Behind the Scene: Female Subjugation in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta

Kouadio Germain N'GUESSAN
University Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire
kouadiogermain@yahoo.fr

Résumé :

The Joys of Motherhood de Buchi Emecheta explores l'expérience de la femme dans la société Igbo (Nigeria). Ici, comme dans beaucoup de sociétés traditionnelles africaines, l'identité féminine est définie selon la perception patriarcale de la femme comme un être construit. On attend de la femme qu'elle joue des rôles à lui assignés plutôt que ceux qu'elle désire. Cette situation la subordonne à l'homme et définit son statut social à travers une extrême altérité. Comme au théâtre, elle évolue derrière le rideau, invisible, jouant un rôle de second plan. Pour exister, la femme doit se conformer à la culture patriarcale dominante de sa communauté. Ainsi, à travers l'expérience de Nnu Ego, l'héroïne, Emecheta dénonce le processus de subjugation de la femme Igbo et par extension celle de la femme africaine confrontée à la domination masculine.
Mots clés : Genre, identité, culture, subjugation, Afrique, homme, femme.

Abstract:

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* inspects the woman's experience in Igbo (Nigeria) community. Here, like in many traditional African societies, female identity is defined by the patriarchal perception of the woman as a constructed subject. She is expected to play roles that are assigned to her rather than the ones she wants. This situation subordinates her to man and defines her social status through an extreme otherness. Like on a stage, she evolves behind the scene, invisible, performing a second class role. To exist, the woman must comply with the patriarchal dominant culture of her community. Thus, through the experience of Nnu Ego, the heroine, Emecheta denounces the process of subjugation of the Igbo woman and at large that of the African woman faced with male domination.
Keywords: Gender, identity, culture, subjugation, Africa, man, woman.

Introduction

In many African communities, gender conflict is a crucial issue to address. The woman is given a second class position whereas man plays the role of the master, the bread winner. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, this dialectics is so recurrent and skillfully articulated in the narrative that it deserves a scrutiny. In fact, while the story deploys, it reveals what appears at first sight as an ordinary and natural situation in African traditional societies: man's domination over the woman. Yet, this representation influences gender relations in contemporary context with the woman claiming more and more room for self-expression as opposed to man's desire to preserve his privileged position inherited from the tradition of his community. However, even if in the novel the heroine often acts according to the standards of her tradition, her attitude conversely uncovers a protest against her confinement by the same tradition. For by exploring Nnu Ego's tragedy, Emecheta denounces the woman's subordination and her being defined as a "second class citizen."[1] In this paper, I seek to analyze this situation of the African woman through tradition. Attention will be paid to gender construction as a desire for self-determination and self-definition. All the same, emphasis will be laid on the necessity for culture to be dynamic rather than static. Finally, from a postcolonial viewpoint, this paper will look into the writer's portrayal of the African woman as a call to recognize the woman, the colonized subject, as a full and independent subject.

1. The irreducible situation of the woman

When reading *The Joys of Motherhood*, the reader discovers the persistent oppression of the woman. She carries this subordination as a burden she cannot get rid of. Indeed, the plot in Emecheta's novel is set in Lagos with the main character, Nnu Ego, a young heroine who came from a small Igbo village, Ibuza, to find herself caught in the fraught of urban life. Tactically, the choice of Lagos is very significant. It helps the writer to structurally and stylistically put forth ideology as the expression of conflicting ideas. This ideological opposition is revealed through the attitudes and life standards of people in Ibuza and Lagos. Indeed, these areas are culturally,

[1] I use this expression in reference to Emecheta's novel *Second Class Citizen* (1983) where she portrays the woman as a dominated and constructed subject.

ideologically, and structurally opposed. While Lagos, with its busy and noisy environment (8) symbolizes modern civilization, Ibuza, as a village exemplifies traditional one. Their opposition, therefore, uncovers the one between past and present, tradition and modernity. Ideologically, both geographies are opposed and raise the question of cultural conflicts. Also, the confrontation between the rural and the urban as it is reflected in the juxtaposition between Lagos and Ibuza, questions the cohabitation between rural and urban, traditional and modern cultures. This is the ambivalence as for conforming to tradition or becoming a modernist that the writer tries to resolve throughout her novel.

In Igbo community to which Emecheta herself belongs, an important characteristic of culture is the woman's social status, precisely, her capacity to bear children. Indeed, in the collective conscience of Igbo people, "a woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman." (62) In this context, she appears as a social pariah and can be repudiated by her husband when she cannot procreate. Thus, in the opening pages of the novel, Amatokwu, Nnu Ego's first husband exemplifies this when he reminds her of this obligation to procreate:

> What do you want me to do? […] I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me any more. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bone. (32)

The heroine is so conscious of this cultural reality that she wants to commit a suicide when her child dies: "But I am not a *woman* any more! I am not a *mother* any more. The child is there, dead on the mat. My chi has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her." (Ibid, my italics)

The words "woman" and "mother" serve to insist on the gender and social status that the woman must fulfill to fully integrate her community. By procreating, Nnu Ego demonstrates her female attributes and since procreation confers motherhood, she gains a social identity through it. Also, because the death of a child is particularly afflicting for the woman, Nnu Ego's desire to commit a suicide displays the cultural significance of child bearing as a quintessence of female identity in her tribe. Indeed, while in Ibuza, Nnu Ego contracted a first marriage. Unfortunately, she did not conceive any children from that marriage. To avoid gossip and mockery from the

other villagers and shame to befall her family, she divorced and left Ibuza for Lagos where luckily she became fruitful through a second marriage with Nnaife, a cook. This procreation puts an end to her long search for children and restores her female identity. Incidentally, the birth of the child fills her with joy. From the perspective of art and creation, this joy assures her entry into the restricted circle of those women who are lucky to enjoy their female identity through motherhood. It also gives fuel to the title of the novel. For, through procreation, the woman lives the plenitude of her femaleness and consequently reveals as a true woman. In this regard, she must assume roles and acts that specifically justify this social status. This is why the death of Nnu Ego's child creates hysteria and a psychological trauma in her.

To Nnu Ego, it is clear, the death of her child means the end of her own existence. In her village, having a child signifies being a woman and a mother. This natural capacity which passes for a cultural obligation and an existentialist reality testifies to the woman's female identity. In Lagos where she probably thinks she will be safe from this cultural reality as inherent to the woman, she inevitably falls into its trap. Even if the load is not so much excruciating in the sense that Lagos houses people from various cultures, the heroine cannot avoid it. Logically, the cultural diversity of Lagos should offer her the possibility to live without minding what other people would think about her. But here too, culture weights down on the woman.

Contrary to life in her village where women fulfill some tasks such as providing for the family welfare regardless of their husbands' contribution, in Lagos, Nnu Ego is confronted with a new reality she cannot understand. For example, she does not understand how people cannot accept that childlessness is not a burden or a social handicap but a natural incompleteness. As such, her contact with new people and cultures makes her feel her culture as a load and she is bound to respect its key precepts. Her difficulties then relate to her desire to be a traditional woman in a modern environment. In other words, Nnu Ego suffers in Lagos because she makes tradition and modernity come into conflict in the same soul without taking time or being able to adjust them. As she tells herself, "it was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child." (81) This is why she feels her child's death more heavily and fails to commit a suicide.

To comfort Nnu Ego and help her find the necessary catharsis to withstand her pain and sorrow, a woman informs her "that out of six pregnancies she only had two children alive, yet she was still living. She reminded Nnu Ego that she was still very young, and said that once babies

started coming they come in great numbers." (62) The woman's advice to the heroine is meant to help her transcend her plight and hope for a better tomorrow. By leaning on her own experience, the woman invites Nnu Ego to consider her present sorrow as a life accident and to lean on it as a step stone to see her future with confidence and brightness.

In the narrative, while childbearing serves to define the woman's condition, man enjoys all his patriarchal privileges. He is safe from the cultural pressure that weighs down on the woman. The only and important thing he is required to do is to make sure his wife procreates. It ensues then that in Igbo cultural cosmogony, the concepts of beauty and love which hold a crucial place in western conception of marriage are relegated to a second position. Only the capacity to give babies matters. Ato makes it clear to Nnu Ego during a conversation when she invites her to accept to sleep with her husband without minding her physical appearance:

> Let him sleep with you. Please, don't let your people down. […] Even if you don't find him a good lover because of his round stomach, you may find him loving. Many men can make love and give babies but cannot love. (75)

This citation defines childbearing as an important cultural element in the collective conscience of Nnu Ego's people. Here, the woman must sacrifice her personal interests in a love affair for those of her community. In other words, after her marriage, the woman recovers her dignity as a female and a woman only through her capacity to give birth to babies to honor her people. Otherwise, she is considered as Emecheta coins, "a failed woman." (56) In this context, the concept of love that underpins marriage is thwarted since only the woman's people or community are dignified but not her. Finally, the collective ideology that goes along with marriage well explains Ato's invitation to Nnu Ego to let her husband sleep with her so as not to let her people down. But in this invitation, the couple of sentences "let him sleep with you. Please don't let your people down" has more than a surface meaning. It calls on Nnu Ego to fulfill her female duty and justify her community's understanding of what it means to be a woman.

From the above, we can argue that like colonial system, Igbo culture contributes to enslave the woman through marriage and typifies her as an inferior being. It silences her and makes of her what African American novelist Zora Neal Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) designates as "de mule uh de world" or what Gayatri Spivak calls "the subaltern" in

her interesting paper “Can the Subaltern Speaks?” (1988) Though both authors are not Africans and that consequently they do not talk about the African woman, their terminologies can well apply to Nnu Ego’s situation. Thus, as a “mule uh de world,” Nnu Ego evolves in a world where she must carry the load of her culture. Furthermore, as a “subaltern” she has no voice and no identity but must submit to what her tradition requires her to do. When we put both terminologies together, the woman in Emecheta’s text appears as a victim of male chauvinism and patriarchal ideology. She is a sort of sub-human, a non-self, a constructed subject, or an “other” as far as she cannot ensure the husband’s lineage. Even when she fulfills this role, she still must comply with the principles of her tradition.

An interesting example of the point above is when Nnu Ego must give her opinion about the dowry paid for Taiwo, her daughter while Nnaife, her husband, is in prison. Indeed, Igbo community is patriarchal-oriented. Men are the dominant figures. They control everything including the woman and her children. In capitalist terms, this social system defines the woman as a productive force, a means of production and man as her main proprietor. As such, all the products of her sexuality, precisely her children, belong to her husband as the capitalist and the possessor of the means of production. This is why Nnu Ego advises that the dowry be given to Adim, her boy child, in the absence of her husband: “The bride price was quickly paid; it belonged to Nnaife, so Nnu Ego made sure that she let it be paid to Nnaife’s representative, Adim.” (220) Though the boy’s age does not entitle him to play such a social role, the fact that he is chosen to receive the price paid for his sister who happens to be older than him is very significant as a cultural feature. It reinforces man’s dominant role among the Igbo and posits the woman as a subject who must remain in man’s shadow. Concurrently, it demonstrates the woman’s restriction to play such social roles as the control over the children and taking decisions concerning them independently of her husband or without the supervision of a male person.

By deciding that Adim takes the dowry, Nnu Ego perpetuates not only this cultural feature, but she also accepts to efface herself in order to highlight her husband’s dignity and beyond him, man’s leading role. Through her decision, she informs about the traditional gender roles differently assigned to the male and the female beings and as they help define social relations in her community. Because Nnu Ego was socialized according to this traditional pattern, she cannot but reproduce it and her desire to conform to this tradition while trying to find her way out in Lagos creates her hysteria and suicidal attempt after the death of her child. Nnu Ego’s

attitude shows that sometimes, the woman partakes in her self-enslavement. Instead of assuming the responsibility of the head of family in the absence of the father as this is the case in western conception of the family, she transfers this role onto Adim as a male character. In so doing, she replicates her community's conception of the male character as the most important member of the family. This consideration for the male figure sheds light onto the patriarchal dimension of her community. Its representation therefore reveals as a protest and a means for the woman to assert herself.

2. Protest and self-assertion

As demonstrated in the first section, *The Joys of Motherhood* chronicles the woman's permanent subordination and her being silenced by the patriarchal culture of her community. In this section, I seek to show that through the representation of this reality, Emecheta tries to denounce this cultural confinement. Additionally, her approach stands out as a means for the woman's self-assertion in a community where she is considered as a second-class citizen.

For instance, Nnu Ego's self-effacement throughout the narrative can be read as a textual motif and an interesting metaphor in comprehending the functioning of her culture and its oppression of the woman. Indeed, through her effacement, Nnu Ego achieves magnificence and recovers all her human nature. When she refuses to take the bride price paid for her daughter, she not only complies with her tradition but she also demonstrates the humility and docility that the Igbo woman must have to deserve all her social identity. The intention beyond her self-effacement is not so much to emphasize her refusal to combat the patriarchal system that silences her and her gender as a group if one reads the text from a feminist perspective. Interestingly, it aims to portray the woman as someone who can achieve the plenitude of her femaleness and personality through resistance to difficulties so as to become a leading person or an icon in her community.

Nnu Ego exemplifies this type of character. All her life is marked by verbal and cultural violence. First, when she does not conceive, she becomes a victim of a verbal violence from Amatokwu, her first husband who indirectly reproaches her with wanting to stop his lineage: "I have no time to waste my precious seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line." Later, when she conceives only male children, she also experiences a verbal violence

from Nnaife, her second husband, who decides to take another wife because he yearns to have a male child to perpetuate his lineage. In the second case, the verbal violence is coupled with a specifically cultural one, namely one which reminds Nnu Ego of the importance of male children in her community and thereby the key role that her tradition grants man to the detriment of the woman.

Nnu Ego's sexual life also highlights the cultural oppression of the woman. At the beginning of the novel, expressing his community's cultural ideology according to which being a woman and a mother means being able to procreate, Amatokwu, reproaches Nnu Ego of being fruitless, refusing to admit that childlessness within a couple can also provide from the husband. Thus, obsessed by this cultural conception of femaleness, both he and his community blame the heroine and somewhat ostracize her. This is why when she starts procreating after her marriage with Nnaife, babies come in great numbers. Unfortunately, this fertility does not provide her with happiness, contradicting her people's conception that child bearing defines the woman's femaleness and assures her social identity and recognition:

> Nnu Ego had 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 children, nine in all, and luckily seven were alive, much more than many women of that period could boast of. Most of her friends and colleagues had buried more children than they had alive; but her god had been merciful to her. Still, how was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children could face a barren old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? She was not even certain that worries over her children would not send her to her grave before her *chi* was ready for her. (219)

In the same way as many African cultural societies, for Nnu Ego's tribe, after giving birth to children and caring for them, parents expect the latter to provide for them in their old age. Unluckily for Nnu Ego, her children abandon her and she dies alone, in a great sorrow. This situation serves to highlight the woman's position as "de mule uh de world" (in Zora Hurston's terms) and her existence as a punch bag for her community. Despite her important role in the

development of her community, she does not receive anything in return and is even made to live as an outcast.

Emecheta's representation of Nnu Ego's experience serves to draw attention to the woman's oppression by Igbo tradition and also to lay criticism on the social organization of Igbo society. The objective is not to condemn this society and its practices but to sensitize, as a writer, on the proscription of the woman. To the writer, it seems, the female being is castrated and her confinement can only end with the end of this oppression and the destabilization of Igbo cultural organization.

The axiomatic paradigms that determine the social roles assigned to man and woman create a sexist environment where the woman appears as a voiceless human being, someone to whom everything is imposed. These paradigms act as a dividing line between man and her. In so doing, they define the household as the place of the woman, a place where she must be isolated, kept immobile, obedient, and where she must procreate and accept poverty as part of her nature and her daily experience.

Nnu Ego's story contributes to describe the woman's subjugation as she becomes a victim of this system. When she suspects Nnaife to desire to take a second wife and consequently wants to protest on account of jealousy, she realizes that she lives in a world where as a woman, she is entrapped in a sort of spiral or a spider's web and that she can achieve the plenitude her identity only through her capacity to conform to the social standards of her community. In this regard, she must procreate to honor herself and her family. All the same, she must not do anything that can hinder the social and cultural organization of her society. Nnu Ego knows that this reality is so stuck in the collective conscience of her community that even her father will not support her opposition to her husband's desire:

> Nnu Ego knew that her father could not help her. He would way to her, 'listen, daughter I have seven wives of my own. I married three of them, four I inherited on the deaths of relatives. Your mother was only a mistress who refused to marry me. So why do you want to stand in your husband's way? Please don't disgrace the name of the family. What greater honour is there for a woman than to be a mother, and now you are a mother – not of daughters who will marry and go, but of good-looking healthy sons, and they are the first sons of your husband and you are his first and senior wife. Why do you wish to behave like a woman brought up in a poor household? (119)

Like the woman who leans on her own experience to help her withstand her sorrow and avoid a suicide after the death of her first child, Nnu Ego is convinced that her father will use the same tactic to convince her to accept polygamy. He will lean on his experience as a polygamist to tell her that having a co-wife is not what matters with regards to the collective ideology of their community but how the co-wives peacefully live their individual experiences and how they achieve to honor their different families through their behavior. The father's reaction that the heroine tries to forecast in her subconscious aims to make her see polygamy not as a place of women's isolation but as a situation that her community endorses as a cultural practice. As a consequence, she will transcend her modernist conceptions of marriage and adhere to her tradition. Her imagination which seems to be a piece of advice to a woman or a girl getting married or being imposed co-wives highlights the categorization of the woman as a second class character and advocates patriarchal ideology and the cultural conservatism that Igbo people cannot get rid of.

In the novel, the woman's oppressive condition is omnipresent and appears as a key motif that substantiates her inferiority. But Emecheta's technique is not to claim the total destruction of the patriarchal system of her society. It is not meant to claim an overturn of her tradition or its destruction. Instead, it aims, in deconstructionist terms, to reconsider the woman's social role. In so doing, she extols what I would call a "non-aggressive" feminism, that is to say a feminism that considers patriarchy as the root cause of women's subordination and consequently claims its destruction. She actually acknowledges the importance of culture in the woman's self-development and social construction. But as it operates in her community, this culture cannot help the woman attain this social status.

Though Igbo cultural system globally oppresses the woman and makes her a subordinated character, Emecheta insists on some of its useful aspects. She suggests a reconfiguration of this system so as to lower the gender barriers that prevent the woman's self-assertion. This suggestion highlights cultural dynamism as a posture that requires culture to be viewed no longer from a purely dogmatic perspective, that is to say a conception of culture as the manifestation of forged and fixed ideologies. Rather, it needs to be appreciated as something that changes and adapts itself to the evolution of humanity and people's needs. In the case under study, the cultural dynamism is this necessity for Igbo culture to take into account the contemporary social reality of

Igbo people, their aspiration and their needs as paradigms for social change and development. In light of this, the heroine laments: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (186)

The heroine's supplication to God clearly shows that addressing the woman's plight is something beyond human reach. And in an oppressive system like that of Igbo people, the woman's predicament becomes more severe, say quite unbearable. In this context, no human but a divine creature can save the woman from her oppression. By calling for God, Nnu Ego appeals to His divinity as a redemptive force or an ultimate means to help the woman overcome her oppression.

From this perspective, the Igbo woman – in Emetcheta's text – and the African woman at large must be considered as a true and independent being. She must be considered as a key stakeholder in the important issues of her society. Even though throughout the narrative the woman evolves behind the curtain, in the shadow of man, she has her importance. Through her effacement, her invisibility, she becomes visible. And this unnoticed visibility due to the patriarchal ideologies of her culture delineates the feminist stand of Emecheta's writing. For example, when she portrays Nnu Ego as a canonized woman whom the other women pray so that they can become fertile like her, she puts the woman at the core of human life and procreation as the woman's contribution to the progress of human species. But Nnu Ego's "refusal" to give answers to their prayers by the end of the novel is very significant. It shows that the woman's burden remains problematic. It is irreducible. Her difficulties still come to knock to man's egoistic desire to dominate the woman as Mariama Bâ puts it in *So Long a Letter*[2]: "I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists."(88) Because the woman partakes in the development of her community and the world through childbearing, she must be respected and integrated in the whole social fabric. It is in this regard, Nnu Ego is described as a canonized woman.

What is at stake here is not simply the heroine's social stature as a fruitful woman. Rather, Emecheta draws attention to her important role in the construction of her community. As such, the chapter titled "A Canonized Woman" should be appreciated relatively to the idea that the woman must be constantly glorified and sanctified. This is why all the other women of the

[2] This English version is by Modupé Bodé-Thomas, 1981.

community pray her spirit so that they benefit from her assistance to procreate. But when they do not receive answer to their prayers, the author wants to show that not all women in a given community deserve this stature. By the same token, Emecheta posits childbearing not only as a cultural or natural characteristic but mainly as a blessing from God.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's text helps understand how Igbo culture victimizes the woman through procreation and makes her evolve behind the scene, in the shadow of man, as a second class citizen. Through the narrative, the woman is portrayed as a social outcast as long as she cannot procreate. In Igbo people's collective conscience, the woman can enjoy her female and human identity only when she can conceive children. As such, procreation is seen as a cultural attribute rather than a natural fact. Finally, it turns out to be the woman's identity marker. By dramatizing Nnu Ego's experience, the writer shows that sometimes, procreation does not permit the woman to attain the plenitude of her femininity and her humanity. For example, Nnu Ego conceived several children but they all left her and she died in a total abandonment while she was expecting them to care for her after suffering and sacrificing her personal interests for their welfare. From a cultural point of view, Emecheta's approach is not so much to lay criticism on the oppressive system of her tradition. Actually, she acknowledges the existence of this oppression and how it prevents the woman's blossoming. She proposes another interpretation of culture as something dynamic and not static. This approach complements the global context of culture as the privilege of all human beings and not that of a few. In this regard, the Igbo woman as well as the Igbo man must be considered as social agents whose contribution to the development of their society must be equally appreciated.

Bibliography

Bâ, Mariama, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas, USA: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981.

Brahimi, Denise et Anne Trevarthen, *Les Femmes dans la littérature africaine*, Paris : Editions Karthala et CEDA, 1998

Emecheta, Buchi, *The Joys of Motherhood*, New York: George Braziller, 1979

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937], Chicago: University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1978

James, Stanlie M. and Busia, Abena P. A., edt., *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, London/New York: 1993

Mikell, Gwindolyn, edt., *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997

Storey, John, edt., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Pearson: Prentice Hill, 1994

Umeh, Marie, edt., *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, Eritrea/New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc., 1996