

## MOTHERHOOD DEFINED

**Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Allison & Busby publishers, London, 1979, 230 pages**

*reviewed By Clara Kariuki*

In 1979, in London, the Allison and Busby publishers saw promise in Buchi Emecheta's novel '*The Joys of Motherhood*' and published it. They were right to do so because it followed Emecheta's trend of highlighting her womanist perspective in colonial Nigeria. The novel follows Nnu Ego and her internal battle, striving to find joy in motherhood, whilst trying to keep afloat in a torrent of changing values and systems. It highlights that the role of a 'mother', a 'wife' and a 'woman', is dynamic, yet traditional, and in all its forms, still highly dependent on patriarchal ideals.

Born to chief Nwokocha Agbadi in the Ibuza village, Nnu-Ego leads a sheltered life in her early years, being immersed in traditional teachings and values, mostly geared towards her role as a woman and how it differs from what her deceased mother Ona, believed. Nnu Ego grows up believing in a singular thought- her value as a woman stems from her ability to procreate.

In her first marriage, a loving one at first, Nnu is found to be barren and is sent away from the homestead, back to her father who marries her off to a man in Lagos, one whom she has never laid eyes on. This causes a shift in setting, from a shunned yet beloved woman in Ibuza, to a disoriented yet unloved woman in Lagos. Nnaife, her new husband, completely dismantles her traditional ideals of what a man should be, what a man should represent. He is an obese, unattractive man who spends his days washing clothes for a white couple. He did not fill her with a sense of security or awe, as expected, instead, she was filled with disgust yet resignation, that she could not go back home, having failed her father yet again. It was with these thoughts swirling in her mind, that she let Nnaife violate her- him, using her to satisfy his selfish desires, and her, in turn, using him as a sperm donor. What follows is Nnu's struggle to raise nine children in conditions of poverty, absentee fatherhood, polygamy, colonialism and cosmopolitan ideals of what motherhood is versus the traditional ones.

In Ibuza, Nnu had no other option but to be a mother- giving birth and raising the children, while the men went out to be the breadwinners. Lagos opened up opportunities for her to be a breadwinning mother- giving birth, raising the children and going out to be the breadwinner, simultaneously. When Nnu's first child died shortly after birth, her reaction was to attempt suicide because it had been ingrained in her that a woman barren, was useless, a woman without a child, was useless, and as a woman who had been both, Nnu saw no other option. At first, the crowd gathered to dissuade her from jumping off the cliff scorned her, wondering aloud, what type of woman would be so selfish as to leave her children without a mother and 'shame her womanhood' and 'motherhood', but as it became clear the reason for her suicidal tirade, "they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 63). Allison & Busby.

This haunting scene plagues the reader's mind throughout, as it gives the impression that a woman's suicide is justified if she does not fulfill her man-given duties.

Nnu slowly recovers from the trauma-inducing experience and soon gives birth to another boy, she decides to forgo her breadwinning role to fully care for the child. This mentality is still prevalent in many societies today, where it is believed that a career-oriented woman is less of a mother and that the two cannot go hand in hand. These sentiments have been echoed by Michelle Obama who said that "when a father puts in long hours at work, he's praised for being dedicated and ambitious, but when a mother stays late at the office, she's sometimes accused of being selfish, neglecting her kids.". In Nnu's reality, economic pressures soon set in and she is forced back into work to provide for her children while Nnaife is unexpectedly drafted to go fight colonial proxy wars, leaving Nnu as the senior wife to his brother's widow. It is in the midst of all this strife that "it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned by her role as the senior wife...they knew a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children"<sup>2</sup> because her worth was hinged on them and their success, and, the underlying belief was that "the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving your all to your children"<sup>3</sup> regardless of whether or not you had anything to give.

Nnu was constantly torn between wanting to be her own woman, not defined by any man or child and being a mother. She constantly prayed, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, not anybody's appendage?"<sup>4</sup> which is a powerful statement, layered in meaning and depth. In our patriarchal society, men create laws pertaining to women's bodies, men push expectations of womanhood on women based off their perception of women's bodies and mainly, men hold women's actions to a higher standard, a standard which they do not set for themselves- men still define womanhood and children still define motherhood, when will women define themselves?

Emecheta fills the book with seemingly trifling statements that may act as a dog whistle for mother's, quotes such as "some fathers, especially those with many children from different wives, can reject a bad son, a master can reject his evil servant, a wife can even leave a bad husband, but a mother can never, never reject her son. If he is damned, she is damned with him..."<sup>5</sup>, "man would never stop blaming her for what had happened to him... bringing up her children badly."<sup>6</sup> and "she was becoming fed up with this two-way standard. When children are good, they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother. Every woman knew this..."<sup>7</sup> these resonate with some mothers in different situations today, showing how timeless this novel really is.

In the end, when Nnu was dying a lonely death on the village roadside, she wondered where she had gone wrong, "she had been brought up to believe that children made a woman"<sup>8</sup> but

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<sup>2</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 137). Allison & Busby.

<sup>3</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 224). Allison & Busby.

<sup>4</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 186). Allison & Busby.

<sup>5</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 214). Allison & Busby.

<sup>6</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 219). Allison & Busby.

<sup>7</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 206). Allison & Busby.

<sup>8</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 219). Allison & Busby.

at that moment, she saw no difference between her and “a barren woman”<sup>9</sup> because as much as she had given her all to her children, it was ironic that she found no joy in motherhood.

Emecheta reveals, time after time, how fiction is not a farfetched depiction of reality. In less than 300 pages, she portrays a myriad of perspectives on major societal issues, with a focus on motherhood. Reading this novel leads to the realization that the role of the mother is still yet to be defined by the mother herself, same to the role of a wife and a woman. This paves the way for discussion on feminist discourse on these topics, in relation to, the reality on the ground today. Would the structure of the family change if women were to define ‘woman’?

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<sup>9</sup> Emecheta, B. (1979). *The Joys of motherhood* (p. 219). Allison & Busby.