

**EXPOSITION OF SYSTEMATIC NETWORKING OF SEXISM AND RACISM IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*****MR. AJAY SAHEBRAO DEOKATE**

M.A. (English) NET, MH-SET.

Research Scholar, School of Languages and Literature  
Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded (MS)

&amp;

**DR. JAYANT S. CHEREKAR**

M.A. (English), Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
ACS College Shankarnagar, Tq. Biloli Dist Nanded (MS)**ABSTRACT:**

*Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta has been widely noted for her themes exclusively related to the struggle and suffering of women like motherhood, child-slavery, and emancipation of black women in tradition-bound Nigerian society. Her stories are the stories of success and achievement for her protagonists. She consciously places her protagonists into the mire of unpleasant and traumatic conditions and shows their courageous struggle to overcome it. Her novels bring forth the tension between tradition and modernity. She challenges the established norms and traditions of the Igbo culture through her novels. The Joys of Motherhood mediates upon the issues of women in traditionally cultured African societies. It focuses on the traditional belief regarding the role and responsibility of a woman in Igbo patriarchal society wherein it was 'the necessity for a woman to be fertile and above all to give birth to sons.' The novel is the tragic tale of its protagonist Nnu Ego who initially faces issues with child-bearing but after her second marriage, she gives birth to nine children. It is after the birth of her first son that Nigerian society starts giving respect to her. But giving birth to a male child and getting respect is no end of suffering for Nigerian women. There are trials and tests at every nook and cranny for her. After the birth of nine children, life becomes a challenge for the protagonist constantly pushing her to prove her roles of 'mother', 'wife' and 'woman.' The present research paper explores the pleasures of motherhood experienced by the protagonist. At the same time, it unveils the evils of traditions, customs, and culture consciously and unconsciously leading to the double exploitation of women within the Nigerian society. Women of color are oppressed by the intersection of racial and sexual forces. The novel acknowledges the strong will and fortitude of its protagonist in fulfilling the responsibilities of the family despite adversities and obstacles of all sorts.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Exploitation, Colonial, Patriarchy, Tradition, Gender Discrimination

### Introduction:

“Due to their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexism (sexual discrimination) and racism (racial discrimination).” (Alice Walker qtd. In Kohzadi, et.al, 1307)

Emecheta has been widely known as the black feminist writer relentlessly upholding the cause of black women in Nigeria and worldwide. Although her novels center around Nigerian women within Igbo society, the problems of women are commonplace all around the world. They have been exploited sexually, physically, and emotionally in male-dominated societies. However, black women in particular are doubly exploited during and after the colonial period. Her novels explicitly highlight the kind of treatment given to black women in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Nigeria was colonized by British Empire therefore its consequences like racial discrimination and colonialism were experienced by Nigerians for a long time even after independence from English domination. In the words of Loomba, Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home.” (P.64) The position of women was constantly disregarded and dismissed by male chauvinists during and after colonialism. Nigeria has been predominantly a male-centered country; here second class position is allotted to women. She cannot create a hue and cry about her condition and has to abide by the rules and regulations set for them.

*The Joys of Motherhood* is the finest example of the authentic condition of a woman in the Igbo community. Along with the consequences of colonialism, it unveils the racial and gender discrimination prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society. Adeola praises the art of characterization which evolves out of minute observation of Emecheta that gets reflected in her female characters. Adeola holds that “Emecheta weaves her female characters through an African woman’s eyes.” (p.43) The protagonist Nnu Ego is supposed to be a damned woman with a curse of a slave girl. Due to a curse or biological defect, she is unable to beget from her first husband who takes another wife. Nnu is married for the second time to Nnaife, whom she immensely despises but from him, she gets nine surviving children. When her husband was drafted into the army during wartime, she found it very difficult to feed nine children at her disposal. Despite negligence and complete disregard, Nnu manages to feed and educate all her children. When she finally returns to her hometown, she is greeted and welcomed as a great woman having her two sons successfully sending aboard and marrying two daughters. For the people of her village, she was enjoying the joys of motherhood in a real sense. But to the disappointment and dismay of Nnu, she has to spend her old age lonely, careless, and completely neglected by her children. She was considered a madwoman in her last days. Throughout the novel, she remains the epitome of suffering and hardships. All women referred to in the novel are subject to exploitation and oppression. From Ona, mother of Nnu, to all the wives of her father Agbadi and her husband Nnaife are treated as either sex symbols or birth-giving factories.

The feminists in the African literary context acknowledge that black women have constantly been the victims of racial and sexual politics. They assert that in post-colonial feminist movement it comes under the same context of a struggle against race and color. That way the colored women in Africa encounter double oppression based on race and sex. Women in

African countries do not raise their voice against the sexual and racial injustices done to them for the very reason that they are constantly reminded of second-class citizenship by their male members. Their speechlessness is the code of conduct for them in Nigerian societies. Hammond Evelyn observes, "Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included primarily concerning African-American men's issues." (qtd in Collins, 124) There are different rules in Igbo society related to black women's sexual harassment. If a black man rapes a black woman it must be kept silenced, there shouldn't be any cry about such exploitation on the other hand if the sexual harassment is done by a white man then only it comes into the court of law. The writer shares an incident of the sexual harassment of Anita Hill at the behest of her black employer, Thomas. The western feminists assert that the issue should be brought into the court of law and the culprit must be punished severely on the other hand the black feminist writers suggest that they should keep quiet on such matters for the story of Hill sends an implicit message that "speaking out doesn't pay." "A harassed woman is still a double victim, and a vocal critical black woman is still a traitor to the race." (qtd. in Collins, 126)

The African societies put restrictions on black women in various matters for instance sexuality. They are not allowed to freely discuss and speak about it. It's contradictory in African communities that women can demystify their sexual oppression but cannot disclose it. A black woman is not expected to violate the set norms of the society that places her at a secondary position. Their wishes, rights, and dreams too are secondary in Igbo culture. Women in African cultural practices are relegated to non-entity while the issues that implicate black men remain off the radar of punishment and justice. Black women often required public silence to assert their sexuality, the term "silence made sense is quite applicable in the rigid and strict environment they get in African countries.

The emergence of the movement 'womanism' in the African context is due to the complete negligence of western feminism to the issues of black women. Western feminism was preoccupied with the issues of white women, heterosexual middle-class women's rights, and social equity. Western feminists attempt to assert equal rights for all women in the world. It attempts to show the extent to which women are subordinated and oppressed within the patriarchal society. The gender identity is created by culture, the culture is created by the male members of the society naturally favoring the male-centered ideology, thus they are not the 'eternal norms of the society.' Women's experience and gender identity are considered in terms of patriarchal order.

*The Joys of Motherhood* is a post-colonial feminist novel that is not only the critics of the intersection of oppressive forces like race, gender, and class but it brings to fore gender oppression and gender inequity in male-dominated African societies. The writer points out the silenced and muted oppression of black women in patriarchal Igbo society. Such oppressions are not objected to by the champions of race and gender in the African context. Anything against black men was objectionable in Igbo society. The novel discusses various aspects of women's oppression like polygamy, motherhood, marriage, and women's reproductive rights. Ibuza the patriarchal social set up in Nigeria has its standards for deciding the superior and the other in terms of African culture. The writer castigates the native patriarchy for oppressing the female characters in the novel. Ona's death while giving birth to a child is considered to be the punishment of not obeying the patriarchal norms of

society. This statement makes it quite clear that how deeply-rooted are the beliefs and misbeliefs in traditional Igbo societies in terms of women and their respective roles. Thus, Emecheta, criticizes the patriarchal social setup being responsible for the second class position of women in African societies. Women, in such a social set-up, are considered secondary and at the bottom of patriarchal hierarchies.

*The Joys of Motherhood* contemplates the issues of female sexuality and sexual oppression in African Feminism. The novel draws a unique line of difference between western feminism and black feminism. Western feminism is largely related to women's bodies and sexuality as has been sanctioned by patriarchy and the phallus while black feminism is determined by the unbalanced sexual division of labor that leaves scope for manipulation weaker section that is women and their creativity. Simultaneously, African culture projects women's bodies as a pleasurable entity that can be enjoyed at the consent or without it by the male member of the society. The male within the polygamous structure of Igbo community pays no heed to the sexual pleasure of women. The chief character Agbadi completely disregards his wives. This situation has been poignantly mentioned by Emecheta in this novel. "He sleeps with his mistress while his wives wish to hear a word from him. ( *JOM*, 36 ) Women in Igbo patriarchal setup are no more than 'the use and throw' commodities. They are sexually exploited; disregarded and discarded after a while their purpose is served. No emotional or psychological bonding can be expected in polygamous society for their emotions and feelings change with the changing wives. Emecheta dares to question male domination and challenge the polygamous structure with the Igbo community. She has been instrumental in giving voice to the voiceless for centuries together and creates a room of their own in the backdrop of African patriarchy.

Emecheta uses the term motherhood to poke fun and unveil the oppression underlying the false belief of the joys of motherhood. She invokes the western ideology of "motherhood" to align it to the African concept of "Motherhood." Western feminists found the idea of motherhood as exploitative and source of oppression of women. Kinser in his book *Motherhood and Feminism* asserts, "The joys of motherhood is a kind of 'false consciousness, it is a power relation and women are duped into thinking that it holds any promise of sovereignty or free expression.'"(07) But in the African context, it is as acknowledged by the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* as the only source of getting respect and helping out to give meaning and completion to life. She believes that by begetting many children she is securing her future which is her old age. As a mother she sacrifices all her pleasures for feeding her children, she even begs for a one-time meal for her children. Taking a cue from the character of Nnu Ego, the writer condemns the institution of oppression and exploitation of women.

Igbo society imposes women with the responsibility of feeding their children; the father of the children might take or completely discard this responsibility. It is the women in this community who have to carry out this responsibility; no matter how difficult might be the situation. Nnaif, the husband of Nnu Ego, announces after his recent marriage to a quite younger girl, "I'm not giving a penny because I haven't a penny to give." (*JOM*, 136) The extract clears the position of women in African society, it is not any better than a slave, a slave with responsibilities. Therefore, Nnu feels that "she is 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 enslave her." (*JOM*, 137) Her dream that her children being her security of the old age is also shattered to pieces for she lonely returns to her hometown and dies neglected and uncared. Although she is praised for making her children succeed in life, herself remaining discarded and disregarded all the time. In an interview with Adeola James, the writer poignantly records, "I created a woman who had eight children and died by the wayside." (p.43)

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, the writer uses the title ironically to expose the disguised and illusory meaning of the term 'Joys of Motherhood' for the exploitation of African women. To get pregnant, have many children, and be the proud mother of a male baby are all illusory tactics and strategies to befool women folk throughout the world. The writer underlines the very important issue of making all women aware of the fact that patriarchal norms set for them are not always good for them. In this way, she raises a question of the rationality of make-beliefs that bind women to responsibilities and household chores to contribute to the improvement of African women's lives.

The novel unfolds the double oppression faced by Igbo women in the wake of colonialism. They were oppressed, suppressed, and relegated to secondary citizenship within their own patriarchal social setup for centuries together. There was the provision for the trial and discussion of gender oppression within the racial context in these communities. Thus the novel questions and examines the issues of female oppression and undeterred male domination in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. The novel, thus, is an attempt to give voice to the disenfranchised silent African women and provided a room of their own.'

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