

Negotiating Identity in a Changing Society: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract—This paper examines how the intersection of colonial administrative systems and economic modernization reshapes personal and collective identity in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Through the protagonist Nnu Ego, the novel maps the slow erosion of Igbo cultural identity under the pressure of what this paper terms "colonial technology." Here, technology is defined not merely as mechanical advancement, but as the comprehensive socio-economic machinery of empire, encompassing wage labour, urban infrastructure, and bureaucratic governance. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory, particularly the works of Frantz Fanon, Ifi Amadiume, and Doreen Massey, this study argues that Emecheta frames colonial modernity as a site where power, gender, and identity are violently renegotiated. By grounding its theoretical claims in close textual analysis of Nnu Ego's spatial and economic displacement in Lagos, the paper demonstrates how the novel voices the silent grief of women caught between a traditional order that has failed them and a modern world designed to exclude them.

Index Terms—Postcolonial Feminism Gender and Space Colonial Technology Economic Modernisation Maternal Identity Urban Displacement Frantz Fanon

I. INTRODUCTION

There is something deeply uncomfortable about reading Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) as a traditional narrative of progress. The novel is set against the backdrop of Nigeria's encounter with British colonial modernity, featuring railroads, wage labour, mission schools, and the machinery of colonial administration. While traditional historiography often frames these elements as markers of historical advancement, Emecheta reveals them as instruments of displacement. Every promise of modernity arrives only to remind the protagonist, Nnu Ego, of how little autonomy she possesses.

To understand this displacement, this paper employs the concept of "colonial technology" to frame the systemic changes imposed upon Emecheta's characters. Technology in this context is deliberately defined broadly. It refers to the systemic apparatus of colonial modernity, including the capitalist wage economy, urban spatial grids, and bureaucratic legal systems. These are manufactured systems engineered to extract labour and enforce colonial hierarchies.

Scholars like Florence Stratton (1994) have established that African women writers occupy a unique position in postcolonial discourse, navigating simultaneous critiques of colonial power and indigenous patriarchal structures. Nnu Ego's tragedy is the result of a collision between a traditional Igbo worldview that values women exclusively as mothers and a colonial economy that transforms motherhood into a catalyst for financial ruin. This paper traces that double violence, asking how Emecheta uses the imposition of colonial socio-economic machinery to unravel Nnu Ego's sense of self.

The paper draws on postcolonial and feminist theory, particularly the work of Frantz Fanon on the psychological impact of colonial subjugation, Ifi Amadiume on Igbo gender systems and Doreen Massey on the conceptualization of space as a site of power relations. The study is an attempt to show how colonial technology functions as an external force and as an internalised mechanism of fragmentation of identity, through a close reading of the spatial and economic dislocation of Nnu Ego in Lagos.

In the end, Emecheta's novel is a powerful testament to the silent grief of so many African women who found themselves caught between two worlds: a traditional order that failed to protect them and a modern colonial world that was designed specifically to exploit and exclude them. Throughout Nnu Ego's

life, the text foregrounds the human cost of colonial modernisation, and opposes any easy celebration of progress. As Nnu Ego reflects in her final moments of despair, “She had been trying to be a good mother, but all she had produced was a set of ungrateful children who had forgotten their mother as soon as they left her” (Emecheta, 219). Throughout Nnu Ego’s life, the text foregrounds the human cost of colonial modernisation and opposes any easy celebration of progress.

II. THE MACHINERY OF THE WAGE ECONOMY AND THE EMASCULATION OF TRADITION

To understand how colonial systems shape identity, one must examine Emecheta’s depiction of the wage economy in Lagos. When Nnu Ego arrives in the city from her village of Ibuza, the urban environment operates on a foreign logic. The colonial economy requires that men enter formal employment, fundamentally restructuring household dynamics and eroding women’s traditional economic agency.

This disruption is immediately visible in the character of Nnaife, Nnu Ego’s husband. In Ibuza, masculinity is tied to farming and the provision of yams. In Lagos, Nnaife works as a domestic servant washing the undergarments of a British woman. Emecheta uses this specific image to highlight the degrading nature of colonial labour. When Nnu Ego first sees Nnaife, she is repulsed by his “pudgy hands” and his subservient role, observing that he performs tasks reserved for women in their traditional culture (Emecheta, 1979, p. 42). Nnaife’s emasculation within the colonial structure produces a fragile masculinity that frequently results in domestic violence and neglect, shifting the burden of survival entirely onto Nnu Ego. When Nnu Ego first sees Nnaife, she is repulsed by his “pudgy hands” and his subservient role. Emecheta writes:

“She could not believe that this was the man she had been sent to marry... He was washing a white woman’s clothes, including her underwear!” (Emecheta, 42).

Frantz Fanon (1963) observed that colonial spaces are constructed in opposition, dividing the settler’s world of abundance from the native’s world of scarcity. Emecheta applies this logic to the gendered division of labour. The wage economy makes the subsistence farming and traditional networks of exchange that

once empowered women completely irrelevant. As Ifi Amadiume (1987) notes, women in traditional Igbo society occupied significant economic roles within a dual-sex system, roles that were systematically dismantled by colonial administrators who only recognised male authority. By forcing Nnaife into a subservient wage role and denying Nnu Ego access to traditional agricultural capital, the colonial economy strips both characters of their foundational identities.

III. URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF COMMUNITY

Lagos itself functions as a colonial technology. The city’s-built environment of roads, markets, and rented rooms violently reshapes human relationships. The sociologist Doreen Massey (1994) argued that identity is inherently place-bound and that spatial configurations dictate social power. In Ibuza, the compound serves as the unit of social organisation where multiple families share space and child-rearing responsibilities. In contrast, the spatial technology of Lagos forces Nnu Ego’s family into a single rented room.

This spatial reorganisation is devastating. Nnu Ego is physically isolated from extended kin and forced to manage recurrent crises alone. The architecture of the tenement building produces a fragile, improvised community among the women, but it is constantly fractured by the intense competition for limited resources.

This spatial and economic pressure culminates in the departure of Nnu Ego’s co-wife, Adaku. Adaku recognises that the traditional rules of marriage offer no protection in the urban colonial grid. When she decides to leave the marital room to become a successful independent trader and prostitute, she explicitly rejects the identity imposed upon her, stating she will not be bound by a system that only values her for producing male heirs (Emecheta, 169). Adaku successfully navigates the colonial market economy, but Emecheta does not present this as a utopian liberation. Instead, the novel demonstrates that a woman can only achieve economic survival in Lagos by stepping outside the bounds of respectable society entirely.

As she struggles in the city, she laments:
 “In the village, a woman had many hands to help her. Here in Lagos, she had to do everything herself” (Emecheta, 89).

IV. EDUCATION AS AN APPARATUS OF ALIENATION

One of the most sustained arguments in the novel is that colonial institutions destroy the organic social bonds through which identity is maintained. Nnu Ego internalises the colonial currency of worth by measuring her success through her children's advancement in the mission school system. She starves herself and neglects her daughters to pay the school fees for her sons, Oshia and Adim, believing they will serve as her social security in old age.

However, the colonial education system functions as a technology of alienation. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) asserts, colonial education was designed to produce compliant subjects for the colonial economy, severing them from their indigenous communities. Oshia and Adim adopt Western individualistic values, eventually leaving for the United States and Canada. They do not return to care for their mother. The very system Nnu Ego relied upon to validate her identity as a mother is the mechanism that ultimately strips her of her children. She sacrifices everything for her sons, believing they will be her security. Yet, her bitter realisation comes too late:

“She had brought forth sons who were to be her saviours, but they had turned out to be her destroyers” (Emecheta, 202).

Meanwhile, her daughters are chronically undervalued because the colonial economy offers little upward mobility for women. Emecheta highlights this trap by showing how daughters become economic liabilities in the urban setting. They are too educated to command a traditional bride price but lack the credentials required for meaningful white-collar employment.

V. MEMORY AND THE CHI MOTIF: RESISTING COLONIAL INSCRIPTION

Against the homogenising power of colonial systems, Emecheta offers the technology of oral tradition and spiritual memory. Nnu Ego's identity is heavily dictated by her relationship to her chi, or personal

spirit. Her chi is a slave woman who was killed to accompany Nnu Ego's grandfather's senior wife into the afterlife. The spiritual burden is expressed when Nnu Ego cries out:

“My chi is a slave woman who died with my grandfather's senior wife... She has followed me to punish me” (Emecheta, 26).

This recurring motif is not mere superstition. It is a critical narrative device Emecheta uses to explore historical trauma. The slave woman haunts Nnu Ego, initially denying her children and later cursing her with a multitude of offspring she cannot afford to feed. This spiritual haunting serves as a metaphor for the unresolved violence of the past weighing upon the present. As Chinua Achebe (1958) demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo identity relies heavily on ancestral obligation. Emecheta extends this concept to argue that women carry a specific, marginalised lineage of suffering.

While Gayatri Spivak (1988) asks whether the subaltern can speak, Emecheta shows that Nnu Ego speaks constantly, but her voice is extinguished by the overarching structures of colonial and patriarchal governance. Yet, through the chi motif, Emecheta insists that identity possesses a historical depth that colonial bureaucracy cannot fully erase. Memory becomes a mode of survival.

VI. CONCLUSION

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is a profound exploration of the cost exacted upon African women at the intersection of colonial modernity and patriarchal tradition. By framing the colonial enterprise as an invasive technology, a vast socio-economic machine comprising wage labour, urban isolation, and alienating educational systems, this paper has demonstrated how Nnu Ego's identity is systematically eroded.

The novel's unique contribution to postcolonial literature lies in its refusal to romanticise either the pre-colonial past or the modernised present. Emecheta exposes a dual tragedy. The traditional Igbo structures fail Nnu Ego by measuring her worth solely through her reproductive output, while the colonial structures fail her by monetising her existence and stripping away the communal safety nets that once made motherhood survivable. When Nnu Ego dies alone by

the roadside, the final irony is complete. As the narrator notes:

“She died quietly, with no one to perform the last rites Nnu Ego had given everything and received nothing in return” (Emecheta, 224).

The title of the novel serves as its final, bitter irony. The joys of motherhood in a colonised, capitalist space manifest only as profound loss. When Nnu Ego dies alone by the roadside, with no children to give her a proper burial and no shrine erected in her honour (Emecheta, 1979, p. 224), the tragedy is complete. Her demise is not a personal failure, but the inevitable result of a woman ground down by the machinery of a world that demanded everything from her and offered nothing in return.

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