



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights men's violence against women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The fundamental idea around which this paper evolves is women's passive position in the face of men's chauvinism. Often adhering to African values and codes, most African women content themselves with traditional roles of homemaking and child bearing and are still discriminated against in every society. They are wrongfully denied access to the basic human need including the decision making power among other things. Interestingly enough, some African human right activists and other emancipated elites such as Buchi Emecheta have undauntedly decided to write in order to depict this ill-treatment of African women.

INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta is a versatile and prolific writer, who has successfully written more than twenty books dealing with various themes such as women abuse, motherhood, marriage, polygamy, poverty, male domination etc. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the feminist authoress has focussed on gender-based violence exerted by male characters on their female counterparts; a destructive phenomenon which undermines women's welfare. "In the novel, Buchi Emecheta is concerned with the conditions of women and their endeavor to achieve self-fulfillment (Helaly, 2016)" (p. 118). Elaborating on women conditions, Eustace Palmer writes that:

Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in African society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives, then their main use is as vehicles for procreating children thus immortalizing the husband's name and insuring the continuity of his line; if they are daughters, the father's only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price (Palmer, 1982) (pp. 21-23). Indeed, *The Joys of Motherhood* is a powerful commentary on polygamy, patriarchy and women's changing roles in urban Nigeria. In fact Emecheta's novel is qualified male-dominated one "...because of her support of the common woman, whom she portrays as a victim in male-dominated society (Peters, 1993)" (p. 14). It details Nnu Ego's painful life in Lagos, a colonized city, exposing her joys of motherhood as the narration ends with her tragic death alone, a lonely death "with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother (Emecheta, 2011)" (p. 224).

The focus novel depicts violence perpetrated against women in a highly patriarchal society. It is a pure expression of men's hegemony on women. This hegemony makes women citizens of the second class subjected to violence and any other forms of bad treatment because "hegemony describes the kind of cultural power wielded by the dominant ideas of a culture or society... (Klages, 2012)" (p. 35). According to *Universal Learners Dictionary*, the word violence is a "great roughness and force, often causing psychological damage or physical injury (Kirkpatrick, 1986)" (p. 843). Also the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (2005) defines violence against women as "any act of gender based violence that results in or likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life" (WHO, 2005). Generally speaking, such violence is perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and is manifested through physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, economic deprivation and acts of omission. Violence is therefore a combination of physical and emotional force and energy designed to manipulate and dominate another competent adult or adolescent in order to achieve submission and dependence. In other words, physical violence is any extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt. It includes unfair or cruel treatment of somebody and can take many forms, such as physical aggression or assault that is to say, hitting, kicking, biting, slapping, shoving, restraining, battery. Psychological violence on the other hand is the effects some words and behaviours of male characters may have on female ones. But whether physical or psychological, violence is simply any humiliating attitude which women are submitted to. The overall aim in this paper is to point out the most significant circumstances in which violence, as understood, has been

inflicted upon female characters in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta. Indeed, Buchi Emecheta's major preoccupation in the aforementioned novel is the African woman within a given socio-cultural and economic setting. She also examines how such a setting acts on the life of women. She is particularly conscious of the fact that the African man constitutes the greatest hindrance to the lives of women to the extent that it limits them in their desire to free themselves. When we go through most writings on Buchi Emecheta's novels by some writers and researchers we notice that they focus not only on critiques of practices in patriarchal Ibo society but also on the newly imported economic system that, unlike their native system, fails to validate or reward women's work. So no wonder then that Emecheta shows great concern about themes that effectively portray the nature of oppressed women in Africa South of the Sahara. On this score, Chukwuma rightfully posits that Buchi Emecheta's novels "have filled the gap between male and female characterization and shown the other side of the coin (Chukwuma, 1989)" (p. 2). As a matter of fact, for Chukwuma, Emecheta's feminism can be as seen in the way she depicts her female characters from the slave girl prototype to the mother and single fulfilled woman. About *The Joys of Motherhood*, Chukwuma maintains that an African woman can only escape the tyranny of tradition by asserting her individuality and can still play out the role of daughter, wife, and mother. Commenting on feminism, Barfi and Alaei "*The Joys of Motherhood*...accommodates some aspects of Western feminism in order to highlight women's gender oppression, gender inequality and sexual difference within the Igbo patriarchal society (Barfi, 2014)" (p.37). Furthermore, Frank (1982) postulates that Emecheta's growth as a novelist, starting from her autobiographical novels to *The Joys of Motherhood* presents her own vision of the African womanhood under an oppressive African tradition (Frank, 1982). Likewise, Cynthia Ward (1990) observes that Emecheta should be commended for speaking of herself as an African womanhood (Ward, 1990). In this wake, Ward tries to promote the identity of Emecheta's female characters in particular and African women, in general. Ward forms a useful basis for the hypothetical question that this paper hopes to answer, which is to know whether the African woman as seen through the female protagonists of Buchi Emecheta's works is submitted to men's violence. This essay is structured around two main sections. The first one is about "men's Psychological Violence on women" and the second one examines men's physical violence on women. The post-colonialism theory will be the bedrock on which the analysis will be based.

Psychological Violence on women

In *The Joys of Motherhood* we can notice the psychological violence that the female character Adaku is subject to when Nwakusor and Ubani, both Nnaife's friends, have been summoned to solve a misunderstanding between Nnu Ego and her co-wife Adaku. As they say, in a phallogocentric way, while blaming Adaku, she has no son for the family, so she has no right to complain about her senior wife's conduct because, not only does she bear girls to Nnaife, but she also bears boys. As the two men admonish Adaku during this meeting, African women immortalize her husband when they give birth to male offspring:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? Nwakusor reminded her. Our life starts

from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life [...] I know you have children but they are girls who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. If I were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my chi to find out why male offspring have been denied to me. But instead, you are here quarrelling about your senior wife (Emecheta, 1979), (p. 166).

As we can notice in the quotation above, African women are subjected to psychological violence and pressure when they cannot meet some social established rules in their community. This implies that a man, and even by the entire community, can complain about her wife when she fails to give birth to male off springs. In the same way, Nnu Ego is submitted to a psychological violence by her first husband Amatokwu when the latter finds out that she fails to bear children for him. The homodiegetic narrator witnesses in the following lines:

She [Nnu Ego] was not surprised when Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. My father is desperate. It is now known that your chi came from the people down by the river. Their women are said to be very strong. I am sorry; Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people (Emecheta, 1979), (p. 30). Obviously, the failure of Nnu Ego to bear children is a great issue in her society. Indeed, a married woman should be productive to ensure the progeny of the man. She is aware of that and tries to beseech Amatokwu. But her husband's reaction to her supplication is too caustic:

I have no 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 any more 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 (Emecheta, 1979). (p.31).

As we can read from the passage above, in Igbo culture, it is not acceptable to continue keeping alone a woman who is not fertile. "...According to the culture of Ibuza, a girl is to get married to achieve womanhood. She must get married to become a mother of sons and to do this successfully, she has to accept the authority of her father and husband. A daughter is not allowed to make my decision regarding marriage and children (Helaly, 2016)" (p.119). Actually, the most important goal of marriage in African society is to get children. This cultural practice stays in line with Ayisi's point of view when he asserts that "marriage is therefore the means by which a man and a woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation (Ayisi, 1980)" (p. 7). As a matter of fact, the story of Nnu Ego is a very tragic one. Her life has been scrambled between the fate of childlessness and the burden of a male-dominated society. As Helaly puts it, "Nnu Ego's journey through life is characterized by a number of continual tragedies that reflect the tragedies of the modern African woman in general and the Nigerian in particular (Helaly, 2016)" (p.118). Absolutely, Amatokwu's words "infertile"; "dry"; "scratched jumpy"; "nervy"; "all bones" are strong enough to hurt Emecheta's character Nnu Ego psychologically. Such forms of violence as described abound in examples in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

A senior wife in traditional Africa is a respected wife. Agbadi's attitude to her senior wife is humiliating, degrading and psychologically hurting. That is why she has become abruptly ill and died the following morning. Though cruel, she cannot complain about her husband behaviour because, in colonial African society, the relationship of a man to his wife is one of a master to his servant. Agunwa cannot bear such psychological hurt that is why she has passed away. Exploring the relationship between mind and body in psychoanalysis theory, Freud, as quoted by Klages, posits that "thoughts could directly cause physical symptoms that had no physiological cause (Klages, 2012)" (p.70). The authoress depicts through the character of Agbadi how women and their sexual pleasure are flouted. "He [Agbadi] himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he could bring his mistress to sleep with right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him (Emecheta, 1979)" (p. 36). This passage highlights the sexual degradation women are subjected to their society.

Nnaife, Nnu Ego's second husband, also exerts a psychological violence on her during a sexual intercourse that very night she has come to Lagos to join him.

She had thought she would be allowed to rest at least on the first night after her arrival before being pounced upon by this hungry man, her new husband [...] this one worked himself into an animal passion ... this man's appetite was insatiable, and by the morning, she was so weary ... O, my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance (Emecheta, 1979) (p. 44-45).

These examples of violence on women during sexual contact are forms of humiliations women are generally submitted to in African societies. After deep and close analysis of these practices, we have realised that violence on women as described here serves as a means of retaliation, of vengeance, or punishment by men on women. And this is no doubt how one can also interpret Agbadi and Nnaife's violent attitude toward their lovers. Finally, Nnu Ego has to go through a series of psychological violence. She "...can be seen as a victim at many levels (Emecheta, 2016)" (p. 125). First she has to bear the fact that her husband has married a young wife called Okpo. In fact, Nnu Ego has to endure her co-wife's presence in the single room they share together with the children. Though "in the traditional Ibo society, polygamy gives some extra power to the status of women as it allows them to cope with the burden they have to share their husbands (Klages, 2012)" (p.124), Nnu Ego is not strong enough for she has no child.

Moreover, she has also to bear the psychological hurt caused by Okpo while having sex with their husband. Such a treatment is a form of marital violence Nnu Ego is submitted to. The second instance of violence Nnu Ego is submitted is in relation with her failure to hear from her two sons, Oshia and Adim, respectively in America and Canada. The following passage shows her sorrow: "[...] what actually broke her was, month after month, expecting to hear from her son in America and from Adim too who later went to Canada, and failing to do so. It was from rumours that she heard Oshia had married and that his bride was a white woman (Emecheta, 1979)" (p. 253). It is plain that like Nnu Ego, many African women are

psychologically violated by the husbands reducing them to wretched persons. And "every culture that recognizes sexual dimorphism (male and female) also creates cultural categories of masculine and feminine (Klages, 2012)" (p. 33). Nnu Ego has also been victims of injustice when in Lagos and she does not content with such situation. She openly criticizes as follows: "It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her in Lagos, where she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance. Was it right for her husband to refer to her responsibility? It seemed that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty (Emecheta, 1979)" (p.137). The word "enslave" testifies the degree of psychological pressure Nnu Ego is going through and how uselessly women in general are perceived. But violence as expressed in the focus novel is not only psychological but physical as well.

Physical violence on women

Violence on women is a serious problem all over the world in both developed and developing countries. But battery in particular is very common among close partners in most African societies. Battery commonly implies the use of physical force with the intention to cause death, physical disability, injury or harm to the weaker party. Physical violence includes scratching, pushing, shoving and grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, slapping, punching, burning, use of a weapon and use of restraints or ones' body size, or strength against another person. In *The Joys of Motherhood* there are instances of physical violence perpetrated on women. "Besides criticizing colonialism and its influential effects on African society and especially black women, Emecheta in *the Joys Of Motherhood*, criticizes the native patriarchy for oppressing, dismissing and dominating the disempowered female characters [9]" (p.14). The first instance has to do with Adaku's harsh abuse by Amatokwu when she was complaining about the insufficiency of the money she receives for the family food. Adaku breathlessly told Amatokwu: "The food money you [Amatokwu] give us is too small. Nwakusor and the other men give their wives double the amount you give us. When we go to the market, we have to keep wandering from stall to stall in search of bargain, because we can never afford anything... (Emecheta, 1979)" (p. 149). It is a normal thing that a woman complains when she and her family members are not well fed. It is the duty of the man to provide his family with food and other basic needs. But for Amatokwu, Adaku's complaint is humiliating and insulting. Adaku should have not compared him to Nwakusor or other men. He has beaten his wife despite the fact that she is carrying a baby. "Suddenly, Adaku screamed from inside the room. Help! Help! He is going to kill me, you madman (Emecheta, 1979)" (p. 150). But though the pregnant woman is calling for help, no man comes to her rescue. On the contrary Oshia, Nnu Ego's grandson who is around makes fun of it. He viciously asks Amatokwu to "serve her right...with wicked grin and ran away (Emecheta, 1979)" (p. 151).

The attitude of Oshia illustrates how insensible some men are to women's suffering. Instead of going to the rescue of the woman, Oshia urges the husband to beat her more regardless what the matter is.

All the same, the way Amatokwu beats his senior wife Nnu Ego when the latter fails to bear him a single child after years

of marital life, is another vivid example. As Peters puts it, “*The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) presents the questionable joys that the heroine, Nnu Ego, experiences in two marriages, the first of which produces no children (Ayisi, 1980)” (p. 33). In fact, on the eve of the day her co-wife is giving birth, the pain of her childless status hits her with such a force that she cannot stand it any longer. So, “[...] she took the boy [her co-wife’s boy] and went into her inner room, forgetting to lock her door. She began to appeal to the boy to either be her child or send her some of his friends from the other world. Not knowing she was being watched, she put the child to her breasts. The next thing she felt was a double blows from behind. She almost died of shock to see her husband there (Emecheta, 1979)” (p. 35).

Another example of physical violence is about the sexual brutality on Ona, Nnu Ego’s mother. She is treated harshly by her husband Agbadi during a sexual intercourse as the following lines show:

‘Please, I am in pain.’

‘Yes,’ came his confident reply. ‘I Want you to be.’

She melted and could say no more. She wept and the sobs she was trying to suppress shook her whole being. He felt it, chuckled, and remarked thickly, ‘Please, Ona don’t wake the whole household.’

Either she did not hear, or he wanted her to do just that, for he gave two painful bites in between her breast, and she in desperation clawed at him, and was grateful when at least she felt him inside her.

He came deceptively gently, and so unprepared was she for the passionate thrust which followed that she screamed, so piercingly she was even surprised at her own: ‘Agbadi, you are splitting me into two! (Emecheta, 1979)’ (p. 20).

For people who are familiar with “splitting fire wood” in the context of Africa, it is easier to understand the force and violence which characterize that activity. Through this metaphor, we understand that the woman represents “the wood” and the man represents the “axe”. So as an axe, Agbadi has vehemently split Ona. Agbadi even bites her wife to make her docile, which is a very bad act of violence. What has happened cannot be called “making love” as there is consent of the woman; it is merely a rape. Through this treatment, the authoress “highlights the extent to which women are sexually oppressed. They are deprived of their sexual desire/rights when they are replaced by a new beautiful young girl (Barfi, 2015)” (p. 35). The comment on Ona after this phallus activity exerted by Agbadi on her can be read in the following lines:

Agbadi’s senior wife, Agunwa, became ill that very night. For some, she sacrificed herself for her husband; but a few had noticed that it was bad for her moral to hear her husband giving pleasure to another woman in the same courtyard where she slept, and to such a woman who openly treated the man they all worshipped so badly. A woman who was troublesome and impetuous, who had the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman (Emecheta, 2011), (p. 18). As we can see, such brutality exerted on Ona has caused a harmful effect on her. She has felt pain and suffered humiliation instead of pleasure and loveliness. This is not

surprising as Agbadi himself is aware that he wants her to be in pain during the sexual intercourse.

Conclusion

All the sufferings of women, all their frustration, all the struggles they go through, all the deprivations they experience, and all the violence exerted on them, as pointed out in this article, have been caused by their male counterparts. Violence on women generally leaves them depressed and anxious and can even cause suicide. Consequently, women victims of men’s violence should be listened to and taken care of. They deserved sympathy and support. The reading of the various articles written by researchers has shown that most of them have put a particular accent on these aspects of women’s oppression. Therefore, effective legislations to prevent violence against women should be put in place and enforced. Law enforcement agents should stop battering and other forms of violence against women by punishing the authors. The violence of a man on his wife should not be seen as a granted right. The trials of men who batter or kill their wife must be given wide publicity in order to serve as deterrence to others who may have such tendencies. There should be greater advocacy to enlighten the public about the existence and reality of the evil of violence against women by government agencies, religious groups and civil rights organizations. This will help in balancing the gender discourse on violence and will bring about better families in the African society. Gender activism must involve a balance of power in relationships in order not to arrogate too much power to the men who will then turn around to use such power to oppress the women.

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