

THE QUEST FOR MALE-CHILDREN IN BUCHI EMEHCETA'S *THE JOY OF MOTHERHOOD* AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

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ABSTRACT: *The desire to perpetuate lineages makes some African families crave for male children. Buchi Emecheta's **The Joys of Motherhood** unfolds this urge in a perceptible manner. The study, therefore, explores the male and female attitudes to the quest for male children. It portrays the desperate search and yearning for male children in the novel. Also, the study critically analyses the effects of the hankering on the female child who discovers that her parents desired a male child before her birth and would have preferred a male child. Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* uncovers the effects palpably. Thus, the study shows both the negative and positive upshot of the incontrovertible desire.*

KEYWORDS: Male-Children, Buchi Emecheta's, Motherhood, Chinua Achebe's

INTRODUCTION

In many African societies, the birth of a child brings joy to a family and it is celebrated in pomp and splendour. In the Igbo society, children are seen as divine blessings from God and are highly valued. So a lot of premium is put on procreation and children. The names Nwakaego (a child is greater than wealth) Nwamaka (a child is very beautiful), Nwabuike (a child is strength) depict that children are invaluable assets. The Igbos see children as future leaders, family representatives and successors. They believe that when parents grow old, their children take care of them and perpetuate the family lineage. So families rejoice at the arrival of children in homes. Thus, children bring happiness and satisfaction. Both male and female children are appreciated in Igbo families. However, the birth of many female children in succession without a male child sometimes brings anxiety to some families. Some of these families are anxious because they believe that male children perpetuate the progeny and they do not want their family names to become extinct. This belief is depicted in the name 'Amaechina' or Amaefule or Ahamefule (may the path never close).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In some African Societies, except for matrilineal ones, people search for male children overtly or covertly. Uchem (2002) asserts that daughters and widows are sometimes denied inheritance rights both in their natal families and in their marital homes respectively. This fact, according to the author is the reason for the quest for male children. The writer elucidates; This predisposes people to value male children more than female children in patrilineal societies. Being childless or having no male issue is used as an excuse to dispossess widows of their family property. Denying women inheritance rights especially encourages levirate marriages, that is, widow inheritance, woman-marriage; and the phenomenon of 'male-daughters', especially in south-eastern Nigeria.

Again, some families in African society yearn for male children for the sole reason of preserving or maintaining their progeny. Ezeigbo (1990) observes that in the traditional Igbo society, the culture of 'Nluikwa' existed. 'Nluikwa' is a tradition which allows a patrilineage daughter from a lineage without male children to remain in her home to produce children (males) who would inherit her father's property especially land.

Ezeigbo (1990) states that such a daughter has power (though limited) in the lineage to control and preside over her father's property until her sons grow up to take full control. In addition to this norm, Amadiume (1987) stresses that in Anthropological studies, these women were referred to as 'male daughters'. Unigwe (2001), in her research work entitled 'sex, women and (Hu) woman's right' states that the quest for male children is seen as objective to an Igbo man with the strong cultural belief that he must have a son to perpetuate his name and pedigree. However, the writer believes that one can take solace in another aspect of the culture which portrays the understanding that 'chi na enye nwa' – God gives children. The author reiterates that the search is an unrelenting one since some men feel that they should have an heir.

Whatever the reason may be, sometimes, both men and women are guilty in searching for male children. The men folk are guilty because they want a successor by all means and the women because they have the desire to satisfy their husbands and keep their marriages intact. Emecheta (1998:556) discovers that most often the female relatives of a man take it upon themselves to disparage and denigrate the wife for not producing male children and then physically eject the 'girl child producer' from her matrimonial home. The writer remarks that prayers are often offered for someone longing for a male child in a traditional set up in this manner.

You will be safely delivered of bouncing baby boy, a real man child so that we can make jolly with whisky and beer. The woman being prayed for will not protest because she secretly longs to have a man-child who will not be married away, but stay in her family to look after his mother when she becomes weak and old. Thus, Emecheta (1988) asserts that some families prefer male children for the benefits of family representation, welfare, decision making and lineage perpetuation. It is discovered that the hunt for male children poses some challenges to some monogamous marriages and this accounts for some cases of polygamy in the African set up. So, some people believe that the birth of a son enhances a woman's authority in the family she is married into.

Theoretical Framework

The hankering for male children in the texts is a psychological one. It exploits man's needs and interests. So Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is relevant to the study. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory which explores humanistic psychology- based on fulfilling innate human needs. The needs culminate in self actualization. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Maslow's human needs are ranked in the following order: physiological; security and safety; love and feeling of belonging; competence; prestige and esteem; self fulfillment and curiosity. The theory, therefore, is relevant to the present study because the characters yearning for male children want to satisfy their psychological needs of security and safety. They feel that giving birth to male children will secure their progeny. The characters explored in the novels also want to satisfy their sense of fulfillment because they feel that having male children will give them a sense of

fulfillment and belonging. Equally, they need to satisfy their physiological needs, esteem, prestige and love. Hence, these needs bring about the inordinate desire for male children.

Textual Analysis

An Overview of the novel “*The Joys of Motherhood*”

The novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, by Buchi Emecheta is a story of Nnu Ego, an assiduous Nigerian wife and mother who suffers poverty and disgrace in a polygamous marriage. She is ejected by her first husband for not being able to bear children. Nnu Ego, remarries Nnaife a city man, whom she finds unattractive but has to accept him in order to bear children. Her marriage to Nnaife Owulum is regarded as successful from the traditional perspective since she is able to bear children. But in the real sense, the marriage is beset with domestic conflicts with Adaku, her co-wife, economic difficulties and physical stress, Nnu Ego is faced with the struggle to sustain her family. Nnu Ego and the other wife bear children for Nnaife but are all cramped in one room apartment. Nnaife's husband works as a dry cleaner with Dr. Meers and later as a labourer with the Railways at Ebute-Metho. His lean income is not enough to take care of his large family. When Nnaife eventually travelled to Fernando Po in search of greener pasture, Nnu Ego is faced with sustaining the family. Thus, the struggle for survival saps her of her beauty, energy and youth, she had to stop educating her female children to pave way for the males. Consequently, the girls' educational growth suffers as they are subjected to street hawking. When Nnaife eventually returns home and discovers that Adaku, his other wife, has deserted him he remarries another wife named Okpo. In the process, all the money he saved from his trip are exhausted. Furthermore, Nnaife's callousness over Aremu his daughter's suitor earns him a jail term of five years which was later reduced to three months due to the clever maneuvering of his lawyer and other personalities. As a result of this, his pension benefits and gratuity are reduced drastically as a condition for his bargain.

Tired of years of bondage, intimidation and conflict, Nnu Ego returns to her village alone unappreciated for her sacrifices and gestures of goodwill.

The Quest for Male Children in the Text

The anxiety over a male child is depicted in the novel through Ona, Nnu-Ego's mother and Chief Obi Umunna, Ona's father. Despite the fact that Chief Obi Umunna has several wives, none could bear him a male child. Ona being her father's ornament' opts not to marry so as to fulfill her father's expectation. She is free to have as many men as she likes and if she bears a son, he will take her father's name. Thus, the text remarks:

..... thereby rectifying the omission nature had made(12).

The omission portrayed in the text is the omission of not having a male child. One wonders if nature has made an omission indeed since Chief Obi Umunna has other children expect that he has no son.

For the sole reason of rectifying the omission nature has made by not giving Chief Umunna, a son, his daughter Ona refuses all male suitors to her detriment in order to stave off the whims and caprices of the society by seeking for a male child by all means. The text remarks:

Because her father had no son. She had been dedicated to the gods to produce children in his name not that of any husband. (17-18).

Ona persistently rejects her long time lover, Nwokocha Agbadi just to please her father and the society at large by staying at home to bear sons for her father. So Ona is one of these male daughters' who has been chosen to remain at home to procreate for their fathers.

The episode described depicts the adamant nature of men and women in quest of male children by all means. It also portrays their persistence in ensuring that a male child is born into a family despite all odds.

When Ona's lover Nwokcha Agbadi is injured by an elephant during a hunting expedition, she takes charge of taking care of him on a sick bed, still refusing to marry him. Obi Umunna comes to visit her as she takes care of her lover in his house. He warns her during one of such visits.

Good, but remember you are not married to Agbadi. I don't want his money. You must come home as soon as he is better (18).

Hence, Agbadi accuses Obi Umunna of trying to turn his daughter Ona into a man and Umunna insists that his daughter Ona will marry no one. Eventually, when Ona gets pregnant for Nwokocha Agbadi, he could still not persuade Ona to marry him. Ona is a victim of tradition that insists that she stays at home to bear children for her father and she is totally helpless in the hands of this cruel traditional that denies her the happiness of a decent martial home. All this is for the quest of a male child. Nwokocha Agbadi accuses Ona and his father of using him as a tool to get what they want (a male child). The statement does not perturb Ona rather she strikes a deal with Nwokocha Agbadi:

"All right"..... My father wants a son and you have many sons. But you do not have a girl yet. Since my father will not accept any bride price from you, if I have a son, he will belong to my father, but if a girl, she will be yours. That is the best I can do for you both (25).

The die-hard attitude portrayed by Chief Umunna and her daughter Ona is the same attitude so many people still show in the present age. Thus, the issue of bearing a male child become a cog in the wheel of progress for some families, not just in the traditional African society. The search for a male child has turned some monogamous families into polygamous ones in our present society. The girl-child 'Ona in the text *The Joys of Motherhood*' becomes the prey toyed with in the hands of her-own father who insists that she must bear him a son instead of making his own daughter start her family and bear him grandchildren.

After the birth of Ona's baby who is a girl, the father Chief Umunna insists that Ona remains in his house even if the baby girl belongs to Agbadi:

She is a woman so I don't see why not. However, because she is my daughter, I am not asking her to violate her word. Yes, the baby is yours, but my daughter remains here. I have not accepted any money from you (26).

After the death of Chief Umunna, Ona relents and goes to Agbadi's house just for the safety of her child 'Nnu-ego'. Thus, *The Joys of motherhood* portrays the quest for male children as important to the characters who are desperate for male children.

An Overview of the novel (Anthills of the Savannah)

The novel *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe centres on political oppression, love and friendship, dictatorship, betrayal and death. Three friends from Lord Lugard, College, a prestigious secondary school in Kangan finds themselves in leadership positions in the post-independence West African state of Kangan. These three close friends and former schoolmates, Sam, Chris and Ikem occupy different positions of authority in their country's political terrain. Sam is the military Head of State; Chris, the Commissioner for Information and Ikem, the Editor of the government owned newspaper, the National Gazette. The story opens with the posture of a military dictator while presiding over a cabinet meeting in an autocratic and indifferent manner. The military Head of State is so corrupt, oppressive and highhanded in his administration that his former school mates had to resist the military dictatorship, Ikem in his position as the Editor of the National Gazette fights the crusade against military dictatorship, corruption, suppression and oppression. As a result of this, Ikem is falsely accused of plotting to overthrow the government and he is arrested and killed by security agents. Sam is also accused of refusing to carry out the presidential order to check Ikem's excesses by suspending him. When Chris learns of Ikem's death, he goes into hiding and is declared wanted by the military dictator. In the course of these events, the oppressive regime is overthrown and the president is kidnapped, tortured and killed. The news of the coup makes the country to rejoice. As Chris attempts to rescue a young girl being raped, he is shot dead. The novel also centers on the relationship between Chris and Ikem and the women in their lives: Beatrice and Elewa respectively. A lot of incidents in the novel portray the deep and genuine affection and loyalty of the lovers even after the death of Chris and Ikem.

The Search for Male Children and its Effects on the Girl Child

The quest for a male child is portrayed in the novel through Beatrice Okoh's parents. Beatrice in the novel is Chris's lover. Her mother longed for a male child after four girls in succession. and when I was born, she had so desperately prayed for a baby boy to give to my father (87) The attitude presented here is that of desperation and longing. When Beatrice is born, the parents are not happy and satisfied because of her sex – a female and the fifth in a row. Beatrice comments: I didn't realize until much later that my mother bore me a huge grudge because I was a girl- her fifth in a row (87).

Furthermore, Beatrice Okoh's second name Nwanyibuife (a woman is something) something portrays a mixture of resentment, surrender and abandonment to powers beyond her parents' control. Beatrice, on her own part, resents the name but her father is insistent. Beatrice indirectly attributes the name to her parent's resentment of having a girl instead of a boy and she is particularly dissatisfied with the name for it draws her undue attention to her being a female. It merely struck me at that point that I knew nobody else with the name; it seemed futed! Somehow I disliked it considerably less in its abridged form, Buife. Perhaps it was the nwayi, the female half of it that I particularly resented. My father was insistent on it. Sit like a female! Or female soldier which he called me as he lifted me off the ground with his left hand and gave me three stringing smacks on the bottom with his right the day I fell off the cashew tree.

Therefore, the resentful attitude shown by parents to a child- girl whom they would have wished is a boy affects the child's sense of security. Because of the subtle resentment and rejection, the girl child sees her right trampled upon and wants to seek redress.

From the negative angle, the child feels insecure. She develops a strong sense of individuality and loneliness. For Beatrice, she develops an extraordinary and powerful feeling that her world is separate from those of her parents and other siblings.

.....whom am I that I should inflict my story on the world? All I'm trying to say is that as far as I can remember I have always been on my own and never asked to be noticed by anybody. Never! And I don't recall embarking ever on anything that would require me to call on other (87).

The lines above portray a sense of aloofness in the girl-child Beatrice as she was growing up. This aloofness is the effect of her parents' grudge on her as a girl child. Thus such emotional and psychological feeling is subject to change if the parents change their attitude.

However, as the girl-child grows up she would prove her worth in the society by ensuring that she excels in all she does: education, career, relationship and the like. Hence Beatrice finds her niche in her career.

I was determined from the beginning to put my career first and if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib..... There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations (88).

These lines portray her quest to excel in her career and independence was cultivated from her childhood. Beatrice Okoh determines to work hard and be on her own. Her determination to be on her own creates room for suspicion in her life. She is prone to doubting even reasonable people coming into her life especially the men folk. She asserts:

Skepticism is girl's number six. You can't blame her, she didn't make her world so tough (88). Hence she is careful in everything she does including going into relationships. She allows Chris her lover to do all the wooing:

And if I say that Chris did all the chasing, I am not boasting or anything. That was simply how it was. And I wasn't being coy either. It was a matter of experience having taught me in my little world that I had to be wary (Anthills, 87).

Beatrice Okoh gives Ikem an insight into the world of women. Ikem is able to change his unclear and reactionary view on the role of modern woman in the society. Ikem asserts: "Your charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression- how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear if it is to succeed again and again (Anthills 97).

Thus Ikem is able to write a treatise on womanhood. It contains his carefully distilled thoughts on the nature of oppression, particularly female oppression and the proper place of women in the scheme of things. Beatrice is able to give this insight because of her background which taught her that women should stop being oppressed and be accepted. From this analysis, it is discovered that the resultant effects of the search for male child have both negative and positive impacts on the girl child.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the society should think about the inordinate desire for male children by all. One should think critically, and re-examine and question all elements of gender bias at birth. Human psyche should be re-educated to accept that both male and female children are of equal importance. Furthermore, Unigwe (2001) re-echoes:

What happens to the fact the Y chromosome is available only to the male? What happens to the belief that God decides who gets what? What happens to the fact that females are as important as male that both are expelled from a womb of a woman?

So, families who desperately long for male children should not lose sight of the fact that the modern trend allows the adoption of male children. So frustration and anxiety need not arise.

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