

Ibuza vs. Lagos *The Feminist and Traditional* Buchi Emecheta

Buchi Emecheta is an excellent example of an African writer who is influencing critical theory through her writing (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 22).¹ Her writing explores Igbo culture, both before and after colonialism's impact. She exposes problems and proposes solutions, but above all, she challenges. She critiques what are thought to be the common relationships and patterns between individuals and society, humanity and nature, and men and women (Fishburn, 1995: 48). It is important to keep in mind that these relationships in an Igbo world view are obviously quite different from Western constructions. This is an obvious point, but one that is easily forgotten by Western critics. Therefore, we need to keep Nfah-Abbenyi's admonition in mind: to understand a work, we must understand the "indigenous theory" in which it is embedded (1997: 20).

Because Emecheta challenges these relationships, critics often paint a one-sided picture of her themes. Many critics call her a feminist, and imply the Western meaning of that term. They assume that if she exposes or challenges problems in the Igbo system, she has changed allegiances from Nigeria to the West. In a discussion of her novel *Kehinde*, Pauline Ada Uwakweh says, "[the work] leaves one wondering if Emecheta's feminist position is not more Western than African..." (1996: 402). This is an important question, and one that can only be answered by examining the women in her novels and the solutions they propose for their situations. As will be shown, the survival and networking tactics used by most of her characters amply prove Emecheta to be an African feminist, a position that combines both her tradition and her feminism. Furthermore, Katherine Fishburn notes that her works, particularly *The Joys of Motherhood*, are complex (1995: 106). In other words, they cannot be seen as simply supporting one vision and challenging another. It is easy for a Western reader to see every one of Emecheta's criticisms as an indictment of

the entire culture. Instead, a balanced reading shows that for every attack she makes on traditional culture, she makes a counter-attack in which the values of the traditional culture can be shown as positive (Fishburn, 1995: 64). Yes, she does often challenge patriarchal notions of Igbo culture that hurt women, but she also questions, just as ardently, the imported sexism of colonialism (Christian, 1985: 147). It is this “plurality of protest” (Fishburn, 1995: 52) that makes Emecheta so dangerous for both the patriarchy and colonialism/imperialism.

The Joys of Motherhood (Emecheta, 1979) is an exceedingly complex novel. Because I cannot begin to cover all of the issues it presents for women in terms of colonialism and traditionalism, I will instead focus on several key women characters’ lives and their relative agency, particularly as related to motherhood, within traditional or colonial society, or in a mixture of the two societies. I will try to show how each woman is able to be (or not to be) a full human being based on the restrictions society places on her, and her ability to thrive using the African feminist principles of networking, survival tactics, marketing skills, and gender flexibility to her advantage. Clearly, the women who choose to live their lives in a traditional context will have a much easier time than the others, but part of the message of *The Joys of Motherhood* is that African women cannot simply choose between the two constructs. Instead, they must find ways to adapt to the new hybrid culture.

The Joys of Motherhood is a novel that is often read by critics as an indictment of Igbo traditions in relation to women. What these critics fail to mention, is that Emecheta is actually speaking out against colonialism and the distortions it causes in traditional culture for women. Many writers have shown the relationship between colonialism and worsened conditions for African women. Unfortunately, in reading *The Joys of Motherhood*, many critics have forgotten that these connections between colonialism and sexism are at work in the novel. When Emecheta is decrying sexism as it is practiced against African women in her own country, she is usually showing the sexism that has been imported or at least worsened by colonialism.

Colonialism’s distortions of the traditional culture are clearly marked for us by Emecheta, who has created a novel in which the two forces, colonialism and tradition, are housed in two different cities, Ibuza and Lagos. Ibuza, the traditional village, represents the separation of gender and sex that gives women in a traditional culture space and power, often as manifested in the valuing of children and the support of communal mothering (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 24). In Lagos, the colonial gender roles, coupled with economic oppression, lead to a loss of traditional status for women (Fishburn, 1995: 113), and a shortage of space, health, and money, which lead to the stoppage of positive traditions.

Emecheta has two motives in her writing: one, she is writing back to the “center,” or to the colonizer; two, she is writing back to patriarchy and men (Arndt, 1996: 46). She is exposing the “oppressive relationships that are sanctioned by myths and customs” (Umeh, 1996: xxvi) of traditional patriarchy,

and she is also protesting the loss of status for women brought about by colonialism (Christian, 1985: 216). While Western feminists assume that African women are oppressed and marginalized by their tradition, and “Anti-Westerners” assume that all problems stem from colonialism (Lewis, 1980: 35-36), Emecheta has found the balance. She knows that simple-minded generalizations should not be made about either institution. Instead, *The Joys of Motherhood* forces us to look at the problems inherent in both institutions (with colonialism being the worse of the two evils), in order to find an appropriate solution. The truth is, women can be protected by traditional patriarchal practices, but not when tradition has been replaced by British colonialism.

A close look at the characters and settings of the novel will demonstrate Emecheta’s balance in locating the dangers of both patriarchy and colonialism, in other words, her African feminism. The characters I will focus on: Ona, Nnu Ego’s mother who lives within the traditional realm; Agunwa, Nnu Ego’s father’s senior wife; Adankwu, a co-wife of Nnu Ego who chooses to remain in Ibuzza; Adaku, another co-wife who finds ways to adapt to life in Lagos; and Nnu Ego herself, demonstrate Emecheta’s double purpose.

Ona’s position in Ibuzza is that of male daughter. Because her father never had a male child, she symbolically takes on the rights and responsibilities of the first born son. This means that she has much more freedom to maneuver than most of her female counterparts. She is permitted to take lovers, and her beauty and arrogance particularly attract the affections of the chief, Agbadi. Ona knows that much of her power over Agbadi is held in her inability to be captured. In fact, women who were “quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after his time, with Christianity and other changes” (Emecheta, 1979: 10). In other words, Ona’s individuality and refusal to be tied down made her more desirable.

Ona utilizes and understands the power that tradition accords her (Fishburn, 1995: 110). But tradition does not only afford her power, it also limits her. She is free in her sexuality and in her movement, but she is not permitted to marry. And if she has a male child, its ownership is already claimed by her father.

Essentially, Ona’s freedom did not free her to make her own decisions about marriage, where she would live, and how she would raise her child. Instead, she made the best compromises she could in her circumstances. When she becomes pregnant with Agbadi’s child, she is forced to choose between the two men:

“All right,” she said in compromise, “my father wants a son and you have many sons. But you do not have a girl yet. Since my father will not accept any bride price from you, if I have a son he will belong to my father, but if a girl, she will be yours. That is the best I can do for you both.” (Emecheta, 1979: 25)

When Nnu Ego, a girl child, is born, Ona’s father does not permit the baby

to live with Agbadi, thus making Ona's decision of the child's ownership null, for the child cannot live without her mother.

After Ona's father's death, Agbadi convinces her to finally move to his compound. Soon after her second child is born, she and the child both die. Ona's last words to Agbadi are a plea for her daughter's freedom, a freedom that she never truly had:

Please don't mourn me too long; and 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. (Emecheta, 1979: 28, [emphasis mine])

Ona does not command that her daughter marry, just that she should have the freedom to choose her own fate. Ona will not be around to raise her daughter, but she did what she could to make sure Nnu Ego's future would be secure. One can read Ona's character as a model of freedom (Sengupta, 1996: 228), but the situation is far more complex. In fact, Emecheta herself says in an interview that Ona had to die because she disobeyed tradition by moving to Agbadi's compound (Ogundele, 1996: 453). She utilizes tradition when it helps her, does her best to follow it, but when she fails, she is punished. Her own and Agbadi's refusal to fear and follow the tradition completely brought tragedy upon them both. Still, Ona's confidence and strength are qualities that will help the next generation of women as they all move into a time of transition. Ona's character seems to show Emecheta's ability to write back both to the colonizer (to attack them for what they have taken away) and also to the patriarchy (for men's refusal to allow women to make their own decisions).

Agunwa is barely mentioned in the text, or in criticism on *The Joys of Motherhood*, but her part is an important one. She is Agbadi's senior wife, and she falls ill the same night that she and the entire compound hear Agbadi having sex with his mistress Ona.² It is surprising that other critics have not picked up on Agunwa's position as a foil to Ona. While Ona is seen as a "bad woman," one who does not readily please her man (Emecheta, 1979: 21), Agunwa seems to be the epitome of the "good woman." Agbadi tells one of his sons by her, "Your mother is a good woman. So unobtrusive, so quiet. I don't know who else will help me keep an eye on those young wives of mine, and see to the smooth running of my household" (Emecheta, 1979: 22). Her unobtrusiveness and service to her husband brings her neglect during her lifetime, but a grand burial in her husband's compound (possible only for women who have sons) upon her death. As we will see with Nnu Ego, following tradition completely (in Emecheta's view) does not always earn women rewards during their lives. However, in comparison with Nnu Ego, Agunwa's life would have been much easier materially, so tradition still holds benefits over colonial life in Lagos.

The women who really thrive in this novel are those who understand the need for adapting to new circumstances, while holding onto traditional African

feminist values and practices. (And if we recall that adaptability and survival tactics are two of the most important African feminist principles, we can better see how African feminism helps women through the dangers of colonialism.) Adankwo is one such woman. Again, we do not see much of her in the novel, but she is an important counterpart to both Nnu Ego and Adaku. As the senior wife of Nnaife's older brother, she is the oldest wife/mother in the family. Seniority and age carry with them power; older women are the ones with the real power in a traditional context (Ogunyemi, 1996: 89). Adankwo is first mentioned when news of her husband's death reaches Nnaife. While one of her co-wives will be coming to live in Lagos as Nnaife's second wife, Adankwo chooses to stay behind to finish nursing her young child (Emecheta, 1979: 117). Instead of joining Nnaife's family in Lagos as is expected, she ends up staying in her husband's family's compound in Ibusa. As we will see later with Nnu Ego, raising children in Ibusa is an easier task, for women share the work (Ogunyemi, 1996: 78). She is welcome there, has respect, her children, and plenty to eat. Adankwo's great lesson is to appreciate the traditional culture that supports her, and she is able to thrive in it.

When Nnu Ego returns to Ibusa to see her dying father, then stays for seven months, it is Adankwo who gives advice to Nnu Ego about her husband and new co-wife. Intuitively, Nnu Ego knows that leaving Ibusa will mean more work, less companionship, and less food. But Adankwo reminds her of her duty to her husband, not just because she is concerned about duty, but because she knows that Adaku (her former co-wife) is ambitious and would not mind taking over Nnu Ego's place (Emecheta, 1979: 159). She first appeals to Nnu Ego's sense of tradition, and then realistically tells her the pitfalls of staying. She also shows her adaptability to change by telling Nnu Ego that her son Oshia's education in Lagos is extremely important:

...there is something new coming to our land. Have you noticed it? We as a family don't all have to live and be brought up in the same place. Let him be trained in Lagos where he was born. He will be able to bring that culture back here to enrich our own. In a few years, he will be able to start looking after you materially.... (Emecheta, 1979: 159)

Adankwo has made correct decisions for her own life, and gives advice in her friend's best interest, thereby showing the important strategies of networking and adaptability to new circumstances. In staying true to tradition, she is the model of a successful Igbo woman.

Adaku, Nnu Ego's co-wife, shines as the most materially successful woman in this novel. Of course, wealth is measured in kin, not money, but Adaku makes hard decisions that allow her freedom and education for her daughters. She can be read as a "Mammy Waater," the beautiful but rebellious woman who refuses to allow motherhood, the mothering of sons in particular,

to be her only defining trait (Ogunyemi, 1996: 34). Adaku can also be read as Nnu Ego's foil (Ezeigbo, 1996: 19). Either way, she shows that adaptability to a new situation may be the only answer for women in the double jeopardy of colonialism and patriarchy, and she uses traditional values to adapt to her new circumstances.

When we first see Adaku, she is trying to use tradition to her advantage. Being well-trained in Ibuza, she knows her place in Nnaife's home and humbly offers to serve Nnu Ego even though she herself is exhausted from her journey (Emecheta, 1979: 118). She knows that Nnu Ego resents her presence, but she has a singleness of purpose that allows her to persevere: "... all she wanted was a home for her daughter and her future children ... it was worth some humiliation to keep her children together in the same family" (Emecheta, 1979: 120). While Adaku is young, beautiful, and clearly interested in winning Nnaife's affections in order to secure her place in this new family (thereby providing security for herself and her children), she is also accustomed to sharing a husband, and earnestly hopes to make it as pleasant as possible for Nnu Ego: "Adaku laughed, the first real laughter she had let herself indulge in since arriving that morning. It was a very eloquent sound, telling Nnu Ego that they were going to be sisters in this business of sharing a husband" (Emecheta, 1979: 123).

She encourages Nnu Ego to join her in a food strike against Nnaife when reasoning with him about food money doesn't work (Emecheta, 1979: 134). Clearly, Adaku is prepared to fight for her rights through striking (a tradition that she knows and uses to her advantage) while helping her senior wife in this marriage.

When Adaku is left on her own in Lagos, she makes good use of the market to secure for herself and her daughters a better livelihood. She has all but been deserted by both her husband (to the war) and her co-wife (to Ibuza), and uses her space and time to build her market business. She has been industrious and a wise investor. Seeing the changes around her—husbands who are not permitted to provide for their families, families who are not really united, and opportunities for business growth—she takes advantage of the benefits of her situation in preparing for a life in which she has to survive on her own. And Adaku chooses to do more than simply survive.

Adaku finally decides to leave the family that has not provided her with the minimum of support or friendship, especially when Nnu Ego and her children return to Lagos. She spends most of her time at the market with her daughters anyway, and can see no good reason to stay in the cramped space with people who do not welcome her presence.

Everybody accuses me of making money all the time. What else is there for me to do? I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit

them in the future ... Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! I'm leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife. (Emecheta, 1979: 168)

She is striking out as a single mother, ready to give her daughters the best education and home life she can afford, and she will do that without a husband. She is truly an innovator, telling Nnu Ego before she leaves, "... we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life more intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own" (Emecheta, 1979: 169). And creating her own standards is exactly what she does. She combines her traditional attributes of ambition and industriousness with the adaptability that she needs in the colonial context of Lagos. Adaku is able to strike out on her own and make herself, her sexuality, and her daughters free. She does this at the price of being snubbed (she is referred to as a prostitute), but even traditional Nnu Ego wonders if she has done better than herself.

Adaku's greatest skill is in adapting to her new situation (Ezeigbo, 1996: 19; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 45). Adaku is rewarded for staying true to Igbo ideals of networking and market independence, but she is considered a fallen woman. Emecheta seems to show in her character that modern Nigerian women have few traditional choices left for them due to the distortion of colonialism, and that survival tactics of adaptability are key. But in Adaku's character she does not show that tradition has no place. In reality, Adaku's character is quite traditional. Her children are always of the utmost importance to her, and she cares for them through traditional venues open to African women, even if she has to adapt tradition to her own role.

Nnu Ego, as the protagonist, is the most complex of all of the female characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*. While the others can be somewhat easily placed in boxes, Nnu Ego defies an easy explanation. As such, she is Emecheta's masterpiece in this work. It is through her life and body that the battle between tradition and colonialism, subjectivity and motherhood, is played out. Nnu Ego's own traditionalism while she lives in Lagos is representative of the war between Igbo and Western culture (Fishburn, 1995: 114). Nnu Ego's tragedy can then be read as an elegy for the loss of tradition, but not only that. Because tradition cannot be easily returned to, and because Emecheta provides us with examples of women who adapt tradition to new circumstances, we can see that while it is right to mourn for this loss of tradition, it is also individually detrimental to refuse to change. Nnu Ego is representative of Emecheta's warning that clinging to tradition in light of the distortions of colonialism is foolish, in that it does not allow for survival tactics (and eventual success) that can help individual women, and eventually, the community.

Because Ona dies so early in her daughter's life, Nnu Ego is left without Ona's model of strength and self-confidence. Instead of being raised to fend for herself (as she will need to do in Lagos), she is raised in her father's

household as a princess who never wants for anything. Tradition, as it works in her father's household and in Ibuza generally, works for Nnu Ego while she is growing up. Agbadi raises her to be a suitable wife (Christian, 1985: 233), and everyone assumes that her role as wife and mother will follow successfully. But the switch in roles from the all-powerful daughter to the powerless wife (Egejuru, 1997: 15) proves to be a difficult transition for her.

The marriage starts well, but when she does not become pregnant (the purpose of marriage in an Igbo world view) the marriage begins to deteriorate. She blames herself fully, telling her husband, "I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right" (Emecheta, 1979: 31). Because Nnu Ego (and her culture) places a premium on motherhood, and because she lacks the natural confidence of her mother, she is easily destroyed by her inability to get pregnant.

Her father permits her to rest in his home until he can "sense the restless ripeness" in his daughter (Emecheta, 1979: 36). She eventually leaves Ibuza for Lagos to marry Nnaife, her husband throughout the rest of the novel. She is described upon her arrival as a "Mammy Waater" (Emecheta, 1979: 43), and Nnaife is congratulated for his good luck. While she has problems adjusting to her husband's position as a laundry man for a white couple, she is eventually pleased in her position with him, as she is pregnant.

When her four-week old child dies in his sleep, she is thrust again into despair. Her suicide attempt, followed by a three-month depression, is indicative of her inability to deal with the harsh realities of life, and this time her father cannot rescue her. Four months later, she is pregnant again. This time her son lives, and he is followed in fairly quick succession by seven other children, one a stillborn female child. This succession of children, and her traditional equation of children with wealth vs. the realities of Lagos, depict painfully the struggle between traditional and colonial values.

Most of the remainder of the novel is about Nnu Ego's struggle to raise her seven living children with the meager allowance Nnaife provides, and sometimes market work.

Lagos is a much more difficult place to be a wife and mother. Because Nnaife is at the white man's mercy (rather than owning his own farm, taking titles in his village, etc.), Nnu Ego sees him as a slave. His slavery puts her in double jeopardy; for as a victim at work, at home he becomes the victimizer (Ogunyemi, 1996: 255). Cordelia echoes this belief when she says, "They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work ... just enough for us to rent an old room like this" (Emecheta, 1979: 51). Nnaife loses his "family allegiances" in the city, the responsibilities that would be expected of him in Ibuza (Fishburn, 1995: 112). In Ibuza, Nnaife would never be permitted to let his children and wife be malnourished while he goes out most nights, spending his money on drinking and music (Emecheta, 1979: 133-134). Nnaife has clearly lost sight of his traditional responsibilities in his colonial environment,

but Nnu Ego still clings to tradition, hoping it will save her.

Instead of utilizing networking with her co-wife and other female friends, she allows her children to shape her identity (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 37) so much that she isolates herself. Without a readily available community, mothering (especially the mothering of so many young children) is much more difficult than it would be in Ibuza (Ogunyemi, 1996: 78). Ezeigbo says that Nnu Ego's biggest mistake is in not returning to Ibuza for good (Emecheta, 1979: 17). I would argue that while this may be true, her other mistake is in not building a network of female helpers in Lagos and instead relying upon her sons to take care of her in her old age (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 49). She has banked all of her material wealth in her sons, and she realizes much too late that this is not enough. When her son Oshia does not get a scholarship for studies and blames his mother for his shortcomings,³ she finally sees the truth about how her sons will treat her:

Oshia, her son, blaming her as well.... All the poor boy had ever seen of her was a nagging and worrying woman. Oh, God, please kill her with these babies she was carrying, rather than let the children she had hoped for so much pour sand into her eyes. (Emecheta, 1979: 185-186)

It is only at this point that she begins to question son preference and her own choices (Emecheta, 1979: 186-187). But the changing times and the city do not allow for tradition.

In her old age (a far too early old age brought about by her hard life), she returns to Ibuza to her natal family (Emecheta, 1979: 223). Her two oldest sons are educated in North America, and never spend time or money on her. Her daughters stay in Lagos with their husbands. Alone, Nnu Ego wanders the village, telling anyone who will listen about the success of her sons. One night, as she descends further into sadness, she dies alone:

... Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother. (Emecheta, 1979: 224)

It is only in death that Nnu Ego is finally paid the respect she deserves by her sons. All of her children return to Ibuza for the funeral, "They were all sorry she had died before they were in a position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen..." (Emecheta, 1979: 224). As part of Nnu Ego's funeral, her children build a shrine to her, allowing for her grandchildren to "appeal to her should they be barren" (224). It is only in her death that she finally has a voice. She never answers women's prayers for children. No one understands her position, "for

what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?" (Emecheta, 1979: 224). Nnu Ego clearly wanted and deserved more, and in not answering prayers, she is finally an active agent, showing her subversion through silence (Daymond, 1996: 286) to the tradition (and distortion of it) that ruled her life.

Nnu Ego does everything in her power to be a "good woman." She relies on tradition, but does not realize until much too late that tradition does not help her in Lagos. She is unwilling or unable to adhere to traditional Igbo values of networking, ambition (which comes from strength and self-confidence), and survival tactics—namely adaptability—that allowed her counterpart Adaku to succeed. One can only imagine that in Adankwo's position, Nnu Ego's life would have been much happier. Emecheta, through the many voices of her female characters, is showing us that tradition does indeed need to be questioned. Son preference and the absolute necessity of motherhood to give a woman identity are both practices that hurt Nnu Ego. However, alone, this is much too simple a reading that allows readers to indict traditional Igbo culture as always harmful to women. By also showing us images of women who survive and thrive utilizing tradition and African feminist values, Emecheta is clearly showing us that tradition has its place, but that women must now adapt in order to survive the distortions of tradition by colonialism.

¹Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) actually believes that African writers are *creating* theory in their works. In other words, they are writing in a way that is forcing critics to re-think their theories.

²"Having sex" is not really accurate to describe the encounter between Agbadi and Ona on this particular night. It is ambiguously described as both a rape scene and a scene in which Ona desires Agbadi, but is left unsatisfied. This is just another point that shows Ona's freedom, even her sexual freedom, is still somewhat defined by men.

³It is traditionally the woman's responsibility to take care of school fees.

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