s compound.

Agbadi and his life long friend allowed themselves to be really drunk. “There is nothing that makes a man prouder than to hear that his daughter is virtuous. I don’t like visiting families where the wedding kegs of palm wine are half filled, telling everybody that the bride has allowed herself to be tampered with.” Idayi declared. (3)
Idayi's words further emphasise the importance of virginity in the traditional patriarchal set up. Post marriage Nnu Ego is expected to conceive but unfortunately that does not happen. Initially she consults her husband and asks her father to sacrifice to her chi. But very soon, it becomes Nnu Ego’s problem alone as she blames herself for being a “failed woman”.

After a while, Nnu Ego could not voice her doubts and worries to her husband any more. It had become her problem and hers alone. She went from one dibia to another in secret, and was told the same thing – that the slave woman who was her chi would not give her a child because she had been dedicated to a river goddess before Agbadi took her away in slavery. When at home, Nnu Ego would take an egg, symbol of fertility, and kneel and pray to this woman to change her mind. “Please pity me. I feel that my husband’s people are already looking for a new wife for him. They can not wait for me forever. He is the first son of the family and his people want an heir from him as soon as possible. Please help me”. (31-32)

Nnu Ego, unlike Ona is characterized by the “singleness of her purpose”. She lives only to be a mother. So carried away she is by the child of Amatokwu’s second wife, that she suckles him at her breast. She receives a severe beating from her husband, a man she had loved, and she is sent away to her father’s compound. Finally, Nnu Ego conceives after her marriage to Nnaife, who is a white man’s servant in Lagos. The baby is beautiful but it dies in infancy. Nnu Ego, crazed with grief tries to commit suicide.

Her baby... her baby! Nnu Ego’s arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and her choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was inside her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she face the world after what had
happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way. (8)

She wanted to die in order to be able to ask her wicked chi why she had made her life “a catalogue of disasters”. (9). Nnu Ego, however, never stops running. Even when the children come, it is a struggle of a different kind- it’s a war she fights to keep them alive. And when her body and mind are incapable of fighting, she just drops down and dies unsung and alone.

Emecheta questions the sanctity of marriage as an institution in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego is married to Amatokwu. Initially they cherish their marriage but the marriage crumbles shortly owing to Nnu Ego’s inability to conceive. She is asked to move to another hut as Amatokwu takes another wife. The same man who loved her now beats her brutally and sends her to her father’s house. The father too does not protest against the injustice meted out to his daughter. He treats it as a woman’s lot and takes Nnu Ego back with him. Agbadi, in his younger days was known for the complete lack of regard he showed to his wives. The only woman he ever loved was Ona who did not marry him for fear that she would be treated with the same disregard with which he treated his wives.

He ruled his family and children as if he were a god. Yet he gave his love without reservation, and she enjoyed it; she suspected, however, that her fate would be the same as that of his other women should she consent to become one of his wives. No maybe the best way to keep his love was not to let that happen. (15)

Nnu Ego’s second husband is Nnaife Owulum- a man chosen by her father. Agbadi feels that his stay in Lagos would have softened him towards the womenfolk and that he would make a kind and considerate husband. The very first encounter with this man shocks Nnu Ego as she describes him as a “pregnant cow”. Nnaife demands his marital rights the very first night.

He demanded his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind. She had thought she would be allowed to rest at least on the first night
after her arrival before being pounced upon by this hungry man, her new husband. After such an experience, Nnu Ego knew why horrible looking men raped women, because they are aware of their inadequacy. (44)

Nnu Ego has no choice but to suffer being raped because to go back to her father would be even more demeaning. Moreover, she reasons that if by suffering Nnaife’s forced coitus, she is able to conceive, she would bear with it.

“O my chi”,... she prayed as she rolled painfully to her other side of Raffia bed, “O my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance. Oh please help me all you my ancestors. If I should become pregnant... (45)

The rape narrative is recurrent in the works of Emecheta. From the rape of the nation, which displaced the “real women”, she builds into her narrative, the rape of the women, garbed in the veil of the marriage. Colonization has robbed man of his manhood, so the only way Nnaife can feel a man is by the act of forced lovemaking. It sends out strong signals to the wife and to his brother and through him to the entire Owulum clan. Nnu Ego need not be told in words that she is now owned by him. The unsaid message is conveyed to Nnaife’s brother that though Nnaife makes a living out of washing a white woman’s underclothes, he can still tame a woman. Through the marital rape he has proved his manhood.

Nnu Ego has internalised the patriarchal values to such an extent that she is willing to barter her body for children. Her mother Ona was very different. For her, the act of sex was for enjoyment rather than fulfilling her so called duty as a woman. In the erotic love scene between Ona and Agbadi, she is seen to be moaning in desire for him. She chooses him to be her lover and firmly disputes marriage as she repeatedly teases him with her body. Emecheta strongly contends that sexual pleasure is as important for women and as for men.

...He worked on her, breaking down all her resistance. He stroked and explored with his perfect hand, banking heavily on the fact that Ona was a woman, a
mature woman, who had had him many a time. And he was right. Her struggling and kicking lessened. She started to moan and groan instead, like a woman in labour...(20)

Though his love for Ona was overwhelming, Agbadi was known for neglecting his other wives. The wives started to show signs of sexual neglect. Emecheta writes. “He would be reminded to do his duty by them, but when they became pregnant he would not be seen in their huts until the time came for him to mate them again.” (45) It is this sheer neglect and the ultimate insult that a concubine is enjoying what is rightfully hers, which kills Agunwa, Agbadi’s eldest wife. Agunwa dies from the stress of pretending to be a “complete woman”. She had a husband and grown up sons but she realizes what she had missed all her life when she sees Agbadi and Ona together.

The plight of the wives is not confined to Ona’s generation. Nnu Ego makes exactly the kind of wife Ona was scared of degenerating into. Irrespective of the change of times and Nnaife’s foray into the city, in his heart he remains a traditional Ibo man. After his brother’s death, he sleeps with his brother’s wives and even impregnates his eldest wife who is forced to carry her last menopausal child. After Adaku’s desertion, Nnaife’s manhood is threatened, so he spends all his earnings on marrying the child woman Okpo. The position of a man with regards to his family is expressed by Nnu Ego in the courtroom when she says, “Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me. Just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words, he pays.”(217)

In keeping with the tradition of Efuru, Emecheta juxtaposes two very different kinds of women. Just as Ossai and Ajanupu are two faces of womanhood quite opposed to each other, similarly Nnu Ego and Adaku, though contemporaries, represent different world views. Nnu Ego like Ossai is a conformist. She never questions the age-old patriarchal traditions and in the process, she suffers, encumbered by innumerable children and trapped in a loveless marriage. Adaku, on the contrary is very different. She is the older Owulum’s wife whom Nnaife inherits. She leaves the village and accompanies Nnaife to Lagos, hoping for a better future in the city. “After mourning nine long months for their
husband, she had had enough of Ibuza, at least for a while. People had warned her that Nnu Ego would be a difficult person to live with; yet either she accepted Nnaife or spend the rest of her life struggling to make the two ends meet.” (120) Since she identifies Nnaife as her benefactor, in the initial days she tries to please him. Nnu Ego, who has been trained to accept her lot with dignity, goes about preparing her bed for the new comer, hating every minute of her job. Adaku is a revelation to Nnu Ego for she does everything which Nnu Ego would never be able to do. On her very first night Adaku tries to show up Nnu Ego by her exaggerated show of pleasure in response to Nnaife’s love making. “It was a good thing that she had prepared herself. Because Adaku turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like. What did she think she was doing? Did she think Nnaife was her lover and not her husband to show her enjoyment so?” (124) Very soon Adaku realizes that coming away with Nnaife and pleasing him sexually did not take care of her daily needs. Nnaife gives very little money to his family. Nnu Ego always tries hard to make two ends meet, but she never complains. Adaku, on the contrary voices her feelings. She says, “I don’t think it is right. Look at us trying to make ends meet, and he squanders his money on drink and top of that plays the guitar right into the early hours of the morning...” (130). She carries her agitation further and asks Nnu Ego to protest against Nnaife by refusing to cook for him. Nnu Ego is unable to fathom Adaku’s courage and her wayward nature.

Nnu Ego looked at Adaku with speculative eyes. “This woman knows a thing or two”, she thought. So independent in her ways of thinking. Was it because Adaku came from a low family where people were not tied to pleasing the rest of their members, as she Nnu Ego had tried to please her titled father, Agbadi all the time. (127)

While Nnu Ego concentrates on being a good mother and a good wife, Adaku concentrates on her trade. When Nnu Ego comes back from Ibuza, she is appalled seeing how the prices in the city had skyrocketed. Her trade had suffered immensely while Adaku’s trade had prospered. And to top it all, she had only two mouths to feed. Adaku’s stall in Zabo market was stocked high with beans, pepper, dried fish, egusi and spicy foodstuffs. She would stay away all day market and coming in late at night. (161)
Adaku had already started contemplating putting her girls in schools. A far cry in a society where a girl was considered worthwhile if she brought in a good bride price-money which would be spent in the education of her brothers. Like always, Nnu Ego feels trapped.

…it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner. Imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. (131)

Things worsen when a quarrel breaks out between Nnu Ego and Adaku during Nnaife’s absence. The fault had been entirely Nnu Ego’s but the men who come to sort out the quarrel support her because she is the mother of sons.

“Don’t you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin?” Nwakusor reminded her. “Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this round of his visiting earth. I know you have children but they are girls, who in a few years time will go and help build another man’s immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business…” (166)

Adaku has had enough. She chooses to walk out of her house to be a prostitute and educate her daughters. Somehow she has managed to address the problem when she says that women suffer because they labour under the impossible standards they set for themselves. She says “we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for each other” (169) Adaku is indeed instrumental in re-inventing a woman’s life. She does educate her daughters daughters and she is always there by Nnu Ego in her times of need. She sees off Oshia when he goes to college and gives Kehinde a great wedding. Slowly, Nnu Ego starts to understand her but now it is too late. Nnu Ego
tells Mama Abby about Adaku’s daughter’s education. “She wants them to (go to college) and they will make it, I am beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women. I saw many young women teaching in schools. It would really be something for a woman to be able to earn some money monthly like a man”. (189)

Emecheta juxtaposes the Pre-colonial woman with the Post colonial woman and reasons that the latter is a worse sufferer. The pre-colonial times were harsh on the women but they enjoyed certain unique privileges. The women were never dependent on the men. They were great traders. The women could also take titles like Efuru’s mother who died just before she took her title. Here, Ona, the pre-colonial woman is juxtaposed to Nnu Ego, the woman who lives in colonial times. Ona, the jewel is a unique woman. There is a long description of her beauty:

She was of medium height, and had skin like that of half ripe palm nuts, smooth, light coffee in colour. Her hair, closely cropped, fitted her skull like a hat atop a head that seemed to be thrust out of her shoulders by a strong, long powerful neck. When she walked, her expensive waist beads, made of the best coral, murmured, and for men raised in that culture, who knew the sound of each bead, this added to her allurement...Though she was always scantily dressed, she frequently made people aware of being a conservative, haughty presence, cold as steel and remote as any woman royally born. (12)

Ona, as mentioned before, loved teasing Agbadi. She refused to be intimidated by his name or his wealth. Yet, inspite of Agbadi’s great passion for Ona, she dies torn between her duty towards her father and her love for Agbadi; Because Obi Umunna had no sons, Ona had been dedicated to the Gods to produce children in her father’s name. She makes a pact with her lover that if she has a son, it will be her father’s and the daughter would be Agbadi’s. So, Agbadi lays claim to Nnu Ego who is the apple of her parent’s eye. On her death bed Ona tells Agbadi, “You see that I was not destined to live with you. But you are stubborn, my father was stubborn and I am stubborn too. Please don’t mourn me for long; and see however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego you allow her to have a life of her own”. (28)
Nnu Ego’s life travesties everything her mother had ever dreamt for her. Primarily it is due to the changes into society due to colonization. The tall well built men of Ibuza have been replaced by the short stocky over washed apology for a man, Nnaife. Emecheta sympathizes with the men who are victims of the colonial onslaught. Nnaife begins as a washer man in the Meers household. His working hours are long and the money he makes at the end of the day is very little. Nnu Ego has little respect for his job. “Everytime she saw her husband hanging out the white woman’s smalls, Nnu Ego would wince as someone in pain”. (47) Time an again Nnaife’s master, Dr. Meers addresses him as a baboon. Dr. Meers represents England’s progress in Science being a scientist himself. But his superior education does not stop him from abusing his black servants. Nnaife is removed from his job unceremoniously. To earn a living, he becomes a grass cutter. One day, without any warning, Nnaife is taken hostage and forced to join the army. Ubani, Nnaife’s friend tries to make sense of it all as he says, “There is nothing we can do. The British own us, just like God does, and just like God they are free to take any of us when they wish”. (148) The situation is grave indeed as the text tells us, “In those days things were such that Nigerians had no voice. No paper would report what had taken place; even if it were reported, how many of those affected could read, and how many could afford to buy a newspaper?” (148) The women’s predicament is summed up by Cordelia, Ubani’s wife. She says, “They are all slaves, including us. If their master treats them badly, they take it out on us”. (51)

Emecheta’s severest critique on motherhood is seen in the last lines of the chapter. Crazed with grief and forsaken by the husband, Nnu Ego is a broken woman. She waits in vain to hear from her son in America. Finally, tired and weary, she breathes her last alone- “with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her”. (224) Emecheta adds that Nnu Ego hardly had friends anyway- she had been too busy securing her position as wife and mother; thereby making a case for friendship and sisterhood which is a big support system in a woman’s life which unfortunately most women choose to ignore. On hearing of their mother’s death, all her children come home. They give her a very expensive second burial and a shrine is made in her name. But Nnu Ego remains wicked even in her death as she refuses to bless people who pray at her shrine, with children. The chapter is
ironically titled “The canonized mother”. The mother who slaves away throughout her life and dies lonely and unsung is canonized after her death. Perhaps Nnu Ego realizes only after her death that her children had enslaved her and that she had not done justice to herself- she had forgotten to love herself. Probably this is why she does not bless women with children when they pray at her shrine. Caught in this web of childbirth and poverty, Nnu Ego has her moments of realization. In one such epiphanic moment she cries out, “God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage... After all, I was born alone and will die alone. What have I gained from all this?” (186)

Uhamiri, we are told, possesses powers both good and bad. She can make women rich and prosperous and she can be the cause of her madness. While Efuru is blessed with her positive powers, Nnu Ego’s chi fails her. While Efuru sleeps peacefully, dreaming of the beautiful Goddess and her wealth, Nnu Ego dies on the roadside, weary and mentally deranged. Both Nwapa and Emecheta are not against motherhood. Bearing and nurturing a child is one of the most beautiful experiences of a woman’s life but she can enjoy it only if she has chosen to become a mother and if her physical health permits her to do so. The operative words here are a woman’s choice and her well being. A woman who has merely internalized the dogmatic patriarchal values and spends her entire life trying to approximate to its impossible standards is bound to suffer and die like Nnu Ego. The authors expose the double standards of the patriarchal society where on the one hand sacrifices are made to appease the Goddesses and on the other, women are discriminated against. A woman begins her life as her father’s rather unwanted property. She soon becomes her husband’s property but not before she has brought a handsome bride price to her father’s family. A boy child is preferred over a girl child. Nnu Ego is proud to be the mother of sons but when she begets daughters, the injustice of the system strikes her as she laments, “men- all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going. But did not a woman have to bear the woman- child who would later bear the sons?” (186)
Conclusion

Motherhood in the Ibo society is a power play of desire and control. To try and gain some control over one's life is not an extraordinary phenomenon but unfortunately women of the Third world and developing countries are denied even that. Both Nwapa and Emecheta along with other women writers have struggled constantly to be accorded their share of respect as writers. Similarly their characters are seen to be constantly in a skirmish with the outside world wherein they seek to establish themselves. The Pre-colonial and Colonial women do not have access to education, so all they have is their bodies with which they fight their battles. Nnu Ego idealizes and lives only to be a mother. She has no life outside the purview of motherhood. But after several childbirths and enjoying her position as the mother of sons, she realizes that she has fed her children not only on her body but on her soul. She has nothing left for herself. In the power play of bartering one's body for children, she has gained children but has lost out on herself. When this harsh reality hits her, she loses her will to live and dies a broken woman. Ona, in her struggle against her father and her lover uses motherhood to settle scores between the two. But here too she remains the loser as her father refuses to relinquish his hold over her, and Agbadi insists on owning her daughter Nnu Ego. Again Ona tries to use motherhood in order to gain some control over her life. She puts all her energies into making a boy which would please her father. But this bartering of the body takes its toll on her and Ona dies torn between the two men who profess to love her but in reality are in love with their egos. Adaku uses her body to secure herself a position in Nnaife's household. She is considered a failed mother as she is the mother of daughters and not sons. Adaku, now uses her body to engage in prostitution. Interestingly in this power play of desire and control, she comes out a winner who not only in her new found position gains control of her life, she also provides her daughters with the tools of emancipation. Nwapa's Efuru remains a unique woman who redefines the boundaries of desire and control. She uses her body to lure the man she loves, she too aspires for motherhood. But her release comes when she looks inwards and realizes the spirit of Uhamiri. She remains a complete woman within the purview of the patriarchal society, who dares to live by different parameters. The joys of motherhood are denied to her but the dignity of
womanhood is restored to her. In the game of desire and control Efuru comes out a winner as she refuses to subscribe to the given norms – thereby creating a unique space for herself. She also exemplifies the fact that womanhood is multidimensional. Motherhood is just one dimension of a woman’s existence – it can never presume to define her entire persona.

Works Cited


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