

The Effects of Double Colonization in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Della Hethcox
English, Linguistics and Communications Department
The University of Mary Washington
1301 College Avenue
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22401

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Shumona Dasgupta

Abstract

My presentation titled “The Effects of Double Colonization in *The Joys of Motherhood*” will examine how Buchi Emecheta’s female characters suffer under the “double-colonization” created by traditional patriarchy and British colonization in Nigeria. My central research question is that in *Joys*, the female characters discover that they must each either work within these oppressive systems, or completely reject them and strike out on their own, forming a new identity outside of the traditional feminine gender role expected in Igbo culture. To support my argument, I apply the theories of Frantz Fanon and Kirsten Holst Petersen and their ideas regarding nationalism and feminism in a postcolonial context. Nigeria was a British colony until the 1960s, when Nigeria claimed its independence. *Joys* takes place prior to WWII, focusing on the interactions of women between colonial and traditional influences in Nigerian society. Emecheta’s main character Nnu Ego is a traditional Igbo woman who seeks fulfillment through motherhood and marriage. However, due to double-colonization, she is unable to find joy or succeed within these oppressive confines, despite fulfilling patriarchal expectations of womanhood and bearing her husband many children. Along with her junior wife, Adaku, the women struggle to find their identities in either traditional Nigerian society, or in British colonized Nigerian society. Additionally, these two forms of female oppression (patriarchal and cultural) are self-reinforcing because they seek to strip women of power and invest that power in men. Like colonialism, the patriarchy serves as a mode of oppression for women, restricting them to the sole identity of mother and wife, and further propagating the marginalization of women. In the application of postcolonial and feminist theories, Emecheta’s novel reveals that these theories share the same goal of resisting the double-colonization of Nigerian women, and encourages women to create new identities outside of the social norms.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, Double Colonization, Postcolonization

1. Introduction

Buchi Emecheta’s 1979 novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, examines the issue of motherhood within the context of the double colonization of Nigerian women in the early 19th and 20th centuries. The addition of Western colonization to an already patriarchal Igbo society led to the further oppression of women, which can be found in Emecheta’s female characters. For Nnu Ego and her junior wife, Adaku, this double colonization created an identity crisis for them as they struggled to fulfill their expected gender roles in British colonized Nigerian society. In Emecheta’s novel, this marriage of oppressive systems produces two distinct types of women, found in the characters of Nnu Ego and Adaku, as they struggle under the burden of systematic oppression, as well as the smaller forms of cultural oppression found in native religion, the lack of education and parental social status. In this novel, Nnu and Adaku discover that they must either work within these oppressive systems, or completely reject them and strike out on their own, forming a new identity outside of the traditional feminine gender role.

In previous generations, Nigerian women created their identities around their village role in a progressive series of dutiful daughter, wife, and finally, mother. However, with the additional layer of colonization, these roles evolved as the colonizers redefined the Nigerian family structure, discouraging the native practice of polygamy, for example. This evolutionary shift was felt strongly by Nnu and Adaku, who struggled with fulfilling their roles as loving and loyal wives and mothers in a strange city, Lagos, that was a far cry from their rural village, Ibuza, and their indigenous customs. For these two women, the struggle to solidify their identity within the confines of double colonization became even more difficult in light of the smaller forms of cultural oppression, such as their religion and their chi, the lack of education for their gender and their social status in their village.

2. Research and Analysis

Frantz Fanon's definition of combative literature in his 1968 essay, "National Culture," readily applies to Emecheta's novel as she experiences "the emergence of the imagination and of the creative urge in [her] stories of a colonized country," which becomes "part of the common lot of people and forms part of an action," (Fanon, 121). Fanon defined "a literature of combat" as molding the national consciousness, "giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons," (Fanon, 120). It is in this combative novel that Emecheta explores the double colonization of her characters and how they react to it. For Nnu and Adaku, their contrary actions are a result of their sense of cultural obligation. However, Salome Nnoromele, an African studies professor, argues that, "I see Nnu Ego not as an object on which society heaps its "unfair" practices and demands, but as a subject of her own actions, as an active determinant of her own destiny," (Nnoromele, 182).

Throughout her critique, Nnoromele views each of Nnu's actions as those of a selfish mad woman, however, labeling Nnu as a "selfish, self-absorbed and irrational" woman (182), disregards the importance that Emecheta bestowed on Nnu's adherence to her culture and nation. Even non-traditional Adaku notices Nnu's dedication saying, "You believe in the tradition. You have changed a little, but stood firm by your belief," (Emecheta, 246). Nnu attempts to negotiate Western, colonial ways as well as the patriarchal Igbo societal expectations by remaining loyal to her husbands and producing many children. Nnu is willing to undergo the restrictions of Western culture on her family by remarriage to Nnaife in a Christian ceremony, and yet still allow her husband to treat her as their culture dictated (for example, the beatings and the allowance of inheritance of his dead brother's wives). Hazel Carby wrote, "Colonialism attempted to destroy kinship patterns that were not modeled on nuclear family structures, disrupting, in the process, female organizations that were based upon kinship systems which allowed more power and authority to women than those of the colonizing nation," (McLeod, 203). Nnu was determined to remain a good wife, despite colonialism's interference in Nigerian family structure. Nnoromele's labeling of Nnu as selfish reduces her to a one-dimensional character, and ignores the impact of double colonization on the role of motherhood, as well as Nigerian society.

The other half of double colonization belongs to the patriarchy, the collection of political, material and imaginative systems that seek to invest power in men and marginalize women (McLeod, 199). Before colonization, this is the authority that Nnu recognizes, a representational system that reinforces social order. Even as a young girl, Agbadi greets her saying, "You will all grow to rock your children's children," a reminder of her place in society as mother and wife (Emecheta, 27). Even her fiercely independent mother, Ona, could not escape the imbalance of patriarchal power combined with her sense of cultural duty: to produce male heirs for their husbands and lovers. In a 1984 essay, "First Things First," Kirsten Holst Petersen writes that Emecheta ignores the African dilemma of female and cultural liberation, which can be seen as Nnu tries to work within the patriarchal system that Adaku rejects (Petersen, 238). This gender imbalance is so deeply ingrained in Nnu's psyche that she quickly spirals into a suicidal depression after the accidental death of her first son, Ngozi.

Even when she is trying to find the courage to jump off Carter Bridge, Nnu is berated for not being a good wife to her husband. "What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son...? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood," berates a village acquaintance (Emecheta, 64). Charles Fonchingong argues that *Motherhood* traces gender inequality in "the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and tradition practices" (139), citing the example of the eldest son Oshia's refusal to carry water, as he claims it is a woman's job (Emecheta, 143). In a sense, the patriarchy is what entraps Nnu and frees Adaku, mainly due to Adaku's finding refuge on her own terms in prostitution.

Both Nnu and Adaku were raised with the sole goal of producing sons and their identities are entirely based on this, which is why the loss of a male child sends them both into self-destructive cycles. However, their reactions differ. For Nnu, she internalizes the blame while Adaku eventually decides that participating in the patriarchy's game is not for her. "I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons...I cannot live up to

your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own,” (Emecheta, 189). Adaku leaves their shared home and becomes a wealthy social pariah, thanks to prostitution, although she also manages a thriving market stall. Nnu is left with the contemplation that her secure social status as a fertile senior wife is a comfort in knowledge only, not in tangible wealth that Adaku possesses. Nnu realizes that “she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife,” (Emecheta, 153). Adaku escapes the prison that motherhood has become and creates a new identity, but Nnu remains trapped by her love for her children and her cultural obligation to the patriarchy.

Fonchingong writes, “Emecheta provides a unique dimension that challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous to female self-fulfillment...[and] lampoons the blatant fact that childbirth brings joy to the mother and defines her self-fulfillment and position within her household and society,” (143). Nnu appears to be a successful wife to Nnaife and mother to seven children, yet she must continually live in squalor and sell her clothes to buy enough food to keep her children from starving. And yet, Nnu must constantly strive to protect Nnaife and her sons at all costs. Similarly, for Petersen, the plight of African women (and writers) was often ignored and conscripted in the nationalistic process while men restored African self-confidence. Petersen offers the contrast of the traditional women in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to the women in *Motherhood* (Petersen, 237), writing that Achebe is content with the unequal state of gender affairs (Petersen, 237) and glorifies the traditional gender roles, while Emecheta highlights the stark differences. Following Nigerian decolonization, women were still required to support men in their quest for national glory (Petersen, 237), and a perfect example is found when Nnu is left to die alone while her children pursue their own goals and identities (Oshia as an intellectual, Kehinde as a wife). Although motherhood is heralded as the most fulfilling role for women, it is continually structured to support the patriarchy and its goals, not the betterment of the women, and particularly not for Nnu Ego or Adaku.

The smaller forms of cultural oppression produced by the patriarchy are revealed through social status, native religion and the lack of education for girls. These forms serve as yet another way to control women, whether it is an admonition of their father’s prominence, to respect their chi or the constant reminder that they do not have education to further themselves and their families. In the same way that the women in the novel centered their identities on their roles as wives and mothers, their identities as daughters were equally important. Just as Ona was identified even after her death as “Obi Umunna’s daughter,” Nnu is consistently referred to as “Agbadi’s daughter.” This social prominence, as well as religion and the lack of education for girls, creates another layer of oppression that the female characters must learn to negotiate. Additionally, Nnu is indebted to her father for her social status, so is she for her chi, which both have negative impacts on her life, such as her fertility. Unlike her senior wife, Adaku rejects her chi when she rejects the patriarchy, “Damn my chi...I don’t care for the life he or she gave me,” (Emecheta, 188). Scholar Stephane Robolin writes that African women were systemically removed from places of social and cultural power (84), particularly from the educational sphere, which is evident when Nnu pragmatically accepts that her daughters will drop out of school so that their brothers can attend. Although Adaku originally claims that her daughters will have to figure their lives out on their own, she is able to pay for their education (Emecheta, 212). Without a sufficient formal education, the wives in *Motherhood* try their best to run small side businesses to pay for food or education fees for their sons, but they are unable to sustain these efforts in the long term. Cultural oppression, though seemingly less threatening than the overall effects of the patriarchy, creates even more difficulties for women and restricts them to a life of male subjugation and continues to identify them in relation to the men in their lives.

3. Conclusion

In the application of postcolonial and feminist theories, a close reading of this novel challenges both forms of male oppression that the female characters experience throughout the course of the novel, particularly in their roles as wives and mothers. Nnu and Adaku seek fulfillment in motherhood in order to empower their husbands and fathers according to their cultural heritage, and their entire identities are built around supporting the patriarchy. However, as Emecheta reveals, women rarely have agency in their forced marginalization, and indeed, find little joy in the role of motherhood. Women can be like Nnu or Adaku, either a woman who encourages these forms of oppression due to her sense of cultural duty, or a woman who rejects her role as “second wife” to become an independent mother of two educated daughters. By the end, Nnu sees the difference between herself and Adaku, and how their actions support the men’s world, saying, “We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help build,” (Emecheta, 210). Adaku is able to escape the cycle and create a new life and identity for herself, but Nnu suffers until the end, realizing that although she had invested everything in building up her joys, she is denied them even in death (Emecheta, 253).

4. References

1. Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Rev. ed. Essex: Pearson, 2008. Print.
2. Fanon, Frantz. "National Culture." 1968. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2nd ed. Oxford: Routledge, 2006. 119-21. Print.
3. Fonchingong, Charles C. "Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8.1 (2006): 135-47. Print.
4. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester, 2010. Print.
5. Nnoromele, Salome C. "Representing the African Woman: Subjectivity and Self in *The Joys of Motherhood*." *Critique* 43.2 (2002): 178-90. Print.
6. Petersen, Kirsten Holst. "First Things First." 1984. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2nd ed. Oxford: Routledge, 2006. 235-38. Print.
7. Robolin, Stephane. "Gendered Hauntings: *The Joys of Motherhood*, Interpretive Acts, and Postcolonial Theory." *Research in African Literature* 35.3 (2004): 76-92. Print.