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تبجيل الأمومة وأزمة الأفراح في رواية بوتشي إيميشيتا أفراح الأمومة

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المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة السخرية والمأساة المرتبطة بالأمومة كما صورتها بوتشي إيميشيتا في روايتها "أفراح الأمومة"، التي نُشرت عام ١٩٧٩. وتبرز القضايا الأساسية التي انتقدتها بوتشي إيميشيتا في عملها، بما في ذلك التحديات الاجتماعية والثقافية والاقتصادية التي تواجهها النساء في أعمال بوتشي إيميشيتا. وقد تم تحديد هذه القضايا باعتبارها هواجس نسوية متجذرة في الواقع الأيديولوجي للمجتمع الإفريقي. وتؤثر هذه الأيديولوجيات على النساء الإفريقيات ضمن نظام أبوي، لا سيما في نيجيريا خلال الحقبتين الاستعمارية وما بعد الاستعمار، حيث يصبح الهيكل الأبوي وتبجيل المجتمع الإفريقي للأمومة أداة للقمع والتغريب بالنسبة للبطلة. وتبرز بوتشي إيميشيتا الفجوة بين الأعراف الثقافية والواقع من خلال تناولها لهذا التبجيل التقليدي للأمومة في مجتمع الإيبو، وتوضح كيف يؤدي ذلك إلى استغلال نغو إيغو ومصيرها المأساوي. ومن خلال منظور النسوية ما بعد الاستعمار، تبرز الدراسة تحول مفهوم الأمومة في إيبوزا عندما يصطدم بالاقتصاد الرأسمالي الوحشي الجديد في لاغوس الاستعمارية. وتبين الدراسة أن الرواية تكشف أن الأمومة ليست مصدراً دائماً للفرح، بل وسيلة أساسية لقمع النساء واستثمار فاشل للنساء مثل نغو إيغو، اللواتي لم ينلن أي إشباع شخصي أو عزاء في سن الشيخوخة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بوتشي إيميشيتا؛ الأمومة؛ مأساة الأمومة؛ تحديات اجتماعية وثقافية؛ استعمار مزدوج

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The Veneration of Motherhood and the Crisis of Joys in Buchi Emecheta'

The Joys of Motherhood

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Abstract

This study examines the irony and tragedy of motherhood as depicted in Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). It emphasizes the central issues critiqued in Buchi Emecheta's work, including the socio-cultural and economic challenges faced by women. These issues are identified as feminist concerns rooted in the ideological realities of African society. These ideologies shape African women within a patriarchal system, especially in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, where the patriarchal emphasis on motherhood becomes a tool of oppression and alienation for the protagonist. Buchi Emecheta highlights the gap between cultural norms and reality by examining the traditional veneration of motherhood in Igbo society, illustrating how it leads to the exploitation and tragic fate of Nnu Ego. Using a postcolonial feminist perspective, the analysis underscores the transformation of the Ibuza concept of motherhood as it conflicts with the new, harsh capitalist economy of colonial Lagos. The study demonstrates that the novel portrays motherhood not as a constant source of joy but as a primary means of female oppression and a failed investment for women like Nnu Ego, who are left with neither personal fulfillment nor solace in old age.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta; Motherhood; Tragedy of motherhood; Socio-cultural challenges; Double colonization.

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المقدمة:

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta, born on July 21, 1944, was a Nigerian-born British author and playwright. Her name, Onybuchì, translates to "Are you my God" in English. She was born to Igbo parents in Yaba, near Lagos, in colonial Nigeria, and attended the Methodist Girls' School in Lagos. Her father worked as a railway worker and passed away when she was nine years old. Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi, a schoolboy she had been engaged to since she was eleven, in 1960. They soon emigrated to London amid the wave of emigration to Britain following decolonization. During their six years of marriage, they had five children, but in 1966, Emecheta left Onwordi after he burned the draft of her first novel, *The Bride*



Price. In 1970, she enrolled at the University of London and gained an honors degree in sociology four years later. In 1972, Emecheta published her first novel, *In the Ditch*. She died in 2017. (Smith, 2008, p.176).

The pressures and difficulties of life, the violation of rights, the cultural norms and traditions imposed on women by male society, and the woman's feelings of despair caused by this unfair treatment have led her to attempt to jump off a bridge because she sees no other way.

Interestingly, the introduction aims to pique the reader's curiosity about who this woman is and why she wants to end her own life. What are the deeper reasons behind her actions? These questions are quickly addressed by discussing, explaining, and analyzing the underlying causes of the events depicted in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* and its protagonist.

To support the claim that Emecheta portrays motherhood as a beautiful yet ultimately empty, gold-colored cage, this paper is divided into seven distinct sections. The first section presents Emecheta's call to redefine African femininity outside patriarchal restrictions. The curse of the slave girl works as a literary tool to epitomize Nnu's struggles, symbolizing the transition from traditional Igbo prominence to the excruciating reality of colonial motherhood. Afterwards, the title suggests celebrating the experience of motherhood, but the narrative reveals that, in reality, motherhood is just an anguish for Nnu Ego. The third section explains how the men in Nigerian society behave as dictators, forcing the rule that a woman is only considered complete if she gives birth to sons. The fourth section clarifies that Nnu Ego's sacrifice is not merely a choice; it is her whole ethical compass. She contends that perpetuating the family unit is the only way to secure her sons' social stature. The fifth section, discusses how Nnu Ego, at the outset, feels superior to her co-wife because she has sons, while Adaku has only daughters. This establishes a perturbed hierarchy in which Nnu Ego utilizes her motherhood as a shield against her apprehensions. The sixth section argues that a dual-patriarchal system deals with women as receptacles of pedigree and human capital rather than as human beings. The seventh section is about the symbolic death of Nnu Ego; it is a deep condemnation of the patriarchal gender framework and the marketization of female fecundity in colonial Nigeria. Nnu Ego's death does not happen exclusively at her old age, but rather cyclically as she is systematically deprived of her individual authority and coerced to sacrifice her personality for the idealized role of the virtuous mother.

Literature Review

The methodology of feminism is primarily concerned with revealing the harsh experiences women encounter in patriarchal societies; its main concerns are social inequality, distinction, harassment, and sexual violence. These patriarchal structures severely affect women physically and psychologically.



The following is a review of essential scholarly viewpoints, underlining their similarities and differences, and points of departure. Stratton, F. (2020). *Contemporary African literature and the politics of gender*. Routledge, she claims that Emecheta elucidates how the patriarchy utilizes the sacrosanctity of motherhood to oppress women. Umeh, M. A. (1982). *The Joys of Motherhood: Myth or Reality?* Colby Quarterly. She explains that the psychological price of Nnu Ego's failure to meet societal anticipations. She claims that Nnu Ego's ultimate misery and lonely death are the only rational conclusions for a woman who has no self without her sons. Boehmer, E. (2009). *Stories of women: Gender and narrative in the postcolonial nation*. Manchester University Press. She claims that the influence of colonialism on masculinity is, in addition, a key scholarly concern, as Nnaife's abasement in the colonial labor pool leads him to affirm a redemptive, often hostile, hegemony over his wives in the household.

1. Delinking Motherhood from Womanhood and the malediction of the living dead

First and foremost, the novel is a demand to separate womanhood from motherhood. Buchi Emecheta is a prominent African feminist voice, but her influence extends to many countries, particularly in the Third World. She represents women who face persecution and marginalization. She has dedicated herself to addressing this suffering through her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Barfi, Kohzadi, & Azizmohammadi, 2015, p. 26). She introduces a caustic, supernatural twist. She portrays Nnu as a woman stripped of agency. Her body becomes a receptacle for her father's arrogance, her husband's pride, and her sons' survival needs. A woman whose whole identity is contingent upon her productive success of sons. Through her death, she finally owns her power and chooses to use it to break the cycle instead of continuing the system that oppressed her. She shatters the chain, understanding that in a changing, colonial world, motherhood is no longer a guarantee of joy or safety—it has become a trap.

Loretta Ross claims that "women are socialized (not created) to care for others". She offers a radical definition of mothering as "the glad gifting of one's talents, ideas, intellect, and creativity to the universe without recompense" (Gumbs & Williams 2016, p xv).

"As you sow, so shall you reap" (Sorabji, 1908, p. 123). Nnu Ego's father killed a slave girl who was his mistress's companion. So, the slave girl's soul haunted Nnu Ego in this world and the afterlife. The slave girl's soul cursed Nnu Ego's father, and at the same time, she cursed Nnu Ego's womb, pledging that she would return in the shape of his daughter, but that she would not experience moments of comfort and joy.

The curse that befalls Nnu Ego was considered a spiritual element, while Nnu Ego's womb was her only source for identity; her tragedy is not only a supernatural



curse, but the result was that the traditional *Joys of Motherhood* were a myth that kept her oppressed in a cycle of misery.

So, the journey of joy (misery) begins here. The author conveys an important message by dispelling the myth of the happy African mother and showing the reader the plain truth that Nnu Ego had the most expensive funeral anyone had ever seen in Ibuza. On the other hand, there is a hidden irony: her children gave her nothing in return. It is a powerful statement that an opulent funeral cannot compensate for a miserable life. Nnu Ego's motherhood is a small source of joy, but at the same time, a strenuous marathon of devotion, destitution, and eventual jilting. This is considered an ironic condemnation of the societal pressures that measure a woman's worth only by her capability to bear children, specifically sons.

The Joys of Motherhood is seen firstly as a chant, secondly, as the worship of motherhood in a male-dominated society that only offers women a limited amount of space if they give birth to male sons, who provide women a chance of survival. The virtual question is: what would the woman do if she were barren? This is a significant dilemma for a woman, and at the same time, motherhood becomes a painful demand that will send any woman into sadness and self-destruction. Conventional marriage in Nigeria is basically a contract between the groom and the bride's father, involving an exchange between the two families. The agreement states that if, after several months, the wife does not produce sons, she will be returned to her father. Nnu Ego is one of hundreds of wives who have suffered greatly because of these customs (Villegas & Domínguez, 2021, p. 43).

The protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* is a girl named Nnu Ego, who has faced misfortune in her marriages. She endures abuse, rejection, and humiliation in her first marriage within the matrimonial home. Her only fault, from her husband's and society's perspective, is that she cannot bear a son. This becomes both the cause and the consequence of her being sent back to her father's house.

The events start in colonial Nigeria. Nnu's tragedy begins when she moves from a rural village to Lagos, "colonial policies deliberately excluded women from new economic opportunities while maintaining their domestic responsibilities, creating unprecedented burdens for African mothers" (Ogbeide-Ihama, 2025, p. 744)—impelled by the culturally expected desire to become a mother, especially of sons, which is viewed as the only way for a woman to find worth and security. Emecheta emphasizes gender as the central theme, focusing on the sexual oppression of women in Third World societies, particularly in Africa. Women are subjected to certain patterns of behavior that are sometimes accepted by one gender and rejected by the other; these patterns are known as social norms. The novel explores the power dynamics between men and women, examining how men exert pressure on women in various aspects of life. One example of these norms is the dominance of men in both private and public spheres, where women are often considered second-class citizens. Therefore, women are seen as mere objects. Bouchi uses this novel to emphasize the



humiliation women face in a patriarchal society. Rich (1976) claims that “Patriarchal motherhood requires women to sacrifice their individuality for culturally prescribed maternal roles that ultimately serve male interests” (Ogbeide-Ihama, 2025, p. 745). This work can support efforts to eliminate women’s oppression and address injustice. She portrays the ordeal of African women and their ability to overcome the constraints of social traditions under colonialism and capitalism.

To achieve gender equality in the Third World, Bouchi, an activist feminist, relies on education to help women achieve their goals. Ostensibly, a goddess of fecundity who repudiates to grant children is seen as “wicked” or “broken” by the local population, but from a feminist viewpoint, this is an act of providential care.

This paper argues that Buchi Emecheta’s novel utilizes the protagonist, Nnu Ego, to illustrate the failure of the traditional patriarchal contract for women in a changing world. Her relentless diligence to motherhood ultimately leads her to destitution, alienation, and depersonalization, therefore revealing the title as profoundly ironic.

1.2 Demonstrating Titular Joy

The author of *The Joys of Motherhood* does not depict happy moments in the novel; she uses the title ironically to refer to the central theme, which gradually reveals the tragic events in Nnu Ego’s life. The title is considered an oxymoron. The author uses a “bait and switch” tactic in the title to grab readers’ attention. Her pursuit of sons (joys) only leads to her suffering. The main theme of the novel is the “necessity for a woman to be fertile, and above all to give birth to sons” (O’Reilly, 2025, P.306).

The novel’s title is a powerful example of dramatic irony. Nnu Ego’s struggle against indigence, exhaustion, and indifference steadily refutes the anticipated joys. Nnu Ego experienced disappointment when she believed that motherhood would secure her respect and comfort in old age, a core promise of the Ibuza tradition, which was crushed. Her lonely death by the roadside after her sons leave for the occident in pursuit of their own self-interest and self-actualization highlights the futility of her investment and the betrayal of the traditional contract. Joy is a myth of the tradition, sustained by a system that needs women to procreate.

1.3 Dictatorship of Patriarchy

Women in Nigeria faced triple oppression from social, geographical, and psychological angles: they were oppressed by the patriarchal system, colonialism, and the societal pressure to bear sons.

Seclusion in certain spaces and spheres has been and remains a reality that has affected only part of the population, specifically the female population, throughout history. This spatial seclusion imposed by the patriarchal system has also meant the assignment of certain isolating roles that have had to be occupied only by women: mother, housekeeper, and wife. This has brought with it an oppression and



silencing which has had serious consequences for women, since occupying these roles has served to keep them subjugated and subordinated to the decisions and power that has been only in the hands of men. (De Dios, 2022, P. 318)

As a defective part of the property, Nnu Ego was disowned by her first husband and sent back to her father because she was infertile. Her father showed no displeasure as he planned to arrange a second marriage for her. As the reader observes, the woman moves within a cycle of men; one man hands her over to another. Physically, it appears to be an error; the cause may be inexplicable. She endures emotional suffering. Her first husband tells her this:

What do you want me to do? Amatokwu asked. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on an infertile woman. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you no longer appeal to me. 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. (Kammampool, 2014, p. 15)

She replied bitterly to him:

At the farm, Amatokwu kept ordering her about, as he would any farm help. She stood in the middle of the farm and said abruptly, Amatokwu, remember when I first came to your house? Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? 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? (Okoye-Ugwu, 2024, p. 90)

Psychologically speaking, he audaciously berates her and puts her down, "If you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams" (Okoye-Ugwn, 2024, p. 90). Moreover, Amatokwu believes: "She is as barren as a desert." Pierre Bourdieu. In his work *The Male Domination* (2000), argues that:

The system of power in the world is based precisely on that male domination —that is, on biological difference and the supposed superiority of men over women—, but that this domination, based on biological differences, is nothing more than a construct created by patriarchal society that is extrapolated to all other aspects of it, thus perpetuating said relationship of domination (De Dios, 2022, P. 320)

The tragedy for the woman, from the man's perspective, is traditional marriage, which begins with the man's search for fertile ground (the woman) to plant his seed so it can grow into a tree with many branches and leaves (sons) to immortalize his Name. It begins with a desire; all the man needs is a sexual organ and a female womb. The womb will bear him sons, and his own will be a good wife or a complete woman, but if the woman is barren, she will face her fate alone. Depending on



African social culture or traditional marriage, she will either return to her father or accept her fate of being a slave woman, and she will be considered half a woman.

West African society places great importance on women's fertility.

As a patrilineal society, having male children is crucial for maintaining the line of succession and preserving the family name.

A woman who has no children is regarded as being in a state of permanent disgrace and is mocked by all her neighbors.

(Kammampool, 2014, p. 3)

Rich aims to deconstruct specific facts that the patriarchal system is engaged with in presenting as indisputable:

A "natural" mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace turned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless. (qtd in. De Dios, 2022, P.321)

This concept leads Rich to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the experience of motherhood, which she describes as "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children," and the institution of motherhood, which she describes as "ensuring that that potential — and all women— shall remain under male control" (p. 322)

This snapshot of events at Nnaife's house illustrates a tragic moment that highlights the psychological harm Nigerian women endure during conflicts between Nnaife and his two wives, Adaku and Nnu Ego. Nnaife's friends intervene to resolve the issue in a patriarchal way. They scold Adaku for her rude behavior and say she has no right to speak to Nnu, insisting she should respect her co-wife because Nnu has children, while Adaku is barren. They distract her in their own special way. In African traditions, a woman can make her husband immortal if she bears him a son (Gbauuidi & Eric Bida, 2018, p. 4266):

Don't you know that according to the customs of people, you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? Nwakusor reminded her: "Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this round of his visiting world. I know you have children, but they are girls who, in a few years, will go and help build another man's immortality (Kammampool, 2014, P. 15)



The male perspective on Nigerian feminists and all women who feel oppressed by male dominance is entirely different and does not support their ideas and views. They see it as an unforgivable campaign to achieve equality between the two genders. They consider it an insult to Nigeria's current cultural attitudes (Chioma, Nkechinyere, 2023, p. 694). This male chauvinism dates back to ancient history, including Aristotle, who said about women, "Not fully human beings and that the nature of women was not efficient, rather women were by nature deficient, not to be trusted and to be looked down upon" (p. 695).

Far from reflecting a "natural" state of woman, the "institution of motherhood" is an artificial construct that was "invented" by "patriarchy." Patriarchy silences women, particularly mothers, as well as what both men and women define as "maternal" or "feminine" in themselves. Male-dominated professions have historically enforced this silence. (qtd in. De Dios, 2022, P.322)

1.4 The Ideal Mother

Nnu Ego's wish for motherhood is not just instinctive but also an internalized cultural order that acts as a dominant Superego. The fear of being an infertile and a total social failure leads her to the point that her entire sense of self (the Ego) becomes intertwined with the role of mother.

One of Rich's main objectives in her work, *Woman Born* (1976), is to examine motherhood as an institution that oppresses women and keeps them within the dominant patriarchal system. This oppression, like any other form of oppression, is a form of violence and abuse against women, a kind of premeditated manipulation that deprives them of the opportunity to develop as free and autonomous beings in the society of which they are a part. (De Dios, 2022, p.321)

This situation leaves no psychological space for her personalized Requirements, aspirations, or self-care. Her first suicide attempt was symptomatic of this narcissistic trauma—the fiasco to accomplish the maternal task. She is controlled by her *Chi* (her personal God) and the societal ghosts of the expectations.

The same reason that prompted her to attempt jumping off a bridge initially reemerged after it became real, ultimately causing her tragic death. She was an elderly woman who once dreamed of having children to help her face life's hardships, but she had none. She died alone by the roadside. That reason was absent both when she first attempted to end her life and again when she died. The novel



reveals that Nnu Ego, at the end of the story, dies “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” (Emecheta, 2011, p. 224).

This analysis is rooted in the concept of intersectionality. Feminist interpretations of the novel emphasize structural societal factors, specifically Igbo traditionalism and colonial economic instability, that shape the ideal. Using Freud and Lacan, psychoanalysis examines internal wounds. The analysis will focus on Nnu Ego’s narcissistic injury (I am afraid I am not a good mother), her Oedipal fixation (on her sons for gratification), and the splitting of the ‘self’.

The second irony in this novel, aside from the irony of the title, occurs when Nnu Ego admits that her second husband, Nnaife, makes her a woman by impregnating her. This flashback aligns with Lacanian theory, in which Nnu Ego sees her sons as symbols of her phallus.

In Foucault’s view, the body is the site where political investments are inscribed: “[P]ower relations have an immediate hold upon [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Ells, C. 2003, P. 214)

Nnu Ego’s body becomes a locus of hard labor and abuse. All her various market ventures are sacrificed to care for her sons. The body fatigue, constant hunger, pain of childbirth, and breastfeeding are tough sacrifices for the family’s continuity, sacrifices that go unrecompensed. Her self-denial is a type of economic enslavement imposed by a patriarchal and capitalist society that fetishizes unpaid, reproductive labor while trivializing the maternal sacrifices she made.

Put in another way, Nnu Ego’s tragedy is a powerful psychoanalytic example of deeply eroded and obliterated identity under the strict control of a constraining Symbolic Order. Her inability to find any worth beyond her assigned role as “mother” results in a terrifying confrontation with the Real’s reckoning with alienation and death.

A materialist feminist perspective shows that what we view as the cause or origin of oppression is actually just the mark imposed by the oppressor... that we consider a physical and direct perception is merely a sophisticated and mythic construction, an ‘imaginary formation’. (Jagger, 2008, p.29)

Nnu Ego’s repeated pregnancies occur within a context of increasing financial strain, yet cultural expectations demand that she continue having children regardless of economic



circumstances. The novel shows how “the cultural valorization of large families conflicts with the practical realities of urban poverty”. (Ogbeide-Ihama. 2025, P. 749)

Bearing sons for Nigerian women is regarded as the cultural “currency” that protects their status in their husband’s pedigree and serves as a cause of solace in old age. Emecheta challenges this conception, portraying motherhood as a mechanism of subjugation. Nnu Ego’s intense desire to produce sons is depicted as an involuntary internalization of patriarchal values, which ultimately fails to deliver the promised fulfillment.

Rich notes that motherhood has a history and an ideology that are “essential to the patriarchal system,” and she succinctly notes that “Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions (De Dios, 2022, P. 323)

Emecheta, as the novel's author and an activist feminist, establishes this early on, clarifying that barrenness is not regarded as a biological disaster but as an ethical or spiritual failure. Nnu Ego’s first marriage to Amatokwu failed because she was unable to conceive. Her husband’s tyranny and his ultimate rejection of her assert that without a son, she is seen as a “failed woman” rather than a human being. Psychologically, these events laid the bedrock for Nnu Ego’s lifelong fixation with motherhood as a means of survival.

Nnu Ego explains how past events are linked to their inability to have children, considering it a curse connected to her father’s actions when he buried a girl alive. The reader can also see how these events relate to her supplication, highlighting the importance of traditional values. She is desperate because fate has punished her “with the difficulty of fathering children”. Nnu Ego pleads with her *Chi* (personal god), “Nnu Ego’s *Chi* is the Slave Woman brutally beaten to death by Nnu Ego’s father.” “Oh, my *Chi*, why must you bring me down so low? Why must I be punished like this? I am sorry for what my father did, and I am sure he is sorry too”. (O, Reilly, 2025, p. 305)

1.5 Jealousy Between Wives

When Nanaief gets home after finishing his work, he is surprised to find that his wife, Nnu Ego, has given birth to twins. This event makes him angry, and he says: When Nnaife returned home in the evening and was told that his wife, Nnu Ego, had two girls at the same time, he laughed loudly as he would always do when faced with an impossible situation. “Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done



Better?

When Nnaife came home in the evening and was told that his wife, Nnu Ego, had given birth to two girls at the same time, he laughed loudly, just as he always did when faced with an impossible situation. “Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better?” (Adesina, O. O, & Jegede, O. O, 2019, P. 80)

Naniaf replies sarcastically to his wife, Nnu Ego, upon the birth of twins: “... what are these?” This mocking statement shows that in Nigeria’s patriarchal society, the son is preferred over the daughter. In another scene, when his second wife gives birth to a son, Naniaf is very happy. Unfortunately, his joy is incomplete when his son dies days later. Adaku expresses her sorrow, “God, why did you not take one of the girls and leave me with my male child?” (p. 80).

The theme of jealousy shadows the novel’s events when Oshie, Nnu Ego’s son, shares a dream with his mother in which his stepmother tries to harm him. Nnu then takes him to an herbalist for advice. The herbalist tells her that “The Child is right,” but he is a man living in a society that upholds male patriarchy and promotes gender roles. He reinforces Nnu Ego’s suspicions by saying, “You must protect your sons against the jealousy of the younger wife.” He asks her for some items to make a spell, saying, “If you bring me two hens and a yard of white cloth, I shall prepare a charm for your sons to wear. No jealousy will be able to reach them after that” (Blay & Annin, 2022, p. 335). This demonstrates that the male dominance system aims to guarantee the protection of sons.

1.6 Society Structural violence

Most African writers believe that a woman earns respect in her family and society as a kinship member primarily by giving birth to sons. Consequently, her fulfillment comes from producing children, without assigning any extra significance. “Reproduction is the foundation of kinship and community continuity, and women, as child bearers, bear both its responsibilities and its honor” (Ogunrotimi & Omolara, 2019, p. 98).

When Nnu Ego gives birth to twin baby girls, their father (Nnaif) does not choose their names. Nnu Ego says wistfully: “They don’t deserve a suitable name”. She gave the first one, named Taiwo, and the second one, Kehinde. Therefore, Emecheta depicts a society in which gender defines a person’s worth. Female characters are subjugated to double despotism at the intersection of repressive forces of race, gender, and class. They are born only to serve men (Barfi, Z., Kohzadi, H., & Azizmohammadi, F, 2015, p. 28).

Barbara Christian said that *The Joys of Motherhood* is a tragic story “of a victim who has yet to articulate her victimization, a necessary step for change. She is destroyed by this lack of consciousness and by the silence in her society where women’s personal lives and wider social change have yet to be related.” (Felski,



2003, P. 161). Alice Rossi said about women who strive for autonomy in a patriarchal society.

A woman graduate student who showed strong commitment and independence is characterized as —an unfeminine bitch|| and others who are quiet and unassertive were referred to as lacking in ambition, women who will never amount to much (Ojukwu & Sam, 2018, p. 101)

This is a kind of behavior that belittles women and disparages them. It is a kind of abject servitude. It's a world like “a sea like world dominated by (males) sharks ready to prey on vulnerable (female) porpoises”. (p. 102).

These rigid norms that shape women's lives, determining their happiness—especially among Igbo women in Nigeria during their traditional marriage process—are influenced by various factors: the impacts of colonial history and the poverty stemming from tough economic conditions in Lagos. This has become an obsession that worries every girl and woman. Recent post-colonial changes in their traditional social environment have led to increased marginalization and victimization. At the very least, it can be said. This unique phenomenon is a result of new variables.

As an author and feminist activist, Bouchi Emecheta is skeptical of social stereotypes of femininity. She struggled with the different roles of “woman,” “wife,” and “mother.” Nigerian women have internalized the common notion that they are failures without children, as having children “ensures the continuity of their people” (O'Reilly, 2025, p. 302).

The joy is not in having sons, but in pleasing her society by obeying her second husband's wishes. She does not know or meet him face-to-face, but she sends messages from the countryside to the city to make herself feel that her life is becoming worthwhile and meaningful. This part reveals the double meaning in the story of the Nigerian woman; women in Nigeria face coercive systems like polygamy and son favoritism. (O'Reilly, 2025, p. 306).

Nnu Ego sacrifices and protects the precious things God has granted her and that she has received from her second marriage (children); she bestows these merits on them and receives satisfaction in return through motherhood. “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” (Buch, 1994, p. 186). She entreats and complains to God, “when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?” She raises her complaint before all the world and the owners of heaven, earth, men, and women to save her and other women from the derogatory treatment by the patriarchal system that wants to see women as an appendage in this society.



I know what you mean. Girls love babies. But only now, with this son, am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman – all I want to be: a woman and a mother. So why should I hate him now?” (Kammampool, 2014, p. 15)

Nnu Ego complains to God about her weakness and sadness, which will be evident in her soliloquy.

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 this? Yes, I have many children... I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? Men make it look as if we must either have 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 for 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 (Blay, R. A., & Annin, F, p.337)

The final question and the heart of the novel’s philosophical feminist message are revealed in Nnu Ego’s final, existential realization. In her soliloquy to God, she asks, “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” This directly challenges the fundamental idea that a woman’s existence is validated only through her relationship to men (as a wife) or her children (as a mother). Emecheta’s novel concludes that when women’s psychology is tied solely to the biological task of mothering, the result is not self-actualization but the inevitable disintegration of the self. In other words, “Suffering as a virtue.”

In Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, as expressed by its protagonist Nnu Ego, a female perspective is offered that conveys disgust with male chauvinism and with patriarchy’s contentment with an unjust, repressive system against women, as in her well-known words quoted above. This contradicts the “phallogocentric” images of happy, joyful women. Palmer concludes that Emecheta’s Nnu Ego is “the forerunner of women’s liberation in Africa” (Jagne & Parekh, 1998, p. 157).

Nnu Ego sacrifices everything to raise her children, her only source of self-worth. Eventually, they become products of a new colonial system that emphasizes individual success and Western education. This causes them to abandon their parents



in pursuit of opportunities abroad, resulting in a cycle of suffering for Nnu Ego and in vain efforts by her children.

The lens of economic analysis reveals that the joy lies in connecting with wealth that the colonial regime outright denies. There is an inconsistency between the cultural belief that having many sons equals success and the economic reality, which shows that having many sons often results in severe poverty.

1.7 Nnu Ego's Symbolic Death

Nnu Ego passed away alone and disoriented, embodying her scattering. An excerpt from the text states that, after her death, people believe she must be compensated in the hereafter: God will grant recompense for her suffering. This final act of solidarity, attempting to impose meaning on her vacant life, functions as a communal denial of her tragedy. From a psychological perspective, her recompense is granted only after the demise of the self, the body, and the mind she sacrificed. The novel concludes that her “joys” were purely an illusion, a cultural narrative imposed on a life shattered in both material and emotional ways.

Nnu Ego puts her full passion and material future in her sons, showing a form of Oedipal projection. Her sons are more than just children; they symbolize her way to immortality and social status. She starves herself to meet the food needs of her offspring and pay for their education, seeing them as investments that, by norms, will care for her in old age. When her sons move away to Europe, continuing a colonial-era success mould, they leave her alone and impoverished.

Unfulfilled promise for which Nnu Ego sacrificed. Her biggest dream was that her children would support her in old age and give her the promised “joys” and respect—but she was heartlessly deprived when her children traveled to Europe. This reveals that the traditional patriarchal contract has been broken by modernity, leaving her forsaken.

Conclusion

The Joys of Motherhood marks a tragic conclusion to the idea of complete maternal happiness. Emecheta effectively achieves her goal by portraying Nnu Ego's life as a warning story: a woman who devotes her life to the highest traditional female goal, motherhood, only to be met with loneliness and death. The final image of her dying by the roadside, left behind by the children she sacrificed everything for, is the



ultimate expression of the novel's main irony. The story shows that while mothering may be motivated by love, the institution of motherhood, when connected to a strict patriarchal and economic system, becomes a way for women to be oppressed and feel deeply alienated. The supposed 'joys' are just fleeting moments, overshadowed by a lifelong experience of systemic pain and sacrifice.

Recommendations

Future literary analyses should continue to scrutinize the glorification of motherhood and to question the underlying patriarchal presumptions, while also exploring alternative paths to female satisfaction and self-realization, both within and beyond domestic environments.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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