



MOTHERHOOD AS A SOCIETAL EXPECTATION IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

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Abstract: Motherhood is considered as an inevitable part of womanhood; however, this aspect of womanhood is not blessed to every woman. Some women are denied the joys of motherhood. These women feel incomplete and carry a sense of low self-esteem. The pressure to become a woman doesn't come from the woman alone, but the society which is patriarchal and views a woman incomplete if she's unable to conceive. This research paper studies the Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta's book 'The Joys of Motherhood' in view of the societal pressure on women to become mothers, that too sons, even at the expense of poverty and physical and mental health of a woman. The paper highlights the worthlessness that infertile women are associated with and the kind of degrading treatment society gives to such women.

Keywords: Motherhood, infertility, societal pressure

I. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a feeling which is inherent in a woman. Every woman, after her marriage, at one point of time wants to experience the beautiful journey of motherhood. It is a well known saying that god could not be everywhere, so he created mother. The glory of motherhood is mentioned in all the ancient and sacred texts like the Rigveda, the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha, the Bible and the Manusmriti. The position of a mother is of supreme status in all the scriptures. To be able to become a mother is a blessing for every woman, but not every woman is lucky enough to enjoy this blessing. There are some women who are not able to conceive biologically, hence they cannot enjoy the joys of motherhood. Such women are scorned by the society and disrespected too. Infertility is a curse on a woman who cannot conceive; such women not only deal with low self-worthlessness. They live with a stigma associated with them by the society. They live with a belief that they are barren and the very purpose of their creation is not served. Unless and until a woman becomes a mother, she's not a complete woman.

Buchi Emecheta, an African woman writer, in her 'The Joys of Motherhood', narrates the journey of motherhood and hardship of Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the novel. Nnu Ego was unable to conceive in her first marriage to Amatokwu. She is sent to Lagos, a colonized city, where she is married to Nnaife, who is a servant of a whiteman. She finally succeeds in becoming a mother and hence is joyful in the fact that at least she's become a mother. The novel describes her tough and strenuous journey of motherhood, as she

struggled through her poverty and mistreatment from her husband. When her husband was away from home, Nnu Ego looked after the home and children all by herself, with the hope that all her children would take care of her in her old age. She doesn't consider herself poor and is content in the knowledge that she is a mother of many children.

II. THE IGBO CULTURE:

The novel gives an insight into the culture and traditions of Igbo tribe through the life of Nwokocha Agbadi, a local Igbo man who followed his culture sincerely. It is told to us in the second chapter of the novel that he had many women in his time, thus the marriage alliance of Igbo culture was polygamous in nature, which allowed a man to have more than one wife. Agbadi, a representative of Ibo culture, used to raid neighbouring villages and brought home with him many women, some of whom he chose his wives and some of whom he kept as slaves for his wives. The people of Ibuza, the town where they lived, had a custom of marrying widows of their relatives. In this way, the Ibuza men kept their population growing by producing children by their wives and also the widows of their brothers. Thus the main function of a woman is to produce male heir to her husband, after that the woman gets occupied in raising her children and manage the domestic affairs, while men go to farms to produce food which will feed their wives and children. This was a traditional Ibo family where the roles of men and women are fixed.

Nnu Ego was born in this Igbo culture. She is the daughter of Agbadi and his mistress Ona. When she comes of age, her father fixes her marriage to a farmer in Ibuza, Amatokwu. Agbadi hoped that by marrying Amatokwu, Nnu Ego would become his senior wife. In the Ibo community, a senior wife is a woman who is the first wife of her husband. A senior wife enjoys lot of respect among the other wives.

Agbadi accepted the bride price which Amatokwu had sent for getting Nnu Ego. This is a tradition in Ibuza that when a daughter is given to her suitor, the father of the bride gets money, known as bride price from her husband.

III. NNU EGO'S FAILURE TO CONCEIVE IN HER FIRST MARRIAGE:

Like every virtuous woman, Nnu Ego was expected to conceive soon after marriage. A newly wed couple doesn't delay the process of procreation, rather it starts with the very first night of the wedding. The traditional Nigerian culture believes in producing more children and hence polygamy was also allowed in Nigeria. As the months passed, Nnu Ego discovers that she is not getting pregnant. She believes that the fault must be on her side, and that she's failed as a woman.

Soon she notices that her husband's people are looking for a new wife. Her in-laws cannot wait for long as they want an heir from him. Nnu Ego still kept hoping that one day she would conceive, but every month she'd get disappointment. She'd feel more pressure to see that her husband was getting impatient. She kept praying to her *chi* to forgive the sins of her father and bless her with a child. She became so

desperate to have children that she would pray an egg, which is a symbol of fertility, to make her fertile so that she can have healthy children for her husband.

Amatokwu gets married again, and the new wife becomes pregnant in the very first month of her marriage. This news becomes a confirmation for Nnu Ego that she is barren and not her husband. She sinks more and more into depression. She used to sleep alone in the night and cried tears of frustration and hopelessness. She was sent to the farm by her husband and treated like any other worker by him. Amatokwu stopped recognizing her as his wife, as she was infertile and useless for him. This is what he says to her on one occasion:

I have not time to waste my precious male 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 anymore. 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 bones.

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It is clear from her husband's opinions about her that if a woman cannot produce children, she is useless for him. Stemming from this belief, he orders her to go to the farm and do the farming chore like other workers on the farm. She's been reduced from the status of a wife to a farm labourer, and that's the cause of her low self-esteem. Nnu Ego is a representative of all those women who belong to the category of 'incomplete', barren women', whose lives have been reduced to nothing by their own family and husbands. Their husbands disown them and turn their attention to the new wives who give them their children soon after marriage.

When the new wife of Amatokwu bears a son, it is Nnu Ego who takes care of him when the biological mother is busy with her husband. Nnu Ego stops the child's cries by making her suck her dry breasts. She repeated this activity on a daily basis and one day, her breasts started producing milk, clearly showing that she had the qualities of motherhood in her. She's all caring and giving, the qualities a mother possesses. It is only her biological inability to conceive that she is not qualified to become a mother in the eyes of the society.

Amatokwu's new wife enjoyed the affections of her husband because she could fulfil his desire of a male heir. Nnu Ego was, on the, other hand was mistreated by him because she could not conceive by him. This kind of bias is very common in the marital life of women in African culture. A woman's ability of become mother is precious, whereas an infertile woman is left alone.

When Nnu Ego has officially left her husband's place, there were no protestations from Amatokwu; in fact he felt relieved on her departure. He says:

Let her go! She is as barren as a desert.

Despite Nnu Ego's contributions in sharing the duty of her junior wife by taking care of her son, her husband did not validate her for being a kind, amicable wife. Her virtues went unrecognized and masked by her infertility.

IV. NNU EGO'S SUCCESS IN BECOMING A MOTHER IN HER SECOND MARRIAGE:

Nnu Ego is sent to Lagos, a colonized city where the natives work for the colonial masters. She is married to Nnaife, who is a washerman at Dr Meers, a white woman. Though Nnu Ego does not like her new husband, she doesn't escape as she doesn't want to go to her father's home to load her problems to him. The journey from Ibuza to Lagos was a very tough one for her, yet she stays there with a hope that at least this man will make her pregnant. She's ready to put up with his ugliness and crude ways only to be able to conceive by him. She finally succeeds in becoming a mother, but her first child dies within a month. She becomes so distraught that she runs away from her house to attempt suicide by jumping over the railings of the bridge. She cries to the mob who discouraged her to commit suicide:

But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore.

The people surrounding her gave her consolation, yet they agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman. They said, 'She has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren.'

Thanks to her chi, Nnu Ego becomes pregnant again and gives birth to sons later on. She becomes a mother of three sons, two sets of twins. She doesn't control her pregnancies as she believes that a woman's job is to produce more and more children. The joys of motherhood were so much that she overlooked the fact that she was raising her children in extreme financial hardships.

V. THE EXPENSE OF MOTHERHOOD:

Nnu Ego's biggest achievement, according to her, was becoming a mother anyhow. What she once thought as an impossible was finally achieved. She considered herself rich as she bore sons. Yet, motherhood came with lot of hardships. After Nnaife loses his job at Dr. Meers, Nnu Ego struggles financially. Though she opens her shop yet the income was not much. Her son Oshia was constantly hungry. He was lucky if he had a good meal a day. Nnu Ego could not go to the market during her second delivery, so her distress was also piling up. Oshia becomes so sick due to malnutrition that his mother's neighbour had to make meals for him so that he recovers. She becomes haggard after her second delivery as her new born baby was being fed on her.

The traditional customs of the Nigerian people also added to the existing poverty. The inheritance of the wives to the brother of a dead relative was a norm for the men of Nigeria. After the death of senior Owulum, Nnaife inherits his elder brother's wives, which means Nnu Ego had to share house with these women and their children. Though there's an advantage of getting helping hands for work, yet she has to share her husband, as his income was now divided between many people of their family.

Nnu Ego gives birth to twins after her two boys. She had no control over the pregnancies she was having and the number of children she was delivering. She did not take any efforts to avoid pregnancy as her traditional beliefs were rooted in her psyche that a woman should be proud of being able to produce numerous children. During her delivery days, her business got affected. When Nnaife went away to fight war for the Britishers, she was left alone along with her co-wives to look after her children. Every day was a struggle for her and there was always a fear in her heart about the possibility of Nnaife's death. At one point she says to Adaku:

But how can I go without money, Adaku? You know what worries me too? We don't even know where our husband is, and whether he is alive or dead.

VI. THE IRONY OF MOTHERHOOD:

When the children grow up, they were busy fulfilling their ambition. Oshia wanted to study further and secure a job. Nnu hoped that after securing a job, Oshia will help in running house by providing money. This hope got frustrated when Oshia did not bother to help the family. Adim, though a considerate son, offered to help after he finishes his studies. Kehinde, the eldest daughter eloped with her fiancé. The other daughter also got married soon. Nnu Ego did not have the least hope that her children would abandon her in her old age. She was very proud of her sons, as they were very clever and she called herself the mother of clever children. But the boys never paid her back for her sacrifices she made for them. This is the central irony of the book 'The Joys of Motherhood'. What was considered as joy turned out to be torture. Nnu Ego struggled so much to raise her children but at the end of the novel she died unnoticed and alone. Thus, Buchi Emecheta actually brings out the irony in the joys of motherhood, as motherhood is something which should be rewarded after a certain period of time, but for Nnu Ego, motherhood becomes the source of physical and mental exhaustion and suffering. Motherhood should have made Nnu Ego powerful, but it was all just a myth. Motherhood made Nnu Ego powerless and helpless. It is revealed in the last chapter of the novel that she did not answer her children's prayers.

VII. CONCLUSION:

The story of Nnu Ego is a reflection of lives of many women who were either denied the joys of motherhood by nature or became mothers very late in their lives. A woman's worth is measured by her ability to bear children. This is a worldwide belief and no society is an exception to that. The belief is patriarchal and it decides the roles of women in a society. A complete woman, according to the patriarchal society is the one who bears children for her husband. Due to this pressure of motherhood, women tend to overlook their physical and mental health and they internalize this belief that their sole purpose in life is to procure children for their partners. The paper makes readers question whether it is correct to enforce motherhood to women. Motherhood should be a choice that should be left to women. If a woman is mentally and physically prepared, she can have children but even if she doesn't have children, still she is by no means less respectable than a woman with children. Through Nnu Ego's life story, the writer has made

the readers think whether the sacrifice of a mother is rewarded and that too many children do not guarantee happiness and security. Nnu Ego endured so much for her children- she had starved herself for prolonged days as money was a thing she did not get. She did not get profuse love from her husband Nnaife. She could not go freely to her father's home as he was in his old age. Her total self-sacrifice neither yielded in gratitude nor monetary rewards. Thus, there are many questions left to the readers to consider:

1. Should society change its patriarchal ways of thinking and let women have their choice in motherhood?
2. Should society stop mandating women to become mothers even if they are not biologically, physically and emotionally ready?
3. Will society stop considering women as the 'other gender'? Should she be allowed to have her individual, complete identity?

Buchi Emecheta finally has one question to ask:

“God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? When will I be free?”

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