

**THE DELUDED POWER HOLDER AND THE REALIST
IN EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD***

Abigail Obiageli Eruaga

Department of English and Literature
University of Benin, Benin City
obiageli.eruaga@uniben.edu; abigail.obiageli@yahoo.com
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-4769-4172

Ethel Ngozi Okeke

Department of English and Literary Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Enugu State University of Science and Technology
PMB 01660, Enugu, Nigeria
Emails: ngozi.okeke@esut.edu.ng; enoya22@yahoo.com
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-5178-068X

Abigail and Ethel are Associate Professors in their various universities above. They both teach various literature courses at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Their research interests include: Feminism and Gender Studies, African Literature, African-American Prose Studies, Oral Literature, Literary Theories and more.

Abstract

Buchi Emecheta is a pioneer Nigerian female writer that explores the plights of women in her works. In her creative activism, she nudges men's and society's conscience in her advocacy for better deals for African daughters, mothers and women who fare far much worse than their male counterparts. *The Joys of Motherhood*, is set in a patriarchal society where men dictate the operational terms of human interactions and existence. Published in 1980 and henceforth *The Joys*, this novel exposes the wrongs that women experience in matters that border on their existence, well-being and survival. The text reveals two co-wives: Nnu Ego and Adaku both of whom respond differently to the patriarchal order that works against women in their Igbo society where the novel is set. Nnu Ego, the deluded power holder accommodates their patriarchal society's harmful cultural dictates to her own detriment while Adaku, the realist, questions and rebels against them and thus, navigates her humanity, sanity and survival. While

Nnu Ego panders to the harmful dictates of their masculine society that negatively impact their freedom and fulfillment, Adaku threads with care and wisdom by putting her well-being and that of her daughters first. Unfortunately for Nnu Ego, men and the patriarchal order eventually exploit, destroy and dump her while Adaku transports herself and her daughters to a comfortable social realm. Adopting the Patriarchal theory, this essay argues that most women like Nnu Ego are deceived by allowing the society accord them a false sense of importance only to be abandoned at critical moments by the same society and men. It concludes by noting that Emecheta supports female bonding as a means of diffusing masculine suppression and oppression.

Key Words: Patriarchy, female bonding, masculine oppression, Emecheta,
The Joys of Motherhood

Introduction: Nnu Ego, the Deluded Power Holder and Adaku, the Realist

A number of scholars have discussed Emecheta's *The Joys* from different perspectives. Grace Eche Okereke identifies two stages of the African novel which she calls the "evolutionary stage and the early feminine stage of apologia and the contemporary female stage of self-assertion" (571). She submits that the novel of apologia is "set in tradition, depicts women traumatically struggling against patriarchal expectations, especially in marriages and communal politics," while the feminist novel "portrays women as rebellious and asserting themselves in marriage, politics, history and the economy." (571). A close reading of this novel reveals that it belongs to both the evolutionary stage and the stage of apologia as the traits of both periods are present in the text. Through the actions and activities of Nnu Ego and Adaku her co-wife, it is convenient to locate Nnu Ego within the stage of apologia while Adaku passes as rebellious and self-asserting in marriage, history and the economy. This position will be revealed shortly.

Rose Mezu identifies a nexus between Gilles Deleuze's postulation in his "Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia" in which the French scholar defines Oedipus as the "figurehead" of imperialism which endorses the "agencies" or territorialities of "power and paranoia" such as the laws of the fathers, family, community and culture with Emecheta's creative worldview. Mezu is of the opinion that most of Emecheta's writings apply

Deleuze's views and aptly compares the concept of Deleuze's Oedipus as implying the same thing as Emecheta's worldview. She submits:

In Emecheta's cosmology, "Oedipus" serves as a metaphor for the baggage of cultural myths and superstitions which over the centuries have sent African females on such guilt-trips that they usually become pliable conformists, while the rebellious non-conformists struggling with sentimental and socio-philosophical problems are trapped within a system of alienation and end up as neurotics (132).

The above observation by Mezu is true with regard to Emecheta's heroines. However, in *The Joys*, it is the conformist heroine, Nnu Ego that ends up as an abandoned neurotic having been consumed by the same patriarchal cultural values that she vehemently promotes. Conversely, Adaku, her non-conformist co-wife who summons courage to rebel against the system survives, thus agreeing with Maurice Blanchot's opinion that "courage consists [...] in agreeing to flee rather than live tranquilly and hypocritically in false refuges" (qtd in Mezu, 137).

In *The Joys*, Emecheta presents the plight of women in the Igbo patriarchal society of Ibuza where women are seen as the appendage and property of the male. Tragically, most women yield to such ugly practice and even strive to uphold it. For instance, Ona, the mother of Nnu Ego is torn between two men – her father and her lover. Ona "grew to fill her father's expectation". He had maintained that she must never marry... she was free to have men, however, if she bore a son, he would take her father's name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made" (*The Joys*, 12). Ona, in this case, is free to fall in love and beget children who must belong to her father should they turn out to be males.

When Ona eventually falls in love with Nwokocha Agbadi, "she had to be loyal to her father, as well as to her lover Agbadi" (17). The reader is repulsed by such an unjust practice which demands that a woman procreates for her father. In another of her novel, *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta's heroine laments: "All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth, you were owned by your people, and when you were sold, you belonged to a new master" (*The Slave Girl*, 112), while Nnu Ego in *The Joys* cries out: "when will a woman be free and not an appendage of a man?" The death of Agunwa, Agbadi's first wife, is caused by the heartbreak inflicted on her by her husband's philandering with Ona his

mistress. The unrequited love of the senior wife who dotes on her insensitive husband sets the former pining through the night while her husband and his mistress give each other pleasure. The emotional heartbreak which claims Agunwa's life is captured below:

Agbadi's senior wife, Agunwa, became ill that very night. Some said later that she sacrificed herself for her husband: but a few noticed that it was bad for her morale to bear her husband giving pleasure to another woman in the same courtyard where she slept and to such a woman who openly treated the man they all worshipped so badly (21).

It is bad enough that Agbadi does not care for his wife emotionally but quite disheartening to know that such emotional neglect is as a result of another woman. Ona does not enjoy such a situation but why she continues in the path carved for her by her father is baffling. However, the selfishness of Obi Umunna is dashed as Ona is never blessed with a male child. After his death, Ona, not having enjoyed her own life when she is at the point of death, passionately pleads with her lover not to allow their daughter Nnu Ego undergo what she herself passes through. She tells him: "[...] please[...] see however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego you allow her to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one[...]" (*The Joys*, 28). A pertinent question at this point is why do women continue to pursue the agenda of men by pleasing them and causing their own gender heartache?

When she grows and gets to marriageable age, Nnu Ego gets married to Amatokwu and the marriage is happy except for the misfortune of her inability to bear him children. Unable to bear with her, Amatokwu takes a second wife who conceives immediately. This throws Nnu Ego into disfavour and so begins her life of hell in the hands of her once loving husband who now tells her: "You will go and work with me on the farm today. Your young mate may be having my child any time now. She will stay at home with my mother" (32). On reminding him of how he used to love and desire her presence by his side before now, her husband retorts:

What do you want me to do?" Amatokwu asked. 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 don't appeal to

me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones” (32).

From the above excerpt, it is evident that Amatokwu’s marriage to Nnu Ego is solely for utilitarian purpose. She is to bear him children and since she is unable to fulfil that expectation she has to become a farm hand for her husband. Though Nnu Ego decides to cope with such demeaning position, the beating she receives from him on a fateful day for playing mother to the son of her co-wife by breastfeeding him in order to stop him from crying, sends her back to her father’s house. She gets married again to Nnaife, a choice made for her by her father. Nnu Ego is willing to put up with Nnaife’s poverty and ugliness if only he can make her a mother. Thus, her attempted suicide on the death of her son Ngozi, does not come as a surprise considering her psychological trauma from a previous marriage. After mourning her baby, the flood gate of children opens and Nnu Ego begins to have them not minding the squalid living condition of her household whose only source of income is the meagre salary Nnaife attracts from being a steward to a white man and Nnu Ego’s little income from her petty trade in firewood. Though they live in a room apartment defined by squalor, Nnaife goes ahead to inherit Adaku, the young widow of his late brother.

Adaku joins Nnaife and his family in their one room apartment amidst animosity and antagonism from Nnu Ego the senior wife. All Adaku’s efforts to warm up herself to Nnu Ego’s heart are rebuffed by the latter. Nnu Ego revels in her ability to produce babies, especially male children. On the birth of Oshia, she is not only happy but imbibes her patriarchal society’s belief that children guarantee the future happiness of their parents, especially mothers and that the more of them one has, the better for one. “She was now sure as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy, (that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as ‘mother’ (54). This expectation is dashed as we see in the end.

Nnu Ego is threatened by Adaku’s youthfulness which she believes will attract her to their husband thereby making her lose his favour and her position. Consequently, she spurns Adaku’s bonding and friendly moves and flaunts her male children before her, ensuring that she gives birth in quick successions. Nnu Ego is only comforted when all Adaku sires are two girls. On one occasion, she boasts to Adaku: “whereas you chose money

and nice clothes, I have chosen my children...” (160). The authorial intrusion reveals that Nnu Ego “... did everything she could to make Adaku jealous of her sons” (162). She neglects herself, lives in abject poverty and places too much confidence in the future comfort she hopes to derive from her children when they are grown. She is so psychologically consumed by such hope of joy that she cares less about her squalid condition:

Nnu Ego was like those not-so-well-informed Christians who, promised the kingdom of Heaven, believed that it was literally just round the corner and that Jesus Christ was coming on the very morrow. Many of them would hardly contribute anything to this world, reasoning, “What is the use? Christ will come soon” (162).

Nnu Ego turns herself into a successful procreator but a pitiable failure in other spheres. Adaku on the other hand, makes up her mind to forget about giving birth to more children and concentrates on giving proper education to her two daughters with the money from her lucrative business: “ I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life... I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future” (168). Moreover, she resolves to quit the marriage and be more useful to herself:

“I’m leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife” [...] my *chi* be damned! I am going to be a prostitute [...] I am leaving here tomorrow with my girls. I am not going to Ibuza. I am going to live with those women in Montgomery Road [...] 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. (168-9)

Adaku the realist foreshadows the fate of Nnu Ego the advocate of patriarchy and takes a realistic view of her condition, refusing to be consumed by the yokes of tradition. She rebels against the Ibuza Igbo culture to assert herself martially and economically. She chooses her friends among the socially successful Montgomery Yoruba traders and seeks her joy and fulfillment outside the marital institution unlike Nnu Ego who blindly follows the patriarchal expectations and the trauma that comes with it. Though Adaku tells Nnu Ego that she is taking to prostitution, she gave her

senior mate a trade to gossip about with since her mind has been irretrievably made up to leave her squalid marital condition where she is not fulfilled for lack of a male child. Consequently, telling Nnu Ego that she was taking to prostitution was her surest way to make Nnaife or any member of Ibuza town union to come after her. Adaku breaks away from the shackles that have fettered her and other women and relocates into safety and sanity with her twin daughters.

On the other hand, Nnu Ego suffers for obeying the patriarchal order. Ironically, she is neglected by the children (sons) in whom she had put her hope and spent all her life bringing up and also by the society whose mores she has promoted with much zeal. It is apposite to note that “Motherhood for Nnu Ego, thus, becomes a bitter, painful, disappointing experience which is a sarcastic comment on the title of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*” (Okereke,579). Reduced to immense poverty when Nnaife their husband is conscripted into the British army against Fernanda Poe, Nnu Ego relocates to the village. Meanwhile Oshia her son wins scholarship to America while Adim, her second, travels to Canada. She is neglected by these sons in whom she invests all her life and dreams. Oshia marries a white woman and none of the male children takes care of her. Heart-broken and deserted, she loses her sanity and dies un-noticed by the way side at Otinkpa square at night. Oshia that refused to send money to cater for his mother when she was alive borrows to give her a decent burial. In an interview with Adeola James, Emecheta (36) has condemned the bickering and petty jealousy of women against one another. She advocates that women bond with one another, stressing that with such unity they can easily rise above the forces that work against them. In her essay, “Feminism with a small ‘f’” (555), making reference to *The Joys* and Nnu Ego, Emecheta states: I [...] describe the life of [a] woman who was so busy being a good mother and wife that she didn’t cultivate her women friends. She died by the wayside, hungry and alone [...]” (555). Emecheta is of the opinion that women, rather than men are responsible for putting themselves on the lowest rung of the societal ladder. Stephane Robolin describes Nnu Ego’s life as being “saturated with pathos” (77), stressing that she encounters a lot of obstacles “in her struggle to achieve the ideal of motherhood”.

Indeed, Nnu Ego is a victim of patriarchy and an encapsulation of Emecheta’s example in her essay above. She realises the trick played on her by her patriarchal society too late. As we see towards the end of the novel, her spurning attitude to Adaku whom she earlier sees as an enemy, changes

and she re-examines her erroneous belief in children as the source of their parents' joy, having begun to suffer neglect from her own sons. Moreover, her husband's nasty attitude and constant verbal assaults point to her that she has been lured by her male controlled society to place herself on such a high pedestal where she does not actually belong.

Before her death, in the court premises where Nnaife their husband is being tried for his crime against a Yoruba neighbor, she apologises to Adaku who has come to solidarise with her: "Try to forgive my condemning your leaving Nnaife when you did. I am beginning to understand now" (218). She regrets to realise too late that the values of her society had begun to change and that a woman with many children could face a lonely old age and may even die a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman" (219). Oshia who graduates from a good secondary school and secures a well-paying job is reluctant to offer financial assistance to his family (191). He plans travelling abroad for further study. It is much later that he bluntly tells Nnu Ego that he cannot help any family member yet and that he does not want to be like his father (193) that she becomes "subdued" and her "enthusiasm" begins "to flag" (193), leading to the deterioration of her health. Oshia's indifference makes Nnu Ego ill and leads to the still birth of her seventh child.

Nnaife is also frustrated by Oshia's selfishness and transfers the aggression on Nnu Ego whom he blames for any mistake of the children's just as he disowns Oshia: "He is no longer my son. Regard his [sic] as one of the lost ones" (201). "Nnaife had looked at her with so much venom..." (219). In Nnu Ego's throes of regret, she tells herself that "she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship" (219). It is ironical that two of Nnu Ego's sons Oshia and Adim (in USA and Canada respectively) from whose neglect Nnaife is "broken" and Nnu Ego "goes downhill fast" (224), send money to accord Nnu Ego "the noisiest and most costly second burial in Ibuza" whereas she died "with no child to hold her hand" (224). Nnu Ego's life and time are indeed, suffused with "pathos" as Robolin rightly observes.

Conclusion

Between Adaku and Nnu Ego are two women that respond to their patriarchal society differently. Whereas Adaku is the realist, Nnu Ego is the deceived one who realises her delusion too late and is unable to amend anything thereby losing out and losing her precious life as well. It is not surprising that Nnu Ego's shrine refuses to honour the fertility prayers

offered to it by barren women as she decides to requite her society which she conceives deceives and betrays her without remedy. In Ibuza, the shrines erected in the names of other productively fertile women like Nnu Ego are famed for granting the petitions of their barren supplicants but Nnu Ego's "never did" however passionately "people appealed to her to make women fertile" (224). In other words, Nnu Ego elects to visit punishment on the society for what she considers to be its crime against her.

Works Cited

- Blanchot, M. (1997). Quoted in Mezu, R. U. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price and the Slave Girl*. A Schizoanalytic Perspective. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 28:1, Jan 1997, 132-146.
- Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann.
- Emecheta, B. (2007). Feminism with a Small 'f' *African Literature: an Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. (Eds). USA: Blackwell. 551-557.
- James, A. (Ed). (1990). Buchi Emecheta *In their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*. London: Heinemann. 35-45.
- Mezu, R. U. (1997). Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price and the Slave Girl*. A Schizoanalytic Perspective. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 28:1, Jan 1997, 132-146.
- Okereke, G. E. (2022). "The Evolution of Women's Image in the African Female Novel": *Literature in English for Tertiary Education in Nigeria*. Ker et al. Eds. Lagos: TETFUND. 571-601.
- Robolin, S. (2004). Gendered Hauntings: *The Joys of Motherhood*, Interpretive Acts, and Postcolonial Theory. *Research in African Literature*. Vol. 35. No.3 Fall 2004. 76-92.