

Gender oppression and images of women in contemporary Nigeria novel: A study of emecheta's the *Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood* with a view to identify the various ways in which women are oppressed by traditional and cultural norms in the Nigeria societies. The text also explores the ways in which African women's lives are affected by other issues, such as colonialism and economic factors. An analysis of the novel reveals that the interconnectedness of racial, class and gender issues exacerbates the oppression of many African women, thereby lessening the opportunities for them to attain self-realization.

Keywords: motherhood. Patriarchy, tradition, culture

Introduction

Like many other African women writers, Emecheta seeks to depict the precarious position of women in a particular African society. Her works display profound discontent with the situation of women in the Igbo culture from which she comes, and through her writing she expresses her resistance to it. Further to this, Emecheta's novel is a significant book about motherhood, examining the ways in which issues of motherhood affect women's lives in a traditional patriarchal Igbo society in Nigeria. Motherhood will therefore be the key theme to be analyzed in this work; and then other, often related issues.

Although polygamy is an important concern, motherhood affects the life of the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood* in a significant way. Commenting on situations encountered by women in African societies, Steady highlights the issue of motherhood and how it can hinder African women's personal empowerment, along with various other factors:

The black woman's situation is different and amongst the things that make her situation different is the lack of choice in motherhood and marriage... enforced silence and a variety of other forms of oppression intrinsic to various societies which still plague African women's lives and must inevitably be at the crux of the African feminist theory" (cited in Boyce Davies and Adams Graves, 1986, p, 7).

The work will not only evaluate the extent to which women in certain African societies acquire happiness through motherhood, but also the way in which women suffer as a result of the societal and cultural pressures placed upon them to become mothers. It is a widespread conviction in Africa that motherhood brings joy, but Emecheta emphasizes the fact that there can be a complete absence of happiness in motherhood. Therefore, the concept of the joys of motherhood is ironic in this book.

As Emecheta relates Nnu Ego's story, she draws particular attention to some of the basic tenets of this patriarchal Nigerian society, in which women are denied independent lives of their

own, existing to serve men. In both her marriages, Nnu Ego is bound by Igbo societal expectations that she bears many children, in terms of which notions of womanhood are defined. Women are not only forced to find their identity through their roles as mothers, but they are also identified in relation to men, as wives, mothers and daughters.

Thus, the work pays particular attention to how these aspects of women's lives are shaped by patriarchal norms which dehumanize women, reducing them to second-class citizens. Above all, Emecheta depicts how such importance is attached to motherhood that any woman feels inadequate if she fails to conceive children within a certain period of time after marriage.

Male Dominance

Ogundipe-Leslie describes that which takes place in some parts of Nigerian societies in the quotation below and this has a bearing on that which takes place in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In her essay she highlights the extent to which women are undermined by the men in their lives, making the following observation:

Woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage. Married she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except for what she accrues to her through her children" (cited in Boyce Davies.1986,p. 68).

It is indeed true that Nnu Ego has an influential position in her father's family, as she is the daughter of her father's favourite mistress. She has everything she needs as a daughter and this is even evident from the way she is sent off to her first marriage, when she has a great many expensive gifts prepared for her. However, she is treated in a callous, disrespectful way in both her first and second marriages, in which she experiences patriarchal oppression. For instance, Nnaife commands her not to question his manhood, and when Nnu Ego answers him back, he quickly reminds her:

What did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner? You know the airs you put on are getting

rather boring. I know you are the daughter of Agbadi. Pity he didn't marry you himself and keep you by his side forever. If you are going to be my wife, you must accept my work, my way of life" (Emecheta, 2006, p. 50) ^[1].

Although Nnaife acknowledges that Nnu Ego is important in her father's family, he insists that she has to be submissive now that he has married her and 'owns' her. Nnaife's emphasis of 'my' and use of 'owner' is rude and dismissive. In the society depicted in the novel it is clear that gender determines the way women are treated, and this also prescribes the way women ought to behave. One dimension of this is the exaggerated importance of the male child, whilst the female child is regarded as inferior. As Fonchingong (2006) ^[6] observes, it is also apparent that gender inequality in Igbo society centers around the gender socialization process, which stems from and is reinforced by customary and traditional practices (p.139).

Consequently, the male child is made aware of his status at an early age, while the female child is undermined. For instance, Oshia refuses to undertake the task of fetching water he had been given by Adaku, his step-mother, saying:

"I'm not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's job" (Emecheta, 2006, p.128) ^[1].

The way he expresses himself suggests that he undermines the duties women are expected to perform, viewing them as lowly and menial and he views women in a similar light, even at an early age.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the relationships between men and women are shaped by Igbo society's views of what constitutes appropriate 'manly' and 'womanly' behavior. For instance, we see Agbadi reprimanding Ona, thinking that he is entitled to be rude because he is a man. Thus, he instructs her to behave in a 'womanly' manner when she tries to forbid him from insulting her father:

You see, you won't even allow yourself to be a woman. You are in the first weeks of motherhood, and all you can do is to think like a man, raising male issue for your father, just because he cannot do it himself" (Emecheta, 2006,p.22) ^[1].

It is clear from the above statement that intellectual capacity and the ability to express independent opinions is viewed as a male attribute and thus it is not 'womanly' to speak out. Agbadi maintains that a woman's principal role in life is that of mothering. Thus, Ona should conform to stereotypical notions of female behaviour, by focusing on her duties as mother. As Agbadi's words suggest, women can be criticized freely, whereas men are infallible even when they engage in inappropriate behaviour. Women are regarded as people who do not matter, so much so that even their beliefs and decisions are viewed as insignificant, and this takes place on an ongoing basis throughout the book. The position of unquestionable authority that a man holds in a patriarchal society such as this one means that men are expected to be held in awe. As the above-cited examples suggest, this exacerbates the suffering of women, as is particularly the case in description below:

"Agbadi was no different from many men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he

could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him" (Emecheta, 2006,p.36) ^[1].

From the above quotation, it is clear that men feel that they can be ruthless and unfeeling towards women, as a sign of manliness. As a result of this, women are subjected to emotional abuse. Some of Agbadi's wives are 'neglect[ed] for years', in part because he pays more attention to certain other wives. Agbadi's wives are also treated as servants, waiting for their meagre food ration from their master: a single yam a day. All the while, they also have to accept their husband's offensive behaviour. He brings another woman to sleep with him whilst his other wives are yearning for his attention. We are told that they 'pined and bit their nails', which shows the extent of their frustration and misery. Again, the extent to which he neglects them is highlighted when we see their desperation for the smallest sign of attention, even if only 'a word', from him. Despite the treatment they are subjected to, Agbadi's wives cannot utter word of complaint, not only because it is unorthodox, but also because they are females, and they cannot question a man's behaviour. Thus they have no choice but to comply with the demands of men. Agbadi is a chief and his position of authority magnifies his abilities as a 'man,' enabling him to sleep with his mistresses 'right in his courtyard' as a display of his virility.

This highlights the way in which polygamy is a feature of male dominance. Men still hold the power, so if they believe that this practice should be followed, they continue carrying it out regardless of what women feel. Various events in *The Joys of Motherhood* bear this out. For instance, when Nnu Ego delivers her first child; she has to 'stifle her labour cries so as not to wake her sleeping husband and Madam in the main building. It is only after the baby is born that Nnaife would be woken from his masculine slumber' (p.55). Again, it is as if Nnaife is a god, whose hallowed 'masculine slumber' should not be disturbed. This shows that he has total control in the relationship.

There are many other forms of male domination in *The Joys of Motherhood*, some of which stem from the fact that women in Igbo society have no choices. Not only do they have to defer to men in all matters, but also they are not free to choose their own husbands. In this and other respects, the women do not make their own decisions. Instead their society makes decisions for them, ensuring that men always benefit. It is the father's responsibility to choose husbands for his daughters, and thus Nnu Ego's father selects Amatokwu as her first husband and then Nnaife, unsuitable as he is, as the second. According to tradition, when Agbadi's village raids other villages he has the right to bring back with him the most beautiful woman or women as wives and slaves. These women have no say in the matter; they just have to follow him, whether they wish to do so or not. Similarly, Nnu Ego is compelled to accept Nnaife as her husband although she is disappointed with him on first sight, so much so that even he notices this himself (p43). It is only fear of social condemnation that deters Nnu Ego from running away. Nnaife's own recollections also indicate that women were indeed forced to marry men they did not love:

He had seen a wife brought for an Ibuza man in Lagos running away at the sight of her future husband, so that friends had to help the poor bridegroom catch the runaway bride" (Emecheta, 2006,p.44) ^[1].

Although he is aware of this, he is so self-absorbed that he does not relate this to his own marriage. When women attempt to choose their own husbands, this can have dire consequences. Nnu Ego's daughter, Kehinde, refuses to marry the man who has been chosen for her, and this results in Nnaife's imprisonment and the collapse of his family structure (p.232). These circumstances show the difficult choices faced by women in Igbo society and other African societies in which similar practices prevail. Women in Igbo society are undermined in other ways. Not only are women deprived of their individuality and subordinated to men, but they are also denigrated. Consoling Nnaife on the loss of his son, his friend Ubani says:

“How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified” (Emecheta, 2006, p.75) ^[1].

From the above quotation, the author shows not only the exaggerated importance attached to men in the Igbo society, but also the extent to which women are undermined. Not only are they not accorded a will of their own and permitted no say in important aspects of life, but it is said that a woman ‘[grows] ugly and old’, whilst a man matures and becomes more dignified. As Ubani's words indicate, Nnu Ego is expected to accept Nnaife's wrongdoings because he is a man and she belongs to him. Men are always the victors, even in old age, and this shows how cruel Igbo society is to women. Meanwhile, it is as if the special authority that the man is believed to possess exempts him from growing old, whilst the woman to whom he is married grows old. Moreover, Ubani's words express the widespread belief that a daughter must accept the authority of her father and husband unquestioningly, because she is not supposed to ‘hate a husband chosen for her by her people’ (p.75). In this case, it is usually the father or another male figure that chooses a young woman's husband. The ways in which various forms of male domination outlined above have affected Nnu Ego profoundly are evident when she is questioned in court about Nnaife's attempted murder case, and she confesses:

“Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays” (Emecheta, 2006, p.245) ^[1]

This extract shows the extent to which African women in societies such as this one are viewed as objects and are encouraged to view themselves as such. Moreover, they are not deemed worthy of support or sympathy in their time of distress. Nnu Ego's words show us that she has internalized her own oppression so much that she feels stripped of her own individuality. Women are controlled by men throughout their lives, and even if the man dies, he still controls the woman. Nnu Ego is also constrained by her father who would not be impressed if she refused to welcome another woman into her house as a co-wife, since it would run counter to her husband's wishes:

Even in death, Nwokocha Agbadi ruled his daughter. She belonged to both men, her father and her husband, and lastly to her sons” (Emecheta, 2006, p.231) ^[1]

As this extract suggests and as we have already seen, Nnu Ego is never allowed to attain self-actualization and acquire a sense of independent selfhood.

Other, related issues are worth considering at this point. The following quotation draws our attention to some of the foremost issues of motherhood and womanhood, and how they are intertwined, in that motherhood in traditional Igbo society defines womanhood. Here, the speaker is Nwakusor, a family friend of Nnu Ego and Nnaife, who also prevents Nnu Ego from taking her own life by throwing herself off Carter Bridge. Despite the fact that he saved her life, the way he speaks to her is indicative of the deeply patriarchal nature of Igbo society. He first asks Nnu Ego why she would want to inflict such an act on a man, her husband, as if he were saying ‘the air in you that you trying to take out what belongs to husband or your father who controls it, have you asked for permission?’ The way Nwakusor questions Nnu Ego also casts light on the place that women occupy in Igbo society - at the bottom of the social hierarchy. He sees womanhood and motherhood as noble characteristics that a woman should not dare defile, as do many other men in her society. Moreover, Nwakusor says Nnu Ego would harm the men in her life, whose property she is, if she killed herself:

“What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your - and you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood” (64).

Attitudes of this kind are still prevalent in various contemporary African societies, in which women have long been regarded as possessions. However, in consequence, they may become like commodities that only appeal to the owner whilst still new. This is evident in Nnu Ego's situation, for she is abandoned when Nnaife takes a younger, more beautiful wife, Okpo. This tendency is also evident in the way Agbadi treats his women:

“He married a few women in the traditional sense, but as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go further afield for some other exciting, tall and proud female” (Emecheta, 2006, p.5) ^[1]

Not only does Agbadi's behaviour demonstrate irresponsibility and self-centeredness, but also a lack of love and consideration on his part. Agbadi's behaviour also suggests that women cannot win, as they are not only expected to be attractive and enticing, but also dutiful mothers and wives. Yet, as they assume these roles, their husbands grow bored with them, which is ironic and highlights men's double standards. In Igbo society as well as various other societies in Africa and elsewhere, many women tend to be seen as mere chattels that lose their value with time and become less appealing to men. *The Joys of Motherhood* suggests that relationships within the patriarchal society in the text lack intimacy to such an extent that women lose their self-confidence. For example, Agbadi's wives ‘sink into domesticity and motherhood’ so that ‘he soon was bored’ and would search for others (p.5). The word ‘sink’ suggests a decline and a defeat of some kind, in that women lose self-confidence and independence as they become absorbed into fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers.

The idealization of women as mothers furthers attitudes of this kind. In certain respects, this abstract concept that undermines women diminishing their individuality by reducing them to

stereotypes. Women who become mothers may experience various problems in consequence. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, they serve to provide entertainment to men and are soon spat out like kola nuts that have lost their taste, as evident in the way Agbadi treats his women. Indeed, women in the societies of *The Joys of Motherhood* are often oppressed as a result of the selfishness of the men close to them. The double standards at work in the above-mentioned societies give men the license to behave as they see fit. The women in *The Joys of Motherhood* acknowledge this and they also see it as unfair that one segment of society, the men, are allowed to behave in whichever way they deem right, while females are expected to be subservient. For example, Nnu Ego makes reference to this when she tries to pacify her co-wife's anxiety over their husband's late coming:

“All men are selfish. That's why they are men” (Emecheta, 2006,p.156) ^[1]

Men's interests are placed before those of women, and to a certain extent women have learnt to accept little or nothing from men, as indicated in Nnu Ego's words.

Agbadi's treatment of his wives stems from notions of manliness, which involves foregoing many other qualities. In order to boost their self-esteem, men also derive happiness from humiliating women. Not only are women debased in ways that we have already seen, but they are also humiliated in matters that require privacy, such as sex. For example, when Agbadi makes love to Ona, there is not much privacy, so that those around can hear the act “Grunting like an excited animal with a helpless prey, he left her abruptly, still unsatiated, and rolled painfully to the other side of the goatskin. Having hurt her on purpose for the benefit of his people sleeping in the courtyard, he had his satisfaction” (p.17). This clearly demonstrates Agbadi's selfishness and also the self-centeredness of men like him in his society who view such behaviour as a sign of manliness. Moreover, this extract suggests that women's feelings are not considered and that they are not accorded space to express their feelings. Agbadi makes sure that Ona cries out whilst he makes love to her, so that everyone who hears it will think that he is a man who knows how to give pleasure to his women. However, Ona cried because this act had violated her confidence and self-esteem, and Agbadi had hurt her on purpose. To such men, sex serves as a means of proving their manliness, not as an expression of intimacy or love. Furthermore, when it involves many women as in the case of Agbadi, this serves as additional proof of male prowess. Thus, sex is simply an act that gives them pleasure, and they do not really care about those who provide it.

Women, on the other hand are deprived of sexual pleasure, which is a form of self-expression. Women are not even allowed to show their emotions in other natural ways, as is shown through the way Nnu Ego acts when Nnaife returns from the war, when ‘they both started to laugh sheepishly, not giving in to any kind of affectionate demonstration’ (p.204). It is disturbing that a woman who had been alone for long period of time feels that it would be inappropriate to express her love and that her husband also deems it inappropriate to show his feelings, because it would not be considered manly. Since women are denied the right to sensual and emotional lives of their own, it becomes much more difficult for them to attain a sense of self-awareness, as they are required to repress a vital part of themselves.

The Sorrows of Motherhood

Omar Sougou (202) observes that ‘in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is a medium through which ideas of motherhood are interrogated’ (p.98). Not only does Nnu Ego live in a society in which the ability to conceive is believed to make a woman complete, but she also earns more respect if she produces male children, and faces neglect and humiliation if she does not bear children. It seems as if women are recurrently obliged to produce proof of their womanhood, so this results in them wanting not only to be mothers, but also ‘worthy’ mothers of male children. Nnu Ego is aware that women who produce male children are respected in her society, and are regarded as ‘real’ women. Consequently, Nnu Ego's destiny is centered on her role as mother.

Nnu Ego struggles to fulfill her destiny as an Igbo woman, which entails providing her husband with many sons. Motherhood has ambiguous rewards for Nnu Ego, because it is both a source of joy as well as a site of defeat. Nnu Ego's ability to bear children does not only satisfy her maternal longings and fulfill social expectations, but it also provides her with the principal form of identity she is permitted to possess, that of a mother, though she derives other parts of her identity from other aspects of her relation to men as a wife and a daughter. She feels proud that she achieved the highest goal in her life: that of becoming the ideal woman in the eyes of her society, so she thanks her *chi* [guiding spirit] for the birth of her sons, saying ‘Thank you, my *chi*, that they are healthy and strong. One day they will become people.’ (p.195). The pressure on women to be mothers is still evident in various present-day African societies and has not been affected by changes brought by western modernity. It is evident that the pressures that compel Nnu Ego to have her own children and fulfill her prescribed role of motherhood still grip many women in modern day societies.. In addition, a woman is only welcome in the family into which she is married for a certain period of time, during which she is expected to prove her womanhood by conceiving and bearing children. This places Nnu Ego in a stressful situation. Initially, when she fails to conceive, she fears that ‘she was failing everybody. There was no child’ (P.29). ‘Failing everybody’ shows Nnu Ego's sense of the depth of her failure and also her awareness of the extent of societal pressure placed upon her. This is also reflected in the fact that she is not surprised when ‘Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. ‘My father is desperate’ Amatokwu had said (P.30). Nnu Ego is ‘casually’ informed of the new developments and her feelings are not taken into consideration. Yet again, Nnu Ego has internalized her own oppression to the extent that she feels at fault, and that she deserves to be treated in this way. Therefore, Nnu Ego is ‘not surprised’, meekly accepting this development. Her husband shows no regret or guilt in the above passage, because as a woman and a ‘failed’ wife, she is not important. Surprisingly, the husband does not accept any responsibility for this state of affairs. He feels that he is infallible, because he is a man so the woman is the only one at fault.

Since they are the ones in control of polygamous marriages and are raised to believe that they can do no wrong, men tend to abuse the powers that they have. Such behaviour occurs in other African societies in which polygamy is practiced. The final and most important decisions are always made by the males or by

women acting in men's interests. In these diverse situations, there is a shared assumption that the needs of men always come first. It is also evident that women who are affected by these decisions have been made aware of their subordinate status that they meekly accept the pressure placed upon them to bear children, and the punishment inflicted upon them when they fail to do so.

Like these women, Nnu Ego is viewed as a 'useless' woman because she has just failed her first marriage by being barren. In the extract that follows, Amatokwu, the man to whom she is married, clearly pronounces that barrenness is an unforgivable sin:

"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' (31).

Amatokwu sounds very harsh and unfeeling, displaying little concern for his wife's suffering. The repetition of 'my' also displays an air of self-importance, showing that all the blame is being laid on Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego is insulted and blamed for infertility, which is a natural biological condition over which no one has control. Also, she is even made to accept blame for faults that may not be her own, as shown in her confession:

"I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right" (Emecheta, 2006, p.30) ^[1].

Nnu Ego meekly accepts the blame even though she does not deserve it and she abases herself before male authority, showing us that she and many other women like her have been conditioned to behave in this way in her society. Therefore, she humbly accepts her position unquestioningly. The words spoken by Amatokwu also suggest the self-centeredness of a man in a society where manhood and its properties are valorised, and thus he refers to his 'precious male seed' (p.31) It is worth noting that, like Nnu Ego, he emphasizes the idea that a woman has '[failed] everybody' (p.29) when she does not produce children. Moreover, the need for children is not unique to Igbo societies. Indeed, it is prevalent in many other African societies.

Ngcobo (2007) observes that in many African societies there are certain beliefs that shape human existence, some of which place pressure on women to give birth to children:

Central to many African beliefs is that there are three states of human existence- the land of the unborn, the land of the living and the land of the ancestors and the dead. Belief has it the children of any given family are always there waiting for the mothers to come and rescue them from oblivion and bring them to life in the land of the living. Failure therefore, to 'rescue' the children is a sorrowful capitulation and a betrayal. In cases of childlessness, people do not think of and share the couples or woman's agony –rather, they hear the echoing cries of the unborn children that she (the mother) will not 'rescue' and bring to life (p.534).

Nnu Ego feels relieved at the birth of her son, but her joy is short-lived, as the child dies within four weeks. Under pressure from her society to be a mother, she is made to feel that she is useless; hence her attempt to commit suicide is indicative of the fact that pressures of this kind can have serious consequences. She mourns and tells the bystanders: "But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore." (p.62). As the people

around her learn her reason for her attempted suicide, they sympathize with her but in so doing, they reinforce the fact that Nnu Ego is regarded as a failure in the eyes of her society, saying', "She is not mad after all, she has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren'. And they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman" (p.65). Nnu Ego feels the weight of family and societal expectations, and cannot find happiness within herself until she accomplishes what is required of her as a woman: to produce children.

According to the beliefs in her society, a childless woman is an embarrassment to her husband and Nnaife draws attention to this when he is quarrelling with Nnu Ego, accusing her of '[putting] Amatokwu's manhood in question so that he had to marry again quickly and have many children in succession' (p.51). His words also illustrate that women are seen as property that men can replace if they are not satisfied with them. Nnu Ego is distressed after the death of her child, but is relieved that she is in Lagos not Iboza, where a substitute wife could easily have been found by her husband's family, as if her child's death were her fault. She reflects on this in the following way:

"One of the advantages of being far away from home she knew, was that her husband's people could not register her dissatisfaction with her by just getting him a girl next door as a surprise bride, neither could they easily interfere to persuade him to make a decision about her" (p.77).

Phrases like 'surprise bride' indicate the swiftness and ease with which another wife could have been found for Nnu Ego's husband. It shows that women like her live in constant fear because they see other women being easily replaced, so they fear that this will happen to them as well. Their tomorrow is not guaranteed, for a woman's position can unpredictably and easily be overturned. Moreover, 'surprise bride' also suggests that younger women are reduced to little gifts used to entice men. Women, on the other hand, are made to view the world from a patriarchal perspective and measure their success in terms of patriarchal criteria, as Nnu Ego's above-outlined responses to her situation show us. This limits women's possibilities for empowerment and undermines their ability to become confident and independent enough to express their true feelings without fear of intimidation, as they are always vulnerable to outside control. Then, even if they become mothers and have sons, women are not exempted from blame and scrutiny. A new set of expectations is imposed on them. They have to prove to be good nurturers and bring up the children to the satisfaction of their men. All in all, the demands of Igbo society are so exacting that it is possible that a woman may never attain a sense of fulfillment, on account of all the factors that could hinder her success. Consequently, as we see in the case of Nnu Ego, many of the so-called 'joys of motherhood' do not always materialize. For instance, even her hopes of being taken care of by her children do not come to bear fruit as the children focus on their own lives.

After rejection by her first husband, Nnu Ego is relieved to learn that she can conceive. Even though she disdains the appearance and occupation of her second husband, the birth of her son provides ample compensation for this. After the birth of her son she feels like a woman:

"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’ (Emecheta, 2006, p.54) ^[1].

This highlights the extent to which the desire to be a mother of sons can diminish a woman’s capacity to take joy in life. Instead of thinking about her future possibilities in life, Nnu Ego focuses on her old age and death, which is ironic, because she does not experience a happy old age and dies a lonely death. Adaku is aware that children may neglect their mothers, so she reminds Nnu Ego that mothers cannot expect to gain happiness from children themselves but the mere knowledge of having them:

“In Ibuza, sons help their father more than they ever help their mother. A mother’s joy is only in the name’ (122)

This shows that the Igbo society does not even encourage the natural bond between mother and child, as it is believed that the child, especially the much-valued male child, belongs to the father primarily. This is also indicative of the way in which women are deprived of even the ability to derive joy from their children. Yet again, this indicates how everything operates in men’s interests, even their relationships with their children. The mother is supposed to find fulfillment only in the fact that she had given birth to children. Indeed, Nnu Ego even felt comfortable in her poverty on account of this:

“Nnu Ego crawled further into the urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood’ (Emecheta, 2006, p.189) ^[1]

Thus, Nnu Ego [enjoys] the *knowledge of her motherhood* rather than motherhood itself. As these extracts show, Igbo society only permits her to admire them from a distance, as if she were a stranger.

Further to this, it is often the case that a woman only receives praise when her children are successful. For example, Nnu Ego is called a ‘mother of very clever children’ (p.222) because her sons succeed in school, so she lives through her children and she does not exist as an independent person in the eyes of her society. Women are not even involved in important decisions for their children, and are sometimes excluded from significant interactions with them, as illustrated in Nnaife’s command:

“Woman, why don’t you go to your cooking place and let me talk to my son?’(225)

His words illuminate some of the problems faced by women, even though they may be mothers of sons. It also shows that important decisions for children are made by their fathers, to whom they belong. Despite the fact that Nnu Ego has given birth to male children, Nnaife still speaks to her as if she has achieved nothing, addressing her as ‘woman’, showing how unimportant she is to both him and his society. He also reminds Nnu Ego of her place as a woman, the cooking area, and instructs her to leave the handling of issues involving her children to him as a man. In other words, Nnu Ego is expected to be a dutiful, submissive and silent woman who does not express any of her views to her husband.

Nnu Ego experiences further suffering as a result of her motherhood. For instance, she is blamed for not bringing up her daughters ‘well’, since they are not as docile and submissive as they should be. Nnaife resents her for this, to the extent that he declares he regrets the day he married her:

“I shall curse you till I die the day you came to my threshold. I wish I had never met you” (Emecheta, 2006, p.232) ^[1]

Here Nnaife uses very harsh language indeed, which is a form of verbal violence. He feels free to abuse her in whatever way he sees fit, because he is her husband. He addresses her in this way because his daughter had refused to marry the man he had chosen for her and this displeases him. Nnu Ego is further insulted when Nnaife tells her to leave:

“I have a mind to tell you and your brats to leave this house immediately. I was not created to suffer for you till I die” (Emecheta, 2006, p.232) ^[1]

Again, this displays the abuse and hostility that can be directed towards women by their husbands. The fact that Nnaife calls the children ‘brats’ is hurtful to Nnu Ego and insulting to the children because they are partly hers. The fact that her and Nnaife’s relationship is characterized by tension and hostility of this nature throughout *The Joys of Motherhood* is indicative of the extent to which Emecheta’s fiction is closer to feminism than womanism in her depiction of men and the relationships between the sexes. Womanist novels such as *The Color Purple* and *So Long a Letter* do highlight gender oppression in relationships but advocate for harmony and healing, while feminist perspectives do not always believe it is possible (hooks, 1984, pp.34; 70) Nnaife just tells his wife to leave without taking into consideration that she too as a parent might be disappointed by the way their children are turning out and hurt by the way he insults them. She is even aware of this as she expresses her distress:

“She was becoming fed up of this two-way standard. When the children were good they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother. Every woman knew this; but for Nnaife to keep hurling it in her face at the slightest provocation was very unfair” (Emecheta, 2006, p.232) ^[1].

Again the unpredictable and unreasonable nature of male behavior in this book is highlighted in the above extract, in the insults that ‘Nnaife [keeps] hurling’ at Nnu Ego. It also seems that becoming mothers of children exposes women open to further attacks and abuse from the men who should be caring for them. Then, when Nnu Ego goes back to Ibuza in disgrace, she is fast overwhelmed with distress as she does not hear from her sons whom she had hoped would console and wipe away shame from her:

“It was not that she was physically poor; her daughters sent help once in a while. However, what actually broke her was, month after month, expecting to hear from her son in America, and from Adim too who later went to Canada, and failing to do so. It was from rumours that she heard Oshia had married and that his bride was a white woman” (Emecheta, 2006, p.253) ^[1].

Despite the fact that Nnu Ego has suffered all her life for her children, sacrificing so much for them, she does not reap the joys of motherhood. She realises this, lamenting: “It was true what they said, she thought, that if you don’t have children longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you” (p.239). As a result of all the tribulations

that she experiences as a mother she never has time to rest. She worries about having children to please her society, but after she has them she also worries about feeding and caring for them and bringing them up in a way that will please the men around her. Then, once they grow up, Nnu Ego's children do not provide a source of comfort to her. Nnu Ego's sufferings as a mother are intensified by her ongoing struggle to support her family. Yet, in the end she possesses nothing but the mere knowledge of the existence of her children which, as we have seen, is not sufficient.

Conclusion

The novels analyzed in this study cast much light on the situations of various women in diverse parts of Africa, depicting the ways in which they are oppressed as a result of gender, and describing the extent to which they are able to empower themselves. This kind of abuse stems from the way in which women are denigrated and devalued. Moreover, they are deprived of opportunities in life as a result of this. This is particularly evident in *The Joys of Motherhood* in which the sole purpose of a girl's life is to make life better for the male child or her husband and family. It is the girl child who is expected to give up her opportunity to acquire education in times of economic hardship or to work to raise funds which will benefit the male child. For instance, Nnu Ego's daughters have to start selling firewood so that her two sons can continue with their education. Further to this, young women are not only deprived of education for economic reasons but also because they are expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers.

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