

# Negotiating Nigerian Motherhood: A Study of Resistance and Subversion in Buchi Emecheta's Novels

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## Abstract

Though Buchi Emecheta, who undeniably is one of the pioneer women writers from Nigeria relating the experience of the Iboland to the global audience, denies the label of being a feminist, the nuances of women's suffering and resistance are clearly the loci of her narratives. Motherhood and the process of mothering has always been a contested ground for feminist studies with multiple lines of thought converging and often colliding with each other: for some motherhood is an essential part of the female experience which enriches the woman's journey of self-discovery and self-assertion, for others motherhood is nothing but a complex domestic bondage which further holds back women from their path of liberation. The present paper intends to look at Buchi Emecheta's two seminal novels, *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *Joys of Motherhood* (1979), with reference to other Nigerian authors like Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa, and investigate how the trappings of motherhood delineate the Nigerian woman's experience. Depicting a period which is in the state of flux (gliding from the pre-colonial times to the colonial era, as in *Joys of Motherhood*) or individuals who are involved in a process of diaspora (the protagonist travelling from Lagos to the United Kingdom, as in *Second Class Citizen*) Emecheta puts forward a powerful statement regarding the Nigerian woman's tryst with motherhood in different temporal and spatial contexts.

**Keywords:** African novel; Buchi emecheta; Feminism; Motherhood.

Buchi Emecheta's fictional space is essentially a world of mothers – the struggling mothers, the hopeful mothers, the failing mothers, the resentful mothers, the unmotherly mothers and the ghost mothers. Be it the pre-colonial tribal cultural space of Ibuza, or the developing urban metropo-

lis of Lagos, or the multi-racial cosmopolitan ethos of United Kingdom, the women protagonists in Emecheta's novels engage in an existentialist struggle characteristic of the Nigerian woman striving to survive in an overtly gender biased societal setup which is caught in a state of flux, whereby the challenges posed by motherhood further intensify the ordeal. Emecheta was quoted saying, "I work toward the liberation of women but I'm not feminist. I'm just a woman": and though she rejects the tag of feminism, the burning questions she raises through her writings, the oppression and abuse she projects, the race-gender conflict that forms the locus of her narratives, indeed make her one woman attempting self-assessment and moving towards liberation, and in documenting her own experience aiming at the betterment of many. Emecheta writes about "what it means to be an African woman in an African society", writes Marie Umeh, thereby projecting the insider's view, of which her male compatriots were unaware of with their essentially "one-dimensional, romanticized images of the African woman, primarily as mother." (190) This limitation of vision, writes Ashley Dawson, was a byproduct of the negritude movement, where "[Leopold Sedar] Senghor and other male intellectuals advanced an idealized representation of pre-colonial Africa, one in which women, seen as repositories of inviolable cultural tradition, were consigned to the role of fecund mothers of the nation." (100) Deviating from this patriarchal construct of idealized motherhood, Emecheta aims at viewing the process of mothering as a fundamental female experience which is wrought with struggle, disappointment and failure, as well as teeming with pleasure, satisfaction and success.

*The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) places the protagonist Nnu Ego in the colonized Nigerian context of the 1930s where she shuttles between her homeland Ibuza and the urban Lagos - the place her marriage brings her to. *Second Class Citizen* (1974) looks at the protagonist Adah's voluntary journey from Lagos to the United Kingdom of the 1960s in search of a better life. Displacement, adaptation, struggle and resistance that underline both these women's experience, and their journey, not only as an individual but as a mother, form the ground of commonality. Nnu Ego's story begins with the traumatic experience of her losing her infant son, which propels her to attempt suicide: she was expelled from her first marriage for not being able to produce a timely heir, and she endures her second husband, whom she otherwise detests for his physical appearance as well as his status as a colonial servant, with the hope that she might become a mother and therefore prove her worth as a woman to herself, her father and her tribe. For Adah, a lonely and fatherless child pushed into domestic servitude at her maternal uncle's place, who struggles alone and procures

formal education, marriage was a way to find a home: with her father dead, and her mother married to her father's brother according to the Ibo tradition of the day, marriage is the only way out as no one would take in a young unmarried lady as a boarder in Lagos, nor would it be possible for her to realize her childhood dream of moving to the United Kingdom without a husband because of the racially biased British immigration laws of the 1960s. Very soon into their marriages both Nnu Egu and Adah understand that their husbands are autocratic, loveless, indolent and often tyrannical: husbands are only to be tolerated and provided for as they are the fathers of their children. Children, and a considerable brood of children, preferably male, are markers of successful womanhood, not only for the illiterate and rustic Nnu Ego, but also for the educated, working and urban Adah. For both Nnu Ego and Adah their own biological mothers were mostly absent: Nnu Ego's mother died at childbirth, and Adah's mother was the very voice of patriarchy that she had been fighting against, who refused her education, dislocated her with her father's death and viewed her as a means to obtain bride price so that her brother could be provided for.

Despite often stated otherwise by colonial studies, Ibo women were never confined to their homes in their traditional tribal set-up: though primarily endowed with domestic duties of keeping the house, bearing children and providing for the husband, all of them had independent trades and owned kiosks at the local markets, and thereby contributed towards the financial wellbeing of the family. Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo writes that Ibo women were dexterous and often this was the quality that made them desirable to their prospective suitors rather than their physical attractiveness: "The woman was usually, after marriage, given a land on which to farm and produce food (cassava, cocoyam, vegetables) to feed her family. The man provided no food except occasionally when he gave yams to his wife. It was the woman who fed her husband and children." (154) But at the same time it was indeed a woman's worth as a reproductive agent that sealed her value in the societal, familial as well as the economic system. While talking about women in pre-colonial West African countries like Nigeria, Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong and Christabel Agyeiwaa write:

The importance of women was reflected in the social system because it was through women that the family existed and was perpetuated through reproduction. [...] Irrespective of the type of kinship system, the fundamental role of women within the household was reproduction and production. Women were expected to be fertile and to bear children for their husband and the com-

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munity. This represents the relevance that West African societies placed on women's reproductive roles. (1101)

When Nnu Ego moved to Lagos, she banked on her traditionally learnt business acumen to start a trade and complement the meager income of her washerman husband. But as she goes on producing more and more children over time, and with her husband jobless or absent most of the time, the entire responsibility of bringing up her children falls on her. Besides providing food and clothes to her children, she has to arrange for their education too: an add-on responsibility that the colonial system brought along where the education of the children must be taken care of if the mother wants to see them succeed. She cannot but question the unfairness of this settlement where the white man's social system demands a docile woman, and though Nnaife converts to Christianity and embraces that worldview, Nnu Ego has to be the main provider in their household. She also deeply feels the injustice of the demand made on her where she, without the support of the elderly ladies of the family as in Ibuza, who looked after the children as the mother went on with her trade, is expected to toil both at home and outside. When her first son dies she blames it on the neglect the baby was subjected to because of her absence and overwork for her business, she thinks "[...] she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child." (81)

The colonial system doubles the burden on women like Nnu Ego who dares to dream for a better future for her children. As Nnu Ego goes on working with superhuman fortitude and keeps on fighting adverse situations with mammoth resilience, the only hope that keeps her afloat is that her old age would be happy: her children, specifically the male ones, are her investments that she hopes to reap benefit from. Clubbed with this hope of a comfortable future is Nnu Ego's desire to go back to Ibuza: she dreams of a future where her son, "a handsome young man, black and shiny of skin like carved ebony, tall, straight and graceful like the trunk of a palm tree, with no fat anywhere but strong bones set inside his perfect body", who is "a farmer or a successful businessman in the country's biggest market" (78), and not a washerman or a ship worker or a grass cutter like his father Nnaife, would take Nnu Ego back to her idyllic space of the Iboland, away from the "crazy town called Lagos" (79). The irony inherent in the name of the novel becomes gradually prominent, as contrary to her naïve dreams, her sons decide to leave the country in search of a better future, proclaiming it in no uncertain terms that they are responsible neither for the financial nor for the emotional wellbeing of the mother. The

daughters, who always came as a second thought, rather become Nnu Ego's support, but still she dies a lonely and dissatisfied death. Nnu Ego's resistance, apart from moments of thoughtfulness where she conceived a future world where women would be self-sufficient and therefore worth of equal education and opportunities, or when she rued the fact that she was too engrossed with her motherly duties and never formed true bonds of friendship with other women, actually comes after her death: she becomes the ghost mother of the clan who refuses to bless her people with fertility. The "joy" she had to endure of breeding repeatedly, of toiling inhumanely day and night for her children, of premature age and untimely death, Nnu Ego refuses to pass on to future mothers.

One must remember that motherhood has been the underlining factor determining a woman's worth in Igbo culture since the pre-colonial times. If one looks at Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which etched Nigeria into the map of international literature for the first time, it comes across as almost an unidimensional picture of masculine hegemony – a world that begins and ends with Okonkwo. But even in a narrative where the fall of the man from prominence to nothingness under the colonial onslaught is at the centre, one cannot overlook the Ekwefi- Ezinma episode in the first section of the novel. Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, and her *ogbanje* daughter Ezinma, exemplify an unique mother-daughter bond which stands for an inimitable sisterhood. After losing multiple children in infancy, Ezinma is the only child who validates Ekwefi's position in Okonkwo's household and the Igbo community as a whole. Ekwefi clings on to her daughter as a sole source of sustenance and even defies Okonkwo's patriarchal authority by giving her food he forbids her to, and moreover by undertaking the odyssey through the night when the life of the child is threatened. One night Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, takes Ezinma on a mysterious journey through the threatening darkness to the shrine of the deity, and Ekwefi does not think twice to defy the authority of her husband and her community to follow her child despite the peril of the unknown. Ekwefi's sticking to Ezinma not only reflects her maternal instinct but it also embodies her sticking to her own identity as a mother which makes her the woman she is.

Emecheta's Nnu Ego seems to echo Flora Nwapa's Efuru's predicament with her constant obsession with motherhood as the marker of self-worth. *Efuru* (1966) is seen as a landmark in Anglophone Nigerian literature since it was the first book written by a Nigerian woman, for that matter any African woman, which was published internationally. Efuru, like Nnu Ego, lives under the shadow of her father, the chieftain of the Igbo village she

belongs to, but unlike the compliant Nnu Ego, she undertakes to marry against her father's wish a man who is unable to pay the bride price. This act makes her a social outcast, though she is thoroughly loved and cared for by her in-laws, since she defies the dictate of patriarchy which fixes the price for the fertile marriageable woman. Keeping true to her Igbo genes, Efuru is a master tradesman, often superseding her lazy husband with her trade acumen. But neither her beauty nor her skill is able to save her from a bad marriage and an absconding husband, and over that she has to endure the greatest tragedy of all – the untimely death of her infant daughter. Her second marriage fails too because of her inability to bear children for her new husband, and Nwapa does not fail to remind the reader often that despite all her triumphs, it is her status as a failed mother that defines Efuru's identity. Efuru realizes her destiny as she is chosen by the lake goddess Uhamiri to be her protégée, since the goddess endows her followers with beauty and prosperity but withholds the greatest blessing of all – fertility. If Efuru's second marriage was unfruitful, Nnu Ego's first marriage was so, leading her to choose a second husband – a man she never met – only for the sake of becoming a mother.

Through her difficult journey of mothering a boy child, eventually losing the first born and then waiting for the other babies to be born, she develops a strange connection with the river spirit. When at one point she wanted to drown herself and meet her *chi* (the personal god, in her case a slave woman killed by her father), while during her next troubled pregnancies her *chi* came to her in the shape of the river spirit to gift her future children. This brings one to the figure of Mami Wata, the water spirit in Nigerian iconography, who is linked negatively to fertility and often is projected as barren herself, but is the patron of wealth and beauty. The cult of Mami Wata embodies the dichotomy of female existence where beauty and wealth cannot be proclaimed simultaneously with the bliss of fertility and motherhood, and thereby women can never have it all. Nwapa's another novel *Idu* (1970) is held to be controversial because it raises query on how the absurd insistence on motherhood oftentimes mars the marital relationship itself. Both the central women characters, Adu and Ojiugo, though initially goaded into submission by traditional norms, go on to reject the societal insistence on the sanctity of maternal status and both decide to hold on to their love for their husbands rather than being celebrated as ideal mothers.

In *Second Class Citizen* Adah's connection with her children mirrors that of Nnu Ego's where battling against her dysfunctional relationship with her husband Francis, it is her children who form the basis of her existence.

Adah's predicament still remains that of a thousand other working mothers': she has to work to run her household with an idle husband who just pretends to study for a degree and philanders openly, and has to worry endlessly about the wellbeing and the safety of her children in a foreign land. The working mother is more often than not characterized as the unnatural mother, who willfully undermines the nurturing responsibilities heaped on her by patriarchy, and thereby choosing herself over her children. The major point of dissociation between the demands of motherhood and employment is sourced to the elementary division between the public and private spheres that all societies primarily work on. As Tuula Gordon notes, the public world of paid work is quintessentially attributed to men whereas the private sphere of reproduction has been culturally ascribed to women. (11) This enables patriarchal subjugation by controlling the woman's sexuality, but the procedure gets severely challenged when the woman has to join the workforce for many different reasons but to the same end of leaving home. The dilemma of the working class mother is more acute: for her work is not a matter of choice but rather it is a necessity. Adah's position as a well-educated working woman in Lagos, an elite who could afford four nannies to look after her two children in her absence, undergoes a sea change as she moves to the United Kingdom: her expenses multiply, she is often jobless due to her repeated pregnancies, she has to face racial discrimination while finding accommodation, she struggles to obtain a proper caretaker or nursery for her children, and she is reduced to the status of a second class citizen where she battles squalor, disease and debasement.

Though it is her children who keep Adah afloat through all this, she detests her unwanted pregnancies caused by instances of marital rape or her husband's refusal to use the contraception she so desperately procures. Both Nnu Ego and Adah, though with a space of three decades in between, are denied autonomy over their bodies, which are burdened with successive difficult and taxing pregnancies, when they are already weighed down with the maintenance of the other children. Their being unmotherly mothers become a part of this experience: when Nnu Ego's seventh child dies at birth, she cannot but wonder that if it was she who unconsciously wished for the death of her child as she slogged for the upkeep of her existing children; when Adah finds herself pregnant for the fourth time, she opts for abortion, though it goes against her Christian upbringing. Both are saddled with guilt in no time at their seemingly unmotherly acts: Nnu Ego goes into depression and has to remind herself that she had been sewing new clothes for her unborn child, so it was by no means unwanted; Adah's failed abortion attempt makes her panicky

about the safety of her unborn child, as if it is born with abnormalities it would be an unforgivable fault on Adah's part, and she goes on to compensate by providing excellent pre-natal nutrition to the child as well as breastfeeding her for the longest possible time.

It is Francis' act of carelessness towards Adah when she is giving birth that makes her gradually resilient to the situation that she is forced into: she cannot forget that though the children are her life, they are eventually going to carry the name of their father, because that is what patriarchy decrees. When she births the third child, though a boy, Francis is as nonchalant as ever, denying Adah even her basic maternity necessities and planning for his own advancement with her hard earned money. During her fourth pregnancy, she refuses to hand over her pay packet to Francis and prepares diligently to give herself and her unborn child proper nutrition and an experience of happy childbirth, disregarding the presence of a neglectful father. Staying true to her Ibo notions of motherhood, where feeding her children is the essential responsibility of the mother, she tells Francis "I know the children are mine, because they need to be fed. You must go out and work. If not, I shall only cater for my children." (208) As Adah cares for her newborn fourth baby after quitting work and thereby making Francis take up employment, for the first time she feels what is to be a "real housewife" (212): she relaxes as she does not have to work both at home and outside, and therefore is happy to "downsize". Adah had once vehemently refused to join a clothes factory like other Nigerian women in the United Kingdom when she first came as she thought it would be an insult to her hard earned education and status; now she is happy to be seamstress, as long she can work part time and from home, with her children around. Adah's change is definitely postfeminist in its edict that women's liberation, the kind the second wave of feminism sought for, actually led to doubling the burden on women: because though women started working outside, men never admitted their share of domestic duties. For these overworked mothers, emancipation would sometimes mean to have the choice of going back to the domestic sphere. For Adah, now it did not matter "whether she became a librarian or a seamstress" (214) as long as she was not made to work like a beast of burden, and she could take pleasure in simple things like taking her children to the nursery.

The autobiographical undertones present in *Second Class Citizen* are apparent at many levels, especially when Adah decides to write a novel named *The Bride Price*, which is the very name of Emecheta's third novel. The term "brainchild" (216), one pronounced by Adah's white male colleague Bill who is eager to see her work published, gets stuck in Adah's



mind and she cannot forgive Francis' despotic act of burning her manuscript: it is an instance of intense psychological violence, a willful act of homicide that Francis commits to her figurative offspring. Adah muses: "Did she not feel totally fulfilled when she had completed the manuscript, just as if it was another baby she had had?" (216) The African woman's act of writing, that too in a foreign language like English, is in itself an act of defiance and self-assertion: an act, which like her ability to create a progeny, give her an essence of self-worth and belonging. Being the shielding mother she is, Adah decides to finally leave her husband, because "Francis could kill her child. She could forgive him all he had done before, but not this." (222) Therefore, "Adah walked to freedom, with nothing but four babies, her new job and a box of rags." (223) She declines to lay any claim of maintenance money from her husband, though she is already pregnant again, finds an accommodation with difficulty, and lives with the aim of securing "her safety, and protection for the children" (226), who "had a right to happiness as well, not just Francis." (208) With this, one may look back at the dedication page of *Second Class Citizen*: Emecheta sends love to her own five children, "without whose sweet background noises this book would not have been written." The skeptical reader cannot but wonder if the use of this oxymoron, the playful juxtaposition of the words "sweet" and "noise", is more potent than it apparently appears. Was it not too much for an African woman like Emecheta, escaping an abusive marriage, single handedly responsible for the upbringing of her own five children, struggling day and night to make ends meet in a racially delineated London society, to be a writer? Did not her multiple pregnancies and recurrent motherly responsibilities undermine her aspirations as a human being? Motherhood to the end remains a much contested ground in the Emecheta's writing, because the scales measuring profit and loss never get balanced to precision.

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