

## Depiction of Women's Suffering in Buchi Emecheta's Novel 'The Joys of Motherhood'

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### **Abstrac**

*Buchi Emecheta holds a prominent place among Nigerian novelists like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ben Okri. She has written many novels like – "In the Ditch", "Second Class Citizen", "The Bride Price", "The Slave Girl" etc. "The Joys of Motherhood is one among them. First published in 1979, the novel reveals the life-journey of the female protagonist Nnu Ego who is childless in the beginning of her married life and is abandoned by her first husband due to it. Her second marriage to Nnaife Owulum invites poverty into her life in the form of nine children. Only sons are welcomed in Nigerian society where patriarchy rules and a woman is considered inferior to a man. Nnu Ego represents hundreds of those Nigerian women who are crushed by poverty, injustice and male ego. Her grand burial after death symbolizes the double standard and pompous attitude of people towards a woman.*

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## **Introduction**

Born in Lagos in 1944 Buchi Emecheta is one of the greatest names in Nigerian fiction who moved with her husband to England in 1960 and enriched the field of fiction with her literary creativity. To her goes the credit of publishing great novels like "In the Ditch", "Second-Class Citizen" etc. In her novels she has revealed the social problems and the miserable condition of women in African society. "The Joy of Motherhood" is one such novel. First published in 1979 the novel reveals the entire life-journey of the female protagonist Nnu Ego, the daughter of Ona and Nowkocha Agbadi, a wealthy local chief from Ibuza. She spends the first- half period of her life in longing for children, a childless woman and the latter in giving birth to child after child and then bearing the hardships caused by poverty and a large family. Poor Nnu Ego is beaten and sent back to her father who remarries her to Nnaife Owulum who is settled in Lagos.

"This one was short, the flesh of his upper arm danced as he moved about jubilantly among his friends, and that protruding belly! Why did he not cover it? She despised him on that first night," (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* P. 45)

With this Second husband her life takes a new turn. Now she has to face physical exploitation and utter poverty. She cooperates with her husband economically by starting a small business of selling cigarettes, matchboxes- box etc. Simultaneously she gives birth to a son. This is a matter of great joy for her, who remained barren and was abandoned by her first husband due to it, but the unfortunate death of this child shatters her completely. Her house remains ignored, unswept and in disorder with dirty curtains. At such a time of trouble Nnu Ego's childhood friend Ato comes to console her and to bring her smiles back. She becomes pregnant again;

"Please God, let this child stay with me and fulfill all these my future hopes and joys". (*The Joys of Motherhood* P. 88)

The changing circumstances throw the family into the thorns of life once again, as the white masters whom he serves, decide to return to England due to the Second World War and it is a serious blow to people like Nnaife, as it invites financial problems in his life. Out of frustration he beats his pregnant wife mercilessly, and then departs in search of a job. The absence of her husband again brings suffering in the life of Nnu Ego. She has to vacate her house, no food to eat, no second dress to wear and her son Oshia is deprived of food by a woman due to his dirty dress. She imagines being rich in the near future and tells her son so, but the deteriorating health of Oshia worries her extremely.

“Oshia, do you want to die and leave me? (The Joys of Motherhood P. 119)

This shows the helplessness of Nnu Ego who calls Oshia her joy, her father, her brother and requests him not to die, Iyawo Itsekiri and some neighbors bring food and help to Nnu Ego and with it comes the good news in the form of Nnaife who is alive and brings money with him. This money is spent on the naming ceremony of the next child Adim, Adimabua meaning “Now I am two” (The Joys of Motherhood P. 128.)

Nigerian custom has it that if the elder brother dies, his widows become the property of the younger brother. Nnaife’s brother has five wives and after his death one of them comes to Lagos to live with them. Adaku or Adankwo, the beautiful widow comes with her child and enjoys the company of Nnaife. This sharing of the husband adds to the sufferings of Nnu ego;

“Nnu ego tossed in agony and anger all night, going through in her imagination what was taking place behind the curtained bed Adaku would not let her. She giggled, she squeaked, she cried and she laughed in turn, until Nnu Ego was quite convinced that it was all for her benefit.” (The Joys of Motherhood P. 144.)

Moreover, incidents like the birth of twin girls, innocent Oshias tearing the paper money to double it and Nnaife’s further disappearance from the house create trouble after trouble in the life of poverty-stricken Nun Ego.

Nnu Ego is pregnant again and gives birth to twin daughters. Already she has five children. Only sons are welcomed in Nigerian society where patriarchy rules and a woman is considered subordinate to a man. She feels that the fulfillment of a woman in herself is the most required thing. Her son Oshia departs for the USA for a job but one of her daughters Kehinde ran away with Ladipo, the butcher’s son, a Yoruba man from a Muslim family and it extremely displeases Nnaife who feels his daughter is a curse and abuses Nnu Ego for it.

“Damn you and your food, Nnu Ego’,” he repeated aloud. ‘I shall curse till I die the day you came to my threshold. I wish I had never met you.’ (The Joys of Motherhood P. 242)

In fact, the Ibuza people never married Muslim Yorubas. The revolt of the daughter infuriates the father and he becomes violent. He is thrown in jail. It further increases the troubles of Nnu Ego who runs behind policemen and lawyers for the sake of her husband who is given five years’ imprisonment. Now she is left alone to ruminate on her predicament. Out of her nine children seven are still alive. She has been old enough to face death alone like a barren woman. She decides to spend the rest of her life in Ibuza but people there also make her life hard by blaming her for

spoiling the children. So finally, she departs to Ogboli and the irony of her life is that after her death all the children come and arrange a grand burial for her.

“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 did not answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial? (The Joys of Motherhood P. 265.)

Obviously, the merciless circumstances of life chase and oppress her rigorously wherever she lives, in Ibuza, in Ogboli and in Lagos in the form of characters like Amatokuwu's son, her first husband and Nnaife Owulum to remind us of the famous statement of Simon De Beauvoir in her famous book. “The Second Sex” “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.” (Simon De Beauvoir, The Second Sex P. 267)

Thus, Buchi Emecheta who occupies a remarkable place among Nigerian authors like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ben Okri has dexterously drawn the character of Nnu Ego in this novel.

She can be compared with Adah in her other novel “In the Ditch” who also endures stark poverty with her five children in London in the hope of getting a better life.

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