

## An Exploration of Marxist Feministic Ideas in Buchi Emecheta's: *The Joy of Motherhood*

By

**Oni, Afolabi Ajibola**

*Department of English, Babcock University, Ilisan, Ogun State.*

### **Abstract**

*Gender inequality is a major twenty-first century concern. It ensures that this is eradicated it is core to review the portrayal of females in a text particularly on written by a female writer in the twentieth century. The percentage of women who experienced single motherhood by any pathway in Nigeria (2008) were 34%. This paper seeks to delve into how the female characters in the text are portrayed as 'the man of the house' thereby being victim of female oppression and exploitation. The fact that she is subjected to a more devastating form of exploitation on the ground that she is female gives insight to the social realities of day to day happenings. It would explore how female characters in the text are exploited, that is, unpaid or underpaid for the services they render because they are females. This would add to the bodies of literature to correct the ills in gender disparity in pay structure to ensure that females are paid as their male counterpart. It is advised that furthers research in the causes of single motherhood as portrayed in African fiction is carried out in order to flatten the curve.*

### **Introduction**

Africa is experiencing steady growth in out-of-wedlock motherhood, marital instability, and widowhood exacerbated by wars and HIV/ AIDS pandemic, which has resulted in many single mother families in the continent. Single motherhood poses a challenge to child's health and survival chances, but the challenges can be minimised if never married, divorced and separated single mother families have access to more economic resources, improve their parental resource and health behavior as such ensuring gender equality.

### **The Development of Feminism**

Ann Dobie (2012) views feminism as '... the social construct that enforces same norm for all' irrespective of gender. It is evident in history that women are treated as inferior creatures. The Greek ecclesiast John Chrysostom (AD 347 - 407) called women 'a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil.' Furthermore, the Holy Bible blames the fall of the man on the woman – Eve in the

creation story. Alexander Pope (1688 - 1744) as cited in Ann Dobie 'Women have no character at all'. Based on the foregoing, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Right of Women* in 1792 where she portrayed women as an oppressed class regardless of social order. She wrote,

*'I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists – I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.... I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.'*

Virginia Woolf buttressed Wollstonecraft's position in 1972 in her somewhat experimental novel *'A Room of One's Own'* and in the Chapter, Shakespeare's Sister Woolf creates an imagination of what would happen if gifted females in the renaissance were educated and given recognition like their male counterparts. She argues that their writing would be better if she was given a room of her own to express herself.

For the feminist critics, the portrayal of women in male text in effort to reveal the misogyny lurking in the text is critical. Nnu Ego lives as a single mother her husband leaves the family to join the army and when he is in the country would not share in the financial burden of the family. This equally applies to a range of females in the novel, yet they are not rewarded as their male counterparts. Furthermore, feminist critics also examine the distinctive characteristics of female experience in contrast with earlier perception of the female using male templates standards and models. This is called gynocriticism. Feminist critics are also concerned with the language choice of the author and how these lexical items portray the females as inferior.

### **The Varieties of Feminisms**

Judith Lorber in his paper 'The Variety of Feminisms and their Contributions to Gender Equality' focuses on the gender reform feminisms which are sub-divided into three broad sub-genres which are Gender reform Feminisms, Gender Resistant Feminisms and Gender Revolution Feminism.

Gender Reform Feminism began in 1960s although it had its roots in 18th and 19th century. In this facet, there was room for brotherhood, but the woman's rights must be put in the right perspective. Some of the sub-genres are liberal feminism (which claims that gender differences are not based in biology, and therefore that women and men are not all that different – their common humanity supersedes

their procreative differentiation.), Development Feminism (Addressing the economic exploitation of women in post-colonial countries on the way to industrialization, development feminism has done extensive gender analyses of the global economy) and Marxist and Socialist Feminism which is the focus of the writing.

The second sub-genre, the Gender Resistant Feminism came to being in the 1970's and the core is in the fact that there is no place for brotherhood in this facet, while the gender revolution feminisms has the revolutionary potential of destabilizing the structure and values of the dominant social order. Please see the table below.

**Feminisms**

<i>Gender Reform Feminisms</i>	<i>Gender Resistant Feminisms</i>	<i>Gender Revolution Feminisms</i>
Liberal Feminism	Radical feminism	Multi-ethnic feminism
Marxist and Socialist Feminisms	Lesbian feminism	Men's feminism
Development Feminism	Psychoanalytic feminism	Social Construction Feminism
	Standpoint feminism	Postmodern feminism and Queer Theory

**Marxism or Socialist Feminism**

Marxism or Socialist Feminism was purposively selected as it is the one which best suit the text based on its ideas. The female children are uneducated and given out in marriage while their male counterparts are educated. This hegemony and male dominance is one of interest to the socialist feminist. Coontz, Stephanie and Peta Henderson (1986) in their work *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origin of Gender and Class* assert that Marx's analysis of the social structure of capitalism was supposed to apply to people of any social characteristics. They argued that if one owns the means of production, one is a member of the capitalist class; if one sells one's labour for a wage, that person is a member of the proletariat. Until the end of the 19th century, married women in capitalist countries were not allowed to own property in their own name; their profits from any businesses they ran, and their wages belonged to their husband.

Although Marx recognized that workers and capitalists had wives who worked in the home and took care of the children, he had no place for housewives in his analysis of capitalism. It was Marxist feminism that put housewives into the structure of capitalism. Housewives are vital to capitalism, indeed to any industrial economy, because their unpaid work in the home maintains bosses and workers and reproduces the next generation of bosses and workers (and their future wives). Furthermore, Barrett Michele (1988) in her work *Women's Oppression today*' adds that if a bourgeois husband falls on hard times, his wife can do genteel work in the

home, such as dressmaking, to earn extra money, or take a temporary or part-time job, usually white collar.

And when a worker's wages fall below the level needed to feed his family, as it often does, his wife can go out to work for wages in factories or shops or other people's homes, or turn the home into a small factory and put everyone, sometimes including the children, to work. The housewife's labour, paid and unpaid, is for her family.

Marxist and socialist feminisms severely criticize the family as a source of women's oppression and exploitation. If a woman works for her family in the home, she has to be supported, and so she is economically dependent on the "man of the house," like her children. If she works outside the home, she is still expected to fulfill her domestic duties, and so she ends up working twice as hard as a man, and usually for a lot less pay.

This source of gender inequality has been somewhat redressed in countries that give all mothers paid leave before and after the birth of a child and that provide affordable childcare. But that solution puts the burden of children totally on the mother and encourages men to opt out of family responsibilities altogether. To counteract that trend, feminists in the government of Norway allocated a certain portion of paid childcare leave to fathers specifically. This would be give the spouse ample equal opportunity to care for the child as against belabouring the mother.

Women in the former communist countries had what liberal feminism in capitalist economies always wanted for women - full-time jobs with state-supported maternity leave and childcare services. But Marxist and socialist feminists claim that the welfare state can be paternalistic, substituting public patriarchy for private patriarchy. They argue that male-dominated government policies put the state's interests before those of women, when the economy needs workers, the state pays for child-care leave; with a down-turn in the economy, the state reduces the benefits. Similarly, when the state needs women to have more children, it cuts back on abortions and contraceptive services. Women's status as a reserve army of labour and as a child producer is thus no different under socialism than under capitalism.

The solution of women's economic dependence on men thus cannot simply be waged work, especially if jobs continue to be gender-segregated and women's work is paid less than men's. Socialist feminism had a different solution to the gendered workforce than liberal feminism's program of affirmative action. It was comparable worth.

In examining the reasons why women and men workers' salaries are so discrepant, proponents of comparable worth found that wage scales are not set by the market for labour, by what a worker is worth to an employer, or by the worker's education or other credentials. Salaries are set by conventional "worth," which is rooted in gender and ethnic and other forms of discrimination.

Comparable worth programs compare jobs in traditional women's occupations, such as secretary, with traditional men's jobs, such as automobile mechanic. They give a point values for qualifications needed, skills used, extent of responsibility and authority over other workers, and dangerousness. Salaries are then equalized for jobs with a similar number of points (which represent the "worth" of the job). Although comparable worth programs do not do away with gendered job segregation, feminist proponents argue that raising the salaries of women doing traditional women's jobs could give the majority of women economic resources that would make them less dependent on marriage or state benefits as a means of survival.

### **Marxist Feministic Ideas in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood***

#### **Synopsis**

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* narrates the story of a traditional woman, Nnu Ego, who knows her identity and its completion in having many children especially the boy one. Suffering from poverty, she knows herself rich, for she has three sons. It seems to her that she would have, according to Ibuza tradition, a comfortable old age due to her sons' help. Having detailed Nnu Ego's painful life in Lagos, a colonized city, the novel ends with her tragic death alone. Yet, far from being devoted to her children exposing her joys of motherhood, Nnu Ego dies, at the end of the story, a lonely death "with 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).

Through depicting the oppression and suffering Nnu Ego experiences in Lagos, Emecheta, indeed, highlights the effects of capital politics and colonial patriarchal regimes in Third World women's marginalization and domination. In this regard, it seems that Emecheta's novel is a practical instance of socialist feminism as she is exploited by all and sundry.

#### **Analysis**

This segment would analysis how women are commodified and seen as object of resource creation. Additionally, all females in the text are either owned by their father or by their husband. It is a shameful thing for a woman not to be purchase with a bride price or given out with a bride price. To add to this, females created a niche in the society to create wealth for themselves in other to solve the fanatical ordeal of their families.

#### **Commodification of Women**

The portray of Nwokocha Agbadi – Nnu-Ego's father gives one the idea of how the female characters in the novel are among the working class and are

deprived of their wages as they are unpaid or underpaid. Nwokocha Agbadi 'was a very wealthy local chief' who the text records that

*'Most of the women he chose as his wives and even slaves were those who could match his arrogance, his biting sarcasm, his painful jokes ...'* pg 5

This gives an insight to the fact that the women had little or no bargaining power as Agbadi is the one doing the choosing. Despite his ability to be rude and insult his wives, they are of little relevance on the social hierarchy as the one who controls the means of production with his wealth is the one who controls all. He uses his wives as farm hands, and he is not obliged to pay them. He equally debases them as he is in constant search for a proud female.

Furthermore, the women are objectified for their femaleness

*'as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood, he was soon bored and would go further afield for some other exciting, tall and proud female.'* Pg 5

This implies that the women lose social relevance according to Agbadi once he becomes used to them. However, the females are not allowed to go even if they are bored of him. The idea of boredom gives one an idea that the females are toys and the fact that familiarity breeds contempt. The Marxist feminist critic would also question why '...an exciting, tall and proud female' would choose to lose her pride to a man with multiple wives. This is due to the fact that the patriarchy nature of the society as the females have no say.

### **Economic Values of Female Character**

Female characters in the text are viewed as being economically irrelevant on their own as their economic relevance is based on their affiliation with male characters. Ona's economic relevance was based on her father's wealth and was owned by her father. After the birth of Nnu Ego that Agabadi wanted Ona to move in with him, Ona recalls,

*'...I am still my father's daughter. Since he had not taken a bride price from you. You think it would be right for me to stay with you permanently? You know our custom does not permit it. I am still my father's daughter.'* Page 24.

This implies that the female characters have no economic value on their own as they are owned either by their parents or their husbands.

The same applies to Nnu Ego after she leaves Amatokwu's house. This was when the younger wife has borne a son and Nnu Ego was found trying to breast

feed the new born. Nwokocha Agbadi (Nnu Ego's father) had to fulfil all the obligation as demanded by the custom.

*'It was with pride that Nwokocha Agbadi returned the twenty bags of cowries to his former son-in-law and he even added a live goat as a token of insult. He had not waited to listen to Amatokwu's protestation that he had not sent her away. However, the goat was too tempting for Amatokwu to refuse...'* page 39

This implies that Nnu Ego still belonged to Amatokwu despite the maltreatment, physical and psychological pains inflicted on her. It was based on the refund of the bride price that liberated Nnu Ego to be owned by another person. Amatokwu could have chosen not to accept the refund but for the token of a goat that was far too tempting. This implies that Amatokwu could have chosen to continuously maltreat Nnu Ego since she was owned by him and she was economically relevant based on her affiliation with her husband.

### **Overcoming Challenges – Female Characters**

In Emecheta's novel, Ibuza women have the monthly meeting in Lagos which marks the constructed solidarity among them. They help one another in order make life easier for them and have a life of their own. This statement is documented in the following extract. Whilst Nnu Ego suffers from poverty, other Ibuza women taught her how to start her own business so that she would not have only one outfit to wear. They let her borrow five shillings from the women's fund and advised her to buy tins of cigarettes and packets of matches (Emecheta, 2011, p. 52).

*'...They borrowed her five shillings from the women's fund and advised her to buy tins of cigarettes singly for a penny each; as there were thirty-six in each tin, she made a profit of one shilling on a tin. The same thing applied to boxes of matches. She would buy a carton of twelve boxes for one shilling and six pence and sell each box for two pence, making a profit of sixpence on each carton. She was so thrilled with this that ...'*

This gives an insight to how Nnu Ego can overcome economic challenges at some point in the novel. This was carried out void of any input from her husband and any male in the society. Women came together as a unit to help one another out of lack and this ensured that she was less dependent on her husband.

However, unlike Nnu Ego her Adakuis able to overcome social economic relevance by leaving her husband's house – Nnaife's house to go into prostitution. After the disagreement between herself and Nnu Ego, she goes to her kinsmen to inform them that Nnu Ego was hostile to her guest, more so, locked her out of the house in the rain. The kinsmen told her off that '...If I were in your shoes, I should go

home and consult my chi to find out why male offsprings have been denied me. But instead you are here quarreling over your visitor.' With this injustice, Adaku overcomes her challenge as she is aware that she would not get a decent burial either as a prostitute or as mother of female children as she recalls 'I'm going to be thrown away in any case.'

Adaku overcomes this challenge by charting a new course for herself in her response to Nnu Ego, she says,

*'Maybe you're right again, my senior. Yet the more I think about it, the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own.'* page 189

Knowing full well that she is an outcast without male children and the fact that her body would be cast away, she resolves to explore other possible options as having a son is not dependent on her but her Chi. She chooses to control her own controllable sphere and overcome the social reality of being an outcast praying for the intervention of the mystic, to be an outcast that is directing her own course.

## **Conclusion**

Noting women's suffering and marginalization due to the sexual oppression and gender inequality in Igbo society, Emecheta criticizes the patriarchal violence. In this regard, she discloses Igbo women as the victims of social patriarchy and men as the oppressors. In her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, she offers her critique on the native patriarchal domination through exposing the violent oppression and exploitation of the disenfranchised female character. She offers us a depiction of a society, Iboza, because Lagos is a colonized city, it is not of primary focus in this debate- in which gender determines who is superior and who is regarded as inferior, who is the norm and what is regarded as the subject. This paper has explored the ideas that would be of relevance to the Marxist feminist in the text as Nnu Ego the mother of seven and the most deprived of the working class, serves her father with her money, gets her capital independent of men, but all she could gather were exhausted by men as she dies with no child to hold her hand.

## References

- Emecheta, Buchi (2008). *The Joys of motherhood*. Pearson Educational Limited, England.
- Barrett, Michèle. (1988). *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. (Rev. ed.) London: Verso.
- Coontz, Stephanie and Peta Henderson. (1986). *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origins of Gender and Class*. London: Verso.
- Hansen, Karen V. and Ilene J. Phillipson. (eds.) (1990). *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist-Feminist Reader*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. (1993). *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Ann Dobie, (2012). *Theory into Practice, An Introduction to Literary Criticism* Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Boston, USA.
- [https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-14-1145#:~:text=Although%20prevalence%20of%20single%20motherhood,births%20\(UNICEF%2C%202013\).](https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-14-1145#:~:text=Although%20prevalence%20of%20single%20motherhood,births%20(UNICEF%2C%202013).)