



Navigating Identity: Estrangement and Cultural Clashes in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

In this research article, the intricate negotiations of identity in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood are analyzed, namely the estrangement and cultural dissonance of protagonist Nnu Ego in colonial Nigeria. When the conventional Igbo values are confronted by the imported Western ideologies of colonial domination, Nnu Ego's role as a mother turns into a site of contested identity, gender, and cultural affiliation that remains challenged. The conflict between native conceptions of womanhood is especially rendered in the novel, with regard to motherhood, fertility, household labor, and conditions of colonial urban life that yield economic deprivation and personal disillusionment. Intensive reading of the novel, the essay analyzes how Nnu Ego's self-denials symbolize bigger problems of dislocation, cultural disintegration, and the psychic expense of clinging to conventional roles in a new world. This paper also explores how Emecheta critiques the idealized notion of motherhood and discovers how it proves to be a source of identity and alienation. Tracing the changing sense of self in the protagonist, the study shows how cultural conflicts undermine communal certainties and force women to negotiate alone with their identity. Finally, the paper maintains that The Joys of Motherhood is a poignant critique of the alienation occurring when inherited identities are no longer sustainable.

Keywords: alienation, cultural conflicts, motherhood, buchi emecheta, nnu ego

Introduction

Womanhood and wifehood were considered women's primary aims in life. They were considered as weaker sections than men and their rights were taken for granted. Women suffer abuse and alienation and are expected to fulfill their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Motherhood continues to be their ultimate responsibility and they are branded "barren" and despised if they fail to have children. A married woman could be replaced at any time and polygamy is allowed in many cultures in the best interest of men. Girls were not always given the best upbringing in comparison with boys. They were discriminated and

this discrimination gradually changed into a custom and continues to be transmitted through generations. The dilemma of women is manifested differently in different societies and countries, but exploitation and subordination are seen as common factors.

The women writers of the twentieth century have unveiled the predicament of the 'double negative' in their works because of the multiculturalist paradigm. The term conventionally denotes the condition in American society where women are disadvantaged both as women and as members of minority racial and ethnic groups. The female protagonists in the works of these writers have to fight against the patriarchal



cultural order as well as against racial discrimination. In a multi-ethnic and multicultural community, a white woman is suppressed and oppressed by white men. But a black woman is oppressed at two different levels because she is 'black' and she is a 'woman'. Moreover, in colonial societies, women face even greater dilemmas as they have to cope with the challenges brought by colonialism. The colonial gender roles deeply affected the family norms in colonized societies. The cultural clash was inevitable and this created a great imbalance in the cultural, social, economic, and political levels, naturally affecting women more than men. Women took up the responsibility of preserving culture and aggressively perpetuated the patriarchal cultural order in the interest of the community. Patriarchy as an ideology and the racism of the mainstream culture are incorporated into the ethnic identity of the immigrant communities in American society. The women of these communities are often seen to use them as weapons to defend their culture and identity.

Estrangement and Cultural Clashes

In the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta depicts the life of an Igbo woman named Nnu Ego who endeavors to achieve self-fulfillment through motherhood. Emecheta explores both the positive and negative impacts of colonialism on women in Africa who are trapped between their traditional society and the modernity brought by colonization. This self-alienation and victimization can be seen in the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego is forced to move to another society that has a culture much different from her native culture. The protagonist has to face the overbearing burden of patriarchy equally in the two societies as she performed the role of wife and mother while she was performing the role of wife and mother. In the traditional Igbo society, a woman is not allowed to make an independent decision on her marriage or maternity. Ona, Nnu Ego's mother, was the daughter of a well-regarded chief in Ibuza and carried herself with strength and confidence. According to Ibuza culture, a girl has to marry to accomplish perfect womanhood. Ona's marriage is in trouble when she gives birth to a girl. Ona says: "My father wants a son

and you (Agbadi) have many sons. But you don't have a girl yet. Since my father will not accept my bride price from you if I have a son, he will belong to my father, but if a girl, she will be yours. That is the best I can do for you." (Emecheta 25). When her husband, Nwokocha Agbadi gets into an argument with her father, Ona asks:

Please, please, aren't you too happy that I have survived the birth? It seems nobody is interested in that part of it I made a promise to Agbadi, yes: but dear Agbadi, I am still my father's daughter. Since he has not taken any bride price from you, do you think it would be right for me to stay with you permanently? You know our custom does not permit it. I'm still my father's daughter. (Emecheta 26)

After that, Ona was separated from Agbadi for several months. She misses him, yet she knows that she is doing the right thing according to her culture. After her father passes away, she has no choice but to live with her husband.

A year after the birth of the Nnu Ego, Obi Umunna died and Ona cried for days for him, especially as he had gone without her producing the wanted son. Agbadi relented when he heard of it, for he knew how close Ona was to her father. For over two years, he persisted in trying to persuade her to come and live in his compound...you are no longer bound by your father's hopes. He is dead. But we are still living. Come and stay with me. You are all alone here among your extended relatives. Please Ona; don't let us waste our lives longing for each. You know my father would not have liked it, so stop talking like that Agbadi. I refuse to be intimidated by your wealth and your position. (Emecheta 27)

Ona dies heartbroken with her wish to defy the obsolete customs of her society unfulfilled. Unlike Ona, Nnu Ego lacks confidence and fails to defy the society that ostracized her for not having children. As a result, Nnu Ego feels intensely isolated and disconnected from her surroundings. Her actions are governed by two different worlds, which lie in contrast with each other, with conflicting cultural codes. She belonged to the Igbo society where family ties are strong, but her inability to produce children compels her to leave Ibuza for the new capitalist urban



city of Lagos. She was forced to get divorced from Amatokuwu as she failed to become a mother. “She fought back tears of frustration. She was used to telling wiry farmers with rough blackened hands from farming, long, lean legs, and very dark skin. This was one short flash of his upper arm dancing as he moved about jubilantly among his friends and that protruding belly. She despised him on the first night” (Emecheta 44). She compares her new husband to a woman, and she does not like Nnaife’s behavior. She describes him as “a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling to this side and then to that” (Emecheta 42). In Lagos, women and men are forced to leave their indigenous customs and are bound to adopt the new socio-cultural order. This became a cause for conflict for the couple since it became difficult for men to switch their familial roles. Nevertheless, women tried their best to assimilate to the new system, but the impact turned out to be devastating. Nnu Ego assesses:

It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children. Nnu Ego tried to imagine her father’s face if she were to return to his house and claim ill-treatment by Nnaife; she would be chased in disgrace back to her responsibility. At home, in Ibuza she would have her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position, but here in Lagos where she faced the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance, was in 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 137)

She becomes desperate, having to suffer both mental and physical agony. Despite having given birth to a child, she never feels at home in Lagos and she expresses her indignation by comparing her life at Ibuza. She says, “At home, in Ibuza I would have had my own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting my position” (Emecheta 137). Emecheta exposes the alienation that an urban economy imposes on individuals. Nnu Ego’s friendship with Cordelia helps her to get over the loss of her first child but she

is alone again when Cordelia shifts from Lagos with her husband. Cordelia explains the gender and racial dimensions of power in Lagos when Nnu Ego first arrives there:

You want a husband who has time to ask you if you wish to eat rice, or drink corn pap with honey? Forget it. Men here are too busy being white men’s servants to be men. We, women, mind the home. Not our husband. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don’t know. All they see is the money, shining white man’s money...they are all slaves, including us. (Emecheta 51)

Nnaife and his two wives and their children lived in a crumbled single room, limiting their economic resources. Another issue she faces is polygamy and Emecheta considers it devastating, especially for a poorly paid city dweller like Nnaife. They were ill-prepared for life like this “where only pen and not mouth could really talk” (179). When Nnaife went to war, Nu Ego was fighting a battle at home to feed her children. Thus, Emecheta tries to underscore how cultural conflicts, social and political issues lead to the alienation of Nnu Ego.

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta can be analyzed as one that effectively illustrates the oppression of mothers, which results in a sense of extreme alienation in motherhood and marriage. The mothers’ limited working and language skills force them to depend on their husbands economically, leaving them trapped in domestic drudgery. Still, they are suffering from the strict patriarchal expectations concerning motherhood and reproduction. Mothers are alienated from themselves, their children, their family members, and society. Estrangement leads to their oppression, resulting in strained relationships. The voices of mothers and daughters rise in resistance, offering subtle yet firm expressions of dissent, seeking relief from the harsh realities of alienation and envisioning a transformed society. Nevertheless, the novel shares the past experiences of a brave woman who questions the norms of patriarchy and defies the rules in the hope of enlightenment and empowerment of their creed.



Conclusion

Through the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta portrays a compelling narrative that illuminates the complex tensions between identity, tradition, and change as experienced by African women during the colonial era. Through the life of Nnu Ego the novel depicts the profound psychological and social effects of cultural dislocation and the burden of gendered expectations. Based on the classic Igbo tradition of motherhood, Nnu Ego's identity becomes increasingly fragmented as she battles the alienating forces of colonial modernity and urban life. Her story is about the typical African woman's struggle to reconcile traditional roles with the demands of a rapidly shifting colonial society. Emecheta's criticism is further directed towards the disintegration of the communal support networks and the psychological price of isolation. The shift from close-knit rural community to scattered city environment defines the cultural disconnection attendant on modernization. Nnu Ego's deprivations and sacrifices here were unremarked and unrewarded, which underscores the invisibility of women's labor and the restriction of patriarchal and colonial discourses in honoring female autonomy and dignity. By deconstructing the intersectionality of oppression, where patriarchy, colonialism, and tradition find common ground, Emecheta challenges dominant discourse around motherhood, success, and accomplishment. Emecheta's depiction of the character Nnu Ego is an incisive critique of systems that limit women to narrow, often dehumanizing roles. Meanwhile, the novel places on center stage for women's resilience and capacity for survival in the shadow of systemic injustice. In summing up, *The Joys of Motherhood* is more than a personal narrative but a human observation on the price of cultural and historical turmoil paid disproportionately by women.

Emecheta encourages the readers to challenge the social values governing women's lives and imagine a more inclusive and just world where women's selves are not bound by fixed roles but loved in all their complexity.

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