



An Analysis of 'son preference' in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

Suraiya Shahin

Research Scholar, English Literature, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi.

110025 Suraiyashahin91@gmail.com

Abstract

Buchi Emecheta is a prolific female writer of Nigeria and has occupied a specific place in the history of Nigerian literature. Nigeria is a country where gender issue has been one of the major factors. The conflict of 'son preference' and 'girl negligence' is very common in such culture and the writer Buchi Emecheta explores such conflicts in her works, especially in her masterpiece *The Joys of Motherhood*. She unveils the patriarchal mindset of Nigerian people who measure status of a woman on the basis of her children and fertile body.

Her central character Nnu Ego in the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is the victim of patriarchal system. Her first husband leaves her only because she delays in conceiving. Even when she is married second time to Nnaife, she had to face ups and down in her coming life. But the question arises here that the woman who is already victim of patriarchal power, also starts to follow the same systems and begins to marginalise her daughters, giving privilege to sons. She gives all freedom to her sons while she engages daughters in household works. The poor girls hardly would get time to see the books. When the daughters questioned their mother on the partiality for sons, the mother taught them that boys are superior to boys and it is girls' fate to support their brothers.

The paper concerns such gender conflict manifested by the novelist in the Nigerian society. She tells us how a traditional woman like Nnu Ego gives birth to nine children in the hope that she will have more and more sons who will serve her in old age. But her expectation turns into nightmare when eventually she dies alone beside the road, and no son fulfils her expectations. The orthodoxical teaching in her culture that 'a son makes a woman complete woman' brings no positive result, it proved failure. Ultimately she could understand the value of daughters and utters, "But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? 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 to build".

Keywords: Igbo culture, women and Gender conflict.

Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian prolific feminist writer whose contribution to the world of literary field is inordinate. As a Nigerian writer, she has crossed over all

other Nigerian female writers through her literary canons. In most of her works, she has traced man-woman relationship, woman's position in a patriarchal society, woman's position through cultural practices and woman's position with children especially with son. She explicitly reflects African society in general and Nigeria in particular; its culture and practices. Society is the kernel subject of the discussion of her works. She strongly acknowledges the fact that every novel narrates a story. As we see it when she interacts with Marie Umeh and Davidson in an interview in *Ba Shiru* where she defends novel:

Every good novel must depict a society.

The society is the bone of the story. (Emecheta 25)

Her writings portray the collective communal traditions and assertion of women's vacillation in African society. She has created many mouthpieces of literature like *In the Ditch* (1972) *Second Class Citizen* (1975) *The Bride Price* (1976) *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Rape of Shavi* (1985) and others and many short stories which reflect her great achievement to the world. She had been struggling hard throughout her life that awakened her conscience the misconceptions which were widely prevailing in her Nigerian society. The fatality always pursued her even after her marriage. Marriage could not bring pleasure ever in her life as her husband proved to be deceiver who could never understand her or her hidden inordinate artistic qualities. She left Nigeria after passing her initial years and took her journey to London where she lived rest of years and supported whole heartedly her family through her writings since her marriage. We can have a close look of her pathetic and struggling life in her autobiographical novel *Second Class Citizen*. Emecheta, similarly her fictional character Adah, also left her husband Sylvester in 1966. Her husband's brutal behaviour could not shake her at all and she became a stoic woman and later her hard work brought a great reward to her. She received a degree in sociology at London despite bringing up her five children alone. She escapes her label to be called a feminist writer. She says that she only chronicles the happenings of African society. There is no exaggeration in her writings. The sole motto of her writing is to bring the unjust systems of women to public world. As in her article "Feminism with a small f", she articulates, "Being a woman, and an African born, I see things through and African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f..." (Emecheta175)

As a feminist writer, she has mirrored the double curse of racial and sexual discrimination in her classical work *The Joys of Motherhood*. In this novel, she has traced how Nigeria being a complete patriarchal country prefers male child through marriage. For receiving a son child how a husband is ready to cross all humanity into beastly. She has disclosed very minutely the hypocritical image of Nigerian society that marginalises women through all torturous traditional systems such as son preference, polygamy and bride price. Since the paper aims at 'son preference' in this novel, it will specifically build its ideas pertaining to such prejudices of traditional

Nigerian society. Emecheta has produced her character Nnu Ego as a traditional Nigerian woman who is always prepared to bow down whatever the patriarchal mechanisms enforce upon her. In her initial days of life, she came to know that children make a woman a complete mother and complete woman. When she grows a little more, her father gets her marry to Amatokwu; a man of conservative mind. Amatokwu, a staunch follower of Igbo culture, gives ill treatment when Nnu Ego finds delay in conceiving. Without waiting much, he marries twice alienating her from her position of a fertile wife. Emecheta reveals Amatokwu's harsh behaviour towards Nnu Ego, in the following words:

I am a busy man. 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 anymore. 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... But now, if you can't produce sons, at least you can help harvest yams. (Emecheta 31)

She lost the position of a wife as soon as her husband brings home another wife. She fights once again with her fate when her father marries her to Nnaife; an Igbo man who worked as a washerman for the white masters, in the urban city of Lagos. Nnu Ego's arrival in Lagos makes her disappointed on the pale, lean and thin body of Nnaife. But what could she do before her fate. Since she was possessed with the obsession of having children especially son, so she decided to compromise even with this ugly man. In the coming years she bred a son that remained a therapy in restoring her happiness. The birth of first child as a son gave happiness in abundance for the couple. Cordelia, one of Nnu Ego's neighbours admired her on the birth of first son, "I see you have given your husband a son. It's not very common for people to have sons for the first baby. You are very lucky" (55). Nnu Ego through this son, was being given highly respectful and fortunate position by her husband. But this happiness could not stick to her for long since her first son Ngozi dies very soon after a few months. The death of her son made her stunt like a stone. A plenty of turmoil roused in her heart that compelled her to attempt suicide. But she was saved by a bicycling man from the crowd.

Uma Alladi in *Women and Her Family: Indian and Afro- American Literary perspective* (1989) has asserted on the Nigerian concept of marriage through the fulfilment of son. According to her, marriage never exists in African culture as a successful marriage unless it begets children more importantly at least a son. In her words being a mother embodies synonymous with being a woman. She is not labelled a real woman until her life is engaged thorough performing the role of mother and nursing the children. Whatsoever respect and power a woman achieves in African society only owing to the company the children provide her. Her role as a mother of son is considered more important than a wife. Nnu Ego's birth of a son brings all happiness to her husband but the scenario gets instantly changed when in the coming days she procreates daughters. Emecheta, with great patience, has attempted to reveal her character Nnu Ego a marginalised woman when she first time procreates twin

daughters. Emecheta here unfolds the negligent of girl children through the tongue of her Nigerian product Nnaife, “Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? Where will we all sleep, eh? What will they eat?” (Emecheta141). Nnaife remained so rude on the arrival of twin daughters that he didn’t consider it pertinent in giving them special names. So, eventually, Nnu Ego herself named them sequentially ---the one who was first, named ‘Taiwo’ and the second one ‘Kehinde’ since she came second. Nnaife’s remark on the arrival of first twin daughters tells us Igbo man’s discriminatory nature towards ‘son preference’ and negligent of ‘girl children’. His immediate reaction and coarse nature with his wife could be seen in his words next time when Nnu Ego once again breeds twin daughters, “All this ballyhoo for two more girls! If one had to have twins, why girls, for Olisa’s sake?” (209). The twin girls were given names according to their position as the social mechanisms assign. One was named ‘Obiageli’ literally means ‘she who has come to enjoy wealth’ and the second one ‘Malachi’ means ‘you don’t know what tomorrow will bring’. The arrival of these twin daughters devastated Nnu Ego because it was going to bring disgrace to her position of an Igbo mother. She desolately utters, “Men—all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names going. But did not a woman have to bear the woman—child who would later bear the sons?” (209). She had already bred sons for her husband, for the extension of his lineage but his Igbo mind-set never escapes from his conservative mind that wretched his wife time to time. It reveals how an Igbo man’s bitterness and angry nature reaches at peak when his wife procreates daughters but glorifies his wife when she procreates sons.

Emecheta has also portrayed the other character Adaku; the victim of patriarchal structures which measures a woman’s status on the basis of son. Adaku was the wife of Nnaife’s dead elder brother whom he had inherited according to Igbo custom. On the arrival of Adaku in Lagos, gave initial happiness to Nnaife. He celebrated more and more pleasure sleeping with her. Nnaife was delighted when she bred son. But all fatality pursued Adaku when her first son took his last breath after a few weeks. When she bred a son, Nnaife was excited. But immediately this happiness turns into devastating state when her son’s death sank her into a desolate life. She gave a heart- rendering cry from the depth of emotions. Now the death of her son encouraged in the weird nature of Nnaife towards her. Adaku unhesitantly started accusing Nnu Ego that Nnaife’s playing music on guitar in the midnight had invited spirits in the house that caused her son’s unexpected-death. On hearing such trifle words of Adaku, a little dispute took place between both the co-wives. Nnu Ego’s eyes began to shed tears and in a desperate tone she bellowed, “O God, please give this woman another boy so that we can all have some peace” (144). Emecheta here brings forth Nnaife’s biased attitude with his wives foregrounding the ideology of son children. His deliberate roused discrimination can be seen when he returns after his job on leave. He first not finding any other option reluctantly goes to sleep with Adaku (a sonless wife) in Nnu Ego’s absence since she had left for Ibuza to attend her father’s burial. Emecheta here conveys the confronting agony of Adaku complaining to Nnu Ego, “...He came to my bed only as a second choice. I didn’t mind, because all I wanted from him was a male child” (188). The lack of son made Adaku to lose her position of a good wife leading her to leave home to become a prostitute. She was

noticing her husband's obsession after a son-child that was thrashing her. Nnaife was not interested at all in spending money on the education of Adak's daughters. She wanted her daughters to be well educated like any other Lagos living girls but her thinking fell flat before her husband. Eventually one day she left the home of Nnaife to become a prostitute:

My *chi* be damned! I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi*!... I don't care for the life he or she gave me... I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons... the more I think about it the more I realize that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own (188-189).

All types of desolation overcame Adaku because without having a son; she was treated otherwise in the eyes of her husband. The Igbo custom of son's value was tormenting her mind strongly apprehending that she will be deprived of a good burial in Nnaife's compound. She felt tormented on such stupid mechanism and she realised, Nnu Ego deserves a good burial since she has produced sons. These thoughts of woman's dignified burial through gaining the position of a son are unfolded between the conversation Nnu Ego and her senior co-wife Adankwo. Adankwo awakens Nnu Ego of her position of a woman of sons which was marginalising Adaku. Adankwo makes her aware of priorities in a swift tone, "You are mother of the men- children that made him into a man. If Adaku dies today, her people, not her husband's, will come for her body. It is not so with you" (177). Through this statement, Emecheta tries to disclose the old psyche of traditional Igbo women who are taught since their childhood that son brings more value to a mother and it is for the betterment of lineage of the patriarchal family. Emecheta has emphasised here that the strangulating Igbo custom of 'son preference' has robbed its women. It denies a woman's existence in case she proves failure to procreate a son. The more a woman breeds sons the more it extends her dignity in the family as well as society. The protagonist in Elechi Amai's *The Cocubine* encounters unjust treatment simply because she was not in a position to produce a son for the lineage her family. To some extent the similar attitude we can have a look in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo measures his wife's dignity based upon son. Okonkwo's persona reflects Igbo culture of androcentric phenomenon who tends to ignore his wives. His piety with Igbo culture of 'son preference' is mostly scrutinised when he without any delay butchers a goat when one of his wives breeds three sons in a quick succession. Like Emecheta, Achebe's male characters are obsessed for male children neglecting female children. A noted feminist theorist Wittig regards that there is no distinction between sex and gender. She considers that the category of "sex" is itself a gendered category, fully political. She scrutinizes the distinct identity of woman in the term of oppositional relation to a man (cited in Butler 153). She aspires to the complete uproot of sex so that women can be identified a universal subject. She asserts that only men are considered "persons", and there is no gender but the feminine, "Gender is the linguistic index of political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in

the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the “masculine” not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general”. (27)

Emecheta’s research on Igbo culture is beautifully depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood*. She has unravelled how an Igbo woman like Nnu Ego bows down against its prevailing system. She draws our attention towards the complete submission of Igbo women who act upon gender basis. Igbo women too tend to be biased towards male children. We can see it clearly Nnu Ego’s unjust upbringing of her sons and daughters. Like any other Igbo mother, she never showed much affection over her daughters. Instead she always bellowed at them. Her mind was moulded through the lens of Igbo patriarchal concept where a son establishes woman’s value. It grabbed her psychology to value sons more rather than girls. Her best fascination towards son is reflected when her son Oshia’s health was deteriorating, and it rendered her heart to burst into deep anguish, “Please stay and be my joy, be my father and my brother and my husband—no I have a husband though I don’t know whether he is alive or dead. Please don’t die and go away too” (Emecheta 115). These painful words of Nnu Ego show that a woman’s status disappears along with losing the son. She knew that she appeared a dignified woman for her Igbo society only with that son. So, the illness of Oshia was apprehending her more and more.

Nnu Ego and her husband’s behaviours towards their children were discriminatory. They provided every type of facility to their sons depriving girls from it. Although Nnu Ego too was a woman but she never showered any pity towards her daughters. She expects lots of work from these little girls all the time. She gave full freedom for study to her sons but kept girls wandering into the dark without appearance of rays of education. She convinced her little daughters to promote her business and support the family so that their brothers could find themselves stress free to build their career. In the coming days, this unjust treatment of family towards the girls occupied them. So, one day the resistance comes up when Nnu Ego asks her daughters to dry out the vegetables as it were wet due to rain fall. Twin girls begin to bellow against their mother, demanding that the boys too should co-operate them in that work. At opening the tongue against the sons, their mother instantly reminds them their position of a girl being secondary. She tries to convince her daughters that boys are free to study but it is not with the girls. She rebukes them by narrating how will the boys concentrate on study if they are distracted in household work? One day Taiwo one of twin daughters gets angry at her mother when she asks twin daughters to fetch wood and support in selling oranges while setting free the boys from such works. On the favour of sons’ study by mother, Taiwo retorts, “The boys have the evening off for their stupid lessons, and they’re let off from going to fetch the wood that we have to sell to feed us” (197). These words immediately infuriated her mother who desperately begins shouting, “But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you... A girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life”. (197-202). Nnu Ego, a woman of traditional Igbo, embraces completely whatever her societal system enforces upon a woman. Although

she was living in urban city of Lagos but it could not make her forgetful of her perpetuating patriarchal norms. The other character Adaku was resistant by nature and a woman of modern thinking but she too remained trapped in such gender discriminatory organisation which pursued her everywhere. Even though she attempted to change her husband who was fogey, by making a food strike in the family but it went rather vain as her husband contradictorily beat beastly both his wives after demanding the extra money to maintain the family.

Almost all the novels of Emecheta give son more value and marginalise girls. In her other novels like *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl* and others, we find girl sex oppression. The characters Akunna of *Bride Price* and Ojebeta of *The Slave Girl* are equally victims of girl sex oppression in a man-ruled society. They embody the true Nigerian perpetuating orders where the birth of a girl is never welcomed. Their men know that girls bring wealth to their family through bride price still they don't consider girls worth of love and equal sex with male. They never rely on the fact that both the sexes male and female are equally needed to contribute for the development of human existence and should be treated equally.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta has revealed the colonial trapping of Nnu Ego that one side it was teaching her something and the other side her Igbo culture something else. On the other hand she was a complete Igbo tradition follower that fettered her against bringing change. Her psyche was infused with old order of her own culture. Colonial mission too was teaching her to give secondary position to the girls. That's why she decides to send their son abroad to build a better career. The couple were supporting Oshia thorough out his study, marginalising girls from such good opportunity. At the end Emecheta tries to focus the expectation of Nnu Ego from her sons that ultimately turned unexpected. She had expected that one day her son will turn into a good Igbo man. After completing the study of her son, she will return with all her children to her ancestral Ibuza. But her dream is shattered to pieces as Oshia becomes the product of western culture living in America who never values his parents or prefers to go to his ancestral place. Nnu Ego was realising that although men prefer sons and she had both, still it couldn't appease her.

Emecheta here tries to reveal that any system continues unless it is put into practice and contributed by both sexes. The Nigerian discriminatory gender system is contributed by both men and women. So, gender discrimination takes its space and emerges from family where parents bring-up their children on the basis of children's certain sex. The way parents mould a child, the same way it takes its form. Oshia used to help in his mother's hawking of cigarettes, paraffin, clothes and chopped wood when he was a young child unaware of masculinity. But with the growing age, his patriarchal family awakens him manly power which he learnt from his father Nnaife's inherent patriarchal nature. Now the masculinity extends in him and his treatment towards his sisters and mothers gave a new turn. The same Oshia one day shows disinterest when his co-mother Adaku asks him to fetch some water from the tap for cooking meal. Oshia immediately not only ignores the words of Adaku but retorts her in a very harsh tone, "I'm not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking?"

That's a woman's job" (143). Emecheta here tries to bring our attention to the discriminatory upbringing of male and female sex among Igbos. She wants to indicate that such discriminatory upbringing emerges within a family where all prefer 'male sex'. The notable feminist critic and theorist Nancy Chodorow has rightly contended that gender discrimination is emerged out of mother's distinguishable nursing of both the sexes. Family gives a platform where girls identify themselves with the mother, and a close relationship between daughters and mother occurs while boys identify themselves with the father separating themselves from mother. Boys' bringing up in a certain way creates a monopoly towards females. Parents encourage the boys to develop in a way that they could be able latter to participate in the public spheres while girls are prepared in a way that they remain merely the home subjects. (Chodorow 169)

P.H.Collins in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, And The New Racisms* points out on the contribution of black women regarding the orthodox patriarchal mechanisms. She says that black women are equally responsible to treat their sons and daughters differently. They provide extra attention to their sons marginalising daughters being the secondary objects. According to her, Gender and sexuality both have historically been crosscutting issues within the framework of patriarchal structures. Debra Dickerson in her memoir *An American Story* comes up with her encountered gender discrimination which she narrates in it. She is disclosing the prevailed gender discrimination among black families through her own observed experiences. She unfolds miseries of her childhood days. She tells us, she was having five sisters and brothers--four girls and one boy. Her mother often ignored her in spite of her many academic achievements. Her mother time to time made her realise the position of a girl. She forgave even the big mistakes of her sons but never her daughter since she was a daughter so deserved such ill-treatment. Dickerson here argues that such neglected attitude of a mother towards her sons lead them to turn into a complete patriarchal product that is diabolic forces for girls. Therefore, first of all, such discriminatory nature of mother with her daughters needs to be changed. (Cited in Collins 83)

Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is moral to those people who pine for sons, and are negligent with the girl children. She tries to teach her readers that the discriminatory nature of children upbringing should be rooted out first of all from family because family is a small society where a child learns his/her custom and culture. Her lesson regarding son biased nature of males is reflected through the tongue of her protagonist Nnu Ego:

The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband—and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is a man's world, which women will always help to build. (210)

Emecheta wants a new spark of change in the psyche of Nigerian women who set their mind that girls can't be source of their support. Through the lens of Nnu Ego, she reveals us the Nigerian rooted monopoly where a mother breeds sons with a plenty of expectations that one day they will be pillars of support for the family but the dream is dismantled in case the sons prove failure to bring such expectations true. Her patriarchal culture has moulded her in such arena which fascinated her to have more and more sons. She thought perhaps her sons will extend her dignity and will make her fortunate one for her further life. She wished to embrace her Igbo culture after her son will complete his study. But her patience was losing day by day when she got herself trapped in a patriarchal land. All types of desolation overcame her when she realised she can never be free from the chains of patriarchal subjugation. The sons whom she had expected inordinate, proved opposite to her. "After such wandering on one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, 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" (253). After her death, her son Oshia visited Nigeria to attend her burial. He built a grand shrine on her name, by taking money on credit, to prove himself a good son in the eyes of his people. Emecheta conjectures that after her death she never responded to women who requested her to give fertility. This shows a woman's anger towards social strangulating mechanisms.

Emecheta teaches all women not to expect such unnecessary expectation from their sons before they are capable to be worthy of expectation. Had Nnu Ego not expected a lot from her children especially from her sons, perhaps she could not have died premature. Had she been able to break the old perpetuating norms of her Igbo pities she most probably would have been satiated from her life. The real cause of her death was lying in her unchangeable traditional character. She thought any transgression of her Igbo culture will bring menace to her. Such subservient psyche had robbed her completely.

Works Cited

Primary text

Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys Of Motherhood*. London: Alison and Bushy, 1979.

Secondary text

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1948

Alladi, Uma. *Women and Her Family: Indian and Afro-American Literary Perspective*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1989.

Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*. London: David Campbell, 1970.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge (2nd edition), 1990.

Collins, P.H. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, And The New Racisms*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

- Emecheta, Buchi. *Second Class Citizen*. Alison and Busby: New York, 1974.
- . *The Bride Price*. Alison and Bushy: New York, 1976.
- . *The Slave Girl*. London: Alison and Bushy, 1977.
- . "Feminism with a small 'f'". *Criticism and Ideology*. Uppasala: Scandavian Institute of African Studies, 1988.
- Friedan, Betty. *Beyond Gender*. John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Millat, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Avon, 1970. Ballantine Books, 1988.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/ Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Tioye, Inny Marie. *UnwindingThreads*. African Writers Series. London: Heinemann, 1994.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Curry, 1993.
- Umeh, Marie and Davidson. Interview with Buchi Emecheta in *Ba Shiru: A Journal of African Languages and Literatures*, 1985.
- Ward, Cynthia. "What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of 'Otherhood'". *PMLA*. P. 83-97. 1990. Web 20 March 2017.