Motherhood, Urbanisation and the Small 'f' of Emecheta's Feminism in *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract
Accounting for the small 'f' that Buchi Emecheta claims for her brand of feminism, the essay discusses the impact that urbanisation has on marriage and motherhood in ***The Joys of Motherhood****, using the dolorous experience of Nnu Ego who migrates from Ibuza, a village where tradition is still strong and her marriage is considered tragic because it produces no children, to Lagos, a fast-growing city where life is difficult. It argues that the small 'f' connotes rejection of extremism in gender discourse and acceptance of the truth of paradox that permeates all cultures and human relationships. It also implies a celebration of motherhood and other salutary indigenous African-Igbo values, in spite of numerous sins of patriarchy and polygyny that reify women and treat them as slaves. Both the sins and the values are elucidated, while a comparison is drawn between Ibuza (tradition) and Lagos (modernity) that are interdependent for continued coexistence. The essay posits that Emecheta uses the novel to signify indispensability of women's reproductive role in propagation of culture and its impracticability without male contribution, demand for freedom, honour and respect for mothers, and foreground the necessity of gender complementarities for the overall wellbeing of society.*

Key Words: Feminism, motherhood, patriarchy, urbanisation, complementarities

Introduction

Set in Ibuza a village in south eastern Nigeria and Lagos a fast-growing town in southwestern Nigeria shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War when the country was still a British colony and preparations

for her political independence were in high gear, *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta provides a comparative study of the sad experience of a poor petty trader married first to a boorish peasant farmer in the former place and later to a working-class washer man who is conscripted into the British colonial army and taken to Asia to fight in the latter. The first marriage produces no child, while the second is abundantly fruitful but extraordinarily harrowing, owing to the heavy burden of baby nursing and child raising with little or no financial and moral support from her licentious husband, who keeps taking in more wives and aggravating the parlous economic condition of the family.

It is extremely difficult to determine what is more painful between being a barren wife with all the shame that goes with infertility in an African community where children are rated above gold and being a mother with a curse of a husband that is grossly irresponsible and wastes the little money he makes on liquor and acquisition of women to prove his machismo and masculinity. Perhaps the worst of all sorrows is losing a first child that is male in a patriarchal society where only the birth of a baby boy assures a wife of a permanent seat in her husband's house, which is precisely the cause of Nnu Ego's irrational suicide bid on Carter Bridge with which the novel opens, a desperate attempt to put an end to all pain and shame in the lagoon. Nnu Ego is not only driven mad by the loss of her baby boy but also to the precipice of the abyss of life which implies that, for her, womanhood and motherhood are inextricably yoked together. The narrator captures her inexpressible agony of loss that is with anger:

> Her baby … her baby! Nnu Ego's arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and the other choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But, unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was there inside her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way. (8).

Yet, this traumatised woman driven to the edge of despair by the death of her first male child has another child at home, a girl, her second.

She lives in accordance with principles and standards set by men, and her struggle to conform to male rules and regulations is the source of much of her suffering in the novel, a major text used to prove the veracity of the axiom that "if you don't have children the longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you" (212). Thus, children, the joys of motherhood, are also collectively and ironically the death of mothers.

Nnu Ego's life, a pathetic narrative of the victimhood of womanhood, which her *chi* (guardian angel), a decollated slave woman buried with her mistress symbolises, is a fulfilment of a prophecy made by the slave who speaks for all women in bondage: "Thank you for this kindness, Nwokocha the son of Agbadi. I shall come back to your household, but as a legitimate daughter. I shall come back . . . "(23). A threat that encapsulates the principle of karma, it rings through with irony, as does the entire novel, not just its title that most explicators have focused on without paying adequate attention to the novelist's paradoxical vision of growth as decay, civilisation as bastardisation, joy as pain, life as woe, and death as bliss mixed with peace. Emecheta uses *The Joys of Motherhood* to demand justice for all mothers who are victims of patriarchy by concentrating on their reproductive role. She affirms the legitimacy and indispensability of the role in reproduction of culture and therefore puts her feminism in the lower case, irrefutable proof that she is neither a philistine nor a hater of men.

Her litany of woes notwithstanding, Nnu Ego does not reject motherhood, but she condemns the devious manner in which husbands take undue advantage of their wives who sacrifice everything that they have for their children. The strong emotional bond between mothers and their children could be traced to no other source than their direct biological connection from the moment of conception through gestation and childbirth to breastfeeding, all of which a man does not have the privilege of experiencing. It is certainly a painful psychosomatic process that is ironically laden with joy. Radical feminists who set total gender equality as their ultimate goal often perceive marriage as an institution invented by men to oppress and subjugate women and motherhood as an instrument despicably deployed to soften and render them compliant for easy manipulation by the powers that be that are also mostly male. "The falseness of the myth of motherhood," Molara Ogundipe-Leslie avers in *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, "has been demonstrated by Buchi Emecheta in her *Joys of Motherhood*." (58). The present essay makes a contrary argument and

considers Ogundipe Leslie's reading of the novel as patently flawed and skewed to support her revolutionary gender agenda.

Emecheta compares motherhood in precolonial and modern times and laments that mechanisms and devices in traditional African-Igbo society that supported and strengthened the institution and made it a thing of relative joy are absent in modern African society, especially in the cities where the new mode of existence promotes individualism and isolationism, whereas motherhood is best served by collectivism. A child is raised in a village by the entire community. Nnu Ego's experience of producing and raising children in an urban environment, where help from neighbours is either nada or in short supply, is riddled with unrelieved agony, bitterness, disappointments, frustrations and woes. The advent of capitalism, Christianity and industrialisation with new beliefs, ethical standards, strange norms and values changes Igbo cosmological and ontological order. Simply put, things fall apart and "motherhood" becomes an obscene word in the lexicon of firebrand bra-burning feminists.

For instance, Christianity execrates the Edegbe customary practice that allows a daughter to stay in her father's house, if he has no male child to perpetuate his lineage name and inherit his property, and produce sons for him as an abominable sin, not because it is exploitative of such a daughter but essentially because it reeks of adultery and violates the marriage system instituted by Jehovah. Similarly, polygyny which permits a senior wife to have abundant time to pursue her own interests, such as starting a line of business, or giving a helping hand to her daughters who have just put to bed, rather than struggling to always meet her husband's needs, is condemned by the new religion. Just as colonialism emasculated African men and reduced them to houseboys and servants of European masters who paid them slave wages, Christianity robs African women of certain freedoms and rights that they used to enjoy in the precolonial period and subjects them to male rule. However, it saved the lives of twin children that were considered in ignorance in some African communities as evil and destroyed. In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume provides several examples of women in traditional Igbo society who participated actively and exercised enormous powers in the economy and politics of the land before the coming of European imperialists, slave merchants and colonialists turned the tables, brought them down and eroded their authority and influence, and Christianity

drove a nail in their coffin. Western education perpetuates the new ontology supervened by patriarchy.

The love relationship between Ona, a male daughter, and Nwokocha Agbadi, an arrogant and domineering man who treats his wives as sex objects, negates the customary belief that male is strong and female is weak. Both lovers are proud and wilful and play the game of power to their hearts' content. However, it is Ona who tortures Agbadi with her provocative sexuality and proves indomitable by refusing to marry the man who is head over heels in love with her. Yet, as untamable as Ona is, she is under the patriarchal control of her father Obi Umunna who has no son and wants her to produce one for him. She agrees to oblige her father by using Nwokocha Agbadi to realise her dream of motherhood. It is indisputable that they enjoy steamy sex sessions together, but the ultimate aim of their noisy copulation is the fruit of the womb. Buchi Emecheta is assertive in the essay "Feminism with a Small 'f'!" that "Sex is important to us [African women]. But we do not make it the centre of our being, as women do here [in the West]" (554). She reiterates the point in the essay: "Sex is part of life. It is not THE life" (554). Of course, sex leads to procreation but, for the novelist, motherhood is a far more important duty than the mere act of copulation and, by implication, redefines fatherhood as something that is more economic than biological. G's bold affirmation in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* that his father "had only fathered the idea of me and had left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me" is instructive (3).

Judging by Ato's critical observation that "Many men can make love and give babies but cannot love" (75), a man's ability to make his wife orgasm each time they mate is not a true test of love. An industrious woman could derive as much pleasure from her work as from sex. Roland Barthes images writing and reading in *The Pleasure of the Text* as lovemaking. It is incontestable that for most people the pleasure derivable from money surpasses the joy of sex. The graffiti scribbled on the toilet wall in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are crystal clear on the matter: "VAGINA SWEET" and "MONEY SWEET PASS ALL" (106). Counting her money gives Iya Segi in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* sensations that compete favourably with raptures of orgasm (75).

Indeed, after one or two children, many women shift attention away from their husbands and devote their emotional and physical energies to caring for their children and providing for their daily needs,

a gargantuan task that is in itself more demanding than human efforts can ever completely accomplish. As Emecheta pithily puts it, "giving birth and nurturing the young should not be looked down upon. It is not a degrading job. If I had my way, it would be the highest paid job in the world" ("Feminism with a Small 'f'!" 556). Revolutionary feminists who argue that she is critical and condemnatory of motherhood in the novel miss it by a long shot. What she finds repugnant and totally unacceptable is undervaluation of women's wifely duties and reproductive role, especially the latter which carries a high risk and often leads to loss of life during childbirth. She also finds objectionable underestimation of the impact of urbanisation on motherhood among the underclass.

There is nothing a true mother would not do to save the life of her child. As ornery as Ona is, she leaves her father's house for Agbadi's not because of love for her partner but for "the safety of her child" (28). After the delivery of her second child, born premature, she becomes ill and dies. Her weak new-born son, too, follows her only a day after. Mother's rites are minatory and sacrificial. Nevertheless, dying Ona admonishes Agbadi to allow Nnu Ego "to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman" (28). In other words, Agbadi should set their daughter free. He starts by making "expensive sacrifices" (35) to appease Nnu Ego's vengeful *chi* and proceeds to freeing all his slaves, adopting as his children all those in his compound who refuse to go. To be a woman is to marry and produce children that will keep the race running and unbroken in consonance with cyclic continuity of the cosmos. It entails a willingness to bear pain, suffer and be subject to all life-threatening risks that accompany matrimony, pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing.

Without mincing words, we boldly declare that the murder of the slave woman whose blood "spurted, splashing the men standing round" (23) is a graphic and moving representation of the fate of women under patriarchy. Emecheta's point in the novel then is freedom from all forms of oppression that hold humanity, especially women, in thraldom, be it in a rural or an urban environment, a primitive or an industrial economy.

Agbadi chooses Nnaife Owulum as husband for Nnu Ego and by so doing demonstrates a lack of understanding of the full import of his dying lover's admonition that he should set their daughter free. Denial of freedom to choose a husband with whom she will live the rest of her life is the first blow received by Nnu Ego after putting behind her the psychological trauma and physical abuse suffered at the hands of

Amatokwu, her first husband. Her first disappointment in Lagos is that Nnaife the husband chosen for her is abominably ugly. Had she been allowed to choose for herself, she certainly would not have gone for such an unattractive and ungainly man whose White employers Dr. and Mrs. Meers call a "baboon" (41, 42). His response to the racial slur is another sore point: "We work for them and they pay us. His calling me a baboon does not make me one" (42). It is with that kind of ludicrous rationalisation that the Blacks have adapted themselves to White racism, the main source of the inferiority complex that undermines them. Material considerations have displaced moral and spiritual values and brought on dehumanisation, lack of selfconfidence, and self-debasement. Nnaife's job as a washer-man is utterly repulsive to Nnu Ego and causes conflict between them.

Colonialism erodes dignity, honour and respectability of the colonised in exchange for frippery. It is noteworthy in this respect that Africans had earlier sold their own brothers and sisters into slavery for such paltry objects as glass beads, mirrors, rum and umbrellas. The greatest challenge that confronts the Black world in the twenty-first century is how to eliminate the inferiority complex that fosters the dependence syndrome that perpetuates underdevelopment. Modern cities of Africa, shadows of true development, are marred and mocked by all manner of inadequacies. The dregs of society are quartered in slums that breed alcoholism, crime, drug addiction, prostitution, violence and other kinds of debilitating social vice. Raising children in such a seedy and unfriendly environment is a pain in the neck for mothers. Nnaife lives in "a queer-looking house" (40) and indignities to which his eight-member nuclear family crammed into one regular all-purpose bedroom are daily exposed are simply unimaginable. Although Agbadi thinks that only lazy men abandon farm work and run to Lagos to work, he has no knowledge of how terribly low and degrading Nnaife's occupation and living conditions are in Lagos, especially since reports of the city that filter out to villagers in Ibuza are those of its bright lights, long bridges, superstores and high rise buildings, which blot out its seamy sides and rotten underbelly. Emecheta gives us in the novel a glimpse of what goes on among the urban underclass in what Maxim Gorky euphemistically calls "the lower depths" roiling in extreme poverty and untold suffering.

Her husband's physical ugliness notwithstanding, Nnu Ego places greater value on his ability to make her a mother and so prays: "O my dead mother, please make this dream [of becoming pregnant] come

true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance" (44-45).

Whereas Nnaife is proud of his work, his wife denigrates him for it and so stares at him while he eats, something that Ibuza tradition forbids. She simply does not regard him as a man for doing the demeaning work and washing "women's underwear" (49). To her husband's complaint that a wife is not allowed to stare at her husband while he eats, Nnu Ego replies, "That applies in Ibuza, not here." (48). Urbanisation has upset traditional customs and practices and replaced them with new ones that complicate gender politics. Nnaife is quick to assert his headship of his family and his manhood, on which his wife casts unstinted aspersion: "Well, whether in Ibuza or not, I am still your husband and still a man." (48). Nnu Ego's sarcastic reply "A man, huh? Some man" (48) forces Nnaife to demand respect from his uppity wife who is a daughter of a chief and remind her at the same time that he owns her: "What did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?" (48). Bride price of course reduces a wife to a chattel, even though it enhances marriage stability. If there is no means to pay it back, a wife who is unhappy with her husband simply becomes more or less his slave and suffers till the point of death. Hence, in many parts of Yoruba land the modern practice is for a bride's parents to return a dowry on the grounds that their daughter is not for sale.

Having impregnated his wife, Nnaife is inordinately emboldened not only to advertise his manliness but also to limit womanhood to motherhood. His haughty question "What else does a woman want?" (49) exposes his ignorance of the dynamic of gender relation and women's needs. It casts in bold relief the perspicacity of Ato's acute observation that most men only know how to engage in sexual intercourse with women but not how to take care of products of the union, raise children, and build a truly happy home. Going by embarrassing disclosures made by Lola Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, it is doubtful that many men understand even the art of lovemaking, which transcends mere penile penetration and demands knowledge of the function of the clitoris as the true organ of sexual stimulation and pleasure. Well, to answer the hubristic husband's question, a woman wants material comfort, happiness, love, peace, security and stability in her marriage. She wants her husband to be always faithful to her and play his paternal role diligently. In addition, she would like to be treated by her husband

and all men with dignity, honour and respect as a human being and not as a man's appendage.

Nnaife lives in mortal fear of losing the job that robs him of his manhood and requests Nnu Ego to keep quiet about her pregnancy, for if they get to know in church that he has impregnated her out of wedlock they will remove their names from the church register and Mrs. Meers will not like that and might even sack him. The new religion makes life difficult for African converts like Nnaife who have not completely abandoned the old way of their ancestors. After paying the mandatory bride price on his wife, he is still troubled by the fact that they have not had a church wedding. We are told that "Ubani the cook had to marry his wife in the Catholic church to save his job" (50). Economic determinism compels urban dwellers to make compromises that they would never accede to back in their villages where the force of tradition still holds sway.

Cordelia stresses the point that African men have lost the value of staying close to their wives and helping them at crucial moments of need, such as child delivery time, and instead are busy chasing money in modern cities:

> Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, shining white man's money. (51)

The introduction of capitalism disrupts indigenous economic, political and social systems in Africa and reduces Africans to the level of slaves, with the only significant difference that the twentieth-century Black slaves are lowly paid for the work that they do, while their great ancestors who experienced the horrors of the Middle Passage received nothing. Cordelia agrees with Nnu Ego that their husbands have been transformed into commodities by their White masters and egregious alienation arising from the metamorphosis explains their abject poverty in the city. She adds perceptively that the mistreatment that they receive from their husbands is a sort of transferred aggression. In other words, African women are the ultimate recipients of the violence that characterises the capitalist mode of production. She tells Nnu Ego:

> They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought. But the pay is just enough for us to rent an old room like this. (51)

An association of Ibuza wives that meets every month cushions Nnu Ego against loneliness and poverty bred by urbanisation and makes a loan available with which she starts petty trading, but as rites of motherhood increasingly occupy much of her time she gradually loses touch with the society and its safety net. Similarly, her relationship with her husband grows lax and loses its connubial essence, and centrifugal urban and market forces take over and wreck the wedlock. The narrator describes the alienating gulf between husband and wife and the widening wound it engenders:

> Like other husbands and wives in Lagos, Nnu Ego and Nnaife started growing slightly apart, not that they were that close at the start. Now each was in a different world. There was no time for petting or talking to each other about love. That type of family awareness which the illiterate farmer was able to show his wives, his household, his compound, had been lost in Lagos, for the job of the white man, for the joy of buying expensive lappas, and for the feel of shiny trinkets. Few men in Lagos would have time to sit and admire their wives' tattoos, let alone tell them tales of animals nestling in the forests, like the village husband who might lure a favourite wife into the farm to make love to her with only the sky as their shelter, or bathe in the same streams with her, scrubbing one another's backs. In Lagos a wife would not have time. She had to work. She provided the food from her husband's meager housekeeping money, but finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comforts, in some cases for the children's school fees, was on her shoulders. (52-53)

It is therefore not a thing of surprise that most marriages contracted in the old way in the countryside succeeded, while a large percentage of marriage contracts freely entered into by men and women in modern society end up in divorce and dissolution.

Companionship, one of the major functions of marriage, an element that cements romantic love, is not easily attainable and sustainable in industrial culture in which imperatives of work often put great distances between husbands and wives. Nnu Ego is told that dock workers are particularly guilty of going away for several weeks, leaving their young wives to have babies on their own, with no help except that given by neighbours. Extremely pathetic is the story of a young wife called Ngboyele whose husband was working at a dock in Port Harcourt.: "She had her first baby in the night, and she never stopped bleeding until she died. She and her child had been buried ten days before her husband Okeibuno returned." (51) In a village where people live a communal life such a death could have been prevented. But in an atomised society in which members live as though they were isolated islands a person could die without neighbours knowing until the bad odour issuing from the corpse would compel them to act, remove the health hazard and save their own lives. Nnu Ego tells the Owerri woman who delivers her of her baby boy, "At home in Ibuza, when a wife is in labour the husband becomes restless. But these our men here [Lagos] sleep through it all" (53). The comparison of Ibuza and Lagos husbands in relation to their attitude to child delivery is a bit strained. Only a husband who is probably drunk or under the influence of hard drug would be indifferent to labour pangs of his wife and sleeps off. Hospital authorities in contemporary times allow husbands to be present and watch their wives in travail put to bed in maternity wards because the agonising experience strengthens bonds of love and induces such men to have a profound respect for motherhood.

Urbanisation and mechanisation are coeval in a way and produce paradoxical effects on love and marriage. From computer dating to application of sex toys, the entire process of expressing and making love in post-industrial society has been transformed in such a bewildering manner that the emotion itself loses its meaning. The more musicians in mechanised society produce rhapsodies of love, the greater the yawning gulf that divides society into two warring classes and the acuter the psychological wrench caused by the latter. While Ibuza people focus more on procreation, the product of lovemaking, Westerners, in Emecheta's view, is irredeemably obsessed with the sexual act itself. Ironically, White men treat their women with greater love and affection and in the process, according to Nnu Ego, "spoil" them (75). Ato subscribes to the myth of hyper sexuality of Black men and says, "White men are not very strong" (75). There is no Black man, however sexually

virile, who could surpass the efficacy and plenitude of a dildo. In spite of advancement in life sciences and reproductive technology, sexual love is mostly sterile in modern society, because industrial culture does not encourage a large family size. Most people prefer purchasing and consuming material goods that are turned out by factories in large numbers and living the good life made possible by improved technology to spending money on education of children.

If mechanisation vitiates the love emotion, it nevertheless heightens its make-believe or superficial realisation and maximises its pleasure. It also eases labour pain. Surgical intervention has saved lives of many pregnant women and their babies. In Cordelia's judgement, real love in the city has long since evaporated, leaving only its ersatz copy. She tells Nnu Ego, "They stopped being men long ago. Now they are machines. But I love Ubani. I was married into his family when I was only five. His mother brought me up, and I had grown to like and respect him long before he sent for me" (53). Emecheta does not join radical feminists in wholesale condemnation of child marriage as practised in traditional Igbo society. She discriminates between one form of child marriage and another. Unlike the type of child marriage practised in northern Nigeria where an immature girl that should still be in primary school is married off to her husband and her life is either threatened by or lost to vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), the form that is experienced by Cordelia reinforces love between a husband and a wife who are mature before they are allowed to come together and actually begin to perform conjugal duties and deepens relations between two families, two connected factors that enable it to endure all manner of strains and stresses and succeed beyond measure.

The reality of her poverty in the city causes Nnu Ego to forgo her dignity and pride and gladly accept a gift of old babies' clothes brought by Madam Meers from England, something that a keen sense of humiliation and shame would not allow her to do in Ibuza. She hides under the cloak of urban anonymity to do what her indigenous culture frowns upon. "She forgot that in her culture only slaves accepted worn outfits for a newlyborn baby: every child had the right to his own first hand-woven *npe* cloth to be wrapped in" (54). It does follow that the new softness that Cordelia complains about is not limited to only African men but also affects their women. In present-day Nigeria, degeneration of culture and dehumanisation of people have reached such a horrendous level that virtually everything that has been used and cast

off in the First World is imported into the country, from computers, smartphones, vehicles to clothes and shoes. They are jocularly called *TòkunbÍÌ* (Arrived from across the ocean). The dependency syndrome has reached an alarming stage with importation of agricultural produce such as groundnut and red palm oil of which Nigeria used to be in the first rank of producers and exporters in the world in the 1960s.

It is irrefragable that motherhood softens women and renders them easily pliable. Nnu Ego exclaims that her first pregnancy is "the greatest joy of my life" (50), which echoes her mother's expression of the same emotion "the greatest joy of my life" (24) on getting pregnant for Agbadi. When she finds out that the child is male, she tells the Owerri woman who took delivery of the baby "only now with this son am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman – all I want to be, a woman and a mother. So why should I hate him now?" (53). The death of the child is a shattering blow that robs her of immeasurable joy of motherhood. She tells the woman who slaps and chides her for abandoning her baby girl and attempting suicide, an abomination in Ibuza tradition, "But I am not a woman any more! I am not a mother any more" (62), which signifies overvaluation of male children in the patriarchal culture. The loss is also painful in the sense that it implies impossibility of realising her dream that someday in the future, when she is no longer agile and productive, her handsome, strong and materially successful son will take care of her. Part of the softness induced by motherhood in women is discernible in the aphoristic notion that "money and children don't go together" (80). Educated middleclass women deconstruct the old idea and render it a fallacy in contemporary times, thanks to the struggle of liberal feminists who ensure that males and females enjoy equal rights under the law. It is possible for a salaried female worker who is also a nursing mother to buy a new outfit today and live the good life even without the support of a husband or a male lover. Education gives women economic empowerment and liberates them from dependence on men. So the remark that "part of the pride of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable" (80) is facetious and no longer holds water.

Emecheta approves of the traditional Ibuza way of life that allows a woman to make a major contribution to her husband's family support but is critical of the modern Lagos family arrangement introduced by the White colonialists in which a husband is the sole provider. As she puts it, "this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role" (81). Besides, Nnu Ego attributes the death of her first child Ngozi to the conflict

engendered by her "trying to be traditional in a modern setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child" (81). Hence, she decides "to play it according to the new rules" in order to preserve the life of her second child. "In Ibuza after the child was weaned, one could leave him with an elderly member of the family and go in search of trade. But in Lagos there were no elderly grandparents" (81). Housemaids used to play the role of grandparents in modern cities of Africa, but compulsory primary education policy of government has made that option a rarity as the number of available servants keeps dwindling.

The brand of feminism at work in the novel is sensitive to exigencies of modern existence, nuances, patterns and shades that characterise new gender roles and redefine motherhood and womanhood. It does not throw away the old Igbo ontology as utter rubbish and neither does it accept uncritically Western liberalism. Rather, it carefully searches for and selects positive elements in both African and Western worldviews that could help society develop and realise its greater potentialities for the overall wellbeing of humanity.

Asking Nnu Ego to look after her children in Lagos where there is no family land that she could farm portrays Nnaife as not only abdicating his role as a father but also blind to emergent urban realities. It is not for nothing that his wife makes the important observation that "Every woman is dissatisfied on first arriving in this town" [Lagos] (85). The problem of unemployment coupled with unending demands of the city – rent, food, school fees, clothes, and electricity and water bills – constitutes a monumental challenge. In fact, after the departure of Dr. Meers and his wife for England at the outbreak of the Second World War, Nnaife is rendered jobless, totally dependent on his wife's paltry earnings from sale of cigarettes and matches, and exposed to humiliation, for a Christian father who does not feed his family is worse than an infidel. She constantly nudges him to intensify his search for a job and relieve her of the heavy burden of nursing, raising children and providing for the entire family, which causes constant friction between them.

From the humiliating job of picking up golf balls for White players in Ikoyi, he secures minimum wage employment that takes him away from home to Fernando Po, which further exacerbates the family's hardship and suffering. Life in his absence is extremely difficult, especially with an addition of one more child to the fold. Messages sent

by Nnu Ego to Ibuza are quite clear on the issue: "things were difficult in Lagos … a place where you could get nothing free" (118). Oshia, her eldest son, cannot go to school on account of untold poverty and is forced to take "garri in the morning, garri in the afternoon and garri in the evening all days of the week" (99) while Nnaife is away in Fernando Po. White soldiers with fierce-looking dogs eject them from their single room that serves as bedroom, playroom and sitting room in what used to be the compound of Dr. Meers to provide accommodation for senior members of the British army stationed in their part of Lagos, a process of gentrification that would later lead to demolition of Maroko, one of the city slums, the subject of Wole Soyinka's satirical play *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagos Kaleidoscope*.

The Second World War took a heavy toll on the family. Nevertheless, reports of a life of luxury lived by the rich in the divided city, its neon lights, and fantastic economic opportunities in the new industries continue to lure a vast army of ambitious and curious people from the hinterland to the coastal city to partake of benefits of urbanisation and splendours of Westernisation.

Emecheta's feminist agenda is unmistakable in her comparison of Nnaife and Nnu Ego after the latter has had three births: "Nnaife looked younger than his age, while she Nnu Ego was looking and feeling very old after the birth of only three children. The whole arrangement was so unjust" (119). However, the novelist neither seeks nor sees gender justice in the court of homosexuality. She is certainly on the side of reproduction of life, propagation of culture, and advancement of civilisation. Nnu Ego excoriates her husband only because he is not as industrious as she expects him to be in the light of their economic adversities. She would prefer that the accumulated fat that makes his belly protrude like that of a pregnant woman be burnt in hard work to provide more for his beleaguered family. Her notion of gender equality translates ultimately into a balanced and equitable distribution of work. There is much domestic work that a husband could do to ease off the burden of his wife during pregnancy and prevent her body from sagging after childbirth from too much labour of nursing and taking care of home, spouse and children. It is instructive that they eat well on the eve of her husband's departure for Fernando Po because "Nnaife made a large soup that would last them for days" (95). Her remark "You're taking away the help you can give us as well" (94) is made in recognition of the little good his physical presence at home could bring.

Both good and bad sides of polygyny are represented in the novel. Nnaife inherits Adaku and her daughter after the death of his senior brother and thereby increases the problem of financial inadequacy and creates as well the condition in which anger, enmity, fear and jealousy thrive among co-wives and their children. Polygyny could be helpful in providing many farm hands in Ibuza where farming is the mainstay of the economy, but in Lagos that is a commercial and industrial hub, a veritable urban jungle where life is governed by the amoral law of survival of the fittest, it is problematic. Although it could teach lessons in accommodation and tolerance, it fuels envy and engenders too much rancour. Nnu Ego reminds Adaku who says that "sons help their father more than they ever help their mother" who "worries over them, looks after them when they are small" (122) that they are in Lagos and Nnaife has no farm for Oshia in the railway compound where he cuts grass. Dynamics of gender roles are well articulated, and neither the past nor the present is completely evil.

By adding more wives and having more children than he can provide for, Nnaife is only intensifying the agony of material inadequacy and wasting scarce resource that could have been used to train children had by his first wife. Taking to the bottle to forget his problems is escapist, further impoverishes his family, and causes disaffection between him and his wives, who conspire against him and refuse to take the three pound notes he gives them as food money for a month because it is too little. They put the money in his meal dish and cover it. To increase the amount of the money that generates conflict in the family and settle the domestic problem, Oshia tears the notes into tiny pieces, which is the climax of the tragi-comic episode. His puerile solution is not by any means different from Kamini's insane instruction to the Chairman of Bugaran Central Bank to return home after his failure to secure a World Bank loan in New York and start printing more currency notes that have no value to solve the problem of scarcity of funds in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (4-7). It is risible but tragic because it worsens the financial situation and intensifies the pain of hunger. Nnaife beats Adaku who is pregnant, but Nnu Ego manages to escape. The first wife, unlike Adaku who is remorseless, later begs their husband passionately to be merciful and give them money to replace the torn notes. Nnaife reviles the penitent supplicant and refuses to yield to her plea for mercy. "It's your responsibility to feed your children as best you can" (136), he tells his protesting wives.

Adaku quits the marriage, becomes a prostitute, and decides to give his daughters a good education and prevent their father from selling them to the highest bidders in his desperate desire for money to continue his dissolute life. The author's message is simple: just as it takes a man and a woman to produce a child, it requires their cooperation to raise and educate the child. Nnu Ego sees through the injustice and concludes that "the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her" is unfair (137). However, her judgement that "All men are selfish. That's why they are men" (139) is too absolute to be accepted as truth in a world that is founded on opposition and complementarities. The wicked judgement given by Nwakusor and Ubani that Adaku has committed "an unforgivable sin" (166) for not producing male children for Nnaife gives credence to Nnu Ego's condemnation of all men. Since it is not women but men who decide the sex of children, mothers who bear only female children are only being crucified for the failure of their husbands. Adaku's audacious decision to become a prostitute is expressive of liberation from the marriage institution and men's control of female bodies. It portrays wives as ersatz prostitutes whose bodies are accessible to their husbands on payment of dowry. The rebellious woman opts for real prostitution that is truly more lucrative. It would not only enrich her but also give her control over her own body and any man who is allowed to have access to it at a price dictated by her. In response to Nnu Ego's advice to wait for the return of their husband, whose whereabouts is unknown, and that she might still have a son, Adaku is blunt: "Maybe you're right again, my senior. Yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. . .. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own" (169). Adaku settles for a life of economic independence and freedom from male oppression.

In contrast, Nnu Ego endures diverse adversities for the sake of her children. As she tells her co-wife, "I am poor only in Lagos. Go to Ibuza and see how rich I am in people in friends, relatives, in-laws" (160). She affirms the beauty of the old communal way that is fast yielding to capitalist individualism. It is then understandable why seven months after her father Agbadi has been buried, she is still reluctant to return to Lagos. Of all the reasons given by Adankwo to support her argument that Nnu Ego should return to the alienating city, the only one that is credible and infallible is that since Oshia was born and raised there he should also be trained there. The wry old woman knows what Lola Ogunwole's father in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* does not know, that once a child

has been brought up in a place of birth, transplanting him or her to another with a different cultural ethos is disruptive and harmful to the emotional development of the child. Contrary to her expectation, however, most people who escape from squalid poverty that hobbles the countryside rarely return to enrich its culture with their newly acquired knowledge and economic power. Her other admonition that Nnu Ego should spend the bride prices of her twin daughters to fund her boys' education is proof that the traditional woman, the oldest in the Owulum family, has internalised male psychology and reproduces it unconsciously (160). Nevertheless, Adankwo recognises the change that is taking place in the land, the migration of people from their villages to urban centres in search of better economic opportunities. Much as Ibuza is portrayed in a good light, the village cannot overcome the lures of the city. Hence, rather than decreasing, movement from the countryside to Lagos, in spite of all the difficulties daily encountered in the urban environment by residents, keeps increasing in geometric proportion. The aftermath of the rural-urban migration is that Lagos has become another Ibuza, while centres of economic power in the world – Amsterdam, Beijing, Berlin, London, New York, Paris, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto and others of their ilk are the new attractions with irresistible centripetal force.

It is undeniable that Lagos has deleterious effects on morals of its denizens. While some Ibuza men blame Adaku's scandalous resolve to become a prostitute on the fickle nature of women, others trace it to the perverse character of urbanity. Whether nature or nurture is responsible for her intrepid decision, the fact remains that she rejects in absolute terms an unjust arrangement in which she is mercilessly reproached for an offence she has not committed. Nothing offends against justice itself more than punishment of an innocent soul. Her bold resolve "I want to be a dignified single woman" (171) is unassailable. The same desire for dignity must have informed Emecheta's decision to walk away from an unhappy marriage. Nevertheless, she asserts, "I still believe in families … I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children, neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of a man, simply to be respectable" (553). She certainly does not approve of mothers abandoning their children as fathers do without qualms. Nnu.Ego is emphatic: "a mother can never, never reject her son" (214), which is affirmative of the novelist's position on the matter.

Nnaife is tried in a law court for cutting a young man's shoulder in his mindless rage to stop Kehinde one of his daughters from marrying a member of "a tribe that calls us cannibals … looks down on us … hates us (210), which is really a ruse for hiding his intention to obtain a high bride price on the girl. He sees his daughters as articles of trade that must bring him oodles of money that he could not get from Kehinde's heartthrob, a butcher's son. The more Nnu Ego tries to cover Nnaife's gross acts of abuse and irresponsibility as a father and a husband the more his life of reckless indulgence and unchecked libido is exposed, and for depredations caused by his aggression and lack of discretion he is sentenced to five years in prison. Only uncontrollable concupiscence could explain his marrying the young girl Okpo and the old woman Adankwo and thereby multiplying misery for his family.

Adaku educates Nnu Ego out of the erroneous belief that a husband owns his wife and the latter increases tremendously in knowledge of women's fundamental rights as human beings and of gender justice. Although she dies a lonely, miserable and wretched woman, she is given an extravagant and exceedingly gorgeous burial by her seven surviving children - one having died in childhood and another a stillbirth - a great funeral celebration for which many parents in a society that still believes in ancestor worship would earnestly pray. She receives after death the attention, glory and honour of which she was denied by her children and the pitiless city of Lagos in real life. People who spread a rumour around that she is a wicked woman because prayers of her grandchildren for fruitfulness at the shine erected in her honour are unanswered are unkind and unfair to the woman who sacrificed all for her children. Her death frees her at last from tyranny of life and patriarchy. Undoubtedly, the joy of giving all to her children would have been much greater if only they had demonstrated their gratitude by caring for and communicating with her in old age.

Unlike her husband who perceives her children as "a curse" (205) solely because his expectations that they would make him rich are defeated, Nnu Ego never once speaks ill of her brood or puts a curse on any of them. She symbolises the good mother who empties herself out for her offspring in full knowledge of ineluctable changes that the combined force of capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation has brought to bear on the life of the *lumpen* proletariat in a fast-expanding city that shows no mercy to its powerless underclass, as indicated in her poser:

> 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 lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? (219)

In an urban environment where atomisation, rather than agglutination, is the rule, where nothing is practically free, a poor woman cannot afford to have many children. Whereas in old Africa children brought parents, especially mothers, great joy, in modern Africa, they constitute an excruciating pain in the light of exceedingly inhibiting cost of maintenance. Hence, the average African family size keeps shrinking in number. The contrast between ethnically homogeneous Ibuza and racially heterogeneous Lagos in the novel signifies dramatic changes that brotherhood, fatherhood, motherhood, sisterhood, and womanhood undergo in modern society. Ties that bind people together in the former are strained by centrifugal forces in the latter and become lax. Men and women have important lessons to learn from marital and sexual relationships depicted in the text in order to salvage the threatened institution for propagation of the human race and protect welfare of members. Children need to appreciate the fact that, for their parents in old age, communication is balm and tonic. A shield against senility, it is recuperative and more valuable than even material gifts. The small "f" of Emecheta's feminism is subtly deceptive and demands close attention if its core meaning is not to be lost in the heat of sterile ideological branding.

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