

AFRICAN WOMEN IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

R. SHILOH JEYA JEEVAN

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Reg. No.19223284011030

Department of English and Research Centre

Women's Christian College Nagercoil

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli)

Dr. G.J. Hamlin

Assistant Professor of English

Department of English and Research Centre

Women's Christian College

Nagercoil

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ABSTRACT:

Africa has gone through many economic, cultural and gender oriented problems throughout the history. Women in general are suppressed and are made silent sufferers of the laws and statutes made by the patriarchal society. In this patriarchal society, man is treated as the lord and on the other hand woman is treated as servant. The women are expected to fulfil the expectations of the male dominated culture. Women who undergo the patriarchal nuisances of the society try to overcome them by finding different ways. They try to come out of the pit of patriarchy by expressing their pent-up feelings and emotions. Black women are not an exception to this and they too express themselves by writing. Buchi Emecheta belongs to the Igbo community, so she highlights the difficulty of the women of the Igbo culture. This paper briefly discusses the blues and the woes of the women of the Igbo polygamous society with reference to Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The novel portrays the sufferings of the protagonist, Nnu Ego. She suffers along with her nine children at the age of forty fulfilling the Igbo cultural expectations.

Key Words: Patriarchy, polygamous society, pent – up feelings, victim, expectations.

Kenyan writer and author Binyavanga Wainaina recommends the writers to use three words to write about Africa. They are Africa or darkness or safari. These three words describe the whole Africa in short. The literal meaning of Africa is sunny, it denotes the climate and the geographical features. Next is darkness which refers to the people dwelling there who are literally dark and dark in their hearts. Third is safari which signifies the nature of people. They are like beasts. Though all these definitions highlight the negative effect on Africa still they are God made.

Religions say that man is a creation of God and so is the Universe. Man, though himself a creation always has a creative urge in him. He has given various forms to his creativity and one of them is literature. As there is a saying that literature is the mirror of life, Black Literature is the mirror of the society of the black people. As any literature, the origin of the African Literature is traced back to its oral literature. Nigerian Literature in particular, began with the oral tradition pioneered by the unsung heroes of the literary past, like royal

bards, warriors, story tellers and many others. This oral literature popularly known as folk literature. This literature responds with spoken words to the literature which is in the written form. In Nigeria as a means of relaxation, farmers used to gather their children and sit under the moon light for story-telling. In that story, children and young were instructed to respect the dialects of their custom.

In fifteenth century, Arab scholars and traders introduced the written tradition in Northern Nigeria. The missionaries arrived in the 1930s and the Roman script they had brought enhanced the written tradition. This consequently gave rise to many poets and prose writers. They also started writing novels. The novels focused on folk tales featuring fantastic characters of humans, animals and fairies. Besides, literary awareness is also increased because of the Western education. The tradition of literature shifted from folk tales to the written and fantasy to realism. According to literary scholars like Emenyonu, strong or firm or authentic Nigerian literature is written in the indigenous language. Sumaila Isah Umaisha, in her writing about Nigerian literature highlights the words of Emenyonu stating, “It is important for any reader of fiction in Nigeria to realize that no matter how much the author denies or disguises it, every Nigerian who writes fiction in English today has his foundation in the oral heritages of his own ethnic group” (4). Though the indigenous language played a vital role, there is no doubt about the fact that Nigerian literature in English has gained a great attention and has influenced both nationally and internationally.

African literature has transformed tremendously in the last twenty years. The reason behind the transformation is the increased number of women writers. Black women have proved that they are not inferior to men but equal to them. They have also contributed to black Literature in English. They even beat the men writers in presenting the insiders’ view of the life of black women. The literature written by black women in Africa and its Diasporas are considered as black women’s literature. Irrespective of genre or place, black women’s literature easily lends itself to the application of feminist theory, because it focuses mainly on their struggles. They record their experiences and perspectives on sexism, gender relationships, marriage, education and empowerment. They also highlight black women’s quest for emancipation from sexism and male dominance. Black women needed that freedom in order to reveal that they started writing books and that eventually became black women’s literature. Lorraine in her book *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* states that, “In the black family domain there is relatively, a strong influence of patriarchy and male dominance whereby the family is mostly male-headed, and male children are preferred to female children because male children can maintain the patriarchal system” (60). Labelling women as less valuable than men often results in women’s displacement. For instance, young women are either married away or sold to wealthy families to work as nannies or house maids.

Women at large are oppressed physically and sexually. The Black Encyclopaedia claims that women constitute the silent majority in the Nigerian society. Their voices have been deliberately silenced by the patriarchal society. So, consequently, women are forced to accept a lot in their life unquestioningly. As affluent women are exposed to both good and the bad in their life. On the other hand, the poor black women experience only sorrow, tears, and pain. The woes and maladies of the black women are plenty and unusual. Their problems are culture bound and patriarchally constructed. Many black women writers represented the voiceless black women in their writings. One of such prominent writers is Buchi Emecheta’s contribution to black literature is unique.

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta is an African feminist novelist. She is an African novelist, who was born on July 21, 1944, Lagos, Nigeria and died on January 25, 2017, London, England. She is an Igbo writer whose novels deal largely with the difference and unequal role of women in the patriarchal African and immigrant societies. She mainly explores the conflict between the tradition and the modernity. Her themes are child slavery, motherhood, marginalization and female independence. She is characterized as the first successful black woman novelist to live in Britain after 1948. She has written plays, fiction, autobiography, and also 'children's literature'. Emecheta got married at the age of sixteen and emigrated with her husband from Nigeria to London in 1962. Her writings are based on her own life, including the problems she initially encountered in England. Buchi Emecheta has written many novels in which majority of her novels deal how women become successful amidst all the stressful situations of child bearing, child rearing, multiple marriages, polygamy and other harassments from the male dominated society.

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* deals with the black women who need for motherhood and glory on giving birth to many children. The reasons behind this desire are biological instinct and to fulfil the expectations of society. Women are expected to accept the process of child bearing and child rearing. The experience of childbearing and child rearing may give a psychological and physiological satisfaction to women, but the other side of the coin is troublesome and painful. In reality, for women the motherhood they undergo by heterosexuality is more of trouble than of pleasure. Nnu is one of such women. She is eulogized and praised as a good woman, a perfect woman and a complete woman. A woman in any cultural background is been obligated to act according to the constructed rules and regulations.

A woman plays different roles in different phases of her life. In which, the role of a daughter is projected a difficult task in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Emecheta gives a clear definition exclusively on daughter as, expected by the patriarchy. The daughter might be the princess in the father's world before marriage but after marriage the daughter will be honoured only when she gives birth to children. If not, she will be seen as an outcast. Nnu gives birth to twins and comes to her father's house. There the senior wife of the family welcomes her, "Welcome, my daughter, welcome. Oh, Oshia, you are a man now. And the twins they are beautiful. We will soon have young men knocking at our doors." (152). Then she presents her children in front of her father Adaku and boastfully says, "Look, look at my children oh father". The father reacts saying, "Stand up and let me look at you. Yes..... magnificent. A full woman, full of children. It is we" (153).

According to this patriarchy the womanhood is completed after giving birth to children. So, a full woman is one who is full of children. The society believes that this full woman is praised even in the paradise. A medicine man says to Nnu after her father's death, "I can see your father now in the land of the dead busy boasting to his friends what a good daughter you are" (155). A daughter when she becomes a mother of many children her father boasts her here and also in the other world after he dies. The writer concludes the chapter by conveying the people's view to Nnu, "You have already proved you are a good daughter, but a good daughter also be a good wife" (155). Of course, Nnu proves herself to be a good daughter to Agabadi, a good wife to Nnaife and a good mother to all her children. To give deep insight, she plays all the roles with pain and great labour.

The next expectation from the society is virginity test. The people not only celebrate the virginity of the newly married bride besides they strongly believe that the virginity will

help her to conceive quickly. Agabadi himself proudly says, “When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive. You shall soon see her children coming here to play” (31). So, the perfect wifhood is been umpired only by the confirmation of the chastity of a woman.

Next to the expectation of virginity in a woman comes her ability to bear children. In the African society, if a woman is a virgin and fertile then she is labelled as a ‘good woman’ and ‘complete woman’. Emecheta in this regard writes about Agunwa the senior wife of Agabadi, as he himself says, “He looked around and saw two of his grown sons watching him. Your mother is a good woman so unobtrusive, so quiet. I don’t know who else will help me keep an eye on those young wives of mine, and see to the smooth running of my household.” Two days later, Agunwa died and Agabadi sent a big cow to her people to announce her death. Having died a “complete woman”, she was to be buried in her husband’s compound (22).

The senior wife of the family is expected to be more responsible than other wives. In the African households, responsibilities are thrust on the shoulders of the Ibo women. Emecheta clearly explains women’s responsibility in Igbo Culture as, “Woman, why don’t you go to your cooking place and let me talk to my son? Now, young man, when are you going to take on your family responsibilities? Have you not sensed enough to know that a father shouldn’t have to ask that of his son, he should do it automatically?”. So, according to the Igbo culture an Igbo woman is expected to be only found in the cooking place.

In this list of expectations, here is another unbearable expectation from an African woman. That is, she should be silent even though her husband is polygamy. So, sharing her husband with another woman is a painful thing of all the difficulties. When Nnu Ego is with her children and Nnaife with the new wife at night, she overhears them and reacts, “Adaku turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like. Did she think Nnaife was her lover and not her husband, to show her enjoyment so? She tried to block her ears, yet could still hear Adaku’s exaggerated carrying on. Nnu Ego tossed in agony and anger all night, going through in her imagination what was taking place behind the curtained bed” (124). Nnu Ego is badly` affected when she hears her husband’s following remark: “My senior wife cannot go to sleep. You must learn to accept your pleasures quietly, my new wife Adaku. Your senior wife is like a white lady: she does not want noise” (124). Through these lines it is evident that, polygamy worsens the existing state of inferiority of women. Besides it puts them especially into a more pathetic condition.

The expectations of the patriarchal society develop anxiety and trauma in women. The struggles they undergo to prove their virginity and procreativity is severe and cruel. Nnu Ego fails to issue a child to her husband. Her anxiety stands, when she tries to convince her husband by blaming it on the slave woman’s curse. She becomes helpless and searches for explanations, because she is supposed to give explanations to her father and his wives. She says, “I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right. How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed? I don’t like going there these days because his wives always rush out to greet me hoping that I am already carrying a child. You can see the disappointment on their faces” (31).

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