

**CULTURAL PITFALLS AND SPLINTERS THAT HINDER WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT IN BUTCHI EMECHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Regarded as the fair sex in the traditional society, Igbo women come across traditional barriers that bedevil human dignity and bring them to sooth their voice into an acceptance of their degrading social status. In so being, it will be interesting, in this paper, to browse through the pages of social obstacles that torn apart the Igbo women's elan toward empowerment. Thereby, an in-depth analysis of the Igbo stratification will put on surface the real and various obstacles that give ground to women's disability to climb the scales of freedom and power of all kinds.*

**KEYWORDS:** Male-Female, Customs, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Right

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Standing as a turning stone in literary production, the thorny point on sex and gender is a focused theme in the topical preoccupations grounded on gender-oriented discrimination. Having being present in the Southern east of Nigeria for some centuries, the Igbo community has sharpened some discriminatory measures that hamper women's empowerment. To stand against such a male-oriented society, Buchi Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, voices the ins and outs of a social stratification that rides roughshod over women who, therefore, in high number, experience poverty and inhumanness. In her capacity as a feminist writer, Emecheta, in her fifth novel, shoulders the mission to voice the social burdens that gangrene Igbo women's rights. Customs and religious realities particularly impede their way toward social and economic emancipation. Indeed, believed to be weak in gender, women, in Emecheta's community, are put on the receiving side of social unfairness and are lapsed into their mere expression of a vulnerable group.

To better apprehend how great is the influence of Igbo's culture on the fair sex's booming and freedom, it will be important to have an insightful analysis of the gangrening aspects of Igbo's customs and traditions on female social status in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

### **The Demeaning Yoke of Father Figure**

Different sex, different status. Igbo's culture, like many others alike in Africa such as the Sereer's *Cosan*, the Wolof's *Adaa*, in Senegal, sets a clear cut line between the female *cage* and the male *yard court*. In Rural Igbo, one is born a man or woman. And social norms are organized in a way that one is compelled to abide by gender differences. Masculine and feminine relationships are then moulded into patriarchal, and patrilinear authorities, giving shape to a powerful and crushing male figure.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the figure of the father is sublimated and drawn to the sheer ranks of an actor who does play and assume the role of the lord and master. Owolum, a strong king, stands, in his family and community at large, as the holder of patrilineage services. He incarnates the height of perfection intrusted with responsibility to flag the rightness of the male upper

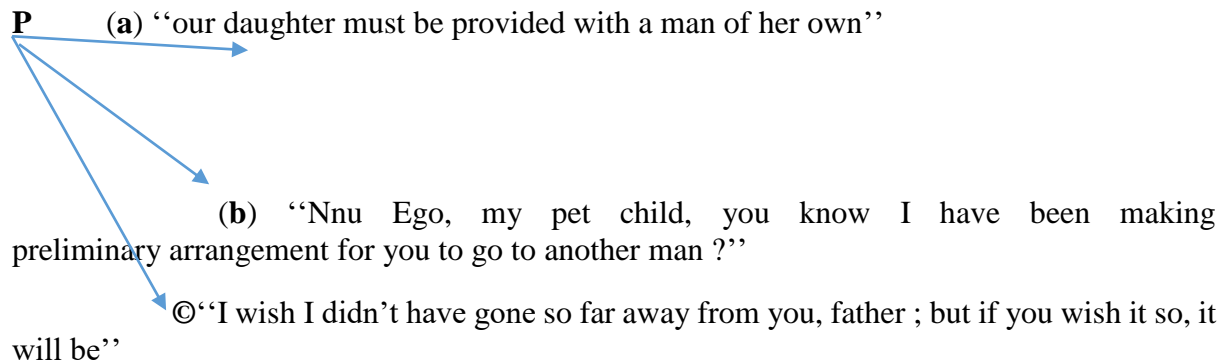
hand on social matters in the community of his own. In his capacity as a father, he handles the modalities of apprehension and comprehension. His likes are honored and his expectations are Bible-like commandements. Her daughter, Ona, tears apart her love toward Agbadi, the hunter, to node in mute assent her father's standpoint in love affairs. She then slips in the pattern of submissiveness and, with a sharp cogency, eases up Agbadi's fantasy on her. She argues :

I made a promise to Agbadi, yes; but, dear Agbadi, I am still my father's daughter. Since he has not taken a bride price from you, do you think it would be right for me to stay with you permanently? You know our custom does not permit. I am still my father's daughter 'Ona intoned sadly ( Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 26)

Being not married to the man she loves, Ona's daughter does not belong neither to her mother, nor to her boyfriend; but to the honorable father who saddles himself with fatherly feedings to outfit her daughter. His right overlaps that of her daughter who does not enjoy any decision-making power. She and her 'motherhood' belong to the go-lucky father. She is not a mother, but a child-bearer forlorn by customs and traditions. Hethcox strengthens as follows: " Nnu Ego remains trapped by her love (...) and cultural obligation to the patriarchy." (Della Hethcox, 2016 : 1844).

Indeed, Nnu Ego's situation tells much about women's fate in rural Igbo land in particular where male seniority by birth and by large iconizes and canonizes male supremacy on female beings. Women are belongings that play flat characters' role in their patrilocal families and society at large. A close analysis of Nnu Ego's use of language furthers the visibility of women's enslavement. Actually, the use of the possessive adjective "my" ("I am still my father's daughter" ) reinforced by the use of the "S" inflection that goes with the word "father" infers definitively a meaning of being possessed. She has no control upon herself and cannot therefore take on herself the right to make her own choice. Her will and social being are chained to the pillar of traditions that ride roughshod over women in Ibuza. The room for manoeuvre that is dedicated to her choice-making is restricted to an acquiescent attitude. She evolves in a sort of society of which stratification sends the woman in her fate of daughter-and-mother-being. Hethcox further the point: "An already patriarchal Igbo society led to the further oppression of women." (Della Hethcox, 2016 : 1842).

Nnu Ego's femininity is not maternalized, but chosified. Equality of rights and in right is denied to her. She is moulded into a bone crunching system in which social levers define social needs and desires and turn women to be the receptacle of pain of exclusion. "I'm still my father's daughter." ( Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 26). Such a possessive assertion enhances the one-sided organization of the sphere of sex. A link of causality appears in her communication: to be a daughter means to be one's father's property. Therefore she has no mind to voice in whatsoever matter. Her father is the symbol of the topmost employer liability who carries the can and controls of his offsprings. His high and mighty attitude is observable through his use of language that articulates a corpus **P** which highlights semantic implications.



(a), (b), (c) are some vectorial visions that point toward a gender based apprehension. Indeed, Agbadi calls in blunt discourse on her daughter “private” matter. And the conjunction of (a) and (b) cannot but implies the driving answer in (c). Nnu Ego is a fraction of the distorted social body. As such, she has no way to back foot her position as a yes-woman. “I wish I did not have gone (...), but if you wish it so, so it will be”. In the name of patriarchy and customs, Nnu Ego makes a temperamental argument that looms large on women’s faith in the Igbo society which, in fact, lays hold on the leonine part of social power. Sefinatu Aliyu highlights:

Nigerian society is Patriachal in nature. (...)it is a society where gender roles are distinct and evident, and gender relation are informed by the dynamics of patriarchy which cast women in a subordinate role to men.” (Safinatou Aliyu Dogo, 2014:1).

Indeed, the Igbo society is a community in which sounds the logic of consecution and consequence movement that governs the cardinal and catalyst functions. Agbadi’s discourse and standpoint define an ambient frame through which emerge three actors: the manipulator-speaker, his competence and power, and the manipulated-receptor who makes do with what is believed to be positive value in her community: passivity and submissiveness. Her traditional-oriented mind affects to the cluster of sentences a value of truth. Indeed, through the (a) and (b) enunciations, a subordinated relation is disclosed and an axiological ideology focused out. Chua Fijino puts on surface the basis of such a given ideology : “Functions to create and maintain unequal power relation between people of different biological sexes and results in the domination and exploitation of women as a group.”( Chua Fijino p 402)

The male domination upon women in the Igbo community is as well illustrated in the wife-beating phenomenon. To ill-treat physically one’s espouse is part and parcel of conjugal matters management. In his capacity as a man, Nnaife stays in the limelight of his community’s customs to expose himself for what he is. After having lost his job, he finds himself at loose ends and spends his time drinking *agogoro*, delighted to stay as long as possible in nocturnal escapade with friends. This situation puts him in daggers drawn with his wives who cannot stomach anymore the whims of a husband who pulls rank on a family he cannot feed anymore. They grumble their dissatisfaction to a man whose exasperated feelings bring him to make reign the law of the strongest. He shows himself up a totalizing virility, brutalizing senior wife and second wife into fear and humiliation:

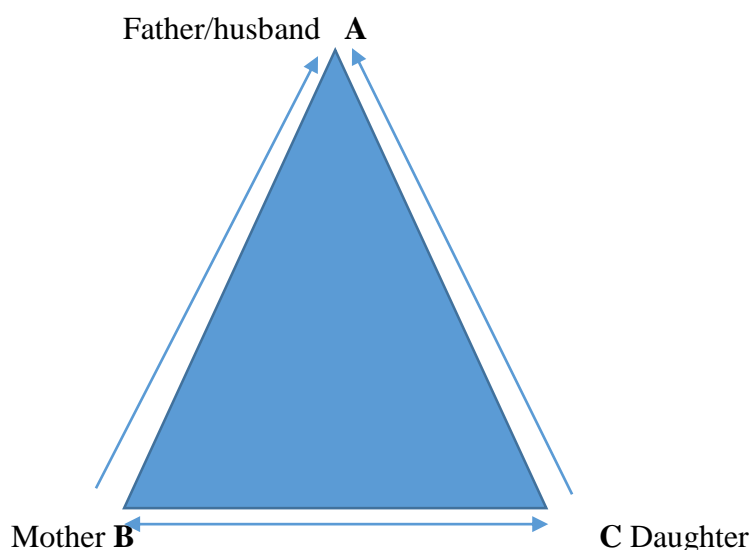
This annoyed Nnaife so much that he flung his napkin at Nnu Ego, but she dodged it and ran out (...). Suddenly Adaku screamed from inside the room “help! Help! He is going to kill me – you mad man!”. She could hear the blows (...).

- Leave the poor woman alone. Do you want to kill the child she is expecting? Open, the door! (...).

- Don't you know Adaku is pregnant? she demanded. 'Don't you know.'" (Buchi Emecheta, 2003: 135).

The modality of utterance that grounds Adaku's exclamatory shrieks (help ! help !) sheds light on the brutality Adaku experiences in her husband's hands. Her use of an axiological connotation through the laudatory qualification (you madman), makes sprout the male mass destruction capacities. The missing of conjugated verb in the fragment denotes an unsaid reality that is supposed to be known and of which full and detail portrayal remain useless. Adaku's description provokes an interrogation that bears the hallmarks of injunctions which move the enunciation into a didactic dialogue (the one who knows addresses the one who ignores) with Nnu Ego as an author of an attributive intervention. She informs her husband and, by the same token, warns him off about a possible killing of a co-wife and her to be born baby. In so doing, Nnu Ego builds up images of horror that are bundled into a lexical field that puts forward isotopies related to the sight and the sense of hearing : “ *flung, dodged, screamed, help ! kill me, madman, blows, shouted, slammed the door, shut poor woman, alone, kill the new child, open the door, grabbed.,*”

The use of this doxa akin to the sphere of violence highlights a gender-oriented suffering in a society where gender based culture plays a far-reaching role. Marriage then defines for women an obligation to remain submissively coy and apathic whatever barbarous may be a husband's attitude. So the lexical field quoted above speaks aloud the described horror, indirect allegation, hidden threat that evok what should not be done and should not be supported in a conjugal homeliness. The monosemic dimension the doxa puts on surface tells much about the world of women who, actually, are meshed into enslavement and torture; with the father and the husband playing a god-like role and the mother and the daughter contenting themselves with a hard-towel importance. And this social interaction can be graphically illustrated as follows :

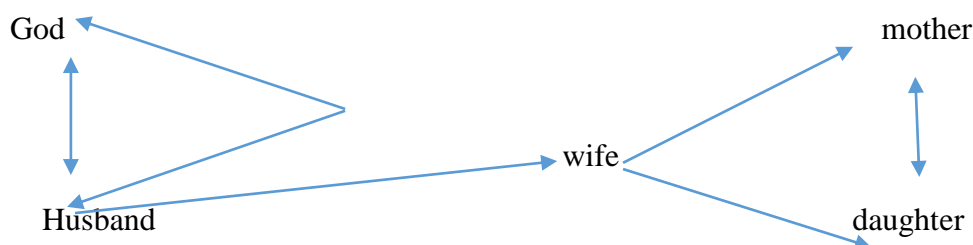


Indeed, from **A** is distilled an attractive force that will incubate **B** and **C**. So **A** operates as a liga-sign which enriches himself with the summed up respect of **B** and **C**. The position of **A** is therefore propelled in a cultural worshipful orbit of majestic forces. The image of **Man** is then

methodically mystified and that of the woman systematically desacralized. So is raised, in the Igbo society in *The Joys of Motherhood*, a social pyramid that welcomes the male on its top and stiffens women at the bottom of the gloomy wharf of destitution and despair. Teresa Derrick puts it as follows: “ the traditional system ‘secures’ women in the role of housewife making them financially reliant on their husband.” (Theresa Derrick, 2002: 2).

Furthermore, let alone the phenomenon of women’s beatings one can identify another chief obstacle that hinders women empowerment in Buchi Emecheta’s community. Indeed, women in Ibuza and Agboli villages evolve in a home-growth custom that shapes an enslaved-minded way of thinking among women. In the name of male seniority, women are defined in slavish living conditions that pinion them to male right of possession. Standing in a tribunal court as a witness to her husband breach of the colonial law, Nnu Ego voices it loud that she is a belonging, a possession of her husband. She vows : “Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me.” (Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 217). Through this statement, one can read the umbilical link that exists between subservience, ownership and femininity. Every property that a woman acquires whatsoever can be the nature belongs, in fact, directly or indirectly to the masculine being. Then, the relationship between an “enslaved” woman and her male “master” consists of a property ownership which is expressed through the power to dispose of her for the sake of personal use or interest. So woman is regarded as an “item” destined to diversion and motherhood. In the eyes of traditional laws she is not justiciable. She is a civil-dead citizen. And as such many a right that can be related to her stands as a “human being” to her corporal nature are null and void. She is mainly valued in her maternal function of motherhood. And Theresa Derrickson to emphasize: “In the Igbo society “Motherhood” is primary source of a woman’s self-esteem and public status.” (Theresa Derrickson, 2002: 2). And Hethcox to further the same point through this statement: “Nnu Ego and Adaku seek fulfillment in motherhood in order to empower their husband and fathers according to their cultural heritage and their entire identities are built around supporting the patriarchy.” (Della Hethcox, 2016: 1844)

Nnu Ego’s use of the possessive article “**my**” provokes an unexpected reaction among the judging panel made up of Whites and Yoruba people. The conative language use bears a cultural content that cannot be understood and accepted by her auditory. She has recourse to a comparison that she expresses in a total certitude and a must-belief statement: “he owns me **like** God in the sky....”. Indeed, the identification and verisimilitude meaning established between God and her husband is an equal foot relation that highlights the grammatical *commative like*. Her motivation finds ground on the synaesthesia of the social link between God and husband. Hence the following graphical illustration.



Nnu Ego employs an argumentative function of the comparison to convince about the legitimacy to be set apart for Nnaife and the legal dimension of her being daily dispossessed

by the man she calls husband. In her society, belongings are clefs and are for men. And the use of spatial deictic underlines the limitless space of the application of the cultural laws and rights. Space and temporality always conjugate women in the passive form of non-existence.

Buchi Emecheta, mainly, through the characters of Ona and Nnu Ego, voices out many a defect of the Igbo society. She pinpoints the vicious cultural values that restrain any meaningful efforts that targets to free women are from the manacle of the male domination. As an activist in African feminism, she, in an adamant position, questions down the exclusive power controlled by men over women. The daily lives of Igbo women are dressed with prejudices and livery social obstacles that delay women's initiatives to become freedom-path finders. In so being, Emecheta stands as a vanguard of social justice and a voicespeaker of the fair sex. *The Joys of Motherhood* appears then as an indictment expressed against African social realities in general that souse African women in both a conjugal violence and dispossession that bears the malignity of a cultural legitimacy.

### **Religious Pitfalls**

In the Igbo society, marriage is a social institution of which importance consists in perpetuating the whiffs of the ancestors' lineage. So it is not viewed as an interpersonal man-woman relationship, but as a common agreement between two families or lineages who accept to be bound by ties of blood. In this regard, a child-birth is meant to perpetuate "the vital force received from ancestor's spirit through an interleaf parenthood." ( José Kaputa Lota, : 2006 : 65.).

Marriage intitution is then a determinist vector that excludes any form of personal liberty for women. It is then organized and sacralized through religion that strongly influences the Igbo's conception of motherhood. Hence the notion of double consciousness that derive from the duality of a "material" or physical being and his "immaterial" or spiritual counterpart. However, the female being who is believed to be the seat of passion, the sanctum of wickedness, must not be subjugated by worldly realities and concerns that distant her from her *chi*, i.e. her personal god.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta revisits the Igbo culture to focus out the psychological determinism that preconditions women's destiny. According to the Igbo cosmogony, life and death form a closed circuit in which can be found the world of the living, the world of the dead and that of the spirits. In this cosmos, a human being, said to be dead, has the opportunity to sojourn among the dead, the spirits or reincarnates himself or herself through a double consciousness: a *chi* who lives with the spirits and a human form who evolves among the living. The former being the personal god of the latter.

In Emecheta's fifth novel, the *chi* impose their will in Agbadi's community. This results in the *inferiorization* of women whose ins and outs depends on the good or bad will of their *chi*. Nnu Ego's fate stands as a specimen that highlights the social nail-biting agony women go through in places like Ibuza, Lagos and Agboli. After two contracted marriages, Ona's daughter fails to experience motherhood. And to her *chi*, is pointed a finger of accusation "I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. 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" (Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 62). Through these words, Nnu Ego vows the helplessness of a woman imprisoned in her "feminism nature" and cannot but be a clear mirror of bones-crunched being who is at the mercy of chance and circumstances. Her losses and holding gains bear the hallmarks of a *chi*-chieftaincy who restrains her paths bending toward motherhood. She then lets come on surface

the depths and darkness of psychic troubles childless Igbo women suffer from. They are inhabited by outside invisible forces that are out of their control. They cannot satisfy their burning desires and devoting pulses of mothers. Their lives, consequently, are dedicated to their omniscient know-about of their *chi*-princess. The narrator furthers the point in the following:

Had she (Nnu Ego) not been told many times at home in Ibuza that her *chi* was a slave woman who had been forced to die with her mistress when the latter was being buried? So the slave woman was making sure that /Nnu Ego's own life was nothing but a catalogue of disaster. Well known she (Nnu Ego) was going to her, to talk it over with her, not in this earth but in the land of the dead, there deep beneath the waters of the sea.(Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 6)

This life stretched to breaking points, is the social burden that the Igbo feminity carries out. They are deterred by traditional belief to think themselves out of the social groundwork in which they are locked. Derrickson points out: “ Nnu Ego becomes and also reflects the experiences of other women (...) who share similar circumstances.” (Theresa Derrickson, 2002: 5)

Nnu Ego, who is in her *chi*'s tender hooks, goes through cross-currents of fear and disillusionment. She is unhinged and gets entangled in a net of weird happenings. And strained beyond endurance and impatient, Ona's daughter is drawn to goodness by goodness. She is appalled beyond reason and views her life in a yawning gap of nothingness. Hethcox defends the same ideas in this way :

In Emecheta's novel, this marriage of oppressive systems produces two distinct types of women forms in the character of Nnu Ego and Adaku. As they struggle under the burden of systematic oppression, as well as the smaller forms of cultural oppression found in native religion. (Della Hethcox, 2016 :1842 )

Space and time are part and parcel of the *chi*'s control. And to be at the force and aft of his living alter ego is in the line of his duty. As such, any movement outside a birthplace without sacrifices for the *chi*'s sake will inescapably echo a boomerang action from one disaster to another.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, women suffer the most from such a belief. As lesser beings, whatever hard the goings may be in specific places, they cannot and dare not err to leave without the permission of their fate's controller. Ona's case is in point. Her daughter whose *chi* doesn't originate from Ibuza cannot have a long-period stay in her homeland. She is egged on by the *Dibia* to leave out her village so as to save her child's life. Ona will then log out, leaving behind her, parents, friends and personal holdings:

Ona you must leave this place'' Agbadi ordered. You have to leave you father's house, otherwise I am taking my daughter from you. She can't worship her *chi* from a foreign place, she must be where her *chi* is until all the sacrifices have been made''. So Ona finally had to leave her people (...) because she wanted the safety of her child.(Buchi Emecheta, 2003 : 26)

This movement is expressed as repentance, a homecoming that will put off all possible disasters that might afflict Ona and her daughter. In the Igbo society, appears then a social organization that atop religious values, which, indeed, petrify and lock up women's mind in the corridor of the arcade of voiceless and submissive beings.

## CONCLUSION

In her capacity as an African feminist writer, Buchi Emecheta succeeds in fingering out cultural flaws that hinder women's emancipation in her community. *The Joys of Motherhood* is an open testimony of the burdening symbols and values that bridle women and stiffen their possibilities of all kinds.

The marital institution handled and whittled to meet men's expectation to the detriment of women's rights. Man, in the Igbo society, is a god-like actor who, at the limelight of social matters, takes advantage of a decision-maker endowed with all powers and consideration. Religion is the opium of women. It is the social bridge that links living to dead, placing women at the receiving side of personal god's whimsical attitude and enslaving demands.

For the foregoing reasons, Emecheta inks out what is and what should be in the society she belongs to. She then calls into questions the gangrening yoke of patriarchy that reduces Igbo women into "leaflets" that move according to the wheel of man's expectations. Therefore, it is hightime people deconstructed the negative side of African culture in general so as to pave the way for social justice and then liberate and celebrate African women for the sake of gender equality and social fairness.

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