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Tale of African Women: Buchi Emecheta's a joy of motherhood

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Abstract

This research article presents postcolonial aspects e.g., capitalism, patriarchy, racism in Buchi Emecheta's *A Joy of Motherhood*. An article tries to present Buchi Emecheta's views on African women's marginalization and suffering in patriarchal society. The *Joy of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, depicts the story of Nnu Ego, traditional woman, having her children specially the boy, knows her identity in the patriarchal society. She, herself is rich having 3 sons. Since she has sons, according to Iboza African tradition Nnu Ego has comfortable old age. At the end of the novel she died, in Lagos, a lonely death "no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her", she had "never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother" (Emecheta, 2011, p. 224). Buchi Emecheta depicts the effects of colonial patriarchy and capital politics in third world marginalization of women. Alice Walker as a feminist observes that because of "their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexism (sexual discrimination) and racism (racial discrimination)" (Kohzadi, et al., 2011: 1307).

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta, *A Joy of Motherhood*, Postcolonial feminism, Capitalism, Colonialism, Feminism, Racism, Solidarity

Western Feminist Consciousness in Emecheta's the Joys of Motherhood

The novel *The Joy of Motherhood* accommodates the aspect of western feminism which brings in the light gender inequality, sexual difference, and gender oppression within the Igbo society. Novel also highlights the way women are oppressed and silenced by patriarchy. Though "concentrating on gender oppression alone would never make sense for who always experienced sexual and racial oppression as linked and compounded" (Lewis & Mills 2003, 5). Polygamy, motherhood, marriage, women's reproductive right, educational right, and else, as the sources of gender oppression, are among the key concepts discussed in this research article.

Women's Recolonization and Post-Colonial Policies

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals various incidents of Nigeria during the British imperialism of 1930 and 'moving forward to the time of independence from colonial rule' (Killam, 2004, p. 42). According to Killam (2004) there were limited contacts between Europe and Africa to slave trade until late 18th century. But from 1780 there was a new interest emerged. Britishers started to offer goods and work for development of their religion in Africa. Europeans started believing that they were superior. And this is the way they were only responsible to give them identity, religion, civilization etc. So that African formal colonization began from 1885 (p. 48).

Emecheta describes how West develops culture and do rule through various institutions. She depicts that how the colonial discourse brings various changes such as religion in Lagos, "the workers are determined to be off only half a day in the week and that is on Sundays in order to attend the church. The marriage should be done in the church, otherwise; it is regarded as an illegal marriage. When Nnu Ego is pregnant for the first time, Nnaif become worry that he may lose his job because they didn't marry in the church. Moreover, Nnu Ego, in the court, is told to swear by the holy Bible not by her chi". (Emecheta, 2011, p. 217) Cynthia Ward states about Buchi Emecheta's feminist views, "Her novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance, a self-constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression... that human society has created, a self that must find its true voice in order to speak not only for itself but for all others similarly oppressed. (Ward 83).

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Emecheta tries to speak for the disenfranchised African women who are oppressed by the colonial patriarchal society. In the opinion of Mohanty third world women are subject to domination and exploitation. The Master from British treats Nnaif as he is “denuded of any cultural or historical being” (p. 86). Master calls him baboon.

The Joys of [M]otherhood: Motherhood

Buchi Emecheta applies Western feminist ideology of ‘Motherhood’ for criticizing the African patriarchal aspects of ‘Mothering’. Motherhood is believed to be the central focuses of women’s isolation and oppression. It is rightly said that, “the joys of motherhood is a kind of false consciousness, it really is a power relation and women are duped into thinking that it holds any promise of sovereignty or free expression” (Kinser 2010, 7). The novel *The Joy of Motherhood* is the story of female protagonist Nnu Ego, who enjoys her life being mother of many children in order to have a comfortable old age. She is ready to sacrifice herself in order to feed and give clothes to children. Emecheta tries to offer her critique the patriarchal meaning of motherhood through her character Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego begs money from Nnaif to feed her children but Nnaif asserts that, “I’m not giving you a penny, because I haven’t a penny to give” (Emecheta 1979, 136). Nnaif again said that, “it’s your responsibility to feed your children as best you can”. These words indicate that a woman is a slave of man, she is a subject of oppression by the patriarchal society. It is rightly said that, “she was a prison, imprisoned by her love for her children [...] it was not fair she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her” (137). Ego has experiences of marginalization and oppression as a mother, is Emecheta’s views of the African patriarchy.

Nnu is ready to struggle vainly to make both ends meet. Here the narrator describes how she manages the family, “Nnu Ego still sold firewood, garri and other foodstuffs. Every morning neighbours could hear her calling: “Oshia, Adim, twins, wake up and let us go to the waterside!” There she would buy the firewood for the day’s sale and they would all carry it home. She normally left Nnamdio with Iyawo Isekiri. As she looked at the children trooping in front of her with their little bundles of firewood, she used to say, “Thank you, my *chi*, that they are healthy and strong. One day, they will become people” (174).

Buchi Emecheta criticized the way African patriarchal institutions defines the word motherhood. In the absence of her husband, she being alone cares her children in best possible way in any worst condition. She does petty works, sells wood only for her children. She also saves money for their school fees. She avers, “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’m lucky enough to die in peace, I have to give them my soul” (186). Due to hard work she grows faint. Adim knows that her mother Nnu Ego is not aged but she only looked in her seventies. Thus being a devoted mother, she does sacrifice her youth, life for her children. She never makes many friends, “she had never really made many friends, so busy had she building up her joys as a mother” (224). In this way she has lonely death with no children and no friends.

Thus, the narrator highlights the burden of African women in the following terms, “In Lagos, a wife would not have time. She had to work. She provides food from her

husband’s meager housekeeping money but finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comfort in some cases for the children’s school fees” (53).

Buchi Emecheta goes on ahead to question the Igbo society which is patriarchal, blames Ego who does not bring up her children carefully. She avers that “Ibuza people blame me: they say I didn’t bring you all up well because I spent most of my time selling things in the market” (212). Buchi Emecheta rightly said that, ...“till, many agreed that she has given all to her children. The joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children, they said; and her reward? Did she not have the greatest funeral Ibuza had ever seen? It took Oshia three years to pay off the money he had borrowed to show the world what a good son he was. That was why people failed to understand why she didn’t answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?” (224). The title of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is the ironic by which novelist tries to presents the oppression, suffering and loneliness which African mother experiences within patriarchal society.

Room of their Owns: Education:

Liberal feminist tries to examine how women are prevented from to play role in the patriarchal society. In this way Virginia Woolf refers to Shakespeare’s sister as one who is as gifted as Shakespeare himself was. She said that since Shakespeare’s sister is a woman, she is not a writer. So that her gender never permits her to have “a room of her own”. She never allows to have the education like her brother Shakespeare.

Buchi Emecheta follows Western feminists who demand for educational rights for women, she offers her critique on the African society which offers the education only for man. Emecheta depicts her critical views through her character Adaku who represents the liberal woman. She knows that the education is a way to women’s freedom, so she tries to educate her daughters. Buchi Emecheta tries to encourage African women to be educated in order to acquire “a room of their owns” by example of this character Adaku.

Marriage: A Site of Women's "Otherness"

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* follows the Western Feminism to question against the marriage. Feminist scholar said about marriage “Men had invented marriage to oppress women. Through such means as kidnapping, rape, and the use or the threat of force, men established dominance over women. This gave men control of women’s sexual activity and reproduction, ensuring that they were the fathers of the children their mates bore” (Steffoff 2006, 36). The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* gives the detail of African women’s oppression in the marriage system of patriarchal society. Women are believed to be only property of men, “commodities that only appeal to the owner whilst still new” (Nyanhongo 2011, 72). In addition they are merely dominated by men, they are just for reproduction, “mere chattels and ..., their principle role is to attend to the needs of their men and to produce children, especially male children” (Killam 2004, 44). That incident can be seen in Nnu Ego’s case, she seems to be infertile when she married first time to Amatokwa. He says her that, “she would have to move to nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife” (Emecheta 1979, 32).

Then she is avoided and disregarded by her husband Amatokwa. He talks to her when it is important. He behaves with her like master and servant. He says that “what do you want me to do? [...] 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 live” (ibid). Emecheta explains the extent of women’s dehumanization. They are not rather than means of reproduction. They are nothing if they can not give birth to children. Female has no any identity or individuality of her own. As they are wo/men, man’s property.

Here is the evident in the novel when Agbadi confessed Ibuza men want women “who could claim to be helpless without them”. The only honor women can get when they can produce many sons. Emecheta rightly depicts, “[s]till, many agreed that she has given all to her children. The joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children, they said; and her reward? Did she not have the greatest funeral Ibuza had ever seen? It took Oshia three years to pay off the money he had borrowed to show the world what a good son he was. That was why people failed to understand why she didn’t answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?”.

Thus Buchi Emecheta disclosed the suffering, loneliness, and oppression which an African woman experiences in the patriarchal society.

The Forbidden “Women”:

Buchi Emecheta criticizes the patriarchy for dismissing, oppressing the disempowered women characters in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. She tries to reveal how the native patriarchal society in Ibuza, who is ‘SUPERIOR’ or ‘OTHER’ is determined by ‘GENDER’. Readers are told that Ona is not allowed to marry her father because she lives with Ahbadi and her daughter. She dies during child birth. According to Buchi Emecheta in her interview, there is power of patriarchy over women lives, by giving an example of Ona who is sentenced to death because she does not obey the patriarchy (qtd In Willey 2000, 9). This indicates the situation to which women’s freedom is controlled by patriarchy. Ona is not allowed to her pleasure as soon as he has his satisfaction, “he wanted her completely humiliated in her burning desire” (Emecheta 1979, 20). This statement indicates that how Buchi Emecheta criticizes the patriarchal society which dehumanizes female characters. As we already know Buchi Emecheta criticizes the patriarchy treating woman as inferior other. Buchi tries to depict the society where female is believed to be SECOND CLASS CITIZEN at the bottom of patriarchal society. Buchi Emecheta said rightly, “I am just an ordinary writer who has to write. Being a woman and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African woman I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist, then I am an African feminist with a small’. I do believe in the African kind of feminism. They call it womanism.” (qtd. in Pandurang 118)

Gender Oppression Polygamy

Buchi Emecheta highlights the issue of woman’s sexuality and oppression in African society by presenting polygamy in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) said about Western feminism that “limited their analysis of

gender inequality to woman's biology and/ or her sexuality and how it has been sanctioned either by patriarchy or by the phallus. Women's sexuality is, on the one hand, controlled by an unbalanced sexual division of labor that manipulates women's procreative; on the other hand, women's body is presented as a pleasure-based entity whose drive have either been sanctioned or repressed”.

Buchi exposed that woman’s sexual pleasures are neglected in the polygamous society. Agbadi does the same for years to his wives for years because he has sex with his mistress. (Emecheta 1979, 36). In this way Buchi highlights that the women are like a commodity.

The hegemonic systems of patriarchy and colonialism subjugate the woman biologically and economically. Katrak avers, “Certain aspects of household and familial organization can be analyzed with a feminist concept of patriarchy (sexuality, fertility, ideology) while others can be slotted in the analysis of the need to reproduce the labour force on which capitalist products depend on domestic labour, childrening, socialization.”

Thus African women try to find their femininity in their capacity of mothering mainly males. But their economic status is down rated. Thus African women are subjugated by both sides like colonialism and patriarchy. Buchi Emecheta wants to give voice to African women a room of their own.

African women suffered from double colonization for example once she transplanted to Westernized Lagos Nnu Ego was subordinate to her husband as well as her white employers. The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is about the postcolonial feminism in the image of Nnu Ego. Feminism and post-colonialism are both overlapped at many levels for example superior-inferior, power-powerless. The phases of hybridity, Othering and ambivalence are faced by the protagonist. The protagonist Nnu Ego daughter of Chief Agbadi accepts the inferior status in the colonized African society. Louisa O Brien rightly said that, “Women as doubly colonized, firstly by white colonialism, and secondly by black masculinity are placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of value through the gendered response by the black man to his racial oppression. Those two oppressions are thus irrevocably intertwined: the more feminized the black man is by the white man, the more he is inferior and the more he needs to assert his masculinity, by which I mean his superiority, over the black woman.”

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