

# Notions of Alienation and Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's

## *The Joys of Motherhood*

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### Abstract

Motherhood as an institution peculiar to women has always been reflected in diverse forms in Nigerian fiction. Whereas many authors venerate motherhood as the peak of feminine and familial achievements, some, like Buchi Emecheta, vilify it for the attendant ills experienced by women who are enmeshed in it. This paper examines Buchi Emecheta's deconstruction of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* with a focus on the possibility of motherhood leading ultimately to alienation. Using the theory of womanism, an African variant of feminism which exalts the peculiarities of African women and their circumstances, the paper analyzes how the author frames the experience of the protagonist as a mother to interrogate how socio-cultural dynamics impact gender constructs and the larger contexts of gendered spaces. In studying the author's textual construction of motherhood, the study discovers that the author employs specific characters as metaphorical indexicalities to denounce patriarchal and traditional feminists' penchant for extolling and venerating motherhood at the expense of women's search for self-realization with individual objectives that do not involve putting their womanhood in the service of society as subservient mothers with depersonalized psyches. The study concludes that the title is the author's ironical way of positing that being a mother is not all-fulfilling, because, as textualized in the novel, motherhood can become an avenue for women's societal oppression, exploitation, and alienation.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Womanhood, Feminism, Motherhood, Female Cooperativeness

As one of the foremost feminist writers in Africa, Buchi Emecheta had always treaded a peculiar path. While other writers appeared intimidated by the popular directions taken by the generality and would prefer to pander to established sexualized prerogatives, Emecheta was not one to shy away from challenging the seemingly inveterate hegemony that continues to militate against gender equality in the continent. For example, when fellow "feminists" thought feminism would provide the much needed panacea for the prejudiced gender situation in Africa, Emecheta came out calling herself "a feminist with a small f," to underscore the limitations of feminism as not particularly suited to ameliorate the challenges faced by females who confront different contextual variables. Indeed, while other feminists gravitated towards prescriptive feminism, which, ironically, like patriarchy, always attracts invitations to draw boundaries around femininity, Emecheta was always confronting and challenging atrocious androcentric cultural conventions and prejudicially hostile paradigms, because, apparently, the female must be free from the oppressive impositions of patriarchy as well as from the prescriptions of the "all-knowing" proponents of a brand of feminism in Africa that could be tottering towards misandrous feminism. While other feminists (like Filomena Steady, Bessie Head, and Katherine Frank, for example) always sought recourse in Western feminism, unmindful of the fact that whatever solutions proffered would be generally exotic and hence would

not take cognizance of distinct autochthonous values in Africa, Emecheta believed that solutions to the problems encountered by women in Africa could only be proffered in the continent by individuals who are conscious of the peculiarities of the cultural and material dispositions in Africa. By seeming to thrive on dissidence, Emecheta highlights and re-examines the various experiential trajectories that form the available avenues for women to explore their femininity.

When she started writing in England in the early 70s, the western world was still in the throes of feminist battles for gender equality. The feminist movement was in its second wave, with feminists concerned with issues beyond female suffrage, their focus having shifted to putting an end to the prevalent gender socio-cultural and political discrimination. For Emecheta, who had gone to England in 1962, her experience as a foreigner trying to live with racial discrimination was further compounded by an ingrained patriarchal system that white women in the society were trying to combat. As a woman and a foreigner, the discrimination she faced would be almost total, the effects more damning. Indeed, Emecheta's first two novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974), explore the experience of an alien black woman in England. Soon, she shifted her focus back home, where the women were still tackling an entrenched form of patriarchy complicated by the postcolonial struggles for significance, for identity. If her first two novels dramatize the traumatized swaths of black female protagonists alienated in a foreign land, mainly because of the color of their skin, in her subsequent novels she examines the lives of her characters in "their own" societies.

Although Emecheta grew up in Lagos, her family maintained significant socio-cultural ties to their ancestral village, Ibuza in the eastern part of Nigeria. She was apparently cognizant of the contradistinctions that defined living in cosmopolitan Lagos and the provincial interiority that characterized living in Ibuza. In terms of religion, socio-cultural relations and politics, colonial Lagos presented a situation where, though seemingly bustling with opportunities, the decades of colonial experience had greatly altered the gender constructs as existed in pre-colonial times:

Colonialism deeply undermined women's autonomy throughout the country as much as Islam undermined women's mobility in northern Nigeria. Colonial gender ideologies were at odds with what existed in pre-colonial societies. In Eastern Nigeria for example, Igbo and Ibibio societies clearly reveal societies where women's mobility and individual capital accumulation were not totally constrained by patriarchy. In western Nigeria, women were important in the economic, political and social affairs. Women performed important ritual and religious functions which empowered them and made their contribution to maintaining social harmony and cosmological balance important. Because colonial administration was established and maintained by a male dominated bureaucracy, it is no surprise that women were effectively excluded from the new administration. (Nnaemeka and Korieh ix-x)

The power equations of the genders were not only affected, the dialectic of gender completely swung in favor of the male. For Emecheta whose teenage life straddled Lagos and Ibuza (and later London), she was able to contrast the gender trajectories in the two places, and could not have failed to notice the hegemonic mythologization that had replaced the gender attitude in the country. Obviously, the pre-colonial patriarchal model did not possess the rigid and oppressive strictures that formed the nub of western patriarchy and anathematized its vectors.

For sure, the colonial period also brought with it new configurations that would be of benefit to women later in their (postcolonial) struggle for equality. For example, the introduction of western style of education would seem to ameliorate the gender situation, allowing that women too would be given access to formal education. Also, though colonial politics and Christianity explicitly reinforce a palpable separatism between the genders, the former excluding women from its bureaucratic structure, and the latter effecting a submissive circumscription on women, for women who are not fortunate enough to be educated, the cosmopolitan milieu through its vagaries provided various opportunities and sundry reliefs:

The colonial and postcolonial city has undeniably granted women more autonomy, allowing them to take on new social identities. Escaping rural constraints, women have found in [cities like] ... Lagos new sources of income, in the area of services and commerce (including prostitution), enabling them to achieve home ownership ... (and) become a vital part of the internal economic sector, outside of state control. (Gondola, qtd. in Kande 27)

Under the new dispensation, to achieve any form of significance, women would have to be resourceful and be self-reliant, and develop a survival impulse that simultaneously incorporates individualism and also communalism with other women. Failure to do this, according to Emecheta, engenders alienation and ostracism.

The intention of this paper, then, is to examine Buchi Emecheta's epistemic textualization of the vectors of motherhood and her (con)textualization of alienation that necessarily attends deliberate estrangement by a character that refuses to join others to combat gender imperialism.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist Epistemology and the Aesthetics of Motherhood**

When womanism was formulated in 1983 by a feminist (Alice Walker) concerned with the unique experience of women of color, most female writers in Africa welcomed it, because of their established grouse with feminism. Feminism, established by middle class white women in Europe and America after the Second World War, is supposed to cater to the needs of all women, without prejudice to color, race, class, or place. However, because African women are doubly oppressed, racially and sexually, the subaltern experience at two levels demands a different socio-political construct that recognizes the paradigmatic indices that catenate such background and the peculiar contextual phenomena that yielded them. For the advocates of womanism, its vectors are adequately and appropriately formulated to handle the essentials of the black woman's distinct experience.

While the focus of western feminism appears to be reactionary, idealistic, Emecheta opines that African women (womanists and African feminists) hold no similar views and cling more to the practical side of things. This is possibly the reason she describes herself as a "feminist with a small 'f'." By advocating a gender solipsistic togetherness that requires a pragmatic and consistent communication and cooperation amongst African women, she underwrites an anti-theoretical approach to tackling gender issues on the continent, an approach that is conceivably more empirical in its ramifications and more satisfying in its requisites.

The fundamentals of traditional African womanhood have always been anchored on the fulcrum of motherhood which vitiates modern ideas of femininity. Motherhood, because of its peculiarity, is venerated in the African tradition. The maxim that theorizes that “mother is gold” admits as much, as the mother is perceived to be a provider, protector, spiritual guide, comforter, and ultimately a life-giver very much prepared to experience self-denial, sadness, suffering, and even death to protect her child(ren). If the notion of fatherhood does not seem to enjoy a similar level of veneration, it is because of the belief that the impact made by a mother is perceived to be more vital in the physiological make-up of a child. Consequently, it is the most revered position a woman could occupy in African culture. Therefore, it is not uncommon to come across such expressions like:

the centrality of the mother to the African epistemology since Africa herself is the mother continent. (Adebayo 2)

Reproduction is the key to the continuity of kinship and community, and women as childbearers, carry its burden and glory. (Falola 262)

in Africa they preserve a special place of honour for motherhood. (Ngcobo 533)

The ethos of womanism and African feminism recognize the patriarchal penchant for eulogizing motherhood, at the expense of womanhood. In most African societies, a woman's womanhood is defined by her ability to give birth, in short, her motherhood. A woman who is unable to give birth is demonized as skewed and is socio-culturally estranged. But that is half the episteme built around the idea of failed womanhood. A woman who does not have a male child is almost equated with a barren woman. Not surprisingly, such parameters have become so ingrained in most cultures that the victimization of barren women or women with only female children seems to be generally accepted, by both male and female members of the society.

To Emecheta, the veneration ascribed to motherhood in the works of male writers and some female novelists – like Flora Nwapa – is too significant to ignore. It is one of the ways by which patriarchy “appears” to ascribe “real” importance to a particular vector of femininity (woman as mother) while simultaneously denigrating other vectors (like woman as wife, or woman as a citizen). To Emecheta, patriarchal idolization of motherhood is vital for its control of women's productivity, because as long as motherhood is perceived by women as the most important aspect of feminine experience, patriarchal stranglehold on women's productivity would continue.

In *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa's attempt to expose “the pain, misery and humiliation which childless or barren women suffer in traditional African society” (528) appropriately problematizes the anathematic affinities that characterize the experience of any woman who is unable to have a child. At the end of the novel, the eponymous protagonist, Efuru, after several unsuccessful attempts to have children, becomes a priestess. In a postcolonial society where women have to combat a more ingrained form of patriarchy supported by colonial gender solipsism imported from Europe, such an end seems to vindicate the valorization of motherhood as the major requisite for womanhood, while denigrating for the woman a quest for personal fulfillment outside of patriarchal expectations.

**(Post)Colonial Gender Displacement and the Poetics of Gendering in *The Joys of Motherhood***

According to Stratton, “in *The Joys of Motherhood*, (the) contextualization of the female characters’ experience constitutes Emecheta’s strongest statement in response to male idealizations of motherhood” (113). While laying emphasis on two constructs in *The Joys of Motherhood* – marriage and motherhood – Emecheta deconstructs their trajectories in a manner that debases them. In a way, she presents these two constructs as experiential snags for women in their attempts to be socio-cultural avatars, and she dissects the pith of marriage and motherhood as avenues for exploitation, particularly when in her attempt to satisfy the requisites of marital felicity and maternal signification, a woman ostracizes herself from her family and other women who otherwise could have provided succour in time of need. Coupled with the fact that most of the central male figures in Emecheta’s novels are metaphoric models for patriarchal oppression, marital irresponsibility, and paternal unreliability, her female characters are consistently obligated to make up for the shortcomings of their male counterparts. The central character’s epiphany aptly illustrates the novel’s major thematic thrust:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children ... It was not fair ... the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children. (137)

Emecheta’s envisioning of Nnu Ego’s tragedy encapsulates a realization of the true nature of marriage and the precariousness of motherhood. One of the key questions in the novel is “Have you ever heard of a complete woman without a husband?” (158). To escape socio-cultural ignominy, Nnu Ego calmly accepts her second husband – Nnaife – after having discovered, with her first husband, Amatokwu, that it is not marriage that actually defines a woman, but the ability to procreate. But with motherhood comes more responsibilities; children will have to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and educated. Though Nnu Ego is initially surprised at the onus placed on her as a mother when her husband fails to fulfill his paternal duty to his children, she subsequently dedicates her existence to feeding the requisites of motherhood, which requires a lot of sacrifices. However, rather than her industry and sacrifices as a responsible mother serving as a catalyst for her children to give her a favorable recompense for the hard work and self-abnegation, she is abandoned and allowed to die by the roadside, uncelebrated and unsung. It is, apparently, a tragic miscalculation for a woman who so much believes that motherhood would erase all her sorrows and also provide for her the much needed succor for the endless yearnings for respect and unconditional love.

In her quest for all this, Nnu Ego completely forgets about allying with other women. According to the author, Nnu Ego is a woman who “was so busy being a good mother and wife that she didn’t cultivate her women friends. She died by the wayside, hungry and alone” (Emecheta “feminism with a small f” 555). This is a trope, a motif that runs through most of Emecheta’s novels; characters alienate themselves from family and friends because they erroneously believe that doing such would ameliorate their problems.

The major level of alienation experienced by Nnu Ego is mental. She could not comprehend the complexion of cosmopolitan socio-cultural gender praxis. For someone who grew up in a rural

enclave where men and women knew “their places,” she finds it inexplicable that men in the cities have become effeminate, unabashedly getting the kind of employment that their counterparts in the rural communities would find demeaning to their manhood. When Nnu Ego discovers that Nnaife works as a servant in the house of a white man, her embarrassment is almost palpable:

Her husband Nnaife would get up at six in the morning by the clock the master and his wife had given him. He would then pull on his khaki shorts, eat the night's leftover food, and dash to Dr. Meer's part of the compound to start doing their washing. He used two giant tin bathtubs, grey and big enough to take up to three people at the same time. He would sit on a kitchen stool by the first bath and wash all manner of articles, towels, women's nightdresses and what-have-you ... Intermittently, he had to fetch water from the garden pump, carrying a tin bucket in each hand. After the day's washing had been hung up to dry, he would go into the pantry and fill the pressing-iron with coal ... They gave him the grand title “Nnaife, the washerman.” So good was he at his job that, for a small consideration the master's friends often borrowed him. (47)

Eventually she is resigned to her “fate,” accepting that the gender vectors have changed, the postcolonial culture bringing with it demeaning employment and other variables alien to the traditional lifestyle. While ordinarily men like Nnaife would have been objects of anathematization in the rural interiors because of their dislike for physical exertion, in the cities they are respected, because they work with the white man. Ironically, and not surprisingly, such men are not loath to view themselves as very important and, considering the circumstances, request that their women give them utmost respect just like their counterparts in the rural communities would do.

However, if for the men the notion of masculinity seems a little bit aggravated but nevertheless accentuated by some of the exigencies of colonial intrusion, the gender situation as it existed in pre-colonial times is forever altered. The transformation of the vectors of gender also affects the female gender too, as the narrator explains, “To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after ... with Christianity and other changes” (10). For most of the men in the rural communities, farming, hunting and other agro-allied involvements provide enough employment, not only for them but also the women. Albeit they are largely charged with taking care of the children, the women too are involved in trading and farming (especially vegetables and food crops). While there could be instances of “stay-at-home mothers,” these would be few in number. With the coming of the western form of “total patriarchy” which allowed the men to make the transition from employment that requires physical work (farming, hunting, etc) to occupations that need mental ability (as clerks, interpreters, and secretaries in the colonial government) came the inevitability of women having to stay at home minding the children and having nothing else to do. That is, except getting involved in petty trading, the kind that Nnu Ego partakes in.

### **Alienation, Motherhood, and the Dynamics of Afro-Phallocentrism**

For Emecheta, the strength of patriarchy resides in the ability of men to cooperate in utilizing all available appurtenances to sustain the gender status quo. This is directly and indirectly supported by the existence of exclusive male groups, societies and other ensembles which champion the virtues of masculinity and patriarchy. The inclemency of cosmopolitan patriarchy can only be

ameliorated if women seek comfort in their fellow women. For example, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego and Adaku find it difficult to present a definite front to challenge their husband's excesses. Even when they go on strike and together refuse to cook for him, they could not sustain their rebellion because Nnu Ego is afraid their actions could have disastrous consequences. However, according to Emecheta, women in polygynous situations ought to cooperate so as to achieve some significance in their lives:

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her ... Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time ("feminism with a small f" 555).

In Adaku (Nnu Ego's co-wife), one could readily perceive the rebellious inclination. When her husband (Nnaife's brother) dies, she is subsequently willed to Nnaife as culture demands. Obviously, her late husband was a responsible spouse and father, like most of the men in the village. When she marries Nnaife as his second wife and comes to Lagos to live with him, she could not comprehend his indifference to his responsibility as a father. If Nnaife's lackluster attitude to his paternal duties seems worrisome to Adaku, because she was raised in an ambiance where shirking responsibilities (in any form) is anathematized, she is more perplexed by Nnu Ego's readiness to quickly forgive their husband's misdemeanors which only further encourages him towards more fecklessness. To her, Nnu Ego becomes complicit in Nnaife's lack of paternal answerability, not only because she (Nnu Ego) works herself to the bone for her children to make up for her husband's paternal inadequacies, but also because she is not interested in combining forces to compel him to fulfill his obligations. According to Adaku, "yet the more I think about it the more I realize that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another" (169). This is a direct condemnation of Nnu Ego's attitude, as she is a woman who refuses to combine forces with other women to combat the manifestations of patriarchal oppression.

However, if Adaku could not comprehend Nnu Ego's complicity in the societal oppression of women, it is not because she (Adaku) is at sea when it comes to utilizing the opportunities presented by the new dynamics of colonialism, the limitless offerings made available by the loose ambiance of urban privileges. Indeed, she is more quickly attuned to the perquisites of cosmopolitan living. When she discovers that having female children is perceived as a curse, and that Nnaife cannot adequately provide for her and her children, and her co-wife would not cooperate with her to make their husband fulfill his obligations, she decides to free herself from the shackles of societal expectations. Unlike Nnu Ego whose major focus is to serve others, Adaku decides to revolt, radicalized by an unquenchable desire for personal freedom as an individual and a maternal instinct that realizes the unhealthiness of allowing her daughters to grow up in such an environment:

Why should I put up with all this any longer? ... What else is there for me to do? I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future ... Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! (168)

Her decision to be a prostitute might not sit well with others, but she has reached the end of her tether and could no longer live her life suffering and smiling in the process. And one does not have to wonder if she gets the support of the narrator, because, when Nnu Ego visits her later after she had abandoned her marriage, the narrator contrasts Adaku's transformed happy mien, enviable abode, and sartorial presence against Nnu Ego's shabby and oppressed existence and concludes with these damning words, "she (Nnu Ego) crawled further into the urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood" (169).

Eventually Nnu Ego becomes a subservient automaton who, though caught in the middle of values that straddle two worlds, could not strive to get the best of both worlds. While her readiness to make her husband happy at whatever cost would not endear her to women with feminist inclinations, her decision to estrange herself from other women further compounds a situation already made worse by Nnaife's paternal nonchalance. Although colonial culture might have eroded some aspects of socio-cultural gender constructs like the male groups and female coveys which existed in most traditional societies in Africa, similar groupings exist in the urban centers which, though lacking in the praxis that bonded the groups in their original contexts, in the cities they still provide varieties of benefits for members, the least of which is financial assistance and succour from marital woes. But Nnu Ego does not see the need to initiate friendship with other women.

Nnu Ego's refusal to cultivate the sisterhood of other women, rather focusing on the nurturing of her "motherhood," does not present a positive calibration, even when juxtaposed with Adaku's decision to become a demimondaine, a "trade" that thrives on the cooperative synergies of members of the group. In Adaku's own words, she is "going to live with those women in Montgomery Road. Yes, I'm going to join them" (168). "Live with those women," "join them" – these words present a comparatively better scenario than what obtains in Nnaife's household, where the children are underfed and cramped together, where the women do all the work but are never appreciated. Adaku seems less interested in seeking societal approbation for her actions, and more concerned about combining fulfilling individual desire for space and freedom. Rather than allow herself to be treated like Nnu Ego, Adaku decides to set up shop on her own, close to other women who would be less judgmental and where the desire for societal approval would not be a constant refrain.

Nnu Ego's alienation comes to the fore when she appears in court to serve as a witness during her husband's trial for attempted murder. Long atrophied by an instinctive streak that perpetually seeks approbation through marital and gender acquiescence, her obsequious posture in the witness box explicably assists the prosecution in its case against Nnaife, and he is sent to jail for five years. Following the court's insistence on truth, Nnu Ego unwittingly reveals that she, and not her husband, "was doing all the providing ... even though she then had five children to look after" (217). It quickly becomes obvious, with this revelation, that Nnaife's murderous rage against Kehinde's people is not motivated by any urge to protect his daughter's honor, but a selfish patriarchal impulse. According to Nnaife, if his daughter agrees to marry an Ibo man, he will receive a big bride price and "over twelve big kegs of bubbling palm wine" (216). His daughter's insistence on marrying Kehinde is not welcomed, because the Yoruba "just give the father (of the bride) a bowl of drink and buy the bride a few lappas" (215). However, even the vagary of

the colonial multicultural system does not permit a man bent on carrying out an act of family redemption to arm himself with a cutlass and invade another man's compound, and particularly not a man with Nnaife's characterological attitude.

Her husband's attitude further compounds Nnu Ego's growing misery. Having spent most of her youth serving her husband and children, now old, she lives alone in the village, uncared for. Even when her husband is later released from jail after serving only three months, rather than stay with her, he decides to live with his young wife, Okpo. Expectedly, Nnu Ego begins to examine her whole life:

Nnu Ego ... allowed herself to wonder where it was she had gone wrong. She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman. She had had children, nine in all, and luckily seven were alive, much more than many women of that period could boast off ... (She was surprised to discover that) a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? (219)

This tardy epiphany puts Nnu Ego on the road towards psychotic depression. For a woman who is only interested in "building up her joys as a mother" (224), solely focusing on this to the detriment of other aspects of her life, she suddenly comes to the realization that being a mother is not enough. And it is indeed too late for her to commence "oiling the wheels" of friendship she never developed when she was young. Her lamentations become a sort of epitaph:

Nnu Ego told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship; but she had never had the time ... she had shied away from friendship, telling herself she did not need any friends, she had enough in her family. But had she been right? ... many of the Ibiza people in general, blamed her for bringing up her children badly. There was Oshia in America, not caring at all, and though Adim was keen on having a footstool in Nigeria Nnu Ego suspected that he too would prefer to leave his family and go abroad.... (219)

Abandoned by her husband and children, the two sets of people she slaved for all her life, Nnu Ego's estrangement becomes total, affected by the "empty nest syndrome." It becomes apparent that the title is the author's ironical sneering at the reverence given to motherhood at the expense of sisterhood. While it is possible to cultivate both – motherhood and sisterhood – sometimes cultivating motherhood could be a given. For a woman who is barren, cultivating other women's friendship would provide long lasting relationships that thrive on togetherness, cooperative camaraderie, and often times, pecuniary welfarism.

The textual life of Nnu Ego appropriately thematizes most of the feminist concerns of the author, Buchi Emecheta. She not only demystifies the traditionalist construct that being a mother ought to fulfill a woman's personal yearnings, she also deconstructs the mothering process and presents it as a source of oppression, alienation, and exploitation. If the duty of a woman as a mother supersedes other duties, this presupposes that both the husband and the children recognize their complementary responsibilities. When these complementary aspects are not forthcoming, the position of a mother becomes precarious. If in marriage there are "inhibitions and restrictions

(which) stultify women's self-realization" (Adebayo 45), the experience of Nnu Ego proves that, indeed, what obscures a woman's self-identity is her readiness to subordinate herself to satisfy others (be it her husband or children) at whatever cost. Except a woman is prepared to challenge the socio-cultural prescriptions for womanhood/motherhood which are oppressive in temper, the exploitation will continue. While for some women it is either divorce or widowhood that begets the much needed epiphany, tragically for Nnu Ego the realization comes late, as it is a transformation in the postcolonial socio-cultural prescriptions for the family which has reduced the interdependence that bonded all family members by emphasizing their responsibilities to one another. And this change, which continues to perplex her till the end, is a constant feature in feminist fiction in Africa. In the novels of Sefi Atta, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and others, the penchant of female writers to show the "true consciousness ... through crisis situations" (Aduke 47) is prevalent.

Contrastively, Adaku, Nnaife's younger wife does not wait for circumstances to become worse before she abandons her marriage. While in a traditional setting she would have been an object of derision and shame, it is Nnu Ego who ultimately "pays" for her marital and maternal dedication and trust in traditional values of motherhood. When Adaku says Nnu Ego "believes in the tradition" (218), it is not an expression meant to praise her, but a kind of sarcasm meaning "I told you, didn't I?" Whereas Adaku has learnt to combine cultivating female companionship with a quest for individual fulfillment, Nnu Ego does not share similar emancipatory commitment. Whereas Adaku quickly finds it expedient to channel her marital frustrations into a "feminist" drive for combating the patriarchal hegemony, Nnu Ego perpetually strives to live with her marital frustrations and personal grievances. Hence, tragically, she drowns in the overwhelming contradictions rising from her devotion to cultural gender values made anachronistic by colonization. Ultimately, she comes to discern "that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty" (137).

### **Conclusion**

Emecheta's textual strategy is to use the experiences of the central characters to explore the nodal specificity of the gender dialectic and advocate her own personal axiology. The three major characters, Nnu Ego, Adaku, and Nnaife, are metaphoric avatars for specific constructs. Nnu Ego, industrious, unassumingly subservient, symbolizes the traditional woman caught in the vagaries of a hybrid world. Loath to cultivate the friendship of other women and steeped in living by the traditional precepts of gender behavior, she realizes tragically too late, that being a mother is not enough, that marriage and motherhood engender personal restrictions particularly when the woman is married to a man who is not conscious of his paternal obligations. Her death at the end of the novel underscores the inevitable calamity that attends loss of identity and inability to achieve self-realization. Adaku represents a generation of females who refuse to be pegged down by marriage and motherhood. Such females are not bound by any belief in traditional gender prescriptions for women, in the fallacy of marriage and motherhood providing unparalleled happiness and security. Such women are conscious of the available opportunities in a (post)colonial culture and are ready to utilize all avenues to achieve self-realization. Nnaife, their husband, like most male characters strewn across the terrain of feminist fiction in Africa, is constructed as an opportunist who is prepared to live a life of privileged masculinity without taking on the attendant responsibilities.

What we have then in *The Joys of Motherhood* is an author's (con)textual demystification and decomplexification of gender constructs in a manner that definitely problematizes the gender situation and simultaneously indicates a new directionality for the African woman. Would her life have turned out differently if Nnu Ego had cultivated friendship with other women? Would she have had better marital experience if Nnaife had lived up to his responsibilities? Would she have achieved some comfort if she had combined her search for self-realization with a quest for communal regard? These are the questions that together form the core of the author's ironic theoretical (con)textualization of the motherhood praxis in Africa.

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