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Burden of Tradition: Male Dominance and Female Experience in *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract:

Colonialism is considered as the transition phase of Nigeria and its variety of emerging challenges in the form of traditional dominance and in the name of Nigerian cultural heritage. Men from Nigeria expect a woman as a daughter, dutiful wife and an earning and supportive mother. Nnu Ego is the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, is considered as an embodiment of sacrifice only from the point of view of the reader, but for her people she is stubborn who always nags with her husband and tortures him for food money in order to survive her children. On Nnaife's part, he also has toiled hard for his family but forgotten to treat Nnu Ego as his better half. The highlight of the novel is Nnu Ego's struggle to prove herself as a good mother and to support conventions. People in Lagos and Iboza think that if a woman has many children, she will have a safe and prosperous old age, and those children will look after her in her old age. The ending of the novel is pessimistic. The themes of motherhood, oppression, sacrifice, and suffering are discussed throughout this novel by the novelist.

In light of these significant themes, this proposed paper aspires to illuminate the essential voices emerging from Buchi Emecheta's literary works and focuses on women's perspectives within society. Her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, follows the life of Nnu Ego, a woman from the rural Igbo community, embarks on a journey of self-discovery.

Keywords: Transition, motherhood, dominance, sacrifice, oppression, suffering.

Nigerian female novelist from Ibo, Lagos, Buchi Emecheta who always with great fortitude deals with the experiences she has throughout her life. Now, by writing several novels she displays plenty of themes really applicable to every women as an individual. Through her dominate works like *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizens* (1974) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), she comments on the traditional customs which exploit women effortlessly. She depicts the traditional trap for women that makes them slaves and imprisoned. Their constant efforts to keep them in imprisonment. It is possible only due to tradition. Therefore, tradition is the core aspect of Nigerian culture to enslave women apart from traditional patriarchal dominance and masculine hierarchies also known as hegemonic masculinity. As a novelist, Emecheta tries to focus on several social evils. Women characters are the protagonists of her most of the novels with emerging voices such as Adah, Nnu Ego, Aku-nna, Kehinde from her novels like *In the Ditch*, *Second Class Citizens*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price* and *Kehinde* respectively. While elaborating Emecheta's aim of writing, Selvakumar S. And Joseph comments that,

“The writings of Buchi Emecheta do play a pivotal role in elucidating the agony and the anguish of black women in general and of black women of Nigeria in particular. As an erudite literary scholar, she spells out in detail the depraving condition of black women. In all her novels, she does offer a beautiful composition keeping the pattern of storytelling which enables the readers to understand the agonizing situation into which the black women have been ditched for ages.” (Selvakumar and Jayraj, 1789)

The above comments highlight the burden of tradition. It seems unbearable for women to carry it out for long. The present paper deals with the traditional weight through many restrictions imposed upon women. The novel depicts the plight and agony of Nnu Ego. Emecheta has witnessed several mental and physical suffering of women and tries to portray



in her fictional works. The burdens put over women in variety of complex situations is not negligible for any rational thinker as Emecheta is.

The novelist brings into light the dark side of female's fate where they are undergoing immense agony, suffering and uneasiness etc. from their birth to death. Male characters outlook towards every female individual is like an object where women are serving them a means of treasury in a form of bride price. They are not taken care by their family members throughout their voyage of life. But after their death, they are given a lavish burial to show the world that how much they love their mother and value their sacrifices. Nnu Ego's solitary death condemns these stereotypes of having sons because she carried out all the responsibilities of motherhood. She spends her whole life in poverty and shortage of money after marriage and finds herself aloof and lonely in her last days as destitute. Nigerian traditional hierarchy is formed by masculine politics to enslave women's as their servants through implementing over them various customs such as bride price, polygamy, marriage system, test of virginity and custom of inheritance and so on. Women lose their freedom and fundamental rights due to the burden of these traditions and stereotypes that exist in Nigeria. Ibuza custom has inculcated a norm among females of being able to conceive sons. So that family bestowed them a title of "mother". Otherwise, they will be neither given value in the family nor in the society. Rashmi Rana and Parveen Kumar highlight the struggle of women in the following way,

"The Joys of Motherhood shows how African women are caught between their roles as wives and mothers, which are set by men, and the needs of a Nigerian culture that is changing quickly because of British colonialism during the Victorian era. The main character, Nnu Ego, is obsessed with the idea of giving birth to children according to the rules of Igbo society. She has no choice but to live alone and is doomed to die." (Rana and Kumar, 219)

If a woman gives her husband a son, it is a kind of a blessing that she has in the form of a boy. In the case of Adaku, this blessing to be a mother of a son is not given. So, she decides to live on her own terms. She leaves her marital duties and becomes a good mother for her daughter. Ebere Celina. Krisagbedo and Chris Uchenna Agbedo state,

“Adaku on her own part left the marriage entirely to become a single parent when it became obvious to her that she couldn't cope up with the psychological violence associated with not being able to bear male children. Nnu Ego who stayed back was the worse for it because she died not just prematurely but miserably.” (Krisagbedo and Agbedo 568)

Violence is also a highlighted aspect of Emecheta's writing which focuses on an unfair treatment given to females as subordinate to men. The resemblance between Adaku and Nnu Ego can be seen in the case of bearing sons. Adaku is a mother of a girl. That's why, every time she feels frustrated and ignored by Nnaife. Same happens with Nnu Ego at the time of her first marriage with Amatokwu who ignores her for not bearing sons. He brings a new wife to make Nnu Ego jealous. It shows male dominance and how it troubles women in their marital lives.

Polygamy is a particular feature of Nigerian custom. Everywhere in the novel, the instances of polygamy are given by the novelist. Agbadi, the father to Nnu Ego, is a very good looking and a strong man among other men of Ibuza. Therefore, whenever he visits other villages, he brings the prettiest girls or women with him. They are the daughters and girls from rich and wealthy families. Another instance of polygamy is seen where Nnu Ego initially dislikes Nnaife. He says in reply to 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 boring... You must accept my work, my way of life. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, P. 49) The above statements clearly mention that by paying the bride price of any girl, man becomes the owner of that girl. She becomes a permanent unpaid servant of her husband.



Custom of burning slaves with their dead mistress is another tradition which does not value an individual as a human especially to woman. Agunwa, senior wife of Agbadi, dies and her body is being cremated as: “Make sure that her slave and her cooking things go with her. We must all mourn her.” (P.22) The alive slaves are buried brutally with their dead masters and do not even value their lives.

The tradition of inheritance is dominant in Nnu Ego’s village. Agbadi has seven wives. He married thrice and inherited four wives from his relatives. Nnaife also inherited the wives of his elder brother. Adaku and the senior wife of his brother are Nnaife’s wives now.

The male dominance is very obvious and ordinary practice seen in Nigeria. To show this inequality, Emecheta crafts an incident where Adaku is busy in her cooking duties. She assigned a duty to her daughter and Oshia to fetch tap water. Here, Oshia denies to carry out that work by stating, “I am not going! I am a boy why should I help in the cooking? That’s a woman’s job”, Oshia yelled back, and went on playing with his friends. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, P.128) It shows the traditional roles that tells that women are meant for cooking and bearing children. So, they can be easily restricted and made busy in these multiple valueless works. Women are not even given value for their tiring works as well. Women feel anxiety, frustration and sometimes undergo depression throughout their journey to raise children.

Nnaife feels delighted when he comes to know that Adaku delivers a baby boy. But, the boy does not survive for long. It brings sadness to Adaku. Family defames her for not giving her husband a boy. Side by side, this incident evokes a seed of jealousy for Nnu Ego’s children in the heart of Adaku. On other side, Nnu Ego is an embodiment of noble mother who has three sons. Her old age will be in prosperous surrounding where her children will look after her. The protagonist has seven children for whom she devoted herself almost entirely; she was compelled by the need to care for them, as her husband is unable to fulfill that role for various

reasons. She faces criticism whenever familial issues arise: the death of her first child is deemed a result of her negligence, her daughter's choice to reject an Igbo suitor arranged by her father. Kehinde likes a Yoruba boy. The mother is blamed for not raising her daughters properly. Her son, Oshia, expresses his dissatisfaction with her parenting, blaming her for his inability to obtain a scholarship to secondary school.

While revealing the true nature of male dominance in marriage, Nandini C. Sen, in her book *The Black Women Speaks: A Study of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta*, writes,

“In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta delineates the pains of marital rape as Nnu Ego is subjected to her husband’s animal like passion but such is her desperation for a child, she chooses to give in and suffer, if it enables her to be a mother.” (Sen P. 42)

The concept of completeness in Nigeria community is dependent upon marriage. So, in post colonial era, Igbo social hierarchy and male superiority is on peak. Nnu Ego is a fighter who fights against patriarchal dominance while in her first marriage with Amatokwu. She is not fertile and considered as barren. Her husband brings a new wife. Amatokwu insults her by doing this. To highlight this feature, Amatokwu’s following statements compels to think about women’s existence as an individual.

“What do you want me to do?” Amatokwu asked. “I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don’t appeal to me any more. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nery female who is all bones.” (The Joys of Motherhood P. 32)

In a marriage system of Nigeria woman are meant to be fertile. When a woman fails to be a mother, she is unwanted and feels heavy or burden for her husband. Nnu Ego’s emotional concern with her husband is taken for granted. In this way, the polygamy exploits every female



individual by putting over them traditional norms and conventions. Emecheta has discussed through her novels about real life plights faced by every women born in Nigeria. Patriarchy is the main component of women's sufferings. The helplessness of female characters in their marital life shows the pathetic condition of women while facing numerous challenges in every single day as a woman. The real empowerment of women will be evident when the growth of women happen in every field such as education, responsibility as a mother, economic independence, social knowledge, political stability and so on. This kind of liberty will be the gift of female creative and authentic depiction of writing by prominent female authors.

Nnaife's family is treated as second class citizen in Lagos. The main occupation of Ibuza people is farming. They have to toil hard to survive and earning their bread and butter. Nnaife is being arrested by police personnel for attacking butcher's son. Girls are not given any importance at their birth. But when the time arrives of getting married, their father feels glad because he will be going to grab handsome amount of her daughters' bride price. This is a contrast behaviour is shown by the novelist that ponders over patriarchal dominance. The novel gives a solid commentary on male dominance from birth and women's unequal treatment and an inferior status to women in rural as well as urban Nigeria. The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* beautifully points out the traditions of polygamy, the bride price, inheritance of widows and the taste of virginity. To conclude, the traditional burden, patriarchy and oppression of women in Nigerian customs force the readers to ponder over the significance of such ideology which exploits females. The story ends on pessimistic note where the burial of Nnu Ego does not answer the prayers of her sons and daughters-in-laws in order to show her reluctant temperament towards the tradition exist in Nigeria.

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