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Reiteration of Relational Dynamics of Women in Family: A Psychoanalytic Feministic Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Slave Girl*

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the repetition of deeply entrenched patterns of oppression in the novels, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta. The protagonists of the novels are brought up as strong women loyal to their culture. They undergo the dilemma of loyalty towards themselves and that of the culture. The development of sexuality and subjectivity in the unconsciousness of Nnu Ego of *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ojebeta of *The Slave Girl* are inextricable. Nnu Ego was allowed to live a life on her demands till her marriage. From infancy, she is forced to remain virtuous for her husband. At the same time, Ojebeta was brought back to her life with several offerings to her 'chi' (personal God). She was the most precious member of the family until her parents' death. The construction of gender is an essential factor evident through the traditional practices of the region. Nnu Ego is grown with the notion that being a mother is the only virtue. Ojebeta cannot fight for her identity as the power lies with her brother. This study aims to critically analyze the varying dynamics of women and men in their respective families with fluctuating power structures.

Keywords: oppression, culture, subjectivity, women, gender, identity

Introduction

Psychoanalytic feminist theory claims that subjugation of women is inculcated from infancy. Women are nurtured with the notion of being inferior to men using tools like tradition and culture. Ojebeta and Nnu Ego are subjected to the same oppression. Ojebeta's parents Okwuekwu and Umeadi treat their daughter as precious as her two sons Enuha and Okolie. However, Okolie sells her sister to Ma Palagada after their parents die due to Influenza. Ojebeta's struggle for identity began at the age of seven as she moved to Onitsha. She was constantly reminded of her gender and her need to be silent before her owners.

Freudian concept on the development of gendered roles in society, such as women being responsible for mothering is evident throughout the novel. Nnu Ego is instilled with the concept of mothering as the request of a woman's life. Her fiancée rejects her because she is unable to bear children. Nnu Ego takes children for her husband later in her life but is criticized at each phase for not effectively tackling her difficulties. She remains in a dilemma concerning polygamy by her husband, Nnaife. The traditional rule in Ibo allows the younger brother to inherit the elder brother's wife. The limitations of the society silence Nnu Ego.

Autonomy and separation of self in the family:

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The Joys of Motherhood is a perfect example of how the protagonist Nnu Ego becomes autonomous in the family despite the constant pressure from society. Nnu Ego strives for her identity in the patriarchal as well as colonial setup. She always tries to fit in the norm of societal concepts but emerges as a powerful soul. Nnaife, her husband, joins the army and leaves for war. Nnu Ego struggles to feed her children with her limited resources. She then takes up the role of a bread earner in the family, which is not a title given to women in Ibo. She even separates her from the family by returning to her village after Nnaife gets arrested for assaulting his son in law. She rises as a strong character when she stands up against Nnaife for bringing a teenage girl Okpo as his wife:

We only have one room to share with my five children, and I'm expecting another two, yet you have brought another person. have you been commissioned by the white people you fought for to replace all those that died during the war? Why don't you let other men do part of the job? Even Adakwo, whom we regard as our mother, is pregnant for you, just you. You have to do something. I don't want the girl sleeping in my bed. I am not giving it up this time, and I don't care what your friends say. (Emecheta 184)

Ogbanje Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl* tries to escape slavery by being the most trustworthy servant. She works at Ma Palangada as the most hardworking servant. She is sold by her brother Okolie. She served Ma Palangada for years until her death. Miss Victoria, her daughter, tried to inherit her, but she stood as a stone against her: "I would rather be a poor girl in Ibo than a well-fed slave in this house without Ma. So I should be really happy." (Emecheta 150) After her wedding to Jacob, she gets hold of her household and frees herself from the trauma of slavery. Ojebeta finds relief in her new family and becomes autonomous: "In her way, Ojebeta was content and did not want more of life; she was happy in her husband" (Emecheta 178). The growth of her new self was awe-inspiring.

Oppression and power are two sides of the same coin. They are inseparable because one cannot function without the other. When power is misused, it leads to exploitation, victimisation, and resource denial. These oppressive agents put several constraints on the person, group, and society. The system of domination and subordination is the primary cause of black oppression. They are also degraded since they belong to a specific social group. (Sinthuja and Prabhakar 6166)

Unconscious mind and subjectivity of women:

Women in *The Joys of Motherhood* are viewed as tools of reproduction. Their worth is measured in terms of the heirs produced by them. Nnu Ego was sent back to her household by her fiancé, Amatoke, because of her inability to get pregnant. Emecheta portrays this subjectivity of women in her novel. As Nnoromele says, "I find it troubling that even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African women as slaves, brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines critical Western attitudes" (178). Nnu Ego tries to end her life when she loses her first child. She tries to jump off the Carter Bridge, and Nwankwo questions her about her duty as a mother:

What are you trying to do to your husband, father, people, and son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your baby for you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood." (Emecheta 61)

Even when Nnu Ego is on the verge of ending her life, she is questioned about her duties. She tries to commit suicide because she thinks that she is incapable of looking after her firstborn. The patriarchal society has inscribed in her mind that her duty as a mother is much more important than her own life.

In *The Slave Girl*, women, apart from subjectification, are also viewed as slaves. Chicago, one of the slaves of Ma Palangada and Pa Palangada, is sexually assaulted by both Pa Palangada and his son Clifford. Pa Palangada promises her freedom and to make her the second wife. Women unconsciously have a belief that their body is the only way to gain independence. Moreover, as slaves, they are bound to obey the rules. Chicago never complained about the exploitation of Ma Palangada as she thought there was no other way to escape it. Okolie, who was responsible for taking care of his sister, sold her for eight pounds. The thought of selling his sister to pursue his dream of becoming a performer did not bother him.

Emecheta's works respond to a West African vernacular tradition of storytelling that resists applying normative models of identity and instead demonstrates the importance of each individual to the community. This vernacular tradition, elaborated in Emecheta's work by a non-paradigmatic tension between "oral" and "literate subjectivity" (a tension potentially present to varying degrees in non-African subjectivity but "marked" in West Africa by multilingualism and the co-presence of vernacular and literate languages), provides a critique of productivist, authoritarian discourse (Ward 83).

Alterity and alienation of protagonists:

Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* alienates herself when she finds out that she cannot be a mother. She finds aid in the children of her junior wife. She tries to find a console in the arms of others and expects that they will understand her situation. She then gets into the path of excelling by becoming a great mother and caretaker. She willingly subdues her emotion to become a new person who is considered a great 'mother'. Nnu Ego thrives in all the roles played by her and gets appreciation from her home town also.

Emecheta depicts a character who disconnects from the things that support her while still attaching to what oppresses her. Someone of this calibre is lost. Nnu Ego is so determined to be a successful wife and mother that she will demolish anything that stands in her path. Emecheta implies that just because a woman is raised in Igbo tradition does not guarantee that she will absorb and use the few tools that her upbringing provides. Here's a character that can't even accept help because everyone is considered as a threat. This constrains Nnu Ego by denying her the benefit of a possible friend in the form of her junior wife (Holmes 18).

Ojibeta, the protagonist of *The Slave Girl*, turns out to be a strong character by changing her roles according to her situation. She comes out as a will powered woman even when she is sold to slavery. She distinguishes herself from other slaves and becomes Ma Palangada's favourite. She also alienates her from her brother and develops a strong will to come out of slavery.

In *The Slave Girl*, Ojibeta finally becomes aware of the fact that she lives in the dominant world where she only finds herself changing her master (i.e. she refers to her husband as her master and compares him with her absolute White master who bought her as a slave in her early life). Thus, she states that she feels better to have another "master", her husband, after being freed from her slave owner master. Both Ojibeta and her female relatives are portrayed as patriarchal women who eventually became submissive to the deeply ingrained patriarchal social structure (Aboye 21)

Conclusion:

The psychoanalytic study of the novels *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood* has brought forth the autonomy and alterity of the characters. The protagonist has emerged as solid characters and escaped their brutal realities by either alienating themselves or fighting them. By reiterating the daily chores, they have established their place in the dynamics of the family. *The Joys of Motherhood* portray women and their need to balance the stability in the family. Women in the novel try to bring cohesion to the entire existence of men around them. The notion of motherhood and its importance is also mocked sarcastically. While in *The Slave Girl*, the protagonist, as a slave, supports the family of her master and makes it possible for them to have a typical family dynamic. She then emerges as a strong character where she builds her own family and frees herself from slavery. She makes tough choices as a slave to be a free person. The unwritten rules of society unconsciously influence the women in both novels. They are bound to the traditional roles of a woman and are expected to fulfil the same. The paper thus briefly looks into the different aspects of psychoanalytic feminism in the selected works by examining the women in them. It questions the relational dynamics of women in a patriarchal society.

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