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ECSTASY OR SOLITUDE? : PROBING INTO BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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ABSTRACT

Nobody can deny the pleasures of motherhood, the divine emotion, an explicable feeling of becoming a mother. The Nigerian society is one that is intricately woven with threads of traditions, values and culture so it deems that motherhood is a woman's destiny; the only way a woman's being can be rendered whole. In Igbo society, a woman is always seen according to her relationship with a man as a daughter, a wife or a mother. A Woman is considered to be blessed only, if she is fortunate enough to be all the three in a patriarchal society. A woman's role in traditional Igbo society is to produce children and in particular male children, her value as a woman is dependent on fertility. If she is infertile she is a failed woman, if she has only girls she isn't a failed woman but she lacks honour. The position women had in the traditional Igbo society may have been flexible but that did not guarantee instant respect and equality with men.

Keywords: Culture, Emotions, Motherhood, Rituals, Tribal Society.

Colonialism in African countries thrived on the Eurocentric notions about history and civilizations according to which the Africans had no past and no history and so, they were child-like or primitive. This faulty, self-righteous and arrogant attitude along with the imposition of Christianity, Western education and consequently a total set of new values, created a tremendous amount of pressure and conflict on the minds of the Africans. That is why when the early generation of the writers started expressing themselves, their primary task was two-fold Firstly, to inform the outside world about Africa's past and culture, and secondly to restore the lost confidence in the African himself. Achebe views the writer as teacher. Ngugi wa Thiong'o goes a step further and views the writer not only as a teacher but also as a maker of revolutions In their novels and through them, Achebe and Ngugi recreate the African past by making use of the myths, legends and proverbs from

their respective societies, Sometimes even the actual historical happenings are interwoven in their novels.

Buchi Emecheta, the recipient of Jock Campbell Award from the New Statesman in 1978 is an outstanding contemporary writer of fiction in Nigeria. Born in 1944 to an Igbo couple, she started writing when she was just sixteen. She has produced so far sixteen novels, including several children novels and short stories. She is more overtly political and more concerned with the consequences of racial prejudices. In all her writing she demands social justice rather than empathizing mere feelings. Her writings sensitively explore the psychological and emotional outburst of suppression and oppression of her women protagonists. It is about education, she most brings to mind. She considers Charles Dickens and Oliver Twist as her leaders.

Buchi Emecheta has concerned herself with many themes, but the characters that populate her novels differ from those created by earlier black female novelists. Her characters are seen as harbingers of change and mouthpieces for the call for re-evaluation of certain societal norms at a time when not only the Nigerian society but the entire African society was undergoing a paradigmatic upheaval. But for the black society to effect the needed transformation towards liberation and equality, it must first look within itself, self-reflexively, and iron out the societal seems. A taboo is something declared forbidden either for its sacred nature or to protect the people of a given community from the wrath of the gods and the leaders.. An *osu* is an outcast within the caste system and marrying one is considered a taboo that must never be done. Buchi Emecheta focuses on the role of women in traditional African cultures as they are forced to assimilate into a colonial-influenced life style. Emecheta's other works include *In The Ditch* (1972), *The Bride Price* (1976) *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Wrestling Match* (1980) *Second Class Citizen* (1994).

Emecheta's novels reflect such transformational turning point because Emecheta has experienced the societal change and re-examination of gender and historical roles fostered by the African women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, engaged in the struggle for both their physical and psychological survival. The lives of these African women consist of struggle, a struggle to survive in the horror of poverty and enslavement. Emecheta's women are engaged in a struggle to empower their lives, a struggle that may sometimes take radical swerves for the purpose of redefining the self and the role no matter what the consequences might be.

It is hoped to evaluate through this research that the awareness of such practices will eventually expose the social and cultural inequalities that are emerged by such practices in the lives of women in the African Society.

In *The Joys of the Motherhood*, when the heroine decides to abandon the traditional role of mother, she is able to serve as a mother figure on a

different level. Though Nnu Ego is never depicted as a happy or content woman, she is shown as having arrived at a peace and understanding of herself.

Emecheta's depiction of the black woman in her roles as wife, mother, and lover illustrates why it is morally imperative for the Africans to work towards the eradication of racism and sexism: those institutionalized attitudes result in suffering and the tragic waste of human potential and lives. In Emecheta's second novel, *The Joys of the Motherhood* emotional and psychological growth are possible for African women, but at a great cost. In this novel, the psychological and emotional health is affected by her commitment as a selfless mother.

The African mother is a spiritual anchor. Thus, she is greatly respected in African societies. By giving birth to children, African women ensure their people's continuity, both in the here and in the hereafter. Thus the high regard for women, circumscribing them even as it honours them. Yet, African women in many traditional societies were defined only by their positions as mother and wife. Their contributions to the household were indispensable, and their status was often higher than that of their European counterparts. However, these women lost many of their rights when European colonialism imposed its cultural gender constraints. Undoubtedly, the intersection of traditional values which both respected women yet restricted them, and the colonial system which denied them the traditional rights, gravely, affected the meaning of motherhood in the African societies.

In Igbo society, not only mothers are honored, but mothers of sons are more privileged than mothers of daughters. A Woman who gives birth to female children is denied her role as a woman in Igbo society. Buchi Emecheta's words are appropriate in this regard about Nnu Ego's role as a mother, "she was the mother of sons. Men were so clever. By admonishing her and advising her to live up to her status as senior wife, they made it sound such an enviable position, worth any woman's while to fight for". (JOM 167)

Nnu-Ego is a rebellious woman who dares to fight against slavery .she hesitates the way her husband is working as a slave in white men house,

she despised the job that her husband has been doing, washing those inner wears of white women .Nnu Ego craves for happiness and love, seems overwhelmed with her pregnancy, she wants her husband to celebrate her, but he thinks about job and money all the time. Nigerian women have the power to undergo all kinds of suppression as they never blame men. Emecheta expresses the pleasure of motherhood as she says," Nnu Ego smiled weakly, I know what you mean. Girls are love babies. But, you see, 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?" (JOM 55)

Nnu Ego is the destitute Igbo woman who finds innumerable struggles and difficulties to take care of her family. She is the victim of poverty, being a mother of so many children she stumbles to meet up the expenses. The divine feeling of motherhood becomes a nightmare for her. In the process of sacrificing all her needs, she lost herself. At the end of novel, she is left all alone and the joys, desires and happiness once she yearned for transform in to ordeals. Her dilemma is exposed as she cries:

God when you will 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 I have 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 am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul...When will I be free?...But who made the law that we should not hope in 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.(JOM 186-187)

From the above passage, Emecheta brings the plights and pangs of motherhood into limelight. There is a hunger for freedom within the muted voices of Igbo women. As stated by Sukanya Ghosh:

Finally through the tragic experiences with the males that determined her life-she gains an understanding of two ways standard of Igbo society Thus, her awareness evolves into a rebellious spirit defly revealed by her inner speech that constitutes the strongest feminist statement of the novel. (211)

The Joys of Motherhood is Emecheta's most successful attempt exposing the pangs of motherhood. It also reveals the emotional trauma that Igbo women face by the anarchic forces.

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