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The Joys of Motherhood: *Myth or Reality?*

by MARIE A. UMEH

THE MOST celebrated female character in African creative writing is the African mother. Anglophone African writers from the sub-Saharan area esteem her as the epitome of love, strength and affection. This image of the African mother for the most part reflects traditional African societies' mores. African societies highly regard African women for their reproductive ability, and African writers similarly portray African women in roles where they are protecting, comforting and nourishing their children. Accordingly, two predominant images of the African woman as mother dominate African creative writing. The first holds the African mother as a supreme symbol. This image of the African mother as supreme is found in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Achebe points out that when there is misfortune and sorrow a man finds refuge in his motherland. Achebe contends that "it is to a mother to whom one turns, of whom one speaks of when nostalgia grips . . . when distress clouds the vision of the moment . . . when there is sorrow and bitterness . . . the mother is there to protect you and that is why we say Mother is Supreme."¹ In this novel, Achebe establishes the mother image as representative not only of maternal love, protection and comfort, but also of power and respect. The second portrayal of the African woman as mother depicts her as an all-suffering, self-sacrificing victim. Take Ama, the mother in Christina Aidoo's short story, "No Sweetness Here," as a case in point. According to Aidoo, the typical mother is one who sacrifices herself for her children. Other views of motherhood in African writing depict the African mother as the symbol of security and dignity.

In Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, one witnesses the collapse of these glorifying images of the African Mother. As a literary artist preoccupied with promoting change, author Emecheta, an iconoclast, breaks away from the prevalent portraiture in African writing in which motherhood is honorific. Children do not always maintain strong and loving ties with their mothers throughout adulthood. As Emecheta states in her novel, "the joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children."² The title of the book, which is taken from

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1959), p. 123.

2. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), p. 219. All subsequent quotations will be referred to in the text by page numbers.

Flora Nwapa's novel, *Efuru*, is then significant and bitterly ironic.³ Dazzled by ambitious sons educated outside of traditional Igbo values, Nnu Ego breaks down and her old secure world gives way to a new one. Fully conscious of the irony in her life, she says, "a woman with many children could face a lonely old age and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman" (p. 224). Here Emecheta constructs a wholly different set of economic, socio-political and cultural imperatives which diverge from the existing literary models.

Nnu Ego, the protagonist in the novel, is an offspring of Agbadi, a great chief and elephant hunter, and the proud Ona, who remains the great love of Agbadi's life although she refuses to become one of his wives. Because Nnu Ego, the reincarnation of a slave girl who has come back to live her life again, is barren in her first marriage, she is returned to her father's village. The old chief is reluctant to see her marry a second time but he relents and allows Nnu Ego to marry Nnaife Owulum, a man she has never seen and does not know. Nnaife Owulum lives in Lagos where he is employed as a laundryman in the home of an English family. Upon arriving in Lagos, Nnu Ego is disappointed with her spouse because of his obesity and his servility before Dr. and Mrs. Meers, his employers. In any event, Nnu Ego remains with her husband and bears him nine children of whom seven live: three boys and four girls. When she despairs because of a loveless marriage, she draws comfort from the fact that Nnaife is responsible for her seemingly esteemed position as mother. Upon the birth of their first son, Oshia, she reflects: "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' " (p. 54).

The Joys of Motherhood is the most complex and difficult of Emecheta's five published novels. The book's complexity arises out of the dramatization of the place of motherhood in Igbo society. At the level of realistic narrative, Emecheta tends to present a far more well-rounded and multi-dimensional character, emphasizing the problems that afflict a woman because of her blind adherence to tradition. Of particular interest to this author are the problems of polygamy (jealousy among wives and the inequity of some husbands), the problems of the childless wife in a society that honors fertility, the problems of women married to weak men, the problems of widows. Emecheta does not dwell on the perfections of the mother. Instead she draws spirited individuals, not without faults. In this book, the mother figure is described in a variety of situations. One witnesses the mother sacrificing herself for her children, fighting with her husband in order to get financial support for the children, protecting her children from their father's wrath, correct-

3. Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 281.

ing her children and suffering because of their absence, their revolts against traditional customs, their needs.⁴ Unlike most African male writers who revere their mothers in autobiographies, recalling their mothers' affection, Buchi Emecheta records the troubled and chaotic moments in a mother's life. Apart from the positive aspects of motherhood, author Emecheta records the turmoil and anguish of women who long for children and of mothers who worry about their children (p. 212).

The basic narrative lends itself toward neo-feminism. The main female characters struggle to shed the conditioning which forces them to act out roles that bring little fulfillment. Like the African-American dramatist, Ntozake Shange, Emecheta has two of her characters—Nnu Ego and Adaku—evoke radical feminist ideologies in their quests for abundant life.⁵ After experiencing both the joys and pains of motherhood, Nnu Ego realizes that children do not always bring fulfillment. Nnu Ego ruminates, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being not anybody's appendage?" (p. 186). What Emecheta does is to present an African woman's reaction to a universal problem: children often fail to honor their parents. In voicing this idea through the traditionalist, Nnu Ego, Emecheta emphasizes the fact that women have the social responsibility to criticize and participate in the social order.

Structurally, this text is more complicated than her earlier works. Her artistic growth as a writer, demonstrated in her prolific use of literary devices such as flashback, interior monologue and *Bildungsroman*, is stylistically exciting. For example, Emecheta employs the technique of the *Bildungsroman*—novel of formation—to underscore the development of the protagonist's mind and character as she matures and recognizes her role in life. She also skillfully uses flashbacks to weave together crucial information central to the development of the plot and to the full understanding of her characters' relationships to both the external and spirit worlds. The result mirrors working-class Ibuza men and women from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1960's providing sport for their gods.⁶ Additionally, what makes the novel stylistically refreshing is the air of social realism brought about by the author's use of the English language. Emecheta is careful to select the manner of speech which authentically represents each character in his particular environment. In dialogue, for example, an urbanized Nigerian never

4. Anne Lippert, *The Changing Role of Women As Viewed in the Literature of English and French Speaking West Africa* (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1972), p. 166.

5. See the play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

6. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Buchi Emecheta: The Changing Perception of a Writer." Paper presented at the African Literature Association Annual Meeting, Claremont, Calif., (April 8-11, 1981), p. 21.

speaks like an English person or a villager. Emecheta has the gift to individualize her characters by differentiating their speech and utilizing the correct imagery that reflects the time, place and people she is trying to describe. The novel itself has the passions of human drama: love and rage, coupled with socio-historic objectivity similar to that utilized by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel, divided into six major episodes and eighteen chapters, celebrates survival: a woman's capacity to master pain and betrayal with courage, fortitude and dreams. There is a presence, too, of Emecheta's personal identification with characters as they search for their individuality. By doing away with the third person pronoun she employed in her earlier works, Emecheta utilizes the first person plural *we*: "The men make it look as if *we* must aspire for children or die" (p. 187, emphasis mine). This is an effective technique which introduces the reader into the collective consciousness of the novel.

The Joys of Motherhood is a good example of an African *Bildungsroman*. The book covers a twenty-five year span, tracing Nnu Ego's personal development from the time she is newly married until her old age. Nnu Ego's growth from a staunch traditionalist to a feminist, when she discovers after many years that motherhood has not brought fulfillment, is cleverly drawn. Her respect for Ibuza customs comes across clearly at the beginning of the novel and her disappointment in discovering their shortcomings is equally well-portrayed. With the exception of a composite overview of Nnu Ego's family background in the first three of the book's eighteen chapters, Emecheta uses character introspection. This is something new in African writing. Introspective characters of African women are rare primarily because the situational novel, which is concerned with external events, looms large in African creative writing.⁷ For the most part, African writers—male and female—tend to approach their characters "objectively," describing their external reactions to their circumstances without attempting to probe their minds in order to illuminate the psychological forces that motivate their actions. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, however, one is eased right into Nnu Ego's subconscious mind and into her thoughts. For example, in explaining her temporary nervous breakdown following the loss of her first son, Ngozi, Nnu Ego laments, "But I am not a woman any more! I am not a mother any more. The child is there, dead on the mat. My *chi* has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her . . ." (p. 62). Here Nnu Ego puts forth traditional Igbo ideas as well as the role of one's *chi* in the psyche of an Igbo person.⁸ But gradually a chain of di-

7. Bessie Head's novel, *A Question of Power*, is the only other African novel written by a woman that deals with character introspection.

8. According to Richard Henderson *chi* is the life conceived as an animate self that directs the course of one's existence. It is therefore said that when an individual is born, he/she makes a pact with a particular essential being (*chi*) who selects his/her length of time on earth and procures his destiny. See *The King in Every Man* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), p. 107.

sasters in Nnu Ego's life awakens her to the reality of her unrewarding years of suffering and sacrificing for her children. Nnu Ego says:

I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I 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 I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: it will be hailed as a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free? (pp. 186-7)

Nnaife's numerous marriages, the hardships attendant on subsistence living, and frequent pregnancies all contribute to her lack of fulfillment. In her metamorphosis which emanates from her association with her co-wife, Adaku, Nnu Ego, turning feminist herself, in a monologue probes:

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband—and now I have to include my sons. 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. (p. 187)

The ironies and cruelties of her life force the protagonist to move from the collective consciousness to the individual consciousness. Coming to terms with colonialism and its aftermath has meant coming to terms with oneself. The narrator's private history then becomes fused, producing a highly charged protagonist who is and is not part of the events she describes. Like her spokesperson, the narrator, Nnu Ego, having found a place for herself in the new order of female emancipation, divorces herself from the traditional African concepts in her search for abundant life.

Nnu Ego's metamorphosis is no surprise to the reader. Throughout the novel, Adaku's independent character is juxtaposed to Nnu Ego's subservient nature. In promoting the feminist's cause, Emecheta balances Nnu Ego's traditionalism with Adaku's tendencies toward female emancipation. Adaku's "Feminism" is introduced in the novel when she initiates a strike by refusing Nnaife supper until he increases his wives' food allowance. Adaku's struggle for equality is reiterated when she walks out on her husband to be a "dignified single woman" and educate her two daughters alone. That she is a failure and considered insignificant because she has no sons prompts Adaku to seek fulfillment as a business woman selling fabric in the market place. In resigning herself to her fate, she informs Nnu Ego, "I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman just because I have no sons. . . . I am going to make some of our men who return from the fighting happy. . . . I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life . . ." (p. 168). Undeniably, there are certain aspects of the Ibuza's community

treatment of women that are in need of change, but the people themselves are incapable of effecting the necessary changes even when there is a vague realization that they are necessary.

Although it is not until Nnu Ego is ostracized by the Owulum family (even though she had created firm roots by producing male heirs) that she comprehends her "second-class" status, this is a welcomed occurrence. Entrusting her life to her children, sacrificing friends and the comforts of life for her sons, were mistakes. So she dies alone, without husband, child or friend. In any event, by this time, Nnu Ego has radically altered her views about marriage and children:

When her children heard of her sudden death they all, even Oshia, came home. They were all sorry she had died before they were in a position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen, and a shrine was made in her name, so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren. Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children. (p. 224)

Realizing too late that a single woman can be happy even though she has no children, Nnu Ego in death becomes spiritually committed to heightening the consciousness of the African woman. Hence, both Adaku and Nnu Ego have been able to envision what authentic selfhood would be and how they might move toward achieving it.

Although this book is valuable as a feminist work, it lacks strong feminist consciousness and ideology in form. Neo-feminist works, in general, are controlled by the dynamics of struggle. As Ellen Morgan notes: "Time, place, pattern, rhythm and plot are functions of the meeting of women with the forces aligned against them. Where there are tightness and compression, they reflect the pressure and constriction of these forces. Where there is looseness, disorder, chaos they reflect women's sense of disorientation, their feeling that they are between two worlds."⁹ *The Joys of Motherhood* is not influenced directly by the current women's liberation movement. Although author Emecheta censures many traditional conventions (noble and good in Igbo society), the novel is not the best illustration of the new direction neo-feminist literature is taking. For example, Adaku, the actual feminist character in the novel, verbalizes ideas and feelings of rebellion which African women writers have previously expressed through their characters. Prior to the West's emancipation movement, novels were written by women who independently had come to many of the conclusions openly expressed by Adaku. For example, Flora Nwapa's protagonist Efuru in the novel, *Efuru*, challenges many accepted mores and assumptions in the Igbo community when it was not popular to do so, just like Adaku. Efuru leaves her husband Gilbert when he falsely accuses her of committing

9. Ellen Morgan, "Human Becoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel" in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Susan Koppelman Cornillion (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Press, 1971), p. 188.

adultery, and does so without sharing the sense of failure the community dictates she should. Comparable with the independent character portrayal of Efuru is the character of Penda in Ousmane Sembene's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*. In the beginning of the novel, Penda is depicted as an independent woman who alienates herself from the community. She refuses to be bound by convention, and instead of selecting a spouse and having a family, she indulges in sexual escapades with any man who pleases her. Penda, viewing marriage as a trap, decides to remain single.¹⁰ Emecheta falls short of being a serious feminist writer in that her main character, Nnu Ego, acquires her raised consciousness to personhood only as the book closes. Although her character Adaku serves as a model of the liberated woman who conducts herself as a "free woman" and provides us with a glimpse of how an African woman conducts herself as a separated mother with two children, we have yet to see a realistic novel which describes a fully liberated heroine who lives an independent life as a respectable human being within African society. Because of the conservative sexual mores expected of women in the Igbo community, Adaku, by renouncing her marriage to Nnaife, choosing to live alone, and entertaining men friends, sets herself apart from the other married women in her community who seek status and protection in the home of respectable African men. Adaku, by contrast, is determined to become a successful trader and keep men at her disposal.

In conclusion, in *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta extends her metaphor of the enslaved Igbo woman, arguing that the society also programs women to be slaves of their male offspring as well as their husbands. In describing the joys, author Emecheta is at her best in the irony implied in the title. Children give joy, we all agree. From this premise, she builds an elaborate story to demolish the myth, while at the same time pretending to uphold the age-old idea. Indeed, a mother of sons should be happy; such happiness should help her to bear the grind of poverty. Underneath all this is the motif of the lonely and all-suffering mother. Thus, Nnu Ego gradually realizes that motherhood has not brought fulfillment.¹¹ After years of sacrificing everything for her family, our heroine is forced to understand that "the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children" (p. 224). Therefore, this work is not solely about Nnu Ego's conditioning into the female role and her many defeats and retreats in adhering to social convention. It is also an account of her gradual awakening, and the beginning of her self-affirmation. Nnu Ego is a realistic heroine who is not totally defeated. Although she does not achieve authentic selfhood in her lifetime, her commitment to her sisters lies in her refusal to passively watch them be

10. Kenneth Little, *The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 53.

11. Ogunyemi, ALA paper, 1981, p. 18.

fenced in by housewifely duties and have too many children that bring abundant economic and emotional strains. Hence, in death “however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did” (p. 224). As such, *The Joys of Motherhood* stands as a model for other African women writers who wish to portray the actual condition of women and their responses to their condition and the actual possibilities of overcoming barriers and achieving individuality.

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