

THE INTERPLAY OF CULTURE/TRADITION AND SOCIALITY IN POSTCOLONIAL
MILIEU: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF
MOTHERHOOD*

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ABSTRACT

All over the world, societies are shaped by norms, tradition and culture. It is either individuals began to claim rights or allege others for shirking responsibilities. Inhabitants of each geographical entity adopt ways of life and governance based on their mutual homogeneity. Literature delves into people and impact of one people and place on the other. The writer is capable of collapsing the global society and bringing it to the literary stage for people to watch. Through this medium, government and governance, work and economy, culture and tradition are watched on the field of play. The writer is the 'referee' in each of these situations. This paper intends to bring to limelight, Buchi Emecheta's attempts in her book: *The Joys of Motherhood*, the complexities in living between tradition and culture on one hand and sociality and duty on the other. As the world population consists of both masculine and feminine genders, it is discovered in Emecheta's postulates in the novel that each of them should be accorded due recognitions and play complimentary roles for societal survival.

KEY WORDS: Norms, Culture, Homogeneity, Sociality, Complexities, Complimentary, Survival.

INTRODUCTION

Every society of humans in the society is beset by the complexities of its own tradition and culture right from inception. Individuals are born, nurtured and live with such characteristics with little or no opportunity to make any appreciable impact in changing the status quo. Any attempt made by the individuals to change the norms is often met with disappointment, if not

outright frustration. However, what later comes to be regarded or noticed as questionable in the ways of life of a people had long been in existence among generations and had since been accepted as their ways of life, which they were happy with. However, the advent of civilization ushered in by intercontinental exploration, the socio-cultural, as well as economic awareness of the people began to witness agitations. It is either individuals began to claim rights or allege others for shirking responsibilities.

The dawn of colonization in Africa followed by the attendant civilization, began to turn households, families, clans, wives and husbands against one another. The need to provide self with “better” and more comfortable means of livelihood led to the search for greener pastures. Nationals move outside their domains in search of human and economic fortunes. This development brought about conquests for economic dominance, such as it happened during the scramble for slaves starting from the 15th century. This was followed by introduction of Christianity as recorded by Abiola(1974).

Myriads of writers have since emerged in Africa, Nigeria in particular. Each of them have produced works on cultural, traditional, religious, social and economic interplays. A great number of the literary works contain colonial and post-colonial themes. They portray indelible marks which civilization- aftermath of colonization/Christianity left on the pre-colonial status quo. One of the outstanding literary works with post-colonial themes is *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Buchi Emecheta was born in 21st July 1944 in Lagos, Nigeria. She is a British-Nigerian writer.

Her urge for writing began with her interest in the older stories the elder sister use to tell them after dinners in their early age. She got married to Sylvester Onwodi in 1960. The husband later became unsupportive to her efforts as it was reported that he burnt the manuscript of her first book, *The Bride Price*. This development led to separation of the relationship in 1966. Emecheta continued to struggle on her own at the age of 22. She received honors degree in Sociology at the University of London in 1974 as well as her PhD in Social Education in 1991.

Among her literary works are; *In The Ditch*(1972), *Second Class Citizen*(1974), *The Slave Girl*(1977), *The Joys of Motherhood*(1979) and *The Rape of Shavi*(1983). She has an anthology titled *Head Above Water*(1986). She served as visiting Lecturer and Professor of universities in the United States of America, England and Nigeria. Sarah K. Horsley(2016)

THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

The protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* is Nnu Ego. She is the daughter of a local chief called Agbadi in a place called Ibuza. The father loves her so much as a result of the circumstances surrounding her conception and birth. She happens to be the only child delivered to Agbadi by Ona, a stubborn woman whom he loves dearly, though he has many other wives. Ona refuses to marry Agbadi because by tradition, she suppose to produce male child(ren) for the father's(Obi Umuana) family line who is unable to produce one. As providence will have it, Ona goes to stay with Agbadi when he sustained injuries in his farm. The intimacy between the two of them results in her pregnancy. Already Ona had agreed that if the pregnancy is male, it will be for her father, Umuana and if it is female it will belong to Agbadi.

Nnu Ego grows to be a beautiful woman and she is given out to Amatokwa for marriage. This does not last because she is not able to produce any child. The other woman the husband later

marries instantly conceives. There after Amatokwa only sees Nnu Ego's usefulness in the farm. She is being ordered here and there in the farm, even she is no longer considered serviceable in relationships. This development gives Nnu Ego psychological problem and her health becomes so negatively affected that she returns to her father's house. Not too long after this incident, a marriage is contracted between her and Nnaife who works in Lagos as a launder for Mr and Mrs Meers. The marriage between Nnu Ego and Nnaife is in proxy. She is only sent to Nnaife in Lagos. Consequently, she feels disappointed on seeing Nnaife because he does not look like the ideal husband she would have loved to marry. Notwithstanding, she soon becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy named Ngozi. On this she says ... 'But, you see, only now with this son am I going to love this man {Nnaife}. He has made me into a real woman' (55) When the son dies Nnu Ego attempts to commit suicide as she tries to jump off the bridge into the lagoon. It takes the concerted efforts of concerned people around the scene before she is rescued Nwakusor, one of those who saves her life leads her home safely to the husband. All along she begins to compare life in the traditional setting of Ibuza to that of the modern setting of Lagos. She gives birth to a baby boy named Oshiagu-meaning "the bush has refused this."

The conflict between tradition and socialiity soon begins to rage within Nnu Ego. Traditionally. Women do struggle to make considerable contributions to house keeps despite the husbands. Emecheta observes: ... "but in urban Lagos man had to be the sole provider; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role." (87) Nnu Ego insinuates that her attempt to live traditional life in Lagos by engaging in additional part times that will bring in additional income was responsible for the death of her first child.

The Meers whom Nnaife serves in Lagos returns to Europe as a result of the second World War and his family only rely on Nnu Ego's petty business for survival. Providence later smiles on them, Nnaife secures job on a ship but Nnu Ego has to take care of the house until he is back. He (Nnaife) returns to discover that his elder brother in Ibuza is dead and he is by custom saddled to inherit and cater for the late brother's household. Adaku, one of the late brother's wife had come to Lagos with her daughter to stay with the Nnaifes. Life later becomes more severe with Nnu Ego when Nnaife is forced to join the army. He is sent to fight in the second World War. Later Nnu Ego travels home to Ibuza for the late father's burial rites but on her return to Lagos she has to start afresh in order to survive, whereas, the junior wife's business is already flourishing. This leads to rivalry between the wives. Once they quarrel the elders settle it in favour of Nnu Ego, being the senior wife. This development annoys Adaku and she decides to leave the house to engage in prostitution.

One day Nnu Ego receives three months accumulated salary of Nnaife. She pays the children's school fees and settles some other domestic bills. At the end of the war Nnaife returns and he travels home to Ibuza to meet the brother's wives. He impregnates Adankwo, one of the other wives of his late brother's wives and brings her to Lagos as another wife. This development displeases Nnu Ego. She considers Nnaife's continuous procreating as uncalled for. He expends the rest of his military pay on Oshia's education at the expense of the others. Nnaife's hope that Oshia will soon return from America to take care of the siblings is dashed as he decides to stay back for further studies. To the parents, Oshia shirks his responsibilities in the family. To the chagrin of Nnaife and the wife, their daughter, chooses to elope with a Yoruba man contrary to their approval. In Nnaife's rage he assaults Kehinde's father-in law. This leads to his being sent to jail.

On the long run, Oshia remains in America, Adim is in school, the female children are settled in their matrimonial homes while Obiageli is left to stay with Kehinde and her husband. Nnu Ego goes back to Ibuza and stays in her father's house as the husband's family rejects her.

When Nnu Ego dies the children come home to give her a befitting burial. Unfortunately the children feel sorry for her to have died before they are able to be in positions to cater adequately for her. A shrine is made in Ibuza in her name.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Egbuwalo et al (2011) submit that "A literary artist, moved by emotions, purges out his ideas as a way of shaping the society. He exposes the ills and praises the gallantry of individuals and corporate bodies within the society." (143) Buchi Emecheta has been able to exploit her literary prowess to combine words with vision to intimate the reader with the conflicting position the average indigenous mother finds herself in the hitherto traditional milieu polarized by the emerging modernity. Sarah K. Horley, in *Fembo: Buchi Emecheta-Biography* (Internet source) says "The Joys of Motherhood addresses the harmful potential of rigid gender structures amidst otherwise changing Nigerian culture." Ever before the emergence of the acclaimed civilization vis-à-vis modernity, individuals communities within the African setting has their own ways of doing things. They hold their culture and norms to esteem. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta employs images to expose the myriads of problems faced by the mother in the postcolonial Nigeria as a contemporary society. Ibuza symbolizes the traditional society while Lagos symbolizes socialised or modern society where cultural values are either polarized or neglected. Nnu Ego has once been told in Ibuza that her chi was a slave woman who has been forced to die with her mistress during the burial. It was further revealed that the slave woman was making

effort that Nnu Ego's life was nothing but catalog of disasters. This piece of information is corroborated when she (Nnu Ego) says:

O my chi. O my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man. I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance. Oh, please help me, all you my ancestors. If I should become pregnant—hn...(45)

Moments after this hallucination, the chi actually appeared to her in a dream when she(chi) tries to snap her baby from her until she wakes up. Despite Nnu Ego's relocation from her native rural Ibuza to the modern Lagos, her chi still manifests in her life. It is the possessive influence of the chi that manifests when she decides on going to jump into the river at the cater bridge.

Emecheta has this to say:

...Well,, now she was going to her {the chi} to the unforgiving slave mistress from a foreign land, to talk it over not on this earth but in the land of the dead, deep beneath the waters of the sea. (4)

In other words, the cater bridge is symbolic of the boundary between life and death to Nnu Ego. If she has successfully jumped over the bridge into the river her life would have translated to death.

In a typical traditional African Igbo culture, men are not to or be seen washing women's clothes not to talk of the 'undies.' Incidentally this is part of the daily routines of Nnaife in Lagos as

He would sit on the kitchen stool by the first bath and wash all manner of articles, towels, women night dresses and what have you.(48)

Emecheta remarks on Nnu Ego's disposition towards this development. She states:

But everywhere she saw her husband hanging out the white woman's
smalls, Nnu Ego would wince as someone in pain. The feeling would
be deeper when, with sickening heart, she heard Nnaife talking
effusively about treatment of dainty clothes...(49)

In other words, life in Lagos has removed the 'manhood' of the traditional Ibo man to a woman. He now washes woman's clothes just as his neighbor Uba, who is equally an Ibo man, cooks for the white woman.

Despite the fact that Nnu Ego and her husband are far removed from Ibo, the husband still displays such ego a typical man in Ibo will exhibit on the wife. On an occasion, Nnaife says that the wife is not to stare at him while he eats. The following conversation ensues:

'You stare at me as if you don't want me to eat the food you
Cooked. You know a wife is not allowed to do that,' 'That applies
in Ibo, not here,' Nnu Ego said. 'What did you say? Did I not
pay your bride price? I am your husband and still a man. You
should not sit there staring at me.'(50)

Perhaps Emecheta feels that the woman should be entitled to some bit of 'freedom' of closeness with the husband, more so when they are in an environment where lesser attention should be placed on custom.

Juxtaposing Ibuza and Lagos, wives and husbands are in different worlds in Ibuza as opposed to Lagos. The hitherto cordial affinity among wives, husbands and children which prevails in Ibuza is virtually absent in Lagos due to the circumstantial necessities therein. Emecheta expresses:

There was no time for petting or talking to each other about love.

That type of family awareness which the illiterate farmer was able

to show his wives, his household...had been lost in Lagos for the

job of the white man, for the joy of buying expensive lappas...

Few men in Lagos would have time to sit and admire their wives'

tattoos, let alone tell them tales... like the village husband who might

lure a favorite wife into the farm to make love to her... or bathe in

the same stream with her, scrubbing one another's back.(55)

Nurturing and upbringing of the child is the main preoccupation of a mother in the rural (traditional) society. Mothers devote much of their time for this. The reverse is the case in the modern day society. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta remarks:

In Lagos a wife would not have time. She had to work. She

provides food from her meager housekeeping money, but

finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comfort, in

in some cases for the children's school fees, was on her shoulders.(55)

When both the father and mother have to be away from home always, the children will not be given the required basic moral training they deserve. Think of the indigenous setting where the family observe close relationships that engender collective struggle for improved economy. The search for greener pastures in the urban societies creates a scenario of scattered children.

The ability of the woman to produce male children is used as the yardstick for determining her status in many traditional beliefs. Male children determine the acceptability or otherwise of the woman in the typical Igbo custom. Ona, Nnu Ego's mother was expected to produce a male child for her father following the inability of her mother to produce one for him as custom demands. It was when she gave birth to a female (Nnu Ego) that she was free to marry. When Nnu Ego gives birth to a set of female twins Nnaife gives a lame excuse and says "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? Where will we all sleep, eh?(141) Surprisingly when Adaku had her own baby a few weeks later, Nnaife was happier because the new wife gave him a son. Unfortunately the baby dies later. When Nnu Ego displays obsession with Adaku's visitor, Adaku reports her to their kinsmen. Eventually Adaku is blamed. Consider the following comment by Emecheta:

...but instead of laying the whole blame on Nnu Ego. They made Adaku feel that since she had no son for the family she had no right to complain about her senior's conduct.(185)

Any misbehavior displayed by the child is visited on the mother. The 'responsible' child is for the father while the 'irresponsible' one belongs to the mother. When Kehinde decides on her own accord to choose whom she wants to marry, it is blamed on Nnu Ego. Consider:

He [Nnaife] must have it out with Nnu Ego. Why, he had thought the woman's children were more a blessing to him. Now he was beginning to see that they were a curse .(231)

Nnu Ego is rejected by the husband's family on her return to Ibuza. They brand her a bad woman as though she is responsible for the husband's predicaments..No doubt they shift the blame of Nnaife's imprisonment on her.

CONCLUSION

We can neither condemn sociality in its entirety nor can we throw our cultural/traditional values into the dust bin. What is necessary is to consider a blend of the two for the society to be a better place for us to live. How do you convince me to forget my genealogy and discard my cultural values and norms? I would not want to live like a bastard neither do I want to be shut out of world trends.

The initial hold to the idea that only males are useful to the family should be regarded obsolete.

If men and women are given equal status, there will be improvement in the per capita income of the continent. Unfortunately, the United Nations Development Programs 2016 Africa Human Development Report as pointed out by Lisa(2016), indicates that "... African women across board are denied the same kind of economic, social and political opportunities men enjoy". Even where this idea is still being held religiously, females perform outstanding feats nowadays in all facets of life. One way or the other sociality has given the woman a lee from the wind of restriction and limitation they were formerly subjected to.

If the current conditions now favour women to occupy such positions that were hitherto regarded as exclusive for men, the entire world, Africa in particular should be in symbiosis. The best solution is for us to adopt a blend of TRADITION and SOCIALITY.

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