6. Utopian Quest in the Novels of Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta

6.1 The Move towards an Ideal World – An Approach

Utopia can be defined as an ideal or perfect place or state, or any visionary system of political or social perfection. In literature, it refers to a detailed description of a nation or commonwealth ordered according to a system which the author proposes as a better way of life than any known to exist, a system that could be instituted if the present one could be cancelled and people could start over. The word itself was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book of the same name. The roots of the word are from the Greek meaning “no place” or “nowhere”. In literature, utopia is usually speculative and satirical. Such writing ridicules the existing conditions and they may not offer any practical solutions to the problems present. Utopian societies have always been idealistic and have been greatly admired. Practical utopian communities have been established around the world, but these do not survive for long with the original format and goal.

The apartheid system in South Africa came into existence in 1912 but was officially pronounced and adopted as a government policy in 1948. Jack Watson explains that Dr Malan used apartheid as his campaign slogan to canvas for votes in the 1948 elections which he won. Apartheid became real with the passing of many acts/laws which stipulated segregations in various domains. This was done with the objective of thwarting the growth of the black majority. Due to the socio-economic and political inadequacies of this policy on the blacks, they started revolting against the policy. Most writers simply left the country either on voluntary or imposed exile given that most of their works was under strict censorship.
In his article *Interrogating silence: New possibilities faced by South African literature*, Andre Brink points out that:

*The experience of apartheid has demonstrated that different kinds on levels of silence exist... Behind these loomed larger, greyer areas, whole territories of historical consciousness silenced by the power establishment and invalidated by the dominant discourse in order to make them inaccessible to other voices. This included the distortions of the right to the land, abuses in the name of Christianity, the extent of miscegenation between staunch Afrikaners and their slaves or servants, then enslavement of indigenous peoples in the interior strategies to ensure and perpetuate the marginalization of women in both black and white societies.* (Derek 1998:15)

Under this stressful and difficult situation, it became almost impossible for writers to write. Those who had the courage to write were only out to promote internal resistance. Most of the texts that were written however were generally meant to criticize the apartheid regime. This explains why most of the authors were being chased. Derek Attridge and Rose Mary in their *Introduction to writing South Africa* wrote:

*South Africa has passed through a period that has for obvious reasons produced a large body of what one might call judgmental texts, both critical and creative texts that assume an ethical*
sufficiency to exist in the condemnation of apartheid and its agents. For this reason the current South African situation forms a productive arena for the exploration of the uses.... as well as alternatives to judgmental writing. (Derek 1998:7)

With this very sordid background, most of the South African writers decided to go on exile and others committed suicide in desperation. Dorothy Driver notes that writers in exile were separated from writers at home, and none of them could readily claim a literary heritage. One observes there that South Africa was not certainly conducive to the flowering of creative literature and we understand that great literature generally operate through the vision of a traditional outlook. The focus in this chapter is on identifying the utopian and dystopian elements in the selected works of Bessie Head and Buchi Emechta insofar as these relate to Africa and African culture and society.

6.2 Social Groups

How are people defined? The obvious criteria include occupying a common territory; speaking a single language or dialect; having a single social organization; having a sense of identity, cohesion, and history; sharing a common religion; and having a single set of customs and behavioral rules (as in marriage, clothing, diet, taboos, and so on). One problem is that any or all of these criteria can change at any time, so that a map of the peoples who live in Africa can soon grow out of date. Two commonly used words deserve comment. These are “indigenous” and “traditional.” Both are often used with the implication being unchanging or static, but for property they do not have this connotation. “Indigenous” is conventionally used not as meaning autochthonous or primordial,
but rather in the sense of having priority of settlement; it is also used to distinguish Africans from non-African incomers. The word “native”, although properly having that same meaning, is today rarely used.

Traditional refers to the customs, beliefs, and practices that the local people of any area consider to have been theirs in the past and not to have changed today from what they were in the past. It is a notion that is held by the people themselves, and not by outside observers. In this sense, a traditional society is one whose members see their lives and the future lives of their children as being essentially the same as those of their forebears, in spite of whatever changes may in fact have been made in the underlying structure of their society. All African societies change continually, but the people themselves may be unaware of this fact or may choose to ignore it as unimportant.

The family is a universal group throughout Africa, with many different forms and functions. Everywhere the basic family unit is the elementary or nuclear family, a small domestic group made up of a husband, his wife, and their children; frequently, attached kin are included as well. This group is formed by a marriage and ends either with the death of one of the spouses or with divorce. Where polygyny is permitted, a husband and his wives form a compound family. Elementary and compound families in most part of the continent traditionally have also been units of wider and longer-lasting families, known as joint or extended families. In these families, there are typically two or more generations, either a group of brothers and sons and their wives and children (a patrilineal joint family) or, in some places, a group of sisters and their husbands and children (a matrilineal joint family). This kind of family is long-lasting, and indeed self-perpetuating; a death makes no difference to its overall structure, and thus it can last over several generations, with a membership of up to a hundred people and more.
As a general rule, joint and extended families are found in rural rather than in urban settlements, the latter more usually being occupied by many elementary families, each in isolation from the others. The basis of kinship, in Africa as elsewhere, is descent from an ancestor. The most widespread descent group is known as the clan, which can be either patrilineal or matrilineal.

The members of the former type of clan comprise all those who are born from a single founding ancestor through the male line only; those of the latter comprise all those born from a single founding ancestor or ancestress through the female line only. Patriliney is far more common in Africa than matriliney, which is limited mainly to parts of Zambia and Malawi, in central Africa, and to Ghana and Ivory Coast, in Western Africa. Regardless of the means of descent, authority in the family and elsewhere is always formally held by men; therefore, men have domestic authority in both patrilineal and matrilineal families (formal matriarchy is unknown in Africa). Clans, which are rarely corporate units in Africa, are clusters of kin who claim a single common ancestry but can rarely, if ever, trace the actual links of descent. Usually clans are exogamous units and may recognize various distinctive characteristics from others.

Clans are typically segmented into constituent groups, with each group recognizing a founding ancestor more recent than the clan founder; these are known in the literature as lineages, one of the criteria for a lineage being that its members, patrilineal or matrilineal can trace actual kinship links between themselves. Lineages may themselves be segmented into smaller units, the smallest typically being the group around which a domestic family is established. Such a family (if patrilineal) includes the husband and his children, all members of the small lineage, and his wife, who by the rule of exogamy must come from another clan. Other forms of descent are recognized, the most common of which is cognatic descent, whereby local kin groups are composed of members who
recognize their common descent through both men and women. A few societies recognize both patrilineal and matrilineal descent simultaneously. Some societies in Africa do not formally recognize these forms of descent at all, but they are not typical and usually consist of long settled urban dwellers.

Almost every African society has some form of descent group, however transitory, as the basis of its social organization. The recognition of these variations of ancestral descent is an effective way of constructing local groups that can last for several - often for many generations and in which the close-knit ties of kinship provide powerful links through the notion of common “blood.” By claiming exclusive ancestry, such a group can claim exclusive rights to clan and lineage property. Marriages between their members, by the rule of exogamy, cement them into larger communities and societies, each possessing its own sense of common ethnic and cultural “belonging.” Although these traditional forms of family and kinship are lessening in importance, with the continuing need for urban and industrialized labor and the consequent increase in labor migration, the strength of kin groups remains great. They are well suited to traditional forms of production and exchange where these are found (which is still the case among the majority of African peoples), and they provide a sense of personal identity and security that is of high emotive value.

A wide range of economic systems can be identified in Africa, all of which are dependent on ecological as well as on demographic, political and cultural factors. The indigenous preindustrial economies have conventionally been classified into three main types; hunter-gatherer, pastoral and agricultural. Few if any economies can be defined as being totally of one or another of these three types, which are remnants of long-outmoded evolutionist theories. Nonetheless, they make a useful starting point for description. In the traditional past, most arid areas have supported various forms of hunting and gathering, as have parts of the
denser forest areas of the Congo region. The Bushmen of the Kalahari and the foragers of the rain forests are the prime examples. Hunting-and-gathering societies necessarily have a low population density, but it must be remembered that none of these societies is based solely on this type of economy. They have also occasionally practiced agriculture and always some trade; they have not been isolated communities, but have been in contact with and usually exploited by their neighbors who live in more fertile areas. Pastoralism (livestock keeping) is widespread throughout the continent. Domesticated animals include cattle (both the long-horned Mediterranean type and the Indian humped zebu cattle), sheep, goats, camels, donkeys, pigs, fowl and the ubiquitous dogs and cats. Strict dependence on pastoralism, however, is limited to a few religions, chiefly the northern and southern Saharan fringes, the upper Nile Valley, and the East African plains and semi deserts. None of these areas support peoples who depend solely on livestock. There has always been some complementary farming and, wherever possible fishing.

Complete dependence on pastoralism is found only among certain portions of the population, such as the warriors of the Maasai, and then for only limited periods of time (e.g. they subsist solely on milk and blood drawn from the cattle’s necks, and they do not kill the beasts for meat). Trade in livestock includes long distance exchanges of the animals themselves as well as of their hides and skins. The societies that are largely dependent on livestock use them also for sacrificial and other ritual purposes, and the cattle are given great symbolic and emotive value. Many culturally determined forms of division of labor are recognized-between men and women, between old and young, and between people of different occupations and ranks. The general principle has been that men are responsible for the heavier tasks of farming and production, and also for warfare, ritual, and government; women are responsible for lighter farm work, for domestic tasks related to household maintenance and child rearing, and for giving personal and
informal advice in everyday family and political matters. There are great variations in the apportionment of such work as cattle milking and care, divination, craft production, and local trade. Women played traditionally complementary roles that are frequently being redefined and resanctioned; in many areas, labor has always been scarce, and traditional forms of slavery, peonage, and other forms of nonpaid labor have been imposed. Nonpaid labor has been an essential aspect of most of the elaborate and powerful kingdoms, the rulers of which have been able to command a large labor supply for both productive and military purposes. Until the late twentieth century, were labor seems to have been unknown.

The present economy of Africa is one of rapid change and considerable variation in types of production and distribution. The continent is, to a greater extent than ever before, part of a single world economy, but its role in that economy remains essentially that of a region that is being exploited. Since the late nineteenth century, in particular, the impact of colonial rule by European powers has greatly affected the traditional economies, in addition to the consequences of several centuries of slave trading by European and Asian slavers. Whereas previously the exploitation of metals had been in most areas a marginal form of production, the extraction of gold, copper, bauxite, and diamonds has become paramount.

Other factors that have deeply marked twentieth century African life include the establishment of large scale plantation enterprises (for such products as coco, coffee, tea, palm oil, cotton, hemp, rubber, and sugar); the introduction of modern consumer goods and the establishment of forms of taxation by cash that can be obtained only by ever increasing labor migration from poorer regions to magnet areas; the increasing inequality between the elite and the poor; the growth of industrial centers and the construction of long distance road and rail transport
facilities; the introduction of widely available forms of money and the lessening of interpersonal forms of exchange; and the appearance of more populous urban centers, that attract impoverished proletariats. The pace of these changes has been more and more rapid; greater and deeper changes have occurred in the years since World War II than had occurred throughout the nineteenth century.

6.3 Patterns of Settlement

Africa has always been and remains even now a region of small rural settlements, with urban centers of several kinds interspersed among them. Settlement patterns vary regionally, depending on differences in ecology, economy and routes of communication and on the distribution of natural resources and of trading centers. With the general poverty of production in most parts of Africa, the most efficient pattern of settlement has been that of many small villages, each generally self-sufficient and not dependent on transport or trade, except for specialty items. In most of Africa, short-lasting materials have generally been used for building houses, which, therefore, have only rarely been permanent. The dwellings built of adobe or stone last longer than those of mud and wood, and, in many areas- especially the western African Savanna – they have been architecturally quiet elaborate. But with a general pattern of shifting farming and pastoralism, coupled with a lack of means for the accumulation of wealth by inheritance, the almost universal pattern of settlements that last for only a few years, certainly for less than a generation, has been highly efficient.

Nonetheless, Africa has also been, and is increasingly, a continent on which urbanism and urbanization have flourished. We may distinguish three main types of urban centers. One is that of the traditional pre-colonial town, built of long lasting materials and typically occupied by people who are engaged in craft
production and commerce. The greatest of these centers are in Northern Africa, in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Others are in Western Africa, in particularly in both northern and southern Nigeria, cities such as Ibadan and Kano, each of which numbered many thousands in population even before the advent of colonial rule. There are also the ancient towns of Ethiopia and the Sudan and the stone-built trading towns along the Eastern African coast that have been on the same sites for many centuries (e.g. Mombasa, in Kenya). Ancient (often ruined) towns also exist elsewhere along the southern Saharan fringes (e.g. the medieval town of Djenne, in Mali) and in other places (e.g., the ruins of the stone fortresses of ancient Zimbabwe). Most of these traditional towns and cities have had ethnically homogeneous populations, ruled by indigenous kings, and their residents’ main occupations have been both trade and farming, with farmers living in the towns and commuting out to their farms.

A second type of town comprises those built by the colonial powers, usually as new industrial centers associated with extractive industries (gold, diamonds, copper). These towns were often cited in areas of low population density, and they have needed a continuous influx of labor, as was the case in Johannesburg and the towns of the Zambian and Zairean Copper belt. Other colonial towns, such as Nairobi, in Kenya, were established as communication centers. Most of these modern cities have also become administrative and business centers. They have heterogeneous populations, drawing as they do on immigrants from wide areas, and typically they have a sexual imbalance, given that most immigrants are men whose wives stay behind to farm in the rural areas.

In the third category of town are the many small “townships’ that were established during the colonial period as local administrative and trading centers. They remain important everywhere as markets, and they provide links between the rural areas and the more modern cities. One factor of crucial importance of
African urbanization is that of labor migration, especially in the newly established cities that need large numbers of unskilled laborers. Because the African continent is generally impoverished, the cities act as magnet areas, as places where men (and some women) can make the money that is unobtainable in the rural areas. The general process (since around the mid-twentieth century) has been that the cities attract men from the country, who work in them until they grow old and return to their rural homes. Meanwhile, the rural areas have a surplus of women, on whose shoulder fall all the tasks of farming. In some areas, especially in southern Africa, this imbalance has led to serious land crowding, underproduction, and social collapse in the countryside and to a violent and predatory life in the large cities, where the men are never more than temporary sojourners. Furthermore, such cities are the seat of modern elites, attracted by the money and power that are available there, who are skilled enough to benefit from the new opportunities offered by modern industry and commerce. During the twentieth century, a new class structure has been emerging, which closely resembles those found in the countries of the modern industrialized world outside Africa. Within this upper elite are both wealthy merchants and modern political leaders, whose interests are more likely to coincide with those of fellow members of the elite elsewhere than with members of the local communities from which they have come.

6.4 Bessie Head’s Utopia

Head is out to present to the world a society in which there is good human relationship, a kind of world in which people feel for each other, work with each other, a society in which sex, race and skin color are not used as the standard for human competence or judgement, but a society in which prejudice is absent and everyone has respect for social norms and values. Above all, a society in which everyone feels at home and for the human race. Edward Ako confirms thus: “When people break away from their constrictions, when they forgo their
prejudice and are prepared to try something new, when what matters is the depth of one’s soul and not the color of the skin or sex when together, the people unite… their losses become their gains” (Ako 1999:151).

Golema Mmiddi, as depicted in Head’s When Rain Clouds Gather is a kind of utopian society purged of prejudice and free of tragedies. Social norms and values are well respected and so people flee from other inhospitable set-ups to seek solace and a place in Golema Mmiddi. We read, “Golema Mmiddi consisted of people, individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life” (Head 1968:22). This is a society in which brotherliness, peace and love have a place. In When Rain Clouds Gather, human relationships and interactions are geared towards a utopian set-up. Characters are in search of happiness and the right place. Makhaya has no place in the biased and racist South African society. He decides to move to Golema Mmiddi where he hopes to find physical and psychological freedom and to live a better and fulfilling life. Makhaya’s revelation to old Dinorego is a testimony to this view: “I just wanted to step on free ground. I don’t care about anything not even the white man. I want to feel what is like to live in a free country and then may be some of the evils in my life will correct themselves” (Head 1968:10).

Makhaya’s vision of Golema Mmiddi is that of a demi-paradise which parallels and sharply contrasts with his home country South Africa, wherein, life is harsh and inhospitable to the extent that he is unable to marry and make children. Rather, he is looked upon and treated like a “kaffir” and reduced to a kind of outcast. Hence he had to leave South Africa to Golema Mmiddi. In this way, there is no hope because children symbolize hope and continuity. According to Makhaya, it is disadvantageous and imperative to move “out of a part of Africa that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false belief” (Head 1968:16). South Africa is presented as a constricting and inhibiting
world in which one cannot blossom. This explains why Makhaya leaves. From his experiences, we observe that hardship rather moulds an individual to success. Human relationship in Golema Mmidi is free from apathy. Consequently, one person’s problem is everybody’s concern. Dinorego is a man full of kindness. He is not only fatherly, but lovely and responsible too. Socially, he is a kind of welfare officer with the purity of the soul. That is why he treats Gilbert and Makhaya like his own “sons”. This he reveals in an exchange with Makhaya “I have no word to describe Gilbert, son… just as I take you as my own son so do I take Gilbert as my own son” (Head 1968:27).

Dinorego’s entire family loves Makhaya who is not their kind. They feel for him, and look at him as one of them. They show a lot of hospitality towards him. When Dinorego meets Makhaya for the first time, he immediately introduces him to his family. Food and water is also offered him. The hospitality and brotherliness that is directed towards Makhaya the stranger reveals that Head manipulates her characters to show that people can live together without class segregation between black and white which is her objective.

In the same story, Gilbert a White loves Makhaya immensely. He expresses the willingness to invite him for supper. Gilbert Believes that humanity no matter its background and origin is one. He is determined to ameliorate the agronomic situation of Golema Mmidi for the welfare of all. Thanks to his agronomic knowledge, he is able to impart agronomic know-how to the people of Golema Mmidi for free. Gilbert is confident that a single individual is incapable of bringing about a positive agricultural revolution. People must work cooperatively to convert the landscape. His dream is that all the cattle of Golema Mmidi should graze on cooperatively owned feeding grounds” (Head 1968:39). To realize this dream, he implements in close collaboration with Makhaya and the women. About
Gilbert we are told: “He was first and first and foremost a practical down to earth kind of man intently on being of useful service to his fellowmen” (Head 1968:81).

Gilbert converts Golema Mmidi into a tragic free land. He works with the women to change adversity to prosperity. Here, he has broken the patriarchal structure that women are subservient. This is Head’s deliberate attempt to create an ideal world different from the norms of society. Through modern agricultural practices, the people of Golema Mmidi convert a barren landscape to an evergreen one. They are able to produce enough food to eat and sell such that, the extra and kitchen thrash are converted to cattle feed. In this way, everyone is happy and healthy. As a matter of fact, matrimonial infidelity becomes a talk of the past. Moreover, matrimonial abandonment caused by the mad search for grazing land by the men who use to abandon their families became unnecessary. About this, we are told:“ Towards the end of the long dry season they too left their watering places along the river beds, and moved with their cattle into the bush where the grass grew in tangled confusion under the trees and watered their cattle in the drinking pools of the wild buck” (Head 1968:161).

From this excerpt, we are made to understand that the men more often abandoned their homes and went in search of grass to feed their cattle. Feeding the cattle well resulted in good sales and consequently they could buy all their needs. About this, the narrator says: “The idea was to get capital in hand which would open up the way for purchasing fertilizers, seeds and the equipment necessary to increase food production in Golema Mmidi” (Head 1968:99). Through cooperatives, Gilbert is able to end subsistent agriculture, which was of little benefit to the people. He eliminates the land tenure system that stratified the society into the rich and the poor and maintained the poor in a permanently poor position. Head’s fictionalized ideal world can be seen through Gilbert’s vision of society, which is that everyone and anyone should work cooperatively together
and reap the benefits cooperatively as we are made to apprehend in the ensuing assertion: “He wanted Golema Mmidi to be cooperative in everything as that was the only way of defeating the land tenure system in the tribal reserves and the only way of defeating subsistent agriculture which was geared towards keeping the poor more poor until eternity” (Head 1968:156).

In Golema Mmidi, personal sorrow becomes communal sorrow. The death of Paulina’s son, for instance, is the concern of the entire community as everyone is grieved. This is a pointer to new historicism which states that literature is a product of society since man does not live in a vacuum. In African societies, death and life are celebrated communally. On her part, Paulina is a very selfless woman. She works hard to improve the society. She is very dynamic. She imparts Gilbert’s ideas to the other women. This helps to open up the way for the agricultural revolution in Golema Mmidi. She is thus indispensable to the village community. Consequently, when Chief Matenge, an impediment to progress attempts to victimize her, the whole village community converges on him and he ends his own very life. This further guarantees growth and happiness in the society.

Mma Millipede on her part, is the “people’s mother”. She is interested in the welfare of the entire community. Although she is aged, she is willing to work for others. She makes every move to see into it that Makhaya feels at home, and feeds well. She investigates into his health situation thus: “do you eat well... please inform me so that I can accompany you to the hospital as you are now far away from your home and relatives” (Head 1968:71.) Thus, through her character, Head portrays ideal motherhood. This could be understood as Head’s attempt at fraternization. A mother is a symbol of life and motherliness and should be propagated even if one is not a biological mother. She is able to organize the wedding of Maria and Makhaya as if they are her biological children. In a utopian setup, suspicion towards each other is absent. Thus Dinorego (Maria’s father)
hands over to Mma Millipede the total responsibility of his daughter’s marriage. The breaking down of gender barrier as a projection of an ideal world is also an important aspect that has been treated in this study. The traditional notion of women being relegated to the background at the socio-economic and political levels in this society has been evaded. Women are no longer looked upon as objects. To idealize her society, Head depicts in her novels female characters that represent the view of the new self-assertive women. The picture of the woman presented to us here is no longer that of one having a complex vis-a-vis men, but that of an educated woman, who, aware of the unfairness of her society, consequently longs to be fulfilled in herself as a full human being and not as anybody’s appendage.

Head bridges this gap by making these women to expand their limited roles of wives and mothers and become so active at the socio-economic and political levels. The hitherto deaf, dumb, quite and contemptible woman has acquired a voice and speaks out aloud. To confirm this, Lylod W. Brown has the following comment: “African women who have been hopelessly mute suddenly found their voices and began to be heard over the world. Despite their exclusion from educational, socio and political opportunities, a number of African women have overcome this obstacle” (Brown 1982:2).

Characters like ma Millipede, Paulina Sebesso stand out glaringly. They do not want to see their femininity as subjective. They decide to put the best of their input and stride alongside with men without fear. As a matter of fact Mma Millipede is courted by Ramogodi, the son of the reigning chief. It is said that Ramogodi is sexually attractive to women and takes this advantage to hop from woman to woman. For this reason, almost all the women of the village have been his bed mates. She counters this ancient custom whereby a man maintained his dignity and self-control in front of women over a harem of concubines. Despite
Ramogodi’s high position in their society, she turns down his proposal. She does not intend to be taken as an object, to be merely used to satisfy the insatiable sexual desires of the son of a chief. Head does this to obtain an ideal set-up, wherein women and men are treated on egalitarian bases. Once Mma Millipede divorces Ramogodi, she settles in Golema Mmidi and becomes a prominent person. Her popularity in the village makes people to consult her to settle important matters. Consequently, Gilbert relies on her to find out the right person who will lead women in the construction of tobacco shed and its cultivation. This accounts for her participation in the cooperative project. To project the image of an ideal society, there is a show of peaceful-co-existence and collaboration amongst the characters.

She organizes Dinorego’s daughter’s marriage. The reception takes place at her premises. This social and peaceful atmosphere reveals an ideal set-up. This quality of leadership and wisdom definitely conferred on Ma Millipede, a sense of dignity and honour in the society in which women are of importance. In fact, the opening of the cooperative gives Paulina Sebesso the scope for managerial talents and brings her intimately in touch with the leading males of the village. As such, she has the advantage over other women of the village as she is the most intellectual among them and lives near the farm. Head, by bringing men and women together, is opting for a perfect world where no one should look on another as inferior.

Politically, Paulina is full of ambitions and displays qualities of leadership. These qualities are recognized by both the women who refer to her as a “big brain” and by Gilbert and Makhaya. For Makhaya, Paulina runs the whole village through sheer will power, whereas for Gilbert, Paulina is invaluable to him and without her initiative, nothing would start. This evidence of men’s confidence in Paulina shows that nowadays, men recognize and appreciate talent when they see
it. This shows an ideal community where in men and women work together for the common good of the society. Men now have to count on women in order to undertake meaningful action in social and political development.

In this novel, Gilbert cannot run the cooperative without the help of women. In this case, the mutual need of men and women underlines the need for cooperation and teamwork and not exclusion. This is the kind of ideal set up that Bessie Head opts for. In this way, instead of stagnation promoted by characters like Chief Matenge, there will be growth, peace, prosperity and progress in the society. Therefore, solidarity between men and women must be the first and foremost important factor in the development of the society. The coming together of men and women for the common good of the society is symbolized by rain clouds. In fact, the gathering of rain Clouds in the midst of draught is a sign of hope. Economically, Head has made attempts at putting in place a vibrant, self-reliant society. She does this by engaging men and women in common tasks for economic survival. Actually, Mma Millipede purchases the skins of wild animals which Dion ego transforms into mats and blankets for her to sell. She also sets up her own poultry. This economic venture enables Mma Millipede to become socially and economically independent. At the socio-economic and political levels, Head has put in place a vibrant ideal society by striking a balance men and women within the above mentioned denominations in *When Rain Clouds Gather.***

**6.5 Utopia as gleaned through Maru**

The notion of utopia can equally be situated in Head’s *Maru* at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels. Socio-culturally, although the Leseding society is dominated by the Botswanas who oppress and dominate the Masarwas (Bushmen), Head uses her principal character Maru to emplace an ideal set-up.
Culturally, the Masarwa have always been considered by the Botswana as people from the “bush tribe” who do not know anything. About this, a pupil is incited to insult Margaret Cadmore Junior from the Marsawa tribe thus, “Since when did a bushy go to school? We take him to the bush where he eats’ mealie pap, pap” (Head 1971:17). As such, they are subjugated and suppressed. Head strives to solve this problem through her main character.

Maru is Witty because he has to put in place a perfect human society wherein there is respect for social norms and values, by hesitating to be crowned paramount chief while working out a solution to equate the Masarwa and Botswana tribes. The implication here is that if Maru accepts to be crowned chief, he will have to see into it that the culture of the society (racial discrimination) is kept intact as we are made to understand:

*If Maru takes over as paramount Chief, he would be expected as the custodian of cultural values to maintain the status quo; at least in terms of the way his people see themselves vis-a-vis the other. Maru’s dilemma therefore, is how to distance himself from the sorry state of affairs, how to keep his purity in the tainted environment.*

(Head 1971: 17)

In order not to continue with prejudice, Maru tactfully calls on the king makers to give him some time to reflect over it. One is embarrassed to think that Maru does not desire the chieftaincy which every other person will normally desire. About it, he defines his position in the flowing lines: “I never intended accepting the chieftaincy I was only born in it to see its evils and its efforts on society. Everything I had done had been an experience, experiment I just move on
to more experiments” (Head 1971:70). Maru is determined to bridge the gap between the tribes. He links Moleka to his sister Dikeledi and by so doing he goes closer to the Masarwa girl Margaret Gadmore. By getting married to a person of the “bush tribe” Maru connotes that, humanity is one. Head successfully bridges the gap between, the Mararwa. Thus, if a prince can get married to a girl from the “bush tribe”, it means he has deviated from the norm. Maru uses the wedding of Dikeledi and Moleka to elope with Margaret Cadmore to a land of fulfillment.

Head also employs politics in Maru to put in place an ideal set-up. She equally does this through her main character Maru. Maru has foresight. He banishes Seth, Pete and Morafi from society. These are all epitomes and promoters of prejudice. They assist Moleka to make life unbearable for Margaret. Maru is aware that if these people who are symbols of evil are purged from society, things will go well. He therefore banishes them. In this way, he purges society of racial segregation and puts in place human equality as Craig Mackenzie asserts about Maru: “He envisions a world apart from petty human hatred and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendor and glory” (Head 1971:46).Maru’s relationship with Margaret Cadmore Junior is a revolutionary move.

When the Masarwa people in Leseding understand that Maru, a royal figure is married to one of theirs, they conclude that their marginalization and inferiority is ended and thus hope for better days ahead. About this, Head in an interview with Lee Nichols underscores: “When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru’s marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room” (Head 1971: 53).
These Masarwas are thus determined to challenge full force and to eliminate whoever will attempt to look on or marginalized them. A new society is therefore in the making as the chief-Maru is married to a Masarwa. It could be said that Bessie Head uses her imaginative creation to resolve problems that were encountered in her society. This is confirmed as Dorothy Driver underlines:

*Using writing as some kind of shrine to go to some means of spiritual survival, Head made a home for a self out of what she saw as Botswana’s potential to be a “cohesive whole”. Her ideal community where the past is recalled in the present with the sense of a continuing and secure future…. and not identified and thus separated in terms of class and race.* (Head 1971: 166)

### 6.6 San Culture in Bessie Head's Maru

Bessie Head's *Maru*, a romance grounded in Botswanan village politics, is often touted as a novel attacking prejudice. It is the story of racial prejudice conquered by idealistic love functioning as a socially progressive force that advances mankind in the direction of racial equality. His emphasis on the fairy tale quality of the novel is important in coming to such a conclusion. Many see the Cinderella-like relationship between Maru and Margaret, the Tswana prince and the young bushman woman, as an affirmation of equality along racial, gender, and cultural lines.

The novel, while it certainly addresses prejudice, does not show an understanding of the San culture which Margaret purportedly represents, nor does
it provide a satisfactory example of how prejudice is successfully overcome. Rather, perhaps inadvertently, Maru’s rescue of Margaret from her despised situation serves only to reinforce Margaret’s perceived noiselessness and powerlessness. The plot of Head’s novel centers on the treatment of a San woman raised in a white mission, who attempts to integrate herself into the black society of Dilepe, a rural village in Botswana. In Dilepe, though, the Bushmen are slaves. In the minds of the villagers, Margaret comes from this despised group of people.

The anomaly of her missionary training has provided her with an educational background superior to other Bushmen, and she has earned a respected position as a teacher. Margaret spends her childhood and adolescent years trying to find out how Bushmen survive as an underclass to the ruling Botswana. In the novel Bushmen are seen as less than human. Head tells that Bushmen and zebras are more alike in the eyes of non-Bushman than are Bushmen and humans. She generalizes that any group who looks different can become "monsters" to another, but the distinction goes beyond appearance. Behavior, which is culturally defined, is also important to the perception of a group. For the children at the mission school, that behavior apparently included three concerns: "the wild jiggling dance, living in the bush, and eating mealie pap, a kind of boiled corn meal paste” (Head 1971: 13).

The dance may have referred to something like the healing dance where the Bushmen, during a singing-clapping cadence, begin to "tremble violently"(Head 1971:53). Adult members of the community attend. People sing and clap rhythmically while the dancers dance themselves into a hypnotic trance, he explains. But this dance, while appearing to celebrate self-abandonment, in reality, serves a community function. The trance dance process unites the community behind the common purpose of resolving tension. It also gives participants a broader perspective on the dispute. Bushmen tradition emphasizes apologies and
forgiveness. The appearance of this dancing may be "uncivilized," but its function goes well beyond the outsiders' own cultural coping mechanisms.

The bush location where they live is despised as uncivilized; in fact, many San in the novel, as we have noted, have been brought in from the bush to live as slaves in Dilepe, which is apparently a "better" life for them. Historically, the San were more widespread across Southern Africa. In time the whites encroached upon the San's traditional hunting grounds. Some Bushmen went to live with them and others moved on west and north in search of land where they could live freely. The food of the Bushmen is notably largely vegetarian. While mealie pap may be considered substandard food, it was, as every school child knows, the typical prisoner's meal during Nelson Mandela's stay on Robben Island; it is far from a badge of inhumanity. It is often considered an appropriate side dish at a braai barbecue. The mealie pap is considered Africa's fast food, the culinary equivalent of chips, without the grease. There are at least 100 million people in Africa who eat a version of pap for supper every day. It would seem this food is neither distinctive of the San people nor dehumanizing.

Each of these distinctions is cultural rather than racial. And each is a mark of ridicule from the mission children. And none of these characteristics is displayed by Margaret in the course of the novel. Head's narrator claims that the future of the Masarwa is in peril because the only place they were accepted (besides in the bush, presumably) was as the slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Botswana. This is the society into which Margaret moves when she begins her professional life, unaware that her identification with the Bushmen will have serious consequences impacting her treatment there. Margaret’s missionary training stripped her of her cultural heritage and left her with only the appearance, the physical trappings of a Bushman. Margaret's adoptive mother of the same name muses on the day of her unofficial adoption about where Bushmen are
buried and says, "They don’t seem to be at all a part of the life of this country". (Head 1971: 9). But once the reader comes to the end of the novel, certainly such a statement is a projection of Maru’s wishes far more than it is reality for the woman who is dominated and exiled with her prince. Her inability to speak or even apparently leave the house gives new meaning to the mindless smiles that the narrator interprets for Maru. This reversal is foreshadowed by Margaret being objectified and subsumed by the Western-influenced society of Dilepe. The administrators and children of the village attempt to force Margaret out of the school. Culturally, Bushmen could not be educated; therefore, by Dilepe logic, Margaret could not, despite her credentials, be qualified to teach the village children.

Maru himself views life differently than those around him. Late in the novel the omniscient narrator reports that the people of Dilepe "knew nothing about the standards of the soul, and since Maru only lived by those standards they had never been able to make a place for him in their society"(Head 1971: 122). But while Maru sees differently, he has been unable to cause others to see differently. Maru’s cohorts still see Margaret after their exile as a woman, everybody would loathe. Maru has convinced only himself, and then not completely, that he has made a choice that has benefited both Margaret and the Masarwa. Neither Maru nor Margaret herself has understood the bi-cultural confusion within Margaret. The Bushman culture attached to her is at best superficial, but she has been made to assume the results of a culture that was never hers. Even to Dikeledi, Margaret's San, culture is attractive but unnecessary. Margaret’s painting is seen as an extension of her, but even that is taken from her as regularly as a mother goat’s milk.

It is interesting that Dikeledi, Margaret's strongest supporter, surrenders her own sense of identity in bedding Moleka, Maru's rival for Margaret's attention,
and, impregnated, becomes the controller of their relationship. The opening, but chronologically ending, scene of the novel, gives us Maru preparing flowerbeds to grow yellow daisies, because they were the only flowers which resembled the face of his wife and the sun of his love. But Margaret is really no different from those daisies. She too has been cultivated by Maru’s care in Dilepe society, fertilized by the art supplies Maru provided and finally transplanted into his garden spot a thousand miles away. She retains nothing of her Bushman heritage, and possibly little of her Englishness.

Set in the British colony of Nigeria in the 1930s and 1940s, Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood* details the life story of an Ibo woman named Nnu Ego who escapes the ignominy of a childless first marriage by fleeing to the distant city of Lagos to start a new life with a second husband. Nnu Ego's simple dream of becoming a mother, a dream rooted in the cultural values of Ibo society, where motherhood is the primary source of a woman's self-esteem and public status is happily realized several times over in this new setting. The pleasures associated with motherhood that the protagonist so eagerly anticipates, however, are ultimately negated by the difficult economic conditions of her new urban environment.

In short, there are so few job opportunities for her husband to pursue and so little ambition on his part to pursue them that Nnu Ego spends her entire life alternately birthing children and working day in and day out as a cigarette peddler to stave off the hunger and poverty that invariably haunt her household. The novel focuses on this grueling battle, a battle that ends in a loss for Nnu Ego, as she witnesses her beloved sons grow up and leave Nigeria for good and her daughters marry and move away. Nnu Ego's hopes of living out her final years in the company of her grandchildren disappear before she turns forty, and she dies at the side of a country road, alone and unnoticed.
The title of Emecheta's novel is patently ironic, for it would seem that there are few joys associated with motherhood after all. And yet while that reality is certainly one message the novel imparts, there is far more to the text than a critique of motherhood. The fact that Emecheta's novel moves beyond this critique to explore the costs of colonialism for women in urban Nigeria is summarized in a crucial passage midway through the novel in which Nnu Ego pauses to assess the injustices of her life in Lagos:

It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. Here in Lagos, where she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance was it right for her husband to refer to her responsibility? It seemed that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty (Emecheta 1979: 6).

6.7 Ibo Society and Buchi Emecheta

Much of the written scholarship on Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood focuses on the novel's critique of traditional Ibo society. Specifically, such articles read Emecheta's text as a denunciation of the reproductive practices of the Ibo people, practices that do harm to women by promoting the idea that a proper wife should seek only to beget and care for her offspring. As critical texts that recognize Emecheta's attempt to expose the gender politics operating within indigenous Africa, these readings are important. They collectively validate The Joys of Motherhood as a work of socio-historical import, as a novel that fills noticeable gaps in the historical record of African women's experiences.
Nevertheless, the scholarly consensus that valorizes this work obscures other thematic threads that are equally important in the recovery of African women's history.

A women's erasure in history entails not only an analysis of their work and their role in the family, but also an analysis of both formal and informal political movements and their impact upon women, women's participation in them and the ways in which they shape male-female interactions, and men's and women's roles in society. The rest of this chapter will develop this suggestion further and argue its validity. In particular, I will demonstrate that the hardships endured by the women of Emecheta's novel emanate from an oppressive cultural practice regarding women's role in Ibo villages, but at the same time the political and economic transition initiated by the values and priorities of British culture clash destructively with the values and priorities of indigenous Africa.

The Joys of Motherhood bears out the fact that this transitional period was particularly disadvantageous for African women. As the plight of the novel's key character reveals, colonialism was a costly reality for those who were forced to walk a fine line between that which was demanded of them by their village communities and that which was demanded of them by the rules of a European political regime. We find that the Ibo women of Emecheta's novel find themselves in this very predicament; specifically, they are subjected to new forms of exploitation as they are asked to assume traditional duties and responsibilities under a newly imported economic system that unlike their native system fails to validate or reward them for such work. In essence, we notice this in the novels of Buchi: the destructive influence of Western capitalism and its associated ideologies on the relative power and autonomy of Ibo women.
Before discussing in further detail the political dynamics underwriting this thralldom, it might be useful to review the role women played in Ibo society before the widespread influence of British rule. The popular belief that African women were impotent and/or trivial in the male-dominated communities of Ibo culture is a gross misconception. While men's labor was widely considered to be more prestigious than women's labor, and while the practice of polygamy and patrilocal domicile (married women dwelling in their husbands' villages rather than in their own) secured men's power over women in general, Ibo women still wielded considerable influence both within their marriages and within the larger community.

Women, for example, were a major force in the society's agrarian economy; they planted their own crops, sold their crop surplus as well as that of their husbands, and exerted exclusive control over the operation and management of the village market, the site where all local commerce took place. In addition, women were active participants in the dual-sex political system of Ibo society, a system in which Ibo men and Ibo women governed themselves separately, both sexes selecting their own set of leaders and cabinet members to legislate issues relevant to the members of their respective constituencies. Women's formidable presence in the economic and political realms of the village gave them significant say in how the village was run and ensured that their needs would not be ignored. Surprisingly, the practice of polygamy worked in subtle ways to contribute to this outcome. While polygamy was not a perfect marital arrangement, it was well-suited to the agrarian lifestyle of the Ibo people and contained several built-in mechanisms that allowed women to better cope with the burdens of that type of lifestyle.

Polygamy allowed co-wives, for example, to form a power-bloc within the family, a power-bloc that was notoriously effective in coercing an otherwise
stubborn husband to behave in ways congenial to his wives. Polygamy also eased the workload of Ibo women by making it a common practice for women of the same union to share domestic chores, such as cooking and babysitting. This benefit was particularly advantageous in the context of Ibo society, for Ibo women were encouraged to have numerous children - far more children than they were probably able to manage on their own. Finally, in addition to the cultural prestige conferred upon those associated with such a union, polygamy protected the economic interests of women by ensuring that a given family had enough members, that is, sufficient manual labor to produce and harvest a bountiful crop.

It would be incorrect to assert, even in light of the foregoing facts, that the status of women in pre-colonial Ibo society matched the status of men, for this was simply not the case. The women of African agrarian societies did not enjoy the same roles and privileges as men; they were equal to men in all the ways that counted: they had equal access to resources and to means of production. The shift of indigenous Africa from subsistence-based societies to money-based societies upset this power balance by introducing a new type of production called cash-cropping. Planting crops for cash as opposed to planting crops for food or exchange was a form of labor that was quickly taken up and dominated by African men.

Cash-cropping proved so superior to other forms of productive labor within the context of the new capitalist economy that it immediately undercut the value of women's work which was not aimed at producing cash and rendered such work practically superfluous. These facts are crucial to understand the hardships experienced by the female protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's novel. As the novel makes it evident, Nnu Ego is a victim of a society in which African women are required to continue performing traditional duties and responsibilities in an economic setting where that labor is no longer of any market value. In other
words, Nigeria's transition from a tribal culture and a tribal moral value system to a Western capitalist system with all its benefits and pitfalls has occurred at the expense of women like Nnu Ego, who have exchanged one form of patriarchy with another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones.

The local economy was indeed a major force in contributing to the subjugation of women like Nnu Ego. The African men were allowed to enter the formal economy of colonial Nigeria by acquiring jobs that paid standard wages while the African women were excluded from this sphere and were edged instead into the informal and highly unstable economy of street-side peddling. This is a universal factor – men had better jobs and women had lower wages and so on- but actually many countries have given a better chance to women after colonial systems came in and changed the social and political scene. It is the African men who are the main cause in Emecheta's novels who cause the suffering of women. Women have to fight for themselves, and men have to help.

The gender bias inscribed in the new, dominant capitalist system proves to be devastating for Nnu Ego, who is pressured to maintain her role as a traditional wife and mother regardless of the fact that this new system works against the success of that role. Nnu Ego's barred access from reliable modes of production confines her to levels of poverty that make it nearly impossible for her to feed, clothe, and educate her eight children. This would not have been the situation in her tribal village of Ibuza, where Nnu Ego's crop yield would have sustained her large family, and where Nnu Ego and the other women of the community would have controlled key sectors of the local economy through the production and exchange of household goods and services. Women's influence over the economic affairs of their community gave them significant political leverage and allowed them to participate in village-wide decisions that affected their well-being as
women. Nnu Ego's life in colonial Lagos not only lacks this measure of security, but it also entails a life of self-abnegation that is never mitigated by the kinds of dividends-both abstract and concrete - that Nnu Ego has come to expect in return for the fulfillment of her maternal role. Her largest payoff, for example, never materializes.

From the very onset of the text, Nnu Ego anticipates the rewards she will reap as a result of her motherhood, dreaming that "her old age will be happy and that when she dies there will be somebody left behind to refer to her as “mother” (Emecheta 1979: 54). This reward, however, remains elusive, a fact that Nnu Ego begins to realize long before her eldest son's move to the States exposes the presumption of such an expectation. In a moment of clarity she reflects: "I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life I have to work myself to the bone to look after them; I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul"(Emecheta 1979: 186).

This interior monologue interrogates the gross discrepancy between the struggles and rewards of motherhood, a discrepancy staged by a new capitalist economy that not only promotes Western values of individualism over familial responsibility, but also no longer awards security and status solely on the basis of one's offspring. Nnu Ego is forced to adhere to the rules of her indigenous culture even though she realizes, on some level, that those rules are no longer the ones that govern what is of value in the colonial context. The absence of appropriate returns in exchange for Nnu Ego's self-sacrifice is apparent in other situations in the novel as well. At one notable point, for example, Nnu Ego tries to comfort herself with the fact of her privation, recalling that in Ibo society, "part of the pride of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable and be able to draw with joy: “I
can't afford another outfit, because I am nursing [my child], so you see I can't go anywhere to sell anything” (Emecheta 1979: 80). This reminder of the former esteem of hardship, however, fails to console Nnu Ego. As the passage suggests, the kind of poverty associated with motherhood in Ibo society was not a burden or an embarrassment, but a point of pride. In Ibo society having children was the primary index of a woman's worth, and therefore the straitened circumstances brought about by childbearing were of little consequence, for they were far outweighed by the symbolic value of being a mother.

Although Nnu Ego's own penury is a result, in part, of the children she has borne, she nevertheless is unable to take comfort in that fact. Her situation is shaped by a harsher economic setting, a setting where poverty is not alleviated by the "blessing" of children because children are too much of a material liability in a place of such limited resources and because there is no longer a communal setting or a community forum where the "flaunting" of one's maternal success can occur.

Thus, while Nnu Ego is obliged to accept cheerfully the fact that "money and children don't go together" (Emecheta 1979: 80), she is denied the maternal pride and recognition that once would have made it acceptable for her to endure the kind of poverty associated with childbearing. She is, in this way, injured by the new political economy of Lagos, injured by a social setting where the tribal glorification of motherhood is still espoused in the face of cultural and economic forces that no longer reward women for their role as mothers. Similar to the cultural "privilege" of poverty, the accolades of the title "senior wife" are also undermined in the colonial context and no longer offer the same material and psychological benefits for the Ibo women it describes. This shift does not go unnoticed by Nnu Ego, who on more than one occasion questions the motives of a patriarchy that insists on using such a title despite its irrelevance outside the tribal sphere. After a scolding by her husband for engaging in a cooking strike, for
example, Nnu Ego lashes back, charging, "Whenever it comes to sacrifice then everyone reminds me about being the senior wife, but if there is something to gain, I am told to be quiet because wanting a good thing does not befit my situation. I can understand the value of being a senior wife in Ibuza; not here in Lagos, Nnaife. It doesn't mean a thing"(Emecheta 1979: 134).

In a later passage, Nnu Ego makes a similar reflection: "Men are so clever. By admonishing me and advising me to live up to my status as senior wife, they made it sound such an enviable position, worth any woman's while to fight for" (167). These passages underscore the fact that Nnu Ego's standing as senior wife requires her to engage in "sacrifice" and self-restraint, and yet, once again, the gains that would presumably compensate for such sacrifice are notably absent. Nnu Ego mentions these benefits elsewhere, observing that "at home in Ibuza would have had my own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting my position"(Emecheta 1979: 137).

In urban Nigeria, however, where financial hardship places space at a premium and where the newly imported capitalist ideology of the nuclear family enforces cohabitation of spouses, Nnu Ego is left without these rewards. Her predicament as a woman is exacerbated, therefore, by the fact that the capitalist system she now lives under still requires her to play the role of the responsible senior wife without offering her the small privileges and benefits that once accompanied that role under the former tribal system. The overall effect of this cultural confrontation between Ibo traditions and morals and Western traditions and morals is registered most profoundly in the decline of women's political agency within the domestic sphere. This shift of power can once again be traced to broader economic structures within urban Nigeria, where the lack of formal employment opportunities for women altered their position in the home by forcing them to become materially dependent on their husbands. Indeed, the very structure
of imported Western capitalism arranges for this dependency by insisting on a separate domain for women, one that removes them from spaces of public production and exchange and secures them in the role of the housewife, making them financially reliant on their husbands.

The fluctuating levels of poverty that define Nnu Ego's situation throughout the novel illustrate this new dependency. When Nnaife works, Nnu Ego and her children are schooled and fed, but when Nnaife stays at home or when his paychecks fail to make it back to Lagos in a timely manner, Nnu Ego and the children face starvation. Such a situation would not have been the case in the agrarian economy of Ibuza. As Nnu Ego herself admits as she prepares to return to her village for the last time, "at least there would be no rent to pay and, if it came to the worst, I could always plant food at the back of my hut" (Emecheta 1979: 219). The city setting of Lagos does not offer these alternatives, and hence Nnu Ego's life there is characterized by a material dependency on her husband.

The resounding failure of the novel's infamous cooking strike demonstrates that her new role as a trapped housewife divests her of virtually all political power within the home. In a rare show of solidarity, both Nnu Ego and Adaku Nnaife's second wife agree to stop preparing meals for their husband until Nnaife increases their housekeeping allowance. Their dependence on him is so great, however, that his blanket refusal to raise the amount forces Nnu Ego to end the strike for her children's sake. Her prompt capitulation underscores her new predicament as an African woman in Lagos: neither she nor Adaku are in any position to make demands as to how their home will be run. Their shared political impotence is inscribed in Nnu Ego's pathetic groveling: "She went on pleading till morning, and when Nnaife was setting out for work she ran after him and begged him again. “Please help, Nnaife, please!” (Emecheta 1979: 137).
6.8 Marginalization of Women

Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* illustrates not only the new marginalization of African women within the home but also the way in which colonialism dismantles the collective power of women by requiring them to place their own needs over the needs of other women. The pre-colonial alliances between women were forged on the basis of their shared roles in the agrarian economy and on the mutual class standing that such roles arranged. By forcing women out of these formal sectors of exchange and by introducing a class system of advanced social stratification, the adoption of a Western capitalist system not only destroyed the basis on which African women's coalitions were formed, but it also relegated women to the ranks of such destitution that collective action was no longer a possible means of organization: survival became a competitive game that was best played on one's own.

Nnu Ego has no choice, then, but to think of her own children and to arrange a separate truce with Nnaife. She tries to explain her actions to Adaku, arguing, "We can't carry on this way and let the children starve. I'm not going to play strike with my children's stomachs" (Emecheta 1979: 138). However, this explanation does little to appease Adaku, whose similarly precarious situation in terms of money and provisions leads her to question Nnu Ego's motivations. Adaku, for example, assumes that Nnu Ego ended the strike in order to curry favor with Nnaife, in order to ensure that Nnu Ego-might be seen as the more favorable wife, as the wife most deserving of money and support. Tensions mount between the two as their shared needs lead them to act in increasingly selfish and divisive ways. The novel confirms this conclusion by revealing Nnu Ego's feelings toward Adaku as the two wives meet for the first time: "Jealousy, fear and anger seized Nnu Ego in turns. She hated this type of woman, who would flatter a man, depend on him, and need him" (Emecheta 1979: 118). As this passage suggests, Nnu Ego
hates Adaku not so much because Nnu Ego feels personally threatened by her or inferior to her, but because Adaku is "needy" and "dependent." Nnu Ego realizes that her own well-being and the well-being of her children are jeopardized by this new woman who will undoubtedly make demands on the family's scarce resources. Any possible alliance between Nnu Ego and Adaku is thus spoiled from the beginning by the grim financial conditions of their shared situation, conditions caused by a colonial economy which denies women the opportunity to obtain positions as wage laborers and thus the chance to support themselves.

The rivalry between both women becomes so intense that it ultimately drives them apart, and their paths do not cross again until the end of the novel. The physical separation characterizing their relationship is not only suggestive of their loss of political power within the home, but it also signifies the loss of a collective support system within African society. Village life was characterized by an informal system in which women worked together and interacted with each other throughout the course of each day. Such interaction was crucial, for it enabled women to deal with the dual demands of marriage and motherhood in ways that took less of a physical and psychological toll on each person. Nnu Ego's return to her village home of Ibuza after the death of her father underscores the importance of female affiliation by demonstrating the way in which African women express solidarity through shared tasks and other meaningful encounters. It is notably a girl who first greets Nnu Ego and her family as they arrive on the outskirts of Ibuza.

_The girl Came tearing into the motor park, hugged each of the children and said she was going home straight away to fetch the young men to help them. Noting Nnu Ego's pregnancy, she instructed her not to move an inch until the men arrived. She left her_
bowls of groundnuts for the children, and then dashed into the
market to bring them some salted ukwa bean cake. (Emecheta 1979:
151)

This passage illustrates the nature of the informal support structures that
bind African women together. Several scenes describe how efficiently women
work together and provide emotional support for each other. As Nnu Ego enters
her village, she is immediately welcomed by another woman, who instantly takes
it upon herself to lighten the older woman's load by volunteering to summon the
help of the village men. This errand is carried out, however, only after the girl
orders Nnu Ego to rest and takes over Nnu Ego's responsibilities as a mother,
feeding her children and rushing off to secure even more provisions for them. At
first, Emecheta obscures this discrepancy, highlighting the philanthropy of an
urban-based women's group that lends Nnu Ego both the money and the know-
how with which to start her own business. Emecheta also equips Nnu Ego with a
friend, an Owerri woman named Cordelia who responds to Nnu Ego's unspoken
appeal for companionship with an appropriately charitable response: “We are like
sisters on a pilgrimage. Why should we not help one another?” (Emecheta 1979:
53).

This spirited invocation of sisterhood, not unlike the sympathetic
intervention of the urban women's group, suggests the presence of an extensive
female support system that binds and unifies the indigenous women of Lagos. And
yet, in reality, these passages serve only to underscore that which is generally not
accessible to African women in urban areas. Nnu Ego's forays into the business of
petty trading, made necessary by the increasing demands of her children, render
her slave to cheap labor and prevent her from maintaining contact with the women
who originally helped her. The loss of such companionship is acutely felt. The
impetus behind women's isolation is both colonialism's new capitalist economy and the pressures that such an economy places on lower-income families. It is the need to earn money that keeps Nnu Ego on the streets. It is the need to earn money that bars her from attending church services and women's meetings. And it is the need to make money that prevents her from feeling part of a larger community in Lagos. Nnu Ego has internalized the script of a modern housewife, accepting the home as her proper domain and her position therein as subordinate. The economic strictures of a male-controlled economy and Nnu Ego's own attempt to play according to the rules of her newly westernized setting enslave her in a role in which she is prevented from forming useful relationships with the women around her.

The losses of such companionship and of any meaningful connection with the public sphere are explicitly inscribed in one of the most pervasive visual images of the text, the encroaching walls and cramped spaces of Nnu Ego's one-room flat. Nnu Ego's isolation within the confines of this space prevents her from accessing opportunities that almost certainly would have made her job as a mother of eight more bearable. The image gives definition to the person Nnu Ego becomes and also reflects the experiences of the other women in Lagos who share similar circumstances. That their lives are imprinted by the profit motive of capitalism and by other social forces that extend beyond the material fact of gender is a conclusion that is both readily apparent and highly problematic. It is only after a life of want and struggle that Nnu Ego finally realizes the value of female companionship, admitting that she "would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship" (Emechta 1979: 219). At the same time, however, she concedes that her forced situation as both a mother and a household provider does not afford her the luxury of accessing the friendships available to her. Pressured to be a model African mother, but stripped of the means and incentives to fulfill that role successfully,
Nnu Ego becomes a casualty of a conflict between the old and the new, a casualty of a colonial system whose modern values and modern economic configurations are fundamentally irreconcilable with the traditional social structures of indigenous Africa. That Nnu Ego finally comes to recognize her predicament as such by the end of the novel is somewhat auspicious, and yet Emecheta ultimately offers no real solution as to what it means to be an African woman who is contained neither by the confines of the old patriarchy nor by the confines of the new.

In this chapter, we have seen that Head’s and Buchi’s works represent a society that is in quest for peace and harmony. Both have done this by mustering people from diverse cultural backgrounds and making them work together, by eliminating from society those who promote prejudice and to compel her characters to turn down power if they have to acquire it by stepping on others. It is imperative to emphasize that even though Head and Emecheta have projected a society in which human relationship is good and people feel for each other, work with each other in a society in which sex, race and skin color are not used as the standard for human competence or judgment, all these remain a figment of the imagination. No such society can exist. It remains a utopian quest. And so we want to think that art remains a medium of education for people to learn. We should however note that dystopias inevitably conclude by depicting unpleasant, disastrous, or otherwise terrifying consequences for humanity. We can only continue to dream but they can be no perfect society. However, people can best exploit their environment and better overcome their problems; meet their needs if they work in collaboration with each other. Instead of giving up in life, one should endeavor to exploit his environment for his welfare. Hard work and human collaboration as realized are a remedy to human problems and a springboard for development.