THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

Woman in Africa is mainly the mother. She finds fulfillment in becoming the mother of sons and is a creative, protective force in life, and is so reflected in African literature. The mother-image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of African culture.

In the African society, as portrayed by Emecheta, an Igbo woman is looked upon with contempt if her marriage is not fruitful. Barrenness is the severest cross a woman has to bear. Motherhood is significant in a woman’s life, because it is a mark of fulfillment. Society ostracizes an infertile woman who does not carry the seeds of her man and propagate his line. A woman strains her utmost, therefore, to discharge her traditional obligations to her man and his world and if, by mischance or adverse fate, she fails to be a mother she suffers untold misery. No mercy is shown to a barren wife even by her loving husband. An African woman is despised and denigrated, ill treated and even turned out of her home if she is unproductive. She is valued only for her potentiality to propagate the species and not for herself. Sterility is a slur on femininity and a flaw in womanhood. To become a wife and mother is the highest ideal and aspiration of every African woman. The tribal Ibo community enjoins that a woman’s foremost duty is to bear children, a large number of them, especially male children, to continue her man’s line. The stigma of barrenness is insufferable and a barren wife is a disgrace to her parents and in-laws alike. This is a tradition instilled into every daughter of the Ibo tribe.
Emecheta’s most powerful novel The Joys of Motherhood presents the same picture of traditional society as we see in the novels of Achebe, but the difference lies in the prominence in her novel of the female point of view registering its disgust at male chauvinism and its dissatisfaction with what it considers an unfair and oppressive system. She presents a society where the roles of men and women are sharply defined:

How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified.¹

The heroine Nnu Ego and her creator Emecheta strongly reject this traditional concept which consigns the woman to the lowest pedestal, and considers her fit only to fetch and carry, to cook and feed, to be a farm-hand and a bed-mate, a bearer of children who could, with impunity and at will, be beaten and scolded and cast aside by man. A woman is obliged to subordinate her interests and desires to the collective will of her community. These narrow social norms constrain her to obliterate her ‘self,’ her individuality and identity. Correspondingly, an inability to conceive is regarded not merely as a misfortune but as a sign of wickedness. When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive. She must find fulfillment for herself, her parents and her husband in bearing children. Brought up under this all-ambient tribal tradition Nnu Ego, the beautiful and proud daughter of a beautiful and proud mother, suffers that

severe heartburn when her marriage with a young and prosperous farmer who is all love for her fails to make her a mother. She is proclaimed ‘juiceless’ and barren for she does not bear a child in the first twelve months of her married life, disappointing everybody including her husband, father and her own self. The tradition of the tribe enjoins the man to take a second wife. The second wife soon becomes pregnant and bears a son compounding the misery of Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego is neglected, ill treated, ignored and even forced to work on the farm like a common labourer. The husband does not come to her part of the compound to spend a night with her for as he insultingly tells her, he cannot afford to waste his ‘seed’ on a barren wife:

I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you do not appeal to me any more. You are so dry and jumpy. ²

She is not barren by nature. She has the “juice” in her as she discovers while caring for his son by his second wife. She even breast feeds the child and milk comes flowing from her virgin breasts. She is superstitious enough to blame her apparent barrenness on her “Chi”, the slave girl who was killed and interred with the senior wife of her father. She is discovered in the act of feeding her stepson by her husband and he forces her to go back to her parental home, and the marriage is annulled.

For some time Nnu Ego is happy in her father’s house. It is clear now that she did not want to go back to Amatokwu’s house. Agbadi, her father decides to celebrate her marriage again. This time he wanted a man who would be patient with her, a man

² Ibid. p.32.
who would take the trouble to make her happy. She marries a second time, to save her honour and the honour of her family by proving that she is not barren. He second husband is an ugly urban resident from her village, making an undignified living as a wash man in a white colonial’s house in Lagos. He is positively disgusting in his looks and in the menial work he does in washing even woman’s underwear with such loving care. Emecheta’s description of Nnaife is a portrait of sheer ugliness evoking nausea.

A man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel. His hair, unlike that of men at home in Ibuza, was not closely shaved; he left a lot of it on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband. His skin was pale, the skin of someone who had for a long time worked in the shade and not in the open air. His cheeks were puffy and looked as if he had pieces of hot yam inside them, and they seemed to have pushed his mouth into a smaller size above his weak jaw. And his clothes — Nnu Ego had never seen men dressed like that. Khaki shorts with holes and an old, loose, white singlet. If her husband - to - be was like this, she thought, she would go back to her father. Why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman!

But this is a man’s world and he is all man in his love-making. She does not love him but lives with him as a woman tradition-bound has to and soon becomes pregnant. She is not barren. She has vindicated herself and that gives her great joy. But her joy is short-lived as the son dies mysteriously in the fourth week. She concludes that she is fated to be a sufferer. She is desolate and in her agony she tries to commit suicide but even in that, she could not succeed. No one bothers to enquire about her personal

3. ibid. p. 42.
circumstances and the mental torture that must have led her to such an attempt. They say:

You mean you have a baby at home yet you come here disgracing the man who paid for you to be brought into this town? I don’t know what our people are becoming; as soon as they step near the coast they think they own themselves and forget the tradition of our fathers. 4

She lives with her husband again and soon she experiences the hopes, pains and joys of motherhood when the second world war intervenes and Nnaife is forced into service. Economically a helpless dependent on her husband before, Nnu Ego is now forced to cope single-handedly with the problem of feeding her growing children in raging inflation while living in crowded quarters. Motherhood Nnu Ego attains, but she is denied its promised taste of joys. She fulfils her traditional role by becoming a mother but discovers that motherhood, in her particular situation, is more a sorrow than a joy, an unrelieved agony. She has to undertake trading in cigarettes and matches and other petty things to make both ends meet.

A man is free to take a second wife ostensibly for the purpose of begetting children or more children, a tradition helplessly acquiesced in by woman in the African society. The polygamous household is supposed to be a happy one. However, a completely different picture of it emerges from The Joys of Motherhood. The usual picture of the wife who silently bears and suffers the consequences of the uxorious and polygamous proclivities of her husband is negated here. Eustace Palmer comments:

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4. ibid. p. 61.
The Joys of Motherhood presents one of the most compelling studies of jealousy from the female point of view in the whole history of the African novel.  

Nnaife inherits his dead brother’s young wife, Adaku. Nnu Ego and Adaku are jealous and suspicious of each other’s motives. The happy polygamous household does not obtain here. While a traditional Ibo wife mutely accepts it without any protest, Nnu Ego is acutely aware of its disadvantages in an urban society. Man has all the rights and privileges and no duties; and woman has responsibilities, cares and no rights whatsoever.

She begins to see how motherhood is used by the patriarchy to keep women relatively powerless. When Nnaife gives his wives too little money, she is afraid to anger him by protesting too much for fear that she may lose what little money he does give her. Nnu Ego feels the injustice of it acutely:

She was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family: that was considered below the standard expected of 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. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children.

Women could not free themselves from the compulsions of tradition. They conform and subordinate themselves to the dictates of society and the men. Nnu Ego’s situation grows desperate as her second set of twins, baby girls, is born. She has been bled dry.

by her long years of motherhood, and she cries out in agony:

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? 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 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 I am lucky enough to die in peace; I even have to give them my soul. .... When will I be free? 7

A woman is not free and Nnu Egos never. Through several of her experiences with her father, husbands and sons, she comes to understand the patriarchal nature of her culture and her own role in perpetuating it.

The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband - and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. 8

Nnu Ego finally realizes that women must unite and work together to change all this. Freedom for them must begin with rejecting the patriarchal glorification of motherhood.

Nnu Ego is terribly disappointed by her male children. She strains to educate them and after receiving good education in Lagos, the two older boys go abroad for

7. ibid. p.186.
studies and never bother even to write to their mother. A woman can never disown her sons. As she explains it to another son of hers who protests against his callous elder brother:

Some fathers, especially those with many children from different wives, can reject a bad son, a master can reject his evil servant, a wife can even leave a bad husband, but a mother can never, never reject her son. If he is damned, she is damned with him ..........

The husband had exploited her; the children exploit her and in the end betray her. She is left with none to care for or to look after her. The pathos of Nnu Ego’s plight is that she has chosen to remain faithful to traditional principles and ideals that have no currency in the urban world of modern Nigeria, a typical African country. In her predicament, she wonders:

How was she to know, when she was still young, that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and may be a miserable death alone, just like a barren woman.

This is precisely her fate and the joys of motherhood she has been vigorously pursuing elude her grasp. The title of Nnu Ego’s sad tale is clearly ironic.

The most celebrated female character in African creative writing is the African mother. The mother in the African tradition is the giver of blessings, the giver and protector of life. She is the creative and protective goddess to be respected and

worshipped. To a woman, in the African society, to be the mother of a son is the goal of womanhood. Society, tradition and religion also look on women from this point of view. (A woman is always told that her “One blessing is you will live to rock your children’s children.”) The mother image shines like an unbroken ray in the whole of African culture and African fiction.

The Anglophone African writers esteem her as the epitome of love, strength and affection. The mother image reflects traditional African society’s mores. The word ‘mother’ is a significant one in a woman’s life. In Africa, children are desired and childlessness is derided and dreaded. No mercy is shown to a barren wife. The hunger for children, the Herculean efforts women make to be rid of the curse of barrenness, the remedies they seek in order to enjoy the pride of parenthood, such as seeking guidance from a native dibia or modern medical gynaec outfits available in the Mission hospitals, the offering of sacrifices to spirits, Gods and Goddesses are all realistically portrayed in *The Joys of Motherhood* and also in her other novels. Other writers like Flora Nwapa, Aidoo, Asare Konodu, Mananye, both male and female, have also developed this theme in their works. The central theme common to all the works is the plight of women due to sterility.

African societies respect women greatly for their reproductive ability, and these writers similarly portray women in roles where they are protecting, comforting and nourishing their children. Two predominant images of the African woman as mother dominate the creative writing. The first holds the African mother as a supreme symbol. The second portrayal of the African woman as mother is that of an all
suffering, self-sacrificing victim. The first image of mother as a supreme symbol is found in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe states that when there is a misfortune and sorrow a man finds refuge in his motherland. Achebe says,

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.

Achebe thinks that one turns and speaks to a mother when nostalgia grips him heavily. Other writers like Peter Abrahms, and Camara Laye express identical views of mother. They worship the land as Mother Africa. These writers establish the mother image as representative of not only maternal love, protection and comfort, but also of power and respect.

The second portrayal depicts African woman as all-suffering and self-sacrificing victim. We have several examples of this image in African literature. We have the image of Ama, the mother in Aidoo’s short story, ‘No Sweetness Here’, who sacrifices herself for her children. Ngugi’s novel *Weep not Child* begins with the image of the mother, small, bold and smiling, though a little worn. She struggles hard for the education of her son. Other views of motherhood in African writing depict the African mother as the symbol of security and dignity.

In Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, one clearly sees the collapse of these glorifying images of the African mother. It shows that children do not always

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maintain strong and loving ties with their mothers through adulthood. As Emecheta states in her novel,

The Joy of being a mother is the Joy of giving all to your children.  

The title of the novel is taken form Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. It is significant and at the same time bitterly ironic. Dazzled by ambitious sons educated outside of traditional Igbo values Nnu Ego breaks down and her old secure world gives way to a new one. In this novel Emecheta constructs a wholly different set of economic, socio-political and cultural imperatives which diverge from the existing literary models.

**The Joys of Motherhood** is the most complex and difficult of Emecheta’s published novels. The book’s complexity arises out of the dramatization and importance of the place of motherhood in Igbo society. The novel realistically portrays the problems that afflict a woman because of her blind adherence to tradition. The major problems that are deftly and poignantly tackled in this novel are the problem of polygamy, the problem of the childless wife in a society where fertility is honoured, the problem of the widows and the problem of the women married to weak men. In this novel, the multi dimensional nature of the mother figure is an icon, caught in a variety of situations is presented by Emecheta. We see the mother, Nnu Ego, sacrificing herself for her children, fighting with her husband in order to get financial support for the children, protecting the children from the father’s wrath. In these experiences, Nnu Ego is but the *alter ego* of her creator. The portrait is almost autobiographical.

Emecheta boldly records the troubled and chaotic moments in a mother's life. Apart from the positive aspects of motherhood, she records the turmoil and anguish of women who long for children and of mothers who worry about their children.

Barrenness is the heavy cross a woman has to bear. Motherhood is significant in a woman's life because it is a mark of fulfillment. The relationship between mother and child is as tenuous as it is tender in Ibo life. A married couple is always looked upon with contempt and hatred if their marriage is not fruitful and solidified with children. So the first prayer on the lips of all women to God is for children. To them to be barren was the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

What we are all praying for is children. What else do we want if we have children. 13

The force of tradition is operative in the way the birth of a girl is viewed in the family. A woman's position and prestige is increased by the number of children, especially male children she has. It is as much a social problem as it is a psychological problem.

Nnu Ego is the most oppressed and powerless of all heroines of Emecheta. It is because she is denied the education which Ojebeta and Aku-nna enjoy. Though she is the most traditional of Emecheta's heroines, she lives in modern Lagos and much of the hardship she endures results from the conflict between tradition and change. The main traditional practices and values that govern Nnu Ego's life are polygamy and the stigma of barrenness. The pity of Nnu Ego's story is that she has

been taken from the traditional environment that bestows a kind of dignity and
grandeur that the other mothers like Ma Blackie, Umeadi enjoy. She is caught between
two worlds, unable to go back to that of her mother ‘Ona’ and unable to adapt to
modern Lagos life as Adaku, her co-wife, successfully does.

Both Ona and Adaku are foils to Nnu Ego. Ona possesses the intelligence and
courage of Aku-nna and the beauty of Ojebeta. She is also stubborn and arrogant and
she refuses to marry Nnu Ego’s father, Agbadi. Emcheta paints a picture of the love
between Ona and Agbadi in traditional society.

In his young days, a woman who gave in to a man without first fighting
for her honour was never respected. To regard a woman who is quiet
and timid as desirable was something that came after his time, with
Christianity and other changes. Most of the women he chose as his
wives and even slaves were those who could match his arrogance, his
biting sarcasm, his painful jokes, and also when the mood called, his
human tenderness. 14

Adaku, Nnu Ego’s co-wife seems more of a descendent of Ona than does Nnu Ego
herself. She is not crushed in her struggle with a hostile environment. As Eustace
Palmer has observed Adaku becomes a forerunner of women’s liberation in Africa.
But in order to gain autonomy she must sell her body and live like a prostitute.
Though it is an imperfect and hollow one, she achieves everything - success as a
trader, education for her daughters, independence from her husband etc. She is goaded
into self-sufficiency and self-determination largely by the tragedy of her barrenness
in the sense that she bore no son. She boldly tells Nnu Ego the reasons that impel her
to leave the house.

As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in this world. I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband. One would think I’d never had one before. People forget that. Well, If my daughters can’t forgive me when they grow up, that will be too bad. I’m going to be thrown away when I’m dead, in’any case, whereas people like you, senior wife, have formed roots, as they say. You will be properly buried in Nnaife’s compound.15

Adaku’s ‘feminism’ is introduced in the novel when she initiates a strike by refusing Nnaife supper until he increases his wives’ food allowance. Her struggle for equality is reiterated when she walks out on her husband to be a dignified single woman and educate her two daughters alone.

An African’s wealth and prestige is increased by the number of wives he possesses. Similarly a woman’s prestige is increased with the number of children she has. Nnu Ego herself is barren in her first marriage and she receives bad treatment from the first husband. She returns to her father’s house, who again hastily marries her off to another man she has never seen who lives in Lagos. But this time she is able to conceive but when her first born son dies in infancy, she attempts to kill herself. She laments:

But I am not a woman any more! I am not a mother any more. The child is there, dead on the mat. My Chi has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her... 16
But gradually a chain of disasters in Nnu Ego’s life awakens her to the reality of her unrewarding years of suffering and sacrificing for her children. She says:

After all, 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. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: It will be hailed as a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free.

Nnaife’s numerous marriages, the hardships attendant on subsistence living, and the frequent pregnancies all contribute to her lack of fulfillment. Nnu Ego emerges as a feminist, possibly as a result of her association with her co-wife Adaku.

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That’s why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband — and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than any one. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build.

It is a strong and defiant statement from Nnu Ego. The ironies and cruelties of her life force the protagonist to move from the collective consciousness to the individual consciousness. From the death of her first son with which the novel opens to Nnu Ego’s own death on the last page, most of the disasters revolve around her children.

18. ibid. p.187.
It is her children, more than her husband and culture, who enslave her. Before she reaches forty, she has endured nine pregnancies and seven of her children survive. The last chapter is ironically titled as – 'The Canonized Mother'. She realizes that

> It was true what they said, that if you don't have children the longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you.  

Instead of the traditional vision of children as a source of joy and wealth, they are portrayed as millstones and greedy insects who suck out and drain the life's blood of their mother. Katherine Frank says,

> The complete futility of motherhood that we find in Joys of Motherhood is the most heretical and radical aspect of Emecheta's vision of the African woman.  

Nnu Ego's children, especially her sons exploit and betray her, and finally denying her the most basic of African children's responsibilities, the care of their parents in old age. Instead Nnu Ego dies one night alone on the roadside.

> Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother.

It is not surprising that when the people of her native village build a shrine to Nnu Ego's memory, and pray she fails to answer their prayers for children. It is clear that she does not want other women to suffer because of the children.

19. ibid. p. 212.
20. Frank, Katherine. “African Woman in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta”.
The pathos of Nnu Ego's plight, which lends a kind of tragic dignity to her story, is that she is faithful to principles and ideals that have no currency in the urban world of modern Lagos. In Westernized Lagos traditional values, roles, and relationships seem to be invalidated. Men like Nnaife are emasculated by their jobs, doing white women's laundry or white men's cooking. Wives are denied the support of the village extended family so that all the child-rearing chores devolve upon them as they are cooped up in one room flats with their babies and young children. Born and bred in the village, Nnu Ego is unable to adapt to the new social realities of Lagos, but she is advanced enough to understand the conflict between the two worlds that makes her life so miserable. She repents:

At home in Ibuza she would have had her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position, but 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. 22

And at the end of the novel, she is able to connect her position of being torn between two ways of life with her recognition that her devotion to her children has all been for naught. She repents:

How was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? She was not even certain that worries over her children would not send her to her grave before her Chi was ready for her. 23

22. ibid. p. 137.
23. ibid. p. 219.
“Nnu Ego” means twenty bags of cowries, hence priceless. Yes, she is a priceless woman. But given the tragic selflessness of her life, her willed self-extinction for the good of others, one wonders whether Nnu Ego’s name might not also ironically suggest just what it sounds like in English: ‘new ego’ — what she so sorely needs and lacks.

The portraiture of men in this novel is realistic. Emecheta’s point apparently is that the traditional arrangements lead to chauvinism and irresponsibility in the male, one may not fully endorse. Eustace Palmers comment:

The author’s determination to show up the males as irresponsible and unreasonable interferes somewhat with her characterization of them. Their irresponsibility is exaggerated to the point of unrealism. ....... It must be admitted that while her portrayal of the women is excellent, Emecheta’s success with the men is something less than total. 24

Emecheta gives a true picture of the male in a traditional society through several characters, like the chief Agbadi, Amatokwu and finally Nnaife. Men are selfish and irresponsible.

One of the peculiar qualities of the novel is the unabashed presentation of the woman’s point of view on various aspects. This comes out not merely in the powerful evocation of Nnu Ego’s misery but even in the narrator’s own omniscient comments. We can be sure on certain occasions when Nnu Ego registers her complaints against the system, that it is Emecheta speaking through her. An immediate instance is Nnu Ego pleading with her first husband Amatokwu when he ill-treats her on the farm,

What happened to us, Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? Do you think I don’t suffer too? 25

We can be sure that she speaks for the author and for all the women. It is the author making Nnu Ego as a propagandist to explain the fate of mothers and the evils of the polygamous situation, and she is meant to express the views of all wives in similar circumstances. When Nnu Ego desperately cries:

God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage .... when will I be free? 26

She is bemoaning the fate, as far as the author is concerned, of all womankind and uttering their desire for total emancipation. Nnu Ego is disgusted by her condition and that of women in general. Frustration does not daunt her. It gives rise to a radically new idea, a new hope:

I am beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women. I saw many young women teaching in schools. It would be really something for a woman to be able to earn some money monthly like a man. 27

Emecheta’s chosen method of narration is ideally suited to her theme. She tells the story almost exclusively from the heroine’s point of view. Through her Emecheta presents an African Woman’s reaction to a universal problem that children often fail to honour their parents. In voicing this idea through Nnu Ego, the author emphasizes the fact that women have the social responsibility to criticize and participate in the social order.

25. The Joys of Motherhood. p. 32.
27. ibid. p. 181
Marie A Umeh says that:

structurally, this text is more complicated than her earlier works. Her artistic growth as a writer, demonstrated in her prolific use of literary devices such as flashback, interior monologue and *bildungs roman*, is stylistically exciting. 28

Emecheta employed the technique of *bildungs roman*, the novel of formation, effectively. It is to underscore the development of the protagonist’s mind and character as she matures and recognizes her role in life. The novel covers a twenty-five year span, tracing Nnu Ego’s personal development from the time she is newly married until her old age. Nnu Ego’s growth from a staunch traditionalist to a feminist, when she discovers after many years that motherhood has not brought fulfillment, is cleverly drawn. Nnu Ego’s respect for Ibuza traditional customs comes out clearly at the beginning of the novel and her greatest disappointment in discovering their shortcomings is equally well portrayed. Except in the first three chapters where Emecheta gives us the family background of Nnu Ego, the rest of the book deals with character introspection. This is something new in African writing. Introspective characters of African women are rare primarily because the situational novel looms large in African writing. Most of the African male and female writers tend to approach their characters “objectively” in describing their external reactions to their circumstances. But in the *Joys of Motherhood* one is eased right into Nnu Ego’s subconscious mind and into her thoughts. Here Nnu Ego strongly puts forth the traditional Igbo ideas as well as the role of one’s Chi in the psyche of an Igbo person.

Emecheta also skillfully uses flashbacks to weave together crucial information central to the development of the plot and to the full understanding of her character's relationships to both the external and spirit worlds. Another factor which contributes to the novel's success is the air of social realism brought about by the author's use of English language. Emecheta is careful to select the manner of speech, which authentically represents each character in his particular environment. Emecheta individualized her characters by differentiating their speech and utilizing the correct imagery that reflects the time, place and people she is trying to describe.

We can find Emecheta's personal identification with characters as they search for their individuality. In this novel she utilizes the first person plural "we" to describe the situation more effectively: "The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die." 29

This is an effective technique, which takes the reader into the collective consciousness of women in the novel. Ellen Morgan notes how

Time, place, pattern, rhythm and plot are functions of the meeting of women with the forces aligned against them. Where there are tightness and compression, they reflect the pressure and constriction of these forces. Where there is baseless disorder, chaos they reflect women's sense of disorientation, their feeling that they are between two worlds. 30

Though the novel Joys of Motherhood is not directly influenced by the current women's liberation movement, the author firmly stands for and is the authentic voice

30. Morgan, Ellen. "Human Becoming, Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel", p. 188.
of the African women. Adaku is the actual feminist in the novel. We have several other characters like Adaku in other African novels. For example: Nwapa’s Efuruc challenges many accepted mores and assumptions in the Igbo community when it was not popular to do so. Penda in Ousmane Sembene’s God’s Bits of Wood is another example. June in Samuel Kahiga’s novel The Girl From Abroad, Waja in Ngugi’s Petals of Blood are good examples of women who stand strongly in their view of opposing the tradition. Adaku like her other counterparts serves as a model of the liberated woman. In describing the ‘joys’, Emecheta is at her best in the irony implied in the title. She says that children give joy to their parents. Indeed a mother of sons should be happy. Such happiness should help her to bear the grind of poverty. But the situation is different here in the urban world of Lagos. After years of sacrificing every thing for her family, Nnu Ego is forced to realise that the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to her children.

Nnu Ego is a realistic heroine who is not totally defeated. Though she does not achieve authentic selfhood in her lifetime, her commitment and request to her sisters lies in her refusal to passively watch them fenced in by housewifely duties and too many children that bring abundant economic and emotional strains. Even in her death Nnu Ego shows her committed standpoint: “However many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did.” 31

Hence, The Joys of Motherhood stands as a model for other African Woman writers

who wish to portray the actual condition of women and the possibilities of overcoming barriers and achieving individuality.

Modern literature abounds in female protagonists who have been raising their voice of protest against the repressive practices they have been subjected to as a class over centuries in the name of racial custom or tradition. Women are conscious of their rights and they are valiantly working to win for themselves their due.

Buchi Emecheta’s Nnu Ego is the forerunner of the modern woman on the war path to liberate herself from the debasing, obviously oppressive and totally irrelevant traditions and customs. She lived her life within the bounds of the traditions of the tribal or social order and yet it shows that she was fully alive to the inequity and injustice of it all. She will be and is followed by other women who would ultimately rebel against the traditional order and proclaim their independence and individuality.

Richard F. Bauerle sums it all up in his pithy comment:

As social commentary the book offers significant insights into the complex relationships between continuity and change in Colonial Nigeria. 32