

Woman's Position in Igbo Society
According to *The Joys of Motherhood*
by Buchi Emecheta

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Käsittelen tutkielmassani Buchi Emechetan romaania *The Joys Of Motherhood* (1979) antropologian ja naistutkimuksen näkökulmasta. Teoriaosuudessa pohditaan postkolonialistisen ja naiskirjallisuuden teorioiden tulkintaa mustissa teksteissä. Kirjallisuuden käsittelyssä on huomioitu Chandra Talpade Mohantyn kritisimi länsimaiden kulttuurikolonialismin vaaroista ja siitä kuinka tärkeää on huomioida myös tutkijan lähtökohdat. Kirjan analyysissä naiseuden näkökulmaan sisällytetään Kamala Visweswaranin ajatus siitä, kuinka naiseuden tutkimukseen pitäisi kuulua paitsi sukupuoli, myös sosiaalinen asema, rotu ja seksuaalisuus. Tutkielmassa keskitytään naiseuden representaatioon Emechetan romaanissa ja samalla pohditaan kuinka totuudellisen kuvan se antaa igbo-yhteiskunnan tavasta asemoida nainen. Tartun afrikkalaisen kirjallisuuden perusdilemmaan kirjallisuuden lähtökohdista.

Afrikkalaista kirjallisuutta on kohdeltu lähes antropologiana, usein teosten kirjallinen arvo on jäänyt lähes taustalle. Yksi teoreettinen katsantokanta juontuu Henry Louis Gatesilta, joka kritisoi länsimaisia tutkijoita siitä, että kirjallisuutta kohdellaan suorana tietolähteenä antropologialle ja unohdetaan teosten kirjallinen arvo. Nyt todennan, kuinka mahdollista tuo kategorisoiminen on *The Joys Of Motherhoodin* kohdalla. Onko afrikkalaisesta naiskirjallisuudesta mahdollista ammentaa tietoa ja todellisia mielikuvia igbo-yhteiskunnan tilasta? Naisen asemaa igbo-yhteiskunnassa tarkastellaan hänen suhteessaan mieheen. Naisella on eri roolit tyttärenä, vaimona ja äitinä. Analyysiosassa käytän rinnakkain antropologisia lähteitä ja kirjallisuustutkijoiden näkemyksiä Emechetan ja afrikkalaisen kirjallisuuden ominaisuuksista.

Tutkielmani osoittaa, että Emechetan romaani *The Joys of Motherhood* kuvaa aidosti igbo-yhteiskuntaa kirjan historiallisena ajanjaksona 1930-luvulta 1960-luvulle. Emecheta luo voimakkaan mielikuvan alemman luokan naisen raa'asta elämästä äitiyden onnen etsimisen tiellä. Kuvaukseen sisältyy vahvasti kritiikki ja äitiyden autuuden ironisointi. Romaani näyttää siis toimivan paitsi antropologisena lähteenä, myös kärkeväenä kannanottona afrikkalaisten naisten oikeuksien puolesta.

Asiasanat: afrikkalainen kirjallisuus, musta feminismi, naisen asema, Emecheta, igbo

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1. Introduction

In many western societies since the 1960s women's rights and freedoms have been regarded as privileged signifiers of democracy, civilisation and development. A wave of female consciousness swept through the Western world from the early rising of women's movements and associations in the beginning of the 20th century to the rising awareness of equal rights in the third world at the end of the century. Maggie Humm sums up the significance in the change of thought feminism has in her preface to the collected book of feminist essays *Feminism, a Reader*: "Feminism radically questions our understanding of men and women and the social structures which maintain their differences" (xi, 1992). Radical feminism can be argued to be one of the most powerful political innovations of the twentieth century.

When women's studies began to engage in cross-cultural and cross-border issues in the 1970s, scholars started to focus their attention on colonized women (Robertson & Chaudhuri 2003, 6). The feminist wave progressed from the west to the east and south. Third world women began to make noise. Scholarly interest in women's issues was rising also in third world universities in the 1970s. For example in Nigeria the growing amount of people questioning a woman's place in the quest for democracy and change in the country lead to the birth of a

radical-feminist association Women In Nigeria (WIN) in 1982 (Abdullah-Olukoshi & Olukoshi, 1989, 14). In African literary circles feminist literary criticism started gaining ground only in the late 1980's (Nfah-Abbenyi 2005, 260). This can explain in part why some of the second generation African women writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s such as the Senegalese Mariama Bâ and the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta did not automatically label themselves as feminist writers, even if their outlook was and is quite feminist.

The new feminist point of view was appealing also to the western feminist researchers. As western feminists shifted their focus of study to women in the Third World, however, they gradually realised the ethical danger involved in trying to speak for women as a universal and unified group. The social order in the Third World may seem as primitive and exploitative and plainly unfair towards woman, especially to the untrained eye, but on what grounds can one criticise the situation without knowing the cultural and historical background of the society they live in and their views on life?

Indeed, western feminism faces complex issues when discussing Third World women. It is impossible to place only women and their culture under examination without taking into consideration the history of colonialism. This intricate relationship between Western researchers and their object of study has caused great debate. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty

points out in her ground-breaking article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses": "Western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship" (1988, 68). Mohanty wants to draw attention to the damaging political effects of western feminist scholars on non-western women with their new type of cultural colonialism. In the eyes of certain Third World women, western feminism merges with the idea of imperialism. To counter this problem, Mohanty suggests that one should pay special attention not only to the cultural background of the object of study but also to that of the researcher. Although one has to be aware of the negative effects of cultural imperialism and choose carefully one's starting point for an objective study, it is nevertheless the effects of colonialism that provide the means for even this study to take place. The cultural imperialism of British colonisation imposed English upon the indigenous peoples of the colonised lands. Language acted as another means of slavery when one's mother tongue usage was suppressed by the superior status of English.

Some branches of feminism assume that all women are alike. This can impede a study of Third World women, which is sensitive to cultural specificity. Kamala Visweswaran restructures Norma Alarcón saying that one should unsettle the logic of identification "by displacing gender from the center

of feminist theory, and starting from a consideration of how race, class or sexuality determines the positioning of a subject - not with being "women" but how women are different". (1995, 75) It should not be a prerogative that women are alike, or that all Third World women are alike. So in addition to the already mentioned cultural, social and historical backgrounds, one should also consider race, class and sexuality.

To be able to understand the culture more in depth one needs to be absorbed into it by means of reading literature, speaking with people from that cultural background or experience parts of their culture otherwise. The studious anthropologist would venture on location and examine the social structures and habits closely at hand, but the literary researcher is not let astray even if left behind. Literary texts can provide an excellent background for further cultural studies. Reading Buchi Emecheta for instance can reveal the social and cultural location of women in the West African Igbo society of Nigeria. It challenges the prevailing definitions and stereotypes there are of Third World women in the media and some western feminist thought. As Mohanty remarks, the western feminist discourse defines the Third World woman outside social relations, instead of examination through these very structures (1988, p.82). The problem here lies in the study of familial structures with western standards, often resulting in terms such as underdeveloped or developing. Therefore it is no wonder

that an "average Third World woman" is the enforced image of a woman in non-western societies (Mohanty 1988, 83).

Literature, on the other hand, gives room for self-reflection and most of all imagination. Whilst reading *The Joys Of Motherhood* (1979) one is not bound with the colonizing tendency of western feminism's civilising mission but taken in as part of the culture as an observing student. Literary texts have the advantage of giving subtle education and leaving space for personal observations, almost as if one was there to see the action take place.

One way to try to learn about a foreign culture is to go on location and spend a period of time there. This would probably result in an understanding at a sociological and perhaps anthropological level. However, as stated above, literature can be a very educational tool for discovering new cultures. The aim of this thesis is to study woman's position in Nigeria, specifically in the Igbo society, with the aid of a novel by the Nigerian female author Buchi Emecheta. After reading Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the difference in attitude towards life and the spiritual world the Igbos live in, made me want to explore the social and cultural history of the people in question in more detail. It is this "tourism of the soul" that Donna Haraway quotes from a poem by Wendy Rose; it is the appropriation of another's experience, often a failed attempt to find similarities in one's own range of

experiences (Haraway p.113). Haraway points out how easy it is to find and construct dichotomies instead of finding affinities in anti-colonialist and feminist discourses (*ibid.*).

This thesis aims to find such affinities by focusing on the social location of women in the Igbo society depicted in *The Joys*. As the study is a literary one, it will take the relevant literary theories in consideration and will use them as a basis for analysing the novel and finding its underlying perceptions.

Throughout the whole novel, and during the examination of it, we also need to bear in mind that the period of time it depicts spans roughly from the 1930s to the 1960s. The depicted era runs a swift from traditional Igbo village society to colonial urban city life. Despite the modern shift the novel remains a historical one, narration ends in the early years of Nigerian independence in the 1960s.

Buchi Emecheta is a diasporic Nigerian author based in England. Her oeuvres concentrate always on black women; the settings vary mostly between Nigeria and The United Kingdom. Some of the works are historic, like *The Joys of Motherhood*, but she writes about contemporary issues as well. Although English is far from being her mother tongue, her way of

depicting world with a slightly code switched¹ English is quite appealing.

Emecheta's almost macabre style of writing and creating stories is still filled with a peculiar sense of humour that conveys the hope her characters still hold for the future. Although the story of Nnu Ego's life is rather a sad one, it is justified by the social hierarchy of Igbo culture, which is criticised by the author at the same time. The aim of the study is to see the different ways in which woman is perceived in that hierarchy. Visweswaran has noticed how an ethnographer's theoretical approaches are becoming more decentred: "If one wants to understand anything about a woman, don't start with women but with their relations to men" (1995, 19). This is one of the ways in which *The Joys of Motherhood* will be analysed - woman will be examined as she is seen in respect to men. This more anti-colonial approach aims to be more appropriate in finding the affinities rather than building the dichotomies. The findings are backed up with background information on the culture and kinship structures from other sources.²

¹ Code-switching means the alternation between two languages in the same discussion, in this case Igbo and English.

² A very valuable source of information has been the library of The Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, where I spent three weeks in December 2003 as a study grant holder. In Uppsala I also had the opportunity to discuss these issues with fellow Africanists, which was an interesting and a rewarding experience.

1.1. Black, postcolonial, feminist literature

Discussing third world literature, and especially that of the African continent, we are inevitably faced with terms postcolonial and black literature. Adding the critical female author we are left with Black feminist literature. All the above terms are fairly vast and complex, which is why a short introduction and a specified point of view will be presented at this early stage to enable a better basis for analysing the literary work in question.

The term "black" is undoubtedly insufficient. The term "black" does not even begin to describe the cultural variety it covers in the Third World and the African American literature. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. disentangles Black literature in his essay "Criticism in the Jungle", he makes a few rudimentary marks that I find crucial to note. The African canon "occupies space in at least two traditions: a European or American literary tradition, and one of the several related but distinct black traditions" (1984, 4). This leaves the black literary work produced in Western language twofold with its double heritage. Gates continues, "Its visual tones are white and black and its aural tones are standard and vernacular" (ibid). The vernacular in the African tradition is the standard from which the black texts derive from. The black oral literary forms added to the European literary traditions form a new kind

of black literature. Emecheta, for instance, draws from the oral tradition as we will see later on. However, pinpointing the vernacular in black texts often leads to the dismissal of the text structure. Gates sees that the language of the actual text in black literature is repressed and the structure of the language becomes transparent (1984, 5-6). According to Gates, the repression can be seen also in the handling of the texts, in many cases the black texts are seen as sociology or anthropology rather than pure literature.

In my point of view this can be addressed to the Western canons accordingly. Interdisciplinary inspection of any literary work can produce knowledge in the anthropological or the sociological fields. For the Western reader the black texts allow this kind of inspection perhaps at a more concrete level than the canonised western texts. The same might be said about the African reader studying for example the Brontës. A literary work is nearly always a reflection of the writer's inherent society or culture. Joseph Obi, a Nigerian sociologist, reckons that "our understanding of the broader relationship between the text and the context of African literature may well be enhanced by the sociological perspective" (2002, 11). Therefore the study of sociology of literature should not be belittled. The interdisciplinary nature of the study will use both the sociological features found in the Igbo society as well as the literary analysis of the Igbo story *The Joys of Motherhood*.

What Gates (1984, 5-6) sees as an important feature of black literature, and claims the unaware researcher a failure, is the figuration and the discreteness of black texts. The elaborate ways of signifying things at a level where one needs acute metaphorical literacy. Metaphors are common to all types of literature, but the reader needs to pay special attention when studying black texts. This does not mean that the uninitiated reader would be unable to read black texts, but knowing some of the background will help in understanding the texts as part of the cultural tradition. Some African literary critics have claimed that there is no specific need for a literary theory, that the literature in itself is such a strong evidence of the uniqueness and "Africanness" on its own.³

Most of West African literature, although as legacy of the colonial era mostly written in European languages, has its roots in the oral tradition of storytelling (Amuta 1989, pp. 10, 69, 105). African scholars have even introduced the term "orature" as opposed to literature to emphasise the importance of oral tradition in the Black African literature.⁴ African authors are therefore not only writers but also transcribes; oral literature includes the origin of the oral folklore, that is the storyteller or the performer.

³ This is in part due to the diverse use of language, the oral tradition has such a strong influence in the African literature.

⁴ In her book "Beyond the boundaries - African literature and literary theory", Mineke Schipper suggests that the founder of the term orature is among others Ugandan scholar Pius Zirimu. (1989, 64)

According to Inyama (1992, 110), folklore is a powerful source and influence on the development of modern African writing; therefore it is not surprising to find so many elements of the old spiritual world of Nigerian culture in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Some view that separate African literary theories or western theories such as post-colonial literary theory could be made redundant as basis of theoretical framework for any research on African literature, because the African oral tradition offers a framework of its own (Nfah-Abbenyi 2005, 264). The traditional beliefs also show the way woman is thought of in the society. Folklore and oral tradition were the first source of inspiration for Emecheta to start telling stories, in other words writing in the first place:

But the Ibo storyteller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt... It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a storyteller, like my Big Mother.⁵

The oral tradition in the Igbo culture that Buchi Emecheta portrays is divided into two major categories: "akuko-ifo" and "akulu-ala". A note on this explains the realities of the novel somewhat better. Akuko-ifo includes tales of the imaginary world, where there is a visible female powerlessness. Akulu-ala on the other hand, represents the realistic world and reveals female centrality (Azuonye 1992, pp. 2-3). As the novel

⁵ Extraxt taken from Nnaemeka's article *From Orality to Writing*

demonstrates, females play a central part in the running of everyday life, although the men prefer to see them as under their control. It seems that although the women make an immense contribution to the household, even they themselves are sometimes oblivious to the reality of the matter.

Almost everything seems to be explicable by spirits in the Igbo culture. "Chi", the personal god, is prayed to for a range of desires from fertility to success in work. The protagonist of the novel *Nnu Ego* often refers to her chi and clearly prays to her personal god, as if the chi is omnipresent.⁶ If a woman or a man has a great number of children it also enhances her or his chances of becoming an "ancestor". The ancestors are thanked and prayed for, as the dead are always a part of the lives of the living. This brings more importance to the patriarchal reproductive function of the female. It is due to the woman or women that men may become ancestors. Therefore it is important to have children, to be blessed by one's chi. The power of personal god reigns even in political institutions. Michael Chukwuma, who has compiled a history of the Nigerian political order and religion, states that "each Igbo in himself was seen as a religious phenomenon, because every Igbo was believed to have in him his personal deity which was called *chi*" (1985, 145). This meant even when exercising his political rights every Igbo was guided by his

⁶ On page 212 *Nnu Ego* cries out to her son, talking about her other son: " Oh my chi --- May his chi help him."

chi. In other words the presence of the personal deity is very strong and affects everything.

Postcolonial as a term refers to the era after the colonisation by European imperialists. The decolonisation of Nigeria, its independence from The United Kingdom, took place on the 1st of October in 1960. As a literary or critical approach it deals with literature by authors of the formerly colonised lands. It may also deal with literature written about colonisation, despite the authors' origin. Postcolonial theory emerged in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) as the founding work of this theoretical orientation. The theory is under constant scrutiny, for its various connotations and implications. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin contend that "the idea of post-colonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing" (1989, 11). As Maria Eriksson Baaz notes, whereas before post-colonialism was almost withheld to only former colonised societies, the more recent postcolonial theorising has come to broaden the concept (2001, 7). Post-colonialism includes the time of colonisation, since "colonial is not dead, since it lives on in its after-effects" (Hall 1996, 247-48).

Feminism is another term that needs some clarification before *The Joys of Motherhood* will be claimed as part of a

literary canon labelled feminist literature. Pam Morris defines feminism as "a political perception based on two fundamental premises (1993, 1)". She feels that gender difference is laid down as a foundation of the structural inequality between sexes that results in women's systematic social injustice. The inequality is not a biological necessity but produced from the cultural construction of gender differences. Feminism, as I see it, is a political tool whose real aim is to make itself unnecessary.

Nigerian professor of cultural and gender studies Molara Ogundipe-Leslie lists two tasks given by feminists to the female writer. First of all they should tell about being a woman and secondly their object should be to describe reality from a woman's perspective (1987, 5).

African let alone Nigerian literature, as well as the society has been male-dominated. Nigerian female authors did not have easy access to publishing, even writing was almost impossible due to the little extra time a woman has after taking care of all the household chores. However, women played a significant role in the art of storytelling and singing poetry. Some women became semi-professional and had their very own repertoire of songs and stories. Most women remained domestic singers, that is singing and storytelling was a very informal practise and formed a natural part of daily life (LaPin 1984, 107). Susan Andrade claims that the spirit of

nationalism brought about the women novelists "to occupy the modern literary marketplace -- at around the time of decolonisation" (2002, 42). On the basis of this notion, it can be argued that all African literature written by women is post-colonial. Emecheta is not the first eminent female author. The very first Black African female novelist is the fellow Nigerian Flora Nwapa, without whom Emecheta would have probably never started writing in the first place. She was the source of inspiration to her (Busby 1996, xiv). Emecheta regards Nwapa as "the mother of a female tradition in [Nigerian women's] fiction" (Stratton 1994, 119). Emecheta does not disregard the male authors, such as the first Nigerian claim to literary fame, Chinua Achebe, but she feels the African women are misrepresented in their works (Ezeigbo 1996, 23).⁷

1.2. Emecheta on feminist literature and authorship

Buchi Emecheta has been regarded as a feminist writer (among others Brown 1981, 35). She has been the object of study in not only African writing but feminist literature. This comes as no surprise for the reader familiarised with her works. Most of her fiction study life from the female perspective. The titles

⁷ In an interview with Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo Emecheta commented the following about igbo women in literature: "Igbo women survive in spite of all odds. Achebe is an excellent writer, but I feel bad about his women and all those other male writers who are creating colorless women" (Ezeigbo 1993, 16)

alone tempt to view the author as feminist, for example the piece of study, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Not only do the literary works depict the life an African woman leads, but also the narrative is very often told in a criticizing light. This is quite prominent in her titles as well, such as *Slave Girl* (1977), *Bride Price* (1976), *Second Class Citizen* (1974).

The author herself shies the stigma of being labelled as a feminist writer. Her works are mostly autobiographical and thus seen from the female point of view, which makes them automatically feminine. Emecheta does not give too much credit for the theoretical feminist ideology as can be seen in a paper she gave at the Second African Writers Conference in Stockholm in 1986. In her often quoted paper, which is entitled *Feminism with a small 'f'!* she notes the following:

Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f. (1988, 175)

Emecheta does not automatically see herself as a feminist, although her writing draws attention to feminist issues. The "ism" is clearly not felt as strongly as the actual issues. Emecheta is not alone in shying away from being called a feminist. Feminism has been a controversial issue among the Third World authors, mainly because it is firmly linked to western ideals. Danish Africanist Signe Arnfred argues that

partly the reason why the term feminism itself is not favoured by African authors nor scholars is that for some reason it neglects motherhood almost completely. Western feminists frequently focus on work, politics and sexuality as they view them the more theoretically challenging aspects of feminist study, whereas African scholars do not see the issue of motherhood as theoretically irrelevant. This in part explains the certain reservation towards the term "feminism" in African context (Arnfred 2003, 2). Nigerian researcher Ifi Amadiume argues that the very thought of women's power being based on the logic of motherhood is offensive to Western feminists since in the European system wifehood and motherhood were the means of enslavement for women. On the contrary, in the African system of patriarchy motherhood was the women's means of empowerment (Amadiume 1997, 114).

Indian author Madhu Kishwar points out that "western feminism is an offshoot of individualism and liberalism" (199, 272). Individualism is not a habitual form of thinking in the Indian society; this is also true to the Igbos or almost any other West African tribe. The common good is the source of personal happiness and not vice versa. Katherine Frank notes that "feminism is **by definition** an individualistic ideology in contrast to the communal nature of African society" (1987,

17).⁸ Kishwar also stresses the other possible cause for the dislike of being labelled a feminist. She sees it again as a tool of cultural imperialism (1999, 277). This can be understood also on the basis of the previous reference. The western ideals of individualism and liberalism are imposed upon "the Third World feminist" as a side effect.

If feminism is claimed to be a crude generalisation as such, so is Third World feminism. The term African feminism could be used for writers like Emecheta. In the literary field there have only been a few Nigerian women to claim fame, as the female Nigerian critic, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, writes (1988, 62): "If [Flora] Nwapa is the challenger, Buchi Emecheta is the fighter. For the first time, female readers through female characters are aware of their subjugation by their fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers and sons." Not only the topics but also the straight-forward manner Emecheta employs in her works sets her agenda right away. Even if she does not liked to be called a feminist, an African voice for African women she most certainly is.

The moment of glory in the history of Nigerian women's movement, has undoubtedly been the famous 1929 Igbo Women's War, or Ogu Umunwanyi as it is known in Igbo. The Igbo and Ibibio women were mobilised to protest or actually to refuse to pay the taxes the British intended to impose on the Eastern

⁸ added emphasis

provinces of Nigeria.⁹ The British call it the Aba riots, of which Susan Andrade notes that it limits its scope and "depoliticizes its feminist impetus" (2002, 52). Language is used to control or even transform history. Nonetheless, the Women's War is seen as one of the most remarkable milestones in Nigerian feminism that is after the introduction of the Western patrilinear social system. Women were very active in running the society before the British invasion. Igbo women's associations were crucial in the egalitarian run affairs of state. According to Amadiume, the European systems undermined the traditional empowering structures of African women's socio-cultural systems (1997, 111). Nonetheless, it seems that Igbo society has always been male-orientated, and women had been of lesser value. The African literary researcher Marieh Umeh states that equal rights to all citizens is made a mockery in Nigeria and Emecheta is indeed "right on target in her consistent impassioned attack on female victimization and deprivation in the face of male self-actualisation and attendant use of power" (1996, xxxiii). How this impassioned but accurate depiction of female position is laid out in *The Joys of Motherhood*, we are about to unravel.

⁹ The war used the traditional methods Igbo women had in negotiations, such as "sitting on a man", where wives refused sex with their husbands and only prepared food for themselves and their children, not the husbands.

2. Woman's position

In Igbo society a woman is always seen according to her relationship with a man. She is a daughter, a wife or a mother. According to *The Joys of Motherhood* or *Emecheta*, a woman is blessed if she is fortunate enough to be all three in this patriarchal society.

Emecheta's text draws attention to feminist issues very directly, sometimes being almost disturbing in its outspoken tone. She addresses topics such as women's education, (in)equality between genders and the role of women. Her poignant illustrations of the hardships of a woman lead the reader to think there is hardly anything more difficult in this world than being a woman. At times, her satiric criticism leaves room to ponder on the realities of the matter. She draws attention to the problems through her protagonist's views on life. Although she is very sharp in her way of describing the everyday life of a Nigerian lower class woman, she also shows some of the few good moments there are in a woman's life. The fact that they have to do with becoming a mother or that they are otherwise involved with the male gender seems not to cause a great contradiction. As Nnu Ego states, being pregnant is "the greatest joy of my life" (p.50). The joys of womanhood could equally well be the title of the novel: "[Nnaife] has made me into a real woman - all I want to be, a woman and a

mother." (p.53) Although the text reinforces the patriarchal gender roles, at the same time these overstated joys of womanhood subtly reveal Emecheta's underlying fine criticism of woman's position in Igbo society.

Nonetheless, historically speaking woman's position in traditional West African life was seen more flexible than man's. Amadiume emphasizes that the rotating periodic markets, shared ceremonies, marriage, organizations and trade, not to forget other cultural activities, allowed women to enjoy a vast communication network which men did not have access to (1997, 130). What is present in *The Joys of Motherhood* is a shift from traditional secured communal way of living to an urban setting, which has had its negative impact on the social network and the sense of togetherness. Having said that, we need to bear in mind that the protagonist Nnu Ego has her share of hardship. This includes poverty, which deters her from participating in social events like the mass on Sundays because she literally does not have the proper outfit.

The position women had in the traditional Igbo society may have been flexible, but that did not guarantee instant respect and equality with men. Old rhetoric was masculine and old Igbo proverbs for instance reveal prejudice and hostility towards women in social discourse (Oha 1998, 87). How does the Igbo female author Emecheta, who was trained at university in sociology, perceive the different social roles women have as

daughter, as wife and as mother? *The Joys of Motherhood* offers insight to a woman's life from a distinct feminine (or feminist) point of view.

2.1. Woman's position as a daughter

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, a child is always wanted, especially if the child is a boy. Giving birth to a girl seems a slight disappointment. The value of children and their sex will be discussed later on in chapter 3.2; now the focus is on how a daughter is positioned in the household relations and how she is expected to act. This naturally varies from daughter to daughter but some rudimentary notes can be made.

The protagonist Nnu Ego was seemingly proud of her father and of her status gained from being his daughter. This was not necessarily a deplorable thing. She was respected as the love child of a great warrior and chief. She respected herself highly because of this and thought she was worthy of more than her lazy second husband. "If you had dared come to my father's compound to ask for me, my brothers would have thrown you out" (p. 49). In other words she felt superior to her second husband. This clearly demonstrates that even if she was a woman in a patriarchal society, she had a certain dignity that no one could take away from her. Social hierarchy was high in prestige.

In the traditional setting, a woman could gain power and status through the institution of being granted the position of a male-daughter. This somewhat ambiguous term was used for a daughter remaining at her childhood home, in a family that has not succeeded in producing a legitimate heir, that is, a son. If everything worked out as hoped, the son of a male-daughter inherited the land and other property of his mother's father (Ezeigbo 1990, 152).¹⁰ Nnu Ego's mother Ona was such a powerful male-daughter. She refused to marry her lover Agbadi, as she had given her father the promise to give him any male heir she might produce. Ona's father "had maintained that she must never marry -- She was free to have men, however, and if she bore a son, he would take her father's name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made" (p.12). The male-daughter was not liked, but well respected by the wives of her lover. The legacy of Ona's arrogant independence and seemingly proud position as a male-daughter did not pass on to her daughter Nnu Ego. This is what Nnu Ego laments as she realises she does not share the boldness and proudness of her mother. "Oh, I wish I had the type of pride they say my mother had" (p.32-33).

Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father, arranged both of her daughter's marriages, receiving both times a bridewealth, or bride price, as it was referred to by Emecheta. Naturally, if a marriage

¹⁰ The old kinship structures were quite elaborate, as can be found in the extensive study by Ifi Amadiume, "Male-Daughters and Female-Husbands" (1987).

fails, the bridewealth has to be returned in full. A hasty judgement of the bride price by those unfamiliarised with the practice may view it as a means of selling and buying wives. One must also note that there is a difference between a dowry and a bridewealth. Dowry is a gift given to the woman to be married and not to her family. It is given by the parents of the bride whereas bridewealth is a more substantial donation to the parents of the bride from the groom or his family (Kayongo-Male & Onyango 1984, 13). It is true that paying the bridewealth is a sign of legitimising the marriage. It is not, however, just a financial transaction between the father and the groom or the groom's family. The amount of cattle or money paid for the bride reflects how much she will be missed by her own family. It is not only seen as a contribution to the expenditure it has taken to raise the girl, but also to the loss of future earnings contributed by the girl, whether it would be in terms of domestic services or babies (Dolphyne 1991, 7-11).

The bride wealth has also acted as a financial incentive to the married couple to see that the marriage works. For the more expensive the marriage, the more one is willing to make the relationship work. The marriage is thus stabilised by an economic contract as the bride's father is expected to pay back the bridewealth in full if the marriage fails. This is partly why Nnu Ego's position as a daughter worries her in her first

withering marriage that produces no offspring: "I am sure the fault is on my side... How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed?" (p.31). If you have ill-treated your wife and she walks out on you because of it, you will lose the bridewealth. It also acts as a sort of a pension for the daughter's parents (Siegel 1996, 230-31). It is practised in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa even today, despite some regulations on the maximum amount it can accumulate to. Bridewealth, or as it is mostly referred to in *The Joys of Motherhood*, brideprice is normally a fixed amount of money or in some cases cattle and kegs of palmwine.

A daughter has her duties to do. It does not seem to matter so much if a son refuses to help his mother to do the household chores but a girl can never fail to do this (p.128). She is also expected to have good manners and obedience towards her parents and her husband. Even as a grown up adult, Nnu Ego still has her duties as a daughter. After her father has died, she is regarded as already offending his father, for extending her welcome at her childhood home (p.158). What I find peculiar, however, is the fact that although the society seems to take the duties of a daughter very seriously, those of a wife and mother surpass them with ease. There is no other explanation for Nnu Ego's absence from her father since she left for Lagos ten years previously. Even if a daughter has become a wife, the origin is never forgotten. Nnaife refers to

Nnu Ego as the daughter of Agbadi especially at the time of hardships. This extract is a fine example of how many things may be forgiven if you are a mother as well:

It hasn't been easy, living with a daughter of Agbadi, I tell you my dear friend. Not any man could have coped with her. But she has given me brilliant children. (p.198)

The way girls are brought up, they will never forget their position in life. Nnu Ego reminded her twin daughters constantly of the fact that they are girls and they should behave accordingly. If a girl goes astray it will affect the whole family and its reputation. It is especially the mother's responsibility to make sure the girl remains chaste up until her marriage. Amadiume (1987, 94) remarks that the socialization of girls stressed sexual restraint and preparation for their roles as wives and mothers. If a girl, however, does not restrain herself from sexual activity, it will be seemingly difficult for her and for her sisters to marry well. It is a cause of great distress and shame. This is evident in Nnu Ego's household, when Nnaife finds out his daughter Kehinde is seeing a neighbouring Yoruba boy, who is Moslem. Nnaife is so upset; he almost cries (p.205). He is distressed not only because of the reputation of the family, but also because he knows he will miss out on his pension received from the bride price. It is not customary to give the bride's parents any financial consolation for the loss of their

daughter in the Yoruba tradition. Igbo girls were taught to understand that promiscuity brought great shame to the family and punishment accordingly. A severe beating or even a red hot pepper being put in her vagina was a result of pre-marital intercourse (Amadiume 1987, 96). In Lagos, Nnaife is willing to kill her daughter for the shame she has brought to him and the whole family: "My daughter with a Yoruba husband, she is better dead - and with her the father of her man (p.209). In the urban surroundings a police was called immediately and no punishment was carried out.

In the colonial Igbo society a daughter is taught early in life how to behave as a wife and what responsibilities she has as a wife: "But you are girls! They are boys. You will have to sell [wood] to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family" (p. 176). This extract also shows why girls are not usually considered worth educating. It is the man's duty to earn enough or farm enough to provide a decent standard of living for the family. Girls had to help their mothers in their business of petty trade and also in the running of the household; therefore girls rarely had the luxury of education. The shift from rural village surroundings to the urbanized postcolonial Nigeria did not ameliorate the position of young girls. Carolyn Kumah points out that "the type of formal education ensured was solely offered to boys, parents were reluctant to send their daughters

to school - a decision that would intensify the familial workload without guarantee of any future employment" (2000, 2). In addition to that, when a daughter's most ambitious goal is to get married well, the thought of education seems somewhat futile.

A daughter's worth is also a great deal less than a son's because it is the son who will continue the father's name. This is also realised by mothers who feel inadequate if they do not produce male heirs. Adaku, Nnaife's second wife gave birth to a baby boy who died shortly after his birth. She was obviously in mourning for the death of her child but her grief is accentuated by the fact that he was her first male child. She revealed to Oshia, Nnu Ego's first son that he is worth ten times more than Dumbi, her daughter (p. 128). Realising this so early in life the boys become conscious of their superior status to girls and may act accordingly.

2.2. Woman's position as wife

Marriage was mostly a transaction and a result of negotiation between two families in the traditional setting (Siegel 1996, 222). Love marriages began to be more common as village traditions started to languish in the urbanised postcolonial setting. The matrimonial accord is very true in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The protagonist hardly has a say in the choice of a

husband. Nnu Ego's father tries his best to marry her daughter well, and in doing so, he does not concentrate solely on her happiness and well-being but also to that of his family and his position.

Nnu Ego longs to have children and therefore to find a mate, so her father finds her one. When the first husband deemed Nnu Ego a failure, another negotiation was needed. The official tone of a matrimonial settlement can be seen in the way Nnu Ego was received by her second husband Nnaife in Lagos. Nnu Ego found him ugly and feminine with his potbelly and sagging arms: "Why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman" (p.42). Despite all this, they were to form a union of marriage. This Nnaife ensures very quickly by demanding "his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind" (p.44). The marriage was consummated and the new wife was shown her status. Nnu Ego was subdued but eventually pleased, as the deed falsified her infertility.

Even if a marriage is a loveless one, it gives the woman a dignified precise status. In the case of an adult daughter living at home as a male-daughter, independence is a double-edged sword. A woman may be free to have lovers, but does not gain the social benefits of friendship from her co-wives and other women. In her death bed Nnu Ego's mother Ona gives her final will to Agbadi as regards her daughter (p.28):

See that however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego you allow her to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman.

Being a woman implies being a mother, which normally in traditional Igbo society insists on marriage. The reason for Ona's appeal is her own position as male-daughter, a position which denies her the possibility of matrimony. Ona never gained the solidarity and companionship of other (married) women. In her position as a male-daughter she is deprived of personal happiness found in a secure relationship and, in addition, she is alienated from other women, especially the wives of her lover. Being a respectable wife gives a woman access to networks and friendships with other women, as can be seen with Nnu Ego's father's other wives.

"The most important thing is to get them good husbands", Nnu Ego says of her daughters (p. 189). This is true because of the structure of society based on old-fashioned gender roles. It is not only the men that enforce this somewhat hierarchical structure but the women who educate their daughters about the importance of men. It was not usually common to educate your daughters, for instance, because women would only work as petty traders or domestics. On one hand, a husband would rather have her wife less educated so that she would not know better, on the other hand, an educated wife is worth more than an uneducated one.

The institution of polygamy is something that affects

greatly a woman's position as wife. Polygamy remains a common practise in many parts of Africa, but it is usually welcomed by women as well (Dolphyne 1991, 17-19). Many Igbos still practise polygamy even today and it has tacit support from the society, since it is still a lawful form of marriage (Uko 2002). More recently, educated women usually oppose to their husband having another wife, because it would entail the sharing of any economical assets the husband might bring to the household. Nevertheless, as Luise White confirms, polygamy, "actual or potential, open or secret, remains an important factor influencing the character of African family life" (1984, 67). If a husband gets a new wife, it usually means a relief from constant housework and matrimonial duties. The wives help each other with nursing, housework and give each other company when the husband is otherwise engaged or when the husband has travelled elsewhere to earn money for the family, as was the case with Nnu Ego and Nnaife's other wives. A man's status and wealth is greater the more wives he has. This is probably why Nnaife was so exited to have a new wife (p.120): "Beaming like a child presented with a new toy, he showed Adaku, as his new wife, round the yard." Children are regarded as a great wealth, therefore it is important to have several wives who produce more children (Gordon 1996, 253). The more children, the better, but the gender of the children has an effect on how the wife is valued.

Matrimonial duties can form a solid reason for contempt or jealousy in a polygamous marriage among the wives, when a husband favours one wife over the other. Even in the loveless marriage Nnu Ego has with her 'jelly of a husband' Nnaife, she cannot help her intense emotions of frustration and agony surface. When Nnaife had her second wife, he exercised his marital right in their one room apartment also the very first night Adaku had arrived. This caused great annoyance to Nnu Ego, which was by all means not lessened by her husband's remark (p.124) as follows:

My senior wife cannot go to sleep. You must learn to accept your pleasures quietly, my new wife Adaku. Your senior wife is like a white lady: she does not want noise.

Sexual pleasure is very rarely stated in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in Nnu Ego's case it is close to extinct. Her mother Ona superseded even Adaku in her exhibit of sexual pleasure. Ona's lover Agbadi made love to her in the same compound, where his wives tried to sleep. The following morning his senior wife was very ill. She had had a seizure whilst listening to her husband giving pleasures to his mistress Ona. The senior wife was so shattered that the seizure was fatal (pp.21-22). It is interesting how Emecheta makes the strong, independent women to cause harm and anxiety in the obedient good women. However, the obedient good woman Nnu Ego explains the lack of romance with her husband with the new urban setting (p.52):

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.

A wife's position as part of her husband's family rather than part of her childhood family is fortified once she gives birth to sons. The following indictment is thrown at Nnaife's second wife's face by Nnaife's close friend and former neighbour Ubani:

Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married only to you, you would have ended his life on this round of his visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years time will go and help another man's immortality. (p. 166)

Having only girls breaks the second wife Adaku eventually. This is partly why she becomes the wife gone astray. As she cannot produce a son to her husband, and is belittled because of it, she makes a drastic decision to leave the cramped and hostile home (p.127). On one hand, she cannot bear her position as a wife with no sons, but, on the other hand, she does not abandon motherhood, as she has high hopes for her daughters.

In rural areas where farming is the means of survival, wives help to grow the crops and the more wives, the more hands to work on their husband's land. In this context, polygamy helps to reproduce and stabilise agricultural production. Obviously, this viewpoint is not favourable to a wife. In Nnu Ego's first marriage she was reduced to a level of a pair of

hands working in the field, since she could not get pregnant. Nigerian women have suffered the patriarchal control in agriculture, where over 50% of the work is done by women, but less than five percent of the land is owned by women. Wives may be appreciated in the field, but they are not consulted over matters concerning the land (Idike 1991, 16). The drastically different lifestyle that a city has to offer has decreased the popularity of polygamy. With no land to cultivate and little space to live in, many wives are no longer as useful as before.

A senior wife is the highest status for a woman in the kinship structure. As Nfah-Abbenyi notes, authors such as Buchi Emecheta and the Senegalese Mariama Bâ illustrate how a woman has at least three things standing in her favour if she is a senior wife (2005, 267). She "can use these with impunity:" her position as a senior wife, her status as mother and her status as mother of sons, "since her sons are the direct heirs to the family's property" (*ibid*). In other words, a woman's position as wife also depends on how many wives her husband has and whether she was there first or last. This was one of the reasons why Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father, was not eager to give her daughter to someone who had already married (p. 37). If the first wife of a husband is also the mother of the husband's first son she is respected highly. The situation had altered in Nnu Ego's opinion as they lived in the city and not in the village where traditions prevailed. In the city everything was

more expensive and seniors were not as important as in the village (p. 118). In addition to that, families often live in small flats in the cities, whereas in the village a family would have a whole compound with a hut for every wife and her children. Nonetheless, the senior wife was the one to see to the family's well being in case the husband was away and sometimes even if the husband was there. "She was supposed to be strong, being the senior wife, to behave more like a man than a woman" (p. 140).

Junior wives were often rivals to their seniors, although in the long run they are usually appreciated by all those involved. Conduct towards the senior wife is extremely important in the novel. Adaku is reprimanded for having shown off her wealth to her senior wife (p.166). Back in the village Nnu Ego addresses her husband's brother's senior wife Adankwo (who was actually inherited by Nnaife, explained further ahead) as mother (p.156) and Adankwo accordingly named Nnu Ego daughter (p.159). The hierarchy among wives is quite explicit.

Men are allowed to have many wives, and they are sometimes even forced to have many wives in case their brother dies. As Siegel clarifies: "under the *levirate*, a man assumes the responsibility for his dead brother's widow and children, while under *sonorate*, a woman takes the place of her dead or barren sister" (1996, 232). Adaku, Nnaife's second wife, was inherited from his brother. His brother had a few other wives

too, for whom Nnaife had to send money annually. The economic burden, although substantial, seems very light at the prospect of suddenly having several new wives under your roof. The inherited surprising new set of wives can be very upsetting for the senior wife. Nnu Ego reprimanded herself in her father's words when her faint refusal to accept a new wife in her house crumbled.

Listen, daughter, I have seven wives of my own. I married three of them, four I inherited on the deaths of relatives. Your mother was only a mistress, who refused to marry me. So why do you want to stand in your husband's way? Please don't disgrace the name of the family again. (p.119)

When Nnaife's second wife had fled from him during his absence his male pride was hurt so that he had to get another wife. To accentuate his masculinity, he went on to impregnate her other inherited wife back in the village. Funnily enough, Nnu Ego did not like the first junior wife Adaku so much, but the second one, Okpo, she welcomed after her initial shock.

It seems that a man in the traditional Igbo society can do almost whatever it pleases him to do as regards family life. A woman has to take care of the children, the house, cooking and cleaning and yet she is supposed to be a sweet mother and a pleasing lover. However, a wife has some weapons she can use against her husband, if he has acted inappropriately. The old Igbo tradition of "sitting on a man" is a system that is recognised by men as well, and to a certain extent wives may

benefit from employing this method. Sitting on a man signifies a sort of a domestic strike against men. Nnu Ego and Adaku try this against Nnaife in order to get more money towards the housekeeping (p.134). They cooked food for themselves and the children, but left him hungry, so he would realise how little money goes towards the food in comparison to his expenditure on palm wine. The wives do not succeed in increasing the meagre funds, but instead they both end up getting a good beating.

A complete woman without a husband does not exist according to Adankwo, the wife of Nnu Ego's husband's deceased brother (p. 158). A man has his duty and a woman hers. "Manage with Nnaife's income and look after your child. That is your duty. Be satisfied with his earnings. Let him do his duty" (p.81). The duty of a wife seems less valuable in the city where suddenly the man becomes the sole provider, this at least in theory. Although the man's duty is to bring the woman and his children food and shelter, it is more often the wife who is ultimately responsible for the well being of the family. Women are forced to find means to gather income.

A clear example of this in the novel is when Nnaife and Nnu Ego are being summoned at Nnaife's trial. First Nnaife claims he pays for his sons' education, then Nnu Ego confesses that the money from selling firewood goes into paying the school fees. There is, however, no contradiction there, according to Nnu Ego, as she explains: "Nnaife is the head of

our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays" (p.217).

This kind of family structure where woman is taught to believe her husband is the sole provider keeps the woman subordinate to the husband when she actually runs the family. Nnu Ego's belief in her position as a mere commodity to his husband is not difficult to understand when you bear in mind an earlier remark made by Nnaife in their early days of marriage (p.48): "What did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?" An ugly remark made at the time of quarrel had sunk in Nnu Ego's subconsciousness to the extent of proclaiming it under oath in the court of law.

2.3. Woman's position as a mother

Motherhood has a special status in African societies. Nigerian sociologist Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, states that when a woman gives birth, two entities are born, a baby and a mother (2003, 1). The position a mother has is linked everywhere and this is clearly seen also in the novel. In the Igbo society represented in *The Joys of Motherhood* there is nothing more important in a woman's life than becoming a mother. Grace Eche Okere, who has studied Igbo birth songs, confirms that motherhood is seen as "an attainment of the peak of the rites of passage into

womanhood" (1994, 19). The more babies a woman can produce, the more she is respected. The status and image of a sweet African mother is such a strong one, even when big international organisations help women in development they are seen in their roles as mothers rather than as citizens and people in their own right (Skard 2003, 76). Motherhood somehow implies the responsibility and selfishness that it should act for the benefit of the whole village.

Becoming a mother is a woman's job, literally. In *The Joys of Motherhood* women give birth alone at home or get help from their co-wives or friends. Like Nnu Ego's neighbour Cordelia said (p.53): "We are like sisters on a pilgrimage, why should we not help one another?" No matter how greatly valued a mother's position is, the news of motherhood are received very indifferently. Nnu Ego's very first pregnancy was announced after a big row. After a long discussion Nnu Ego feels sorry for herself since Nnaife does not even seem to rejoice after receiving the news of their forthcoming child. In the end Nnaife bluntly states (pp. 50-51): "Of course I am happy to know that I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant. But any man can do that. What do you want me to do? - Leave me alone." As harsh as he is on receiving the news, after the baby is born, he has a good reason to smoke cigarettes and drink palm wine. After the birth of twin girls, however, the joy of being a mother is not imminent. The father of the new born

babies then blurts (p.127): "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better?" The respect for mothers is twofold. Giving birth to a son is always a great achievement. For the same amount of tears, a mother does not receive much praise for giving birth to a daughter.

Nnu Ego's second loveless marriage produces seven living children, which traditionally, as Ebele Eko (1986, 216) puts it, "would have constituted the apex of maternal joy in a child-orientated society like hers". In the early days of motherhood Nnu Ego understands the value of motherhood and deems it very important (p.53): "Only now, with this son, I'm going to start loving that man. He has made me into a real woman - all I want to be, a woman and a mother." This seems to reflect the outlook of the whole society.

An infertile woman is despised. If the family receives no heirs, the woman is always the one to blame. However, when a woman does have children, especially sons, she is looked up to. Sons are the guarantee of a secured old age. They will be the ones taking care of their parents, while girls are sent away to be married. This obviously causes great stress to women, as can be seen in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Infertility causes an extremely difficult situation for the wife. If the family receives no heirs, the woman is always the one to blame. The gravity of the situation can be seen in an extract where Nnu Ego is with her first husband and fails to become pregnant.

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. (p. 32).

An infertile woman is treated as if she is something inexplicably futile. The social discrimination based on infertility is quite striking. Nnu Ego is forced to live in a secluded house far from her in-laws. In addition, she loses all the rights she gained by being the first to marry her husband, in other words her respect as a senior wife. Her husband calls her "dry and jumpy... a nervy female who is all bones" (p.32) and even her father makes a remark that she is "thin and juiceless" (p.33). After being socially oppressed in this manner, Nnu Ego starts to suffer from mental and physical deterioration. She begins to regard herself as "imperfect" and "a failure" (p. 33). *The Joys of Motherhood* criticises Igbo society quite clearly in its way of maltreating childless women. According to Susan Arndt, Emecheta is concerned with the "role of women in their own humiliation and suffering in the society" (Arndt 2002:129). Nnu Ego herself accepts the rules given by the society unquestionably. She feels her discrimination is somehow justified.

Motherhood is linked to the power and security felt in stable family life. Nnu Ego's first marriage showed the backside of it. No such secured lifestyle was achieved for having failed at producing lineage. After recovering from the

mental stress caused by the unsuccessful first marriage, Nnu Ego is married to Nnaife. Her second marriage is not the love story of the century, but she manages to get pregnant. With a twist of wicked humour from her *chi* (personal god) or the author, her first son dies soon after birth. After the sudden death of her son Nnu Ego reaches a state of insanity, and attempts suicide. The proof of her fertility had died, and she feels inadequate as a mother. She then became labelled as the failed mother. Her very last pregnancy in her forties renames her again as a failed mother after giving birth to a dead baby girl. Gaining respect through giving birth obviously causes great stress to women.

Being a mother is crucial to a woman in the Igbo society presented in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In her quest for maternal happiness, Nnu Ego has a few moments of hesitation. "Yet all because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room..." (p.167). The passive is used in the extract for denoting the Igbo society. Anthropologist Joseph Thérère Agbasiere notes that the bond between the mother and her child is "the keystone of Igbo social relations" (2000, 85). This does not only imply the necessity of becoming a mother, but also the importance of a mother's duty towards the children. If the children do not live

up to the expectations, it is the mother's fault.¹¹ If they are successful in their lives, the father is credited for it (*ibid.*).

Motherhood is used as a tool for appealing to emotions and to encourage at moments of despair. Nnu Ego was feeling disheartened because of the news she had received regarding her husband's inheritance of wives. Her father tries to elevate her and reprimand her at the same time, using her status as a mother for making her realise the proper way to behave as a senior wife and a mother of sons. Agbadi tries to make her realise her valuable position as a mother (p.119):

What greater honour is there for a woman than to be a mother, and now that you are a mother - not of daughters, who will marry and go, but of good-looking healthy sons, and they are the first sons of your husband and you are his first and senior wife. Why do you wish to behave like a woman brought up in a poor household?

The extract demonstrates how a woman's status as a mother can be deemed as valuable, and nonetheless it can be used against her. After she has achieved her status as a mother, a woman should somehow be eternally grateful for her chi, who has blessed her so greatly. If a woman does something wrong, she is instantly reproached for having brought shame to her womanhood, shaming her motherhood (p.61). Motherhood can be used as a very effective tool indeed.

¹¹ After their son has misbehaved Nnaife says on page 136: "Look at your son, Nnu Ego."

3. The Joys of Becoming a Woman: Motherhood Meets Womanhood

The Joys of Motherhood discusses not only motherhood, but also womanhood and what it is, being a woman. The title of the book stems from the last paragraph from the novel *Efuru* (1966) by Flora Nwapa.

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?

Efuru builds her identity despite her barrenness, whereas Nnu Ego bases her identity on her ability to have and rear children. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi affirms that "motherhood has been the predominant framework for identity for women in African literature" (1997, 35). Motherhood is womanhood. This is also stressed in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego is told several times how she is now a woman, because she has given birth to sons. What was she before that? It is as if bearing a child completes the woman's identity and self-fulfilment. Nfah-Abbenyi (2005, 274) notes that these statements are "loaded with gender-related definitions." She makes a valid point by noting that gender seems to be discontinuous. Nnu Ego is not a woman until the birth of a child, which then confers womanhood and femininity (*ibid.*).

The African woman is a mother, a wife, a daughter, a lover. She is nearly always described on the basis of her relationship to a man and only rarely is seen as an individual on her own right. African fiction written by men has often enforced that image, perhaps due to the lack of a feminine point of view. Nigeria's first claim to fame in the field of literature, Chinua Achebe, depicted women very subdued in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). A close reading of Achebe's work may reveal the emphasis on the women's desolate situation. African literature researcher Carole Boyce Davies notes that novels of men treat mothers, for instance, "more as symbols than as living, suffering individuals" (1986, 244). Nevertheless, most African feminist literary critics have hailed the arrival of African women writers inasmuch as the male point of view does not always imply the female reality truthfully. According to an African literary researcher Gloria Chukukere the woman is portrayed to be very content in her position in Achebe's works (1995, 7). In fact, in the pre-colonial traditional village society woman was more like an equal, and complimentary to man. She had well-defined social and political functions within the society (ibid. 1995, 1). The non-governmental social functions were very much rooted in motherhood. In addition to women's councils, women had associations and beneficial organisations for mothers, other women could join the daughters' associations (Amadiume 1987, 166-167). Women were always seen in relation to

man, whether it be father or husband or son. As Amadiume concludes (1987, 69), the principles of (masculine) control were applied to women until they remained "a productive unit". After the services of domestic chores (including sexual services) and production of babies in the rat race of womanhood had ceased, women became "matrons". Then their "sexual and reproductive capacity" (ibid.) was no longer valued and they could start enjoying the fruit of their strenuous labour. Unfortunately for the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*, this era never followed her years of hardship.

Some female writers, such as the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta and her fellow Nigerian Flora Nwapa have depicted life through an African woman's point of view thus bringing out the difficulties in a critical tone, and by doing so, they have often been categorized as feminists. They defy the perpetual myth of the submissive and naive rural woman. As noted earlier, Emecheta is not particularly keen on being labelled as feminist. According to her, her stories simply deal with everyday life as it is seen by an African woman (Emecheta 1988, 175). Her feminism criticises the patriarchal society and its features hostile to women, such as forced marriages, polygamy, and above all "the view that woman's identity and the justification of their existence is rooted in their motherhood" (Arndt 2002, 126). Motherhood is linked to all womanhood, being first a daughter, then a wife and lover on their way to

becoming a mother.

Interestingly, as Tommy Lee Jackson (2001, 106) points out, men do not have the sole responsibility for the inequitable situation. Women seem to not only live by the set cultural norms, but they tend to also support them. This appears to be Emecheta's opinion as well, at least she made Adaku become tired of the old rules (p.169).

Yet the more I think about it the more I realise 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.

The standards are difficult to erase, so deeply rooted are the values set for women. In fact, women underestimate the value of baby girls, which inevitably reinforces the patriarchal values, for example stating that "a boy was like four girls put together".¹²

Women's identity is so closely related to motherhood in the novel, that one becomes almost blindfold to the strong women in the background, who Emecheta has left there to be picked out as thought provoking undertones. One such character is Nnu Ego's co-wife Adaku. She is a mother, but a mother of two daughters. Lack of sons makes her somewhat less valuable as a mother. She moulds her identity from an obedient wife to an independent entrepreneur, and with this transformation she wants to ensure

¹² The importance of children and their sex is discussed later on in chapter 3.2. This quote is from Buchi Emecheta's second novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974), a novel which deals with similar issues, although it depicts the life of Nigerian immigrant woman in the UK.

that her daughters would not have to endure the same hardships she has had to face. She does not marry her daughters off to give the money from the bride price to her husband, but instead invests in her daughters' education and in that sense hopes to provide them with a new kind of future. Adaku's example and the extremely crude reception she receives after giving birth to a set of twin girls force Nnu Ego to reflect why daughters are so unfairly underestimated (p.187):

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.

Her joy of being a mother of two baby girls was diminished and she finally started to think for herself, as a woman.

3.1 Marriage and family ties

Like in several other Sub-Saharan cultures, in Igbo culture the family signifies the extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. However, in contrast to western kinship structures, the children of one's father's brother would be referred to as brothers and sisters, instead of cousins. Therefore, uncles and aunts would be called mothers and fathers. This might help to explain the situation that is imminent in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego calls her husband's brother's senior wife her mother (p.156). This is seen as a sign of respect, and had

she called her otherwise, it would have been considered ill-mannered.

The pre-colonial setting of kinship and family structures was much more favourable to women. The colonisers, in other words the British introduced the forceful and divisive idea of patriarchy (Gordon 1996, 254). Since the women were mostly responsible for crop production, their workload increased during the colonial period when Africans were forced to produce raw material for the Europeans. So in addition to their own needs they had to produce the export as well. Colonialism also slowly broke down the traditional function of a family as a socio-economic unit into a man-wife-children type of a family ideal (Hay & Stichter 1984, 10-11).

However, the old kinship structures are the basis of social relations in the novel and to an extent they still prevail in modern Igbo society. Marriage is always negotiated between families, and not between individuals. Marriage is considered more like an alliance between two separate families than a union of a couple in love (Siegel 1996, 222 and Dolphyne 1991, 2). However, extra-marital affairs produce legitimate heirs or daughters recognised by their fathers (as daughters were often deprived the right to inherit), as was the case with Nnu Ego and her parents.

Most of the sub-Saharan peoples are identified through patrilinear genealogy, the descent through males, as well as

the majority of the rest of world. In this system the lines of descent and authority converge in the person of one's father or husband. When a wife enters matrimony, she exchanges the authority of her father for that of her husband. In many patrilineal societies a wife progressively becomes part of her husband's patrilineal descent group. This is partly the "natural" reason why men may seem more important than women. Once a woman gets married she forms a part of her husband's family and is less important in her maternal family (Siegel 1996, 226). A son will gain respect from his new family, that is his wife, but the bond to his childhood home and his mother is never forgotten. A man's situation is therefore very comfortable indeed, which becomes evident in an extract where Nnaife contemplates his position (p.95):

-- after all he was a man, and if a woman cared for him, very good; if not, there would always be another one that would care. Yet it was so convenient, so tidy, if the woman who cared for a man happened to be either his mother or his wife.

An intriguing aspect of marital life and woman's position in the historic pre-colonial setting in Igbo society is the plausible alliance between women. Two women could get married, since the Igbo word for husband *di* is non-gendered. A plausible woman-to-woman marriage could be perceived as normal in the case of a male-daughter, who was supposed to continue her father's name and not the husband's. A woman would always continue the lineage of a man. If there was no man in the

marriage, the mother's father's lineage would continue, should any babies occur. An alliance between women was also typical, if a woman was abandoned as infertile from a man-to-woman marriage settlement. If the infertile woman was wealthy and lucky enough, she could form a union with another woman. This type of marriage was even seen as ideological, since it was bound in the spirit of common motherhood (Amadiume 1997, 120) and the idea of a male-gendering husband was enforced with the ideals from Christianity and Islam. (*ibid*,121). However, the male presence is seemingly obvious, since the society (whether it be the woman-to-woman alliance or the more common man-to-woman) always held high in prestige motherhood and the rearing of children.

3.2. The importance of children and their sex

The more babies a woman can produce, the more she is respected. Producing sons is the ultimate reason for men to take wives. Sons are the guarantee of a secured old age. They will be the ones taking care of their parents, while girls are sent away to be married. Although one has to bear in mind that the parents receive the bride price when they marry their girls away. In a way it has been regarded as an old age pension.

Nevertheless, having sons is a way to gain respect and climb the social ladder. The weight of the significance in

having sons is reflected on Nnu Ego after the death of her first infant. Had she felt the loss as severely, had the baby been a daughter? She attempted suicide because of losing a son. After giving birth to a dead baby girl, her reaction was not quite as drastic. Nnu Ego admitted "that it was a girl had lessened her sense of loss" (p. 195). Women are less valuable by choice, it seems. Emecheta poignantly marks how it is not only the patriarchal society, but also, or even more so, the women who label themselves as less important. How a mother could otherwise ever think that a dead baby girl is not as horrific a sight as a dead baby boy?

Having a son is especially important, if you have had only girls to begin with. Nnu Ego's first junior wife Adaku is under tremendous pressure to have a male descendant, as she only had two daughters. She finally gives birth to a baby boy, but unfortunately the child dies at the age of only a few weeks. This sets Adaku into deep depression, not unlike the one Nnu Ego went through after her first son died. Adaku is so hysterical over losing her son, that she is ready to give up her daughters in turn. "O God, why did you not take one of the girls and leave me with my male child? My only man child." (p. 128)

Children have different roles in the family, which reflect the value they have. Often girls are expected to do the hard labour for the family's benefit, meaning domestic chores,

whereas boys are sent to school to study. Even if the girls are almost indispensable for the family and it could be said they almost run the household, they are still greatly devalued.

Adaku, Nnaife's second wife, conveys this mentality by comparing her daughter Dumbi to Nnu Ego's eldest son Oshia:

"You are worth more than ten Dumbis." (p.128)

Even if sons are respected highly, it does not imply that all daughters are neglected. Nnu Ego explains the reason for having a son as her first baby to her neighbour Cordelia, who only has daughters (p.53): "girls are love babies." Nnu Ego herself was a love baby and very carefully looked after. Her father paid special attention to her. (p.36)

Agbadi was no different from many men. He 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 him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him. But when it came to his own daughter, she must have a man who would cherish her.

3.3. The value of a mother

Being a mother is the most highly valued position a woman can have. It seems at first glance, that for Emecheta once a woman has accomplished her role of a mother, she is finally considered complete as a woman. Chukukere also remarks in her article on the role of African women in life and literature, that "a woman's honour and dignity often consist in her

adherence to idealised norms of wifehood and motherhood” (Chukukere 1995, 7). In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist conforms to this role to the extent of not being able to see herself without the motherhood:

I don't know how to be anything else but a mother. How will I talk to a woman with no children? Taking the children from me is like taking away the life I've always known, the life I'm used to. (p. 222)

Agbasiere (2000, 85) underlines that the keystone of Igbo social relations is the bond between a mother and a child; in this respect Nnu Ego's comment seems reasonable enough. Emecheta goes beyond this in her criticism. The protagonist has lived the expected way, and accordingly expects a reward at the end. An Igbo proverb says (p.224): “The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children”. Nnu Ego gives all of her away, sacrificing herself to her children's needs. The tragedy is that her children abandon her in old age. Instead of having a secure happy end, she suffers again from being labelled as the failed mother. The society considers it to be her fault that the children disregard her needs.

The value of motherhood, however, is indisputable. Despite the demands of being blessed so amply by her *chi*, Nnu Ego's pride and joy was to be able to boast to every one about her numerous children. The fact that her first son was in America as a student even caused great envy. A Nigerian proverb says that richness is having lots of people around you. The little

admiration Nnu Ego receives she takes earnestly, as she does in the following when the bus driver on her way back to her home village compliments her (p.223): "Oh, you are a rich madam - You must tell me where you stay, I like to know important people. - Goodness, you must be full of joy." Mothers are placed on a pedestal when they have sacrificed their lives for their children.

4. The irony of Joys of Motherhood

The African mother in fiction is often a symbol of love, security and serenity. Nnu Ego in her plight is far from serene. Gloria Chukukere confirms that *The Joys of Motherhood* refutes these ideals (1995, 192). The protagonist's endless, almost slave like, quest to give her children what they need does not reflect security but despair. Nnu Ego worries and cares for her children in hope of being looked after in her old age. As her seven children fail to look after her she ends up dying alone on a roadside. Emecheta shows that producing children is not a financial and social security for old age, and therefore women are not obliged to have children. The title of the novel thus becomes ironic (Chukukere 1995, 193). An interesting autobiographical note to the title of *The Joys of Motherhood*, is that when Emecheta wrote the novel, she was a single mother of five at the time (Emecheta 1986). There are no joys in Nnu Ego's motherhood, only sacrifices and self-denial, tears for attempting to be a good mother.

Emecheta suggests that an Igbo woman can be happy on her own right. In *The Joys* there are two characters that play a different type of role from that of Nnu Ego. One woman who refuses to step into the full role of a mother is Nnu Ego's own mother, Ona. She is very determined in her way of pursuing life. She refuses to marry, which is normally unheard of for a

woman. She is a proud individual, a male-daughter, who would not be told by men how to live. Her last words concerning Nnu Ego are almost like a hollow echo. "Allow her to have a husband, if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman" (p.28). The conventional interpretation would assume this to be a petition for her daughter's right to marry, as was explained earlier. But if this comment is studied out of the Igbo set of norms, by which becoming a woman would include being a mother, it is quite a radical one. Ona may plead for her daughter's right to be a woman, an individual of her own.

The other slightly unconventional woman is Nnu Ego's co-wife Adaku, who will not wait for their husband to change and suddenly give more money to their meagre household funds. She takes up prostitution to raise money for her market business. With her successful trade she then educates her daughters so they can survive without men. She has no inclination to neither re-marry or to maintain her current miserable state, like Nnu Ego.

'I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship.' She laughed again. 'They do have their uses'.
(pp. 170-171)

Arndt sees Adaku's prostitution as a "metaphor symbolising that a woman must have the courage to free herself from the things which threaten her existence". Arndt reckons that women should

reject all attempts to pin them down as wives and mothers only, when this primarily means suffering (2002, 132).

Prostitution as means of surviving life as a "dignified single woman" is not a very uncommon literary topic. The dilemma of a woman being able to have an independent life regardless her marital or familial status is solved with the idea of prostitution. The male-orientation in Nigerian literature began to break at the emergence of independent single women. The first printed stories written of Nigerian women were sold at the Onitsha market. They were little chapbooks that contained self-willed protagonists, even if the narrator held in contempt the immoralities of the heroines.

One such Onitsha heroine was *Jagua Nana*. Eighteen years before *The Joys of Motherhood* in 1961 Nigerian male author Cyprian Ekwensi published a novel whose hard loving protagonist decidedly lived against the norm and forsook romantic security for the freedom of the streets (LaPin 1984, 115). More recently the Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi dealt with high class prostitution in her novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1975). The difference is often underlined and being a high class prostitute conveys the presumption that the choice is hers. In the urban African setting, however, the choice was not often made. African cities in the colonial setting (and in the early years of independence) did not provide any employment for women, and the amount of young men willing to work increased

rapidly. The husbands were always insecure about their income, therefore women had to resort to any means available in order to keep the household running. According to Luise White, women had the possibility of earning money by providing domestic services for the massive amount of single men residing alone in big cities. Women started selling sex, companionship, food and liqueur (1984, 64).

Nnu Ego, however, has a firm belief in the traditional system. A woman is foremost a mother. She cries after the first baby has died "I am not a woman, I am not a mother anymore!" (p.62). The social structure is very clear to her. She raises her daughters to become obedient wives and mothers, and she never fails to stress to her sons the importance of their sex. Her problem is her new environment. Her village ideals are very difficult to apply in the colonial setting in urban Lagos. She seems to be caught in a time shift, where the society starts to change but she is still living according to the old traditional village norms. After having had her troubles in the city, she admits to this (p.127): "The trouble with me is that I find it difficult to change." After painstaking efforts to maintain the traditional lifestyle she begins to hesitate whether her choice was the right one in the end. She realises what a difficult life she is leading, and the inequality and unfairness of the game strike her in an excruciating manner:

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in

herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? She prayed desperately.
(p. 186)

It is interesting how the literary portrait of an African woman differs so much from what the image is by and large in society as such; the bold, beautiful strong black woman turns bleak and weak. When the story is told by such a strong African woman, a single mother of five, one would expect more outrage and boldness. This is perhaps where the finesse lies. Nigerian specialist in women's studies, professor Obioma Nnaemeka justly asks (1994, 141):

How can one justify or excuse the conspiracy of African writers, male as well as female, in erasing that other African woman - that independent, strong and admirable woman who is celebrated in our oral traditions, that African woman whose presence gave dignity and meaning to pre-colonial and colonial African society, that African woman whose existence and relevance are such an important part of African reality *today*?

Nnaemeka continues to note that one must see the point of view and the location where African women write. They see their literary audience far from their home village and "assume their marginal position in a masculinist literary culture" (1994, 142). After having set or realised the framework it is easier to, in a sense, manipulate the reader. As Nnaemeka confirms, African women writers "deploy different strategies to (re)present the specificity of their positionality" (*ibid*). In part this position is characterised by motherhood, and it has a severe effect in the literature African women produce. Nnaemeka

even asserts that the female author has restricted herself to what she labels "domestic literature" or to be more specific, "motherhood literature" (Nnaemeka 1994, 150).

Even when motherhood is the strong running theme in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the novel holds a very ambiguous opinion of motherhood. Nnu Ego battles all her life to achieve status and to gain respect through the institution of motherhood. The result is something every mother should be proud of, a fine burial (p.224). Because Nnu Ego was a mother of seven, her spirit was prayed for after her death for fertility. "People failed to understand why she did not answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want, but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?" Emecheta forecasts or hopes a change in the quest for women to be individuals in their own right rather than reproductive units. Nnu Ego has finally understood herself and her right of individuality, a right to be exactly what she chooses. In her spitefulness she does not grant children to infertile women, perhaps only to save them the trouble she has gone through. At last she is allowed to be a woman and not a daughter, or a wife or least of all a mother.

5. Conclusion

Women have a crucial social role in the Igbo society portrayed in *The Joys of Motherhood*, despite the seemingly hard way of life they have to lead. However, the respect they receive after giving birth to children seems to be infinite. A woman is taught to be what is traditionally expected of her. Ironically, the upbringing is mostly carried out by mothers, who sustain the vicious circle of female hardship. Although the old traditions and attitudes are slowly changing because of globalisation or the westernisation of life style and family values, the importance of the family structure in Igbo society and the idea of extended families will probably keep their foothold. In this social structure a woman plays an integral part that cannot be underestimated.

Emecheta reflects the hardships of an Igbo woman in such a convincing way that one is certain of her desire to change the system. However, at the same time woman's role seems to be so central in the maintenance and reproduction of this society that it seems almost impossible to transform it. Emecheta is in great awe of the Igbo women before her time, even if she does express her condolences for their difficult lives. Emecheta clearly sees the possibility in women's ability to reach self-fulfilment without the rigid relation to man. The apparent male domination in *The Joys of Motherhood* diminishes the longer

women are repressed. The narrative tightens towards modernity. Emecheta delivers hope for women's equality by transforming the traditional Nnu Ego in the end to deter women from motherhood. She is forcing the women to think about motherhood and its implications, why else would she refuse to play the part of a respected ancestor?¹³ Emecheta leaves Adaku to survive on her own and the future for women is secured in Adaku's educated daughters. The change is already apparent in the generation following Nnu Ego; both her daughters marry for love.

A closer look at *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals in part how Third World women are not the "oppressed Third World women" (Mohanty 1988, 83) if one is willing to let go of the presumptions. The women play an active role and are not mere subjects to the male dominance but a functional part of the social system. Then again, as Haraway (1991, p.123) puts it, reading fiction is a highly political practise. Literary analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* together with comparison to anthropological sources has proven that literature can provide insight to a specific society in the case of Buchi Emecheta's novel. The fictional characters convey an illustration of reality, which is seasoned by their accurate views on its defects. Henry Louis Gates Jr. warns about the complexities and subtleties black texts have (1984, 4-5) in order not to confuse literature with anthropology. However, Emecheta's pungent

¹³ Nnu Ego is prayed for fertility after her death. Her spirit refuses to help the desolate women. (p. 224)

description reflected on the anthropological sources leave me little choice. *The Joys of Motherhood* is not a truthful tale as such, but a fictitious bewildering story that sheds some light on the everyday life of an Igbo woman from the colonial era to the early days of Nigerian independence. Not only does it convey a convincing depiction of a woman's life but it is also a strong socio-political comment. According to Gates, an African author cannot help being politicised: "For all sorts of complex historical reasons, the very act of writing has been a 'political' act for the black author" (1984, 5).

For an African woman, the act of writing is even more political. A room of one's own is indeed a luxury in the child-adoring societies. Emecheta's forerunner and object of admiration, Nigerian female author Flora Nwapa was the first to raise consciousness about African women's reality. *Efuru* tackles the issue of infertility, which can render a woman an outcast from society. *The Joys of Motherhood* by contrast deals with the agonising expectations on maternal bliss. Senegalese Mariama Bâ deals with similar issues in her *So Long a Letter* (*Si Longue une Lettre*), published only a year after *The Joys* in 1980. The significant difference in these two novels is religion. Bâ's setting is in Moslem Senegal.

Religion is an extremely important factor in the Sub-Saharan societies. In *The Joys of Motherhood* the traditional Igbo animism was beginning to blend with Christianity. Nnaife

was Christian mostly when it suited him. Even after Christianity had gained its foothold in Igbo society the old beliefs do not fade. Islam had a better foundation in the Yoruba tribe, because the converters accommodated some of the traditional religions successfully to the Moslem converts (Chukwuma 1985, 63). The conflicts, however, usually rise among the tribes and not the religions.

What is definite, is that African women writers have made a difference to the image of the African woman. This has been confirmed by literary critics such as Marie Umeh, Lloyd Brown and Ebele Eko, among others (Eko 1986, 218). A Nigerian researcher of African literature Mary Kolawole notes (2004, 259) that "some writers transcend the level of creative writing in order to join others in the desire for gender re-conceptualization". These authors include South African Miriam Tlali, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, Tsitsi Dangarembga from Zimbabwe and the first published female Nigerian playwright Zulu Sofola, among others. What else these ladies have in common is their apprehension towards 'feminism'. Emecheta for one refuses the term and becomes more and more agitated when questioned upon it (Emecheta 1989, 19):

Q: Why do you refuse to be called feminist?

A: I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that... I don't like being defined by them.. It is just that it comes

from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism..

Africans find it difficult to be named by others, asserts Mary Kolawole (2004, 260). This is partly why the term 'womanism' was coined originally in 1982 simultaneously by Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (*ibid.*) This term is received well among the African female writers because it includes the idea of black womanhood and it is sensible to the power structure that suppresses blacks.

The Joys of Motherhood does reveal a great deal, even if it is fiction. Emecheta paints a strong portrait of the African woman. She does not, however, underestimate the power of motherhood and the sacrifices women have to make for their children. Even if the *The Joys of Motherhood* can be read as a proclamation for women's right to individuality, motherhood is never forgotten. Emecheta feels extremely close to the African tradition, despite the harsh words of criticism. Her sentiments after writing the novel demonstrate her position as a mother, this is disclosed in her autobiography *Head Above Water* (p.239):

In a way that book made me accept my lot. The worst that could happen to me was to die by the wayside with everybody saying, 'To think she gave all her life for her children'.

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