

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND POST-COLONIAL CLASS CONTEXT: A STUDY OF BUCHI EMCHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD.

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Abstract

This paper traces the influence of western colonization and its associated ideologies on the relative power and independence of Ibo women through the lens of a female African writer. BuchiEmcheta was a prolific writer who was born in Nigeria on 21 July 1944.

The Joys of Motherhood, (1979) tells a story of a Nigerian woman, Nnu Ego. Her existence revolves around her children and that's how she gains the reverence of her society. When colonial influences started changing traditional tribal values and their long-established culture, Nnu Ego has begun to struggle between her belief and accepting the new ways of her people or to be true to her traditional values.

The notion of assimilation and globalization is omnipresent in post-colonial literature. How has being colonized affected the colonized and the colonizer vice versa? When someone is getting "assimilated" into a new culture, how do they influence the culture they are assimilated into and what made them accept or reject the culture? This paper aims to answer all the questions in this regard through this celebrated novel.

Key words: *Post-Colonial studies, Ibo society, cultural conflict, tradition vs colonialism.*

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND POST-COLONIAL CLASS CONTEXT: A STUDY OF BUCHI EMCHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD.

- Shreya Dutta

Buchi Emecheta is one of the prominent female writers from Nigeria in world literature arena. Her Oeuvres have set a milestone in African literature. Her life is as laudable as her resilient, strong, self-made womanist characters. This paper intends to show the influence of western colonization and its associated ideologies on the relative power and independence of Igbo¹ women through the lens of a female African writer. Throughout the journey of Emecheta, she has depicted the vast array of female protagonists in different time frames, among whom Nnu Ego the central figure of the narrative *The Joys of Motherhood* is going to be discussed here.

Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* tells the story of a traditional Igbo woman, who believes her identity and social prominence depends on having many children especially the boy one. In spite of fighting with poverty, she feels herself rich having eight children especially three sons, she thinks she would get a comfortable old age and prestigious funeral due to the sons' cooperation and support and presence. This novel depicts a detailed story of Nnu Ego's troublesome life in Lagos, in the colonial timeframe. At the end of the novel, the protagonist dies all alone, unaccompanied

'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 224)

The notion of class and its division has attained in industrialized countries most of the times where social hierarchies are going through a rapid transformation. But in the African context, we get to know that their society is strongly egalitarian in character which is hardly having the presence of stratification. The perception of 'African humanism', 'traditional collectivism', SécouTouré's communaucracyaaffirm the absence of social classes. Prominent theorist Julius Nyerere has stated that African languages did not have the vocabulary to adapt class concept: Indeed there is a doubt if the equivalent for the word 'class' or 'caste' was existent in African society. According to Nyerere's theory, a degree of

classlessness is certainly observed in some traditional African societies in the respect of physical labor where economic activities are comparatively unspecific.

Emecheta creates the backdrop of the suffering and domination of Nnu Ego which she has experienced throughout her life in a colonized city, Lagos. She told a story of marginalized women who have no voice in their practical life. In this novel, the female characters are multiply maltreated by oppressive coercion of race, gender and class, although they are not being called as a homogeneous group. Emecheta, as a Nigerian woman is the best person to voice for those marginalized people to rewrite the real story against the indigenous patriarchal society and their constant domination. She has stated the fact that though the women share the same culture, they are yet different, they cannot be considered as a singular monolithic subject. For instance, Ona is a boastful lady having male power. Adaku is a representation of liberty who longs for independence and freedom. Nnu Ego, who eulogizes all traditional rituals and accepts the supremacy of patriarchy,. She always tries to be a good daughter, ideal wife and perfect mother. Adankwo, another character of the novel believes in destiny, incarnates the patriarchal values. Most of the times, she encourages in the oppression of Nnu Ego and Adaku. Therefore regarding women as a category of dissection one cannot say just because they represent womanhood as a homogeneous class, they are analogous. They all are different in their own unique way. But being a woman in a colonial patriarchal regime in Lagos has made them silent even more suppressed. In the novel, we find the Igbo women have their monthly meeting in Lagos which signifies constructed solidarity among them. They help each other in order to make their life easier. When Nnu Ego suffers from poverty, her other community women suggested her to start her own business, so that she can live her life with a little ease.

'They let her borrow five shillings from the women's fund and advised her to buy tins of cigarettes and packets of matches. A tin of cigarettes cost two shillings, and she then sold the cigarettes singly for a penny each; as there were thirty-six in each tin she made a profit of a shilling on a tin. The same thing applied to boxes of matches. She would buy a carton of twelve boxes for one shilling and sixpence and then sell each box for two pence, making a profit of sixpence on each carton. She was so thrilled with this that, as the other more experienced women had foretold, she had no time to be lonely or worry about her husband's humiliating job, or bite her fingers about her coming child.'(Emecheta 52)

Emecheta's inheritance has created a path of inspiration for contemporary Nigerian women writers. She refused to acknowledge herself as a feminist but she was more inclined with the term 'womanism' which is coined by Alice Walker. Feminism is a collection of movements which struggles for establishing equal rights for women politically, economically, socially, personally etc. where womanism deals with sexual discrimination and racial discrimination as well. The author casts light upon another aspect of women's lives, domination and marginalization within the Igbo society. Along with criticizing colonialism and racism, she emphasizes the issue of gender oppression, sexual difference, gender inequality which all lead toward cultural conflict.

The joys of motherhood unfold the events in Nigeria during the period when British colonizers invaded and established themselves as legitimate rulers. The European invasion and colonization of Africa in the 19th century has an extensive impact on Nigerian history because it has brought about a bunch of social, cultural, economic and political changes. In the novel, the author discreetly depicts the way in which the colonial disquisition creates changes such as religious belief in Lagos through the institutions: the workers are determined to be off only half a day in the week and that is on Sundays in order to attend the church. The marriage should be done in the church, otherwise; it is regarded as an illegal marriage. When Nnu Ego is pregnant for the first time, Nnaife becomes worried that he may lose his job because they didn't marry in church. Moreover, Nnu Ego is told in court to believe in the holy bible, not swear by her chi, here it is evident how carefully western culture and their rules were being authenticated through the institutions.

Emecheta's Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* 1979, is a reflection of a traditional Igbo woman who braces the traditional values with the advent of colonialism. Here the author demonstrated how the traditional point of view of a women's role in Pre-colonial Nigeria was not applicable during the colonial period. Nigerian women didn't receive any accomplishments from the colonizers, but they became the subjects of double oppression. Through unveiling the contemptuous behaviors which function as a hierarchy from colonizers to the native patriarchy to docile women intensify the sense of marginalization and oppression of the disenfranchised Third world women 'They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us.'(Emecheta 51) It shows how the Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men increasingly disenfranchise and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home. Being humiliated and dejected by the British master, Nnaife as a washer man, takes out all his frustration and grievances on his wife, Nnu Ego. His master calls him 'Baboon' repeatedly while making fun of him. Such sort of treatment considers west as superior

while the 'oriental other' as an inferior creature. The British master mocked Nnaife so brutally that he is exposed bare of any cultural being. On the contrary,

'Nnaife did not realize that DrMeers's laughter was inspired by that type of wickedness that reduces any man, white or black, intelligent or not, to a new low; lower than the basest of animals, for animals at least respected each other's feelings, each other's dignity.'(Emecheta 42)

Nnaife behaves like lord and master in the home, this is a way of reinforcement of his lost power. Numerous times he refuses to respond to Nnu Ego, sometimes he beats his wife. That's how the novelist explores the extent of women's marginalization and oppression due to their forbidden race, class and gender in a colonial patriarchal society as they are enslaved. They cannot take a decision for their life, they don't have the right to ask for money, they should not be educated at all, even they are called randomly because they don't deserve a meaningful name as they are considered an inferior class of the society. When Nnu Ego becomes the mother of twin girls, her husband didn't choose their names. Nnu Ego showed her discontent: 'He did not even suggest their names?'in reply, she was told 'Twins don't deserve special names. This one came first so she is Taiwo and this one is Kehinde---'she who came second'.'(Emecheta 127). Here it is apparent that the colonial society determines the value of a human being based on its gender. Female characters are remarked as the subject of double oppression by the crossways of oppressive forces of race, gender and class. They are just created for men's service.

As Nigerian society evolved, women were yet expected to play their conventional roles as wives, mothers and breadwinners. As a writer Emecheta dedicated herself to explore the social infirmity faced by Nigerian women, she challenges the stereotypical notion that bearing many children will bring security to a woman's life. She expressed in an interview with Adeola James that 'in Joys of Motherhood...I created a woman who had eight children and died by the wayside' (James 43). She tries to portray the message that having so many children does not mean someone is going to be rich and secured in their old age.

As a matter of course, Nnu Ego represents mostly the shortcomings as a female character; she is unable to cope up with the changes as an independent soul in colonial Lagos. Emecheta is being critical while depicting Nnu Ego's character, but she mostly wanted to show the effects of colonialism on the daily life of Igbo women who dedicate

themselves to their family while deceiving themselves as a human being. In this context, it is appropriate to analyze womanist traits in the protagonist's personality as she does actually display fortitude and resilience. In spite of all hardships of fitting herself in colonial Lagos, Nnu Ego raised her eight children single-handedly, working as a street vendor. She earned a handful, with that only she fed them, saved for their school fees without thinking about herself. 'Nnu Ego went back to Lagos and to the old routine of scraping, saving, counting every penny' (Emecheta 190) in fact she refused to have another outfit [lappaⁱⁱ] for herself because she put her children as her first priority. Constantly reminding herself that her children were her first concern, she started living her life as a 'responsible... [And] serious' mother in nurturing her children and her husband. Her incompetence to survive in colonial Lagos does not interfere with her role as a dedicated mother and diligent wife. In her subconscious, Nnu Ego used to believe that her children would come and accompany her at her deathbed. But her fixation of motherhood as a definition of womanhood failed to meet each other at this point.

The Joys of Motherhood unfolds the story of isolation and marginalization of women in African society. Emecheta becomes the spokesperson of those silent women, whose voice had been nullified most of the times. She discloses their oppressed daily life both in colonial and in indigenous patriarchal regimes. The author depicted colonialism under a silver wrap. Native people were compelled to follow the foreign idealistic standards for education and conduct, along with that, they should follow Christianity while jeopardizing their traditional culture. At that point in time all levels of society including Nigerian families and individuals face a cultural conflict severely. Nnu Ego was searching for ideal joy which is associated with motherhood in the traditional Igbo society, but she failed to attain.

Emecheta attempts to speak for the disempowered African women. She has transcended the traditional way of representation while analyzing the patriarchal discourse in the light of her own creative discourse. She has disclosed African women's daily antiracist struggle for their rights, gender inequality. According to Palmer, The Joys of Motherhood is 'the first work in African literature to present the female point of view in registering its disgust at male chauvinism and patriarchy's satisfaction with an oppressive system toward women.' (Palmer 156).

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ⁱ Igbo/Ibo- They are the ethnic group of present day south central and south eastern Nigeria. They are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa.

ⁱⁱ Lappa- It is a wraparound skirt. Lappas are traditionally worn in West Africa.