

Motherhood—A Joy?

The Status of Mothers of African Descent in the Literature and Lore of Africa and the African Diaspora

“Yo mama don’ wear no drawers,” chants a young male character in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” (Wright, 1972: 548). This chanting, part of an African American folk tradition called the dozens, can be traced directly to an African value system in which the mother is so venerated that, ironically, the winner of this verbal game of wits is the one who delivers the greatest insult to someone’s mother. “Mother and Wife,” a calypso song popularized by Trinidadian singer Lord Kitchener in the 1950s, poses a dilemma to men: “If your mother and your wife are drownin’, I want to know which one you would be savin’?” The persona in the song gives his answer, “I’m holdin’ on to my mother, and my wife she will have to excuse[me].” His rationale resonates clearly when he concludes, “I can always get another wife, but I can never get another mother in my life.”

In the folklore and culture of African and the diaspora, the highly esteemed status of mother is often revealed through songs like Kitchener’s, language games, such as the dozens played by Wright’s characters, and tales and proverbs transmitted orally from generation to generation. This paper will consider whether motherhood still holds a hallowed place in today’s society influenced by modernity. In addition, it will examine contemporary influences on the status of mothers of African descent, the physical and mental effects of motherhood on these women, and their roles in shaping the future of their families and communities.

Finally, it will consider women’s own attitudes towards motherhood centered on the question of the joys of motherhood that Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta most directly confronts in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. This paper will examine these issues relevant to mothers of African descent by looking at how Emecheta and other women writers from Africa and the diaspora have presented them in their fictional works and by drawing from the

rich oral tradition of Africans and those in the diaspora. In addition to those in Emecheta's novel, it will primarily draw its analyses from the roles of and attitudes towards mothers in these novels: *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (Marshall, 1981), *Changes* (Aidoo, 1991), *So Long a Letter* (Ba, 1981), *Our Sister Killjoy* (Aidoo, 1997), and *Zenzele, A Letter for My Daughter* (Maraire, 1996), most of which are by African women writers. Since there is greater accord among the core issues of this paper discussed in the works by African women, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is the only one of the books included in the study that was written by an African American writer, although Paule Marshall is sometimes labeled as a Caribbean writer.

Influences on the status of mothers of African descent

Motherhood in many African societies represents the stage of fruition for a marriage, the seal that binds the marriage. Thus, in many instances, it is only when wives become mothers that they become fully accepted into their husband's clan. Mbiti observes that "Marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth" (1970: 143).

If mothers are special, then those who bear male offspring are even more important. It has been noted that women's very essence or "sense of fulfillment as a human being is measured by the number of children (especially males) she bears" is what has been noted (Achebe, 1981: 7). Emecheta illustrates this attitude towards mothers who have borne male children in *The Joys of Motherhood* when Nnu Ego's father Agbadi explains the reason for this preference in his short admonition to Nnu Ego: "What greater honor is there for a woman to be a mother, and now 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" (Emecheta, 1994: 119).

Emecheta's character Andankwo also praises Nnu Ego and reminds her of her favored status among her husband's people because she, not her co-wife Adaku, is the mother of his sons: "You are the mother of the men children that made him into a man. If Adaku dies today, her people, not her husband's will come for her body. It is not so with you" (Emecheta, 1994: 159).

Since male children stood to inherit their mothers, women who had only daughters were considered worthless as reflected in the following quote: "Though Ibuza men admired a hard-working and rich woman, her life was nothing if she left no male children behind when she had gone to inherit the wealth, children who were her own flesh and blood" (1994: 166).

Hence, Adaku, Nnu Ego's co-wife, who had become rich through hard work, is considered worthless because she has only a daughter, and Esi of *Changes* is insulted by her in-laws who label her a "semi-barren witch" (Aidoo, 1991: 70) because she has only a daughter and no sons.

If having one daughter caused problems and heartache for mothers, then having two certainly intensified the stress. Emecheta looks at how Nnaife, Nnu Ego's husband, reacted insensitively to the news that his wife has just delivered

twin girls. Laughing loudly, Nnaife exclaims to Nnu Ego: “Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? Where will we all sleep, eh? What will they eat?” (Emecheta, 1994: 127).

Nnaife makes Nnu Ego feel as if it is her fault that she has had girls, never taking responsibility for his part in creating the newborn girls. His sadness at having become the father of two girls is short lived as within a few weeks, his second wife, Adaku delivers a boy. However, because the boy dies soon after birth, Adaku becomes mentally depressed and “almost impossible to live with” (Emecheta, 1994: 127).

Traces of this biased attitude towards male children can be found in the literature of the African diaspora, as well. Perhaps in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* Silla’s and Deighton’s marital relationship is strained partly because of the death of their son, leaving them with two daughters. And, Silla seems to think that pregnancy with a male child is less difficult as she recounts how carrying her son was much easier than her daughter. (Marshall, 1981: 30)

For traditional African women who suffered either temporarily or permanently from childlessness or barrenness, their lives were impeded by cultural and traditional beliefs that continue to highly value fertility. Barren women bore the brunt of derogatory societal attitudes and insults from their husbands’ families. Several African proverbs reveal these negative attitudes: If a woman who has been barren a long time gets a child, people congratulate the couple saying, “God has taken you from between the teeth of scorners,” or “God has removed your shame” (Mbiti, 1970: 85).

No one knows the scar of shame placed upon such a woman more than Nnu Ego, Emecheta’s heroine, who has tried unsuccessfully to bear a child for her first husband Amatokwu. As a new wife having become obsessed with becoming pregnant, she lamented her failure not only for her husband, but for the villagers as well. It seems that: “Nnu Ego and her new husband Amatokwu were very happy; yet Nnu Ego was surprised that, as the months passed, she was failing everybody. There was no child” (Emecheta, 1994: 31)

Adding to her frustration over her barrenness is the fact that Nnu Ego is unable to confide in her husband about what has become her problem. She maintains the belief according to tradition that the problem of infertility is “her problem and hers alone” (Emecheta, 1994: 31). When she confronts Amatokwu about the blame for her infertility being placed on her, he responds bluntly: “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” (Emecheta, 1994: 32). He further insults her by calling her “dry and jumpy,” (32) one who is “all bones” (32). The barren woman then becomes associated with dryness, which one might liken to a dried seed, or to the dryness associated with menopausal women who are no longer able to bear children. Amatokwu’s use of bones conjures up skeletal images that imply that Nnu Ego is fit for the grave because in her barren state she is useless as a woman.

Traditionally, people of African descent had large families, considering

them a blessing. One African proverb, “May god give you fruit,” reminiscent of the Biblical, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen.1: 28), illustrates one of the communal blessings pronounced upon childless couples. But, some cultural groups in the African diaspora have become alienated from this traditional viewpoint where children are regarded as the measure of marital success. Marshall demonstrates this changed attitude in the kitchen conversation among the West Indian women, in which Silla speaks out against having large families and the oppressive role that men play in the impregnation of women when she tells the very pregnant Virgie Farnum:

This ain home where you got to be breeding like a sow. Go to some doctor and get something 'cause these Bajan men will wear you out making children and the blasted children ain nothing but a keepback. You don see the white people having no lot. (Marshall, 1981: 30)

Marshall uses animal imagery to refer to women’s bearing children in order to emphasize the undesirability of having large families. By telling Virgie that a string of pregnancies would have been acceptable at home in Barbados, Silla attributes this rejection of traditional values to their move to the city where they aspire to Western values and ideals.

In some instances, it appears that the number of children one has does not elevate one’s status in the eyes of that person’s family members. In *So Long A Letter*, the newly widowed Ramatoulaye, for example, felt a sense of outrage towards her sisters-in-law, when at the funeral festivities, they gave equal weight to the years of marriage and number of children that she had had in comparison to those of Binetou, her younger rival and co-wife. Her outcry in antithetical phrases follows: “Our sisters-in-law give equal consideration to thirty years and five years of married life. With the same ease and the same words, they celebrate twelve maternities and three” (Ba, 1981: 4).

If silence registers consent, then judging by the silence of the other members of this community, one can infer that they concurred with Ramatoulaye’s in-laws assessment of her status. Given the collective consciousness of African communities, no one spoke up or protested vehemently this unfair, exploitative treatment of Ramatoulaye.

Effects of motherhood on women of African descent

Motherhood has varying effects on women, sometimes strengthening bonds between mother and daughter. Other times, it has devastating physical and mental consequences on women. Emecheta contrasts the physical appearance of Nnaife with that of his wife Nnu Ego, who had become “so haggard, so rough, so worn” (1994: 118) after birthing children. “Nnaife looked younger than his age, while she was looking and feeling old after the birth of only three children” (1994: 119).

Traditional African women recognize that a woman loses part of her

mental and physical self when she becomes a mother. Thus, Aanaa, Esi's grandmother, speaks up about the devastating consequences of childbearing. Having children, she recites, represents a kind of death. She confides to her granddaughter Esi that:

I have had four children, and I know that each time a baby came out of me, I died a little. Somehow, my sister, there is a most miniscule fraction of time when the baby is tumbling out of her womb when the woman in labour dies. (Ba, 1981: 110)

Once faced with the daunting task of motherhood, however, women perform admirably and sometimes selflessly. After many years of sacrifice and love, these women feel abandoned when their children leave to pursue their own lofty ambitions and lead their own lives. A woman who has given her entire life to rearing her five children, Nnu Ego, feels a failure as a mother, since her son Oshia has gone to America, not even bothering to write, and another Adim goes to Canada and marries a white woman.

Like Nnu Ego, Silla feels unappreciated and abandoned by her children after she has struggled to give them a comfortable life. Her older daughter Ina has revealed plans to marry and leave home, while Silla plans to travel to Barbados. Silla voices her frustration with Selina's announcement that she is leaving home by asking "Gone, is this what you does get for the nine months and the pain and the long years putting bread in their mouths?" (Marshall, 1981: 306).

Silla, who is regarded by her daughter Selina as simply "the mother," is painted as a cold, hardened woman. She is a woman who becomes enraged when Selina travels across town alone at night to meet her at work. Instead of embracing Selina with hugs and kisses, she hurls harsh words and threats at her. Upon leaving the factory where she works, Silla tells Selina angrily, "Patrolling the streets this time of night. Taking trolley out to this hell-hole making my heart turn over thinking something happen. I tell yuh, I wun dare strike yuh now 'cause I'd forget my strength and kill you" (Marshall, 1981: 102).

As a woman who knows that the world is a difficult place where one has to work hard to survive, Silla, therefore, advises Selina, "I tell yuh, to make your way in this world, you got to dirty more than your hands sometime" (Marshall, 1981: 102-103).

Ba presents Ramatoulaye as one who is very concerned for her children's well-being. Feeling that perhaps she has been too permissive with her children when she learns that they have been smoking and wearing western trousers, she agonizes over how she could have prevented these behaviors. Conscious of her role as nurturer, Ramatoulaye fights off her initial response to abandon Aissatou, whom she has learned is pregnant out of wedlock. Instead, she acknowledges a closeness with her child and reasons it best to put aside her pride. Her relationship with Aissatou takes on new meaning as revealed

through images of rebirth:

The umbilical cord took on new life, the indestructible bond beneath the avalanche of storms and the duration of time. I saw her once more sprung from me, kicking about, her tongue pink, her tiny face creased under her silky hair. I could not abandon her, as pride would have me do. (Ba, 1981: 83)

In handling this crisis, Ramatoulaye was forced to examine her attitudes and roles as a mother. A conquering, forgiving spirit triumphs as she recites a litany of motherly duties and responsibilities:

One is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end. (Ba, 1981: 82-83)

Educating a nation

When Dr. Kwaggir Aggrey stated, "If you educate a woman, you educate a nation, but if you educate a man you educate an individual" (Gyamfuaa-Fofie, 1997: 43), he embodied the communal spirit of African-centered philosophy. He perhaps lays out one of the most useful roles for women from Africa and the diaspora. The job of educating a nation, however, for African mothers has been rife with difficulties since, as Aidoo points out, African mothers have had a long history of suffering, which they have endured since they and their children were kidnapped into slavery, raped, forced to labor on plantations, and drafted into imperial armies (Aidoo, 1997: 123). In spite of these ordeals that African mothers have endured, her children do not truly appreciate her and add to her suffering by returning with grandchildren with whom she cannot communicate, those who speak only "English, French, Portuguese, etc. and she doesn't?" (Aidoo, 1997: 123).

And sometimes, the African mother loses not only her grandchildren but her children who become educated in the Western sense and return home with cultural amnesia as did Mukoma Byron in *Zenzele*. After ten years of study in Britain to become a doctor, he returned unrecognizable to his own people, with an Anglicized name, a white wife who refused to call the country by its new name of Zimbabwe, and a refusal to speak Shona, his first language. When he encounters his mother for the first time after his long absence, embarrassed by the person whom he has become, she curses him: "You left here as my son and return a stranger... I taught you Shona. Do not try that nonsense with me! You are a disgrace! Go! Leave me in peace" (Maraire, 1996: 61).

Aidoo calls for something other than the solution where they (sons) build mothers a house (1997: 123). For, what good is a house if the continuity of the

family unit is destroyed? There are ways that one can more greatly appease the mother: The solution lies not in material goods, but in honoring the traditions of the ancestors, by keeping the culture intact, using one's talents for the betterment of the nation, making certain that one's family is reared within the culture, and honoring one's cultural roots. Mothers can assist this cultural integration largely through educating the family, the cornerstone of the nation. Thus, nation building or rebuilding of cultural mainstays is what Aidoo seems to believe is the best solution for building a strong, healthy people (1997: 122). Mothers as the foundation of the family can help it thrive in the same way that an African nation should, that is, by drawing upon the strengths of African culture, allowing for its individuality or its unique character to remain peculiarly African.

Ba does an excellent job of exemplifying this kind of nation building through her character Tante (Aunty) Nabou, who successfully educated and "mothered" a young Nabou through oral tradition, teaching her cultural values through folktales. The results of this education, according to Ba, allowed "the virtue and greatness of a race to take root in this child" (1981: 47).

Similarly, Amai Zenzele, mother of Zenzele, the young woman about to leave to study abroad in America, provides the same kinds of virtuous lessons when she imparts to her daughter her wisdom consisting of a healthy respect for the cultural values and traditions of her people in Zimbabwe. Her mother best sums up the worldview that she wants her daughter to have when she states:

How could I allow you to grow up reading Greek classics, Homer's Iliad? the voyages of Agamemnon, and watch you devour The Merchant of Venice and Romeo and Juliet yet be ignorant of the lyrical, the romantic, and the tragic that have shaped us as Africans? (Maraire, 1996: 8)

Her mother continues to explain the reasons that they take their annual sojourns to their village is so that she can understand and know the cultural traditions of her people.

Perhaps, if Silla had given Selina these kinds of cultural lessons, instead of becoming obsessed with assimilation into American society and the trappings of a material society, Selina would not have had to go back and fetch her roots in Barbados, in order to place some order into her chaotic world. Mary Helen Washington, in her critical essay of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, observes that the Bajan community's participation in Gatha Steed daughter's wedding signified their full imitation of white American social mores and a rejection of traditional Bajan community life (Washington, 1981: 316).

Motherhood—a joy?

Emecheta's (1994) novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* ironically looks at the African mother and the joys of being a mother. Nnu Ego, the central woman

character, who is initially joyless because she remains childless, during her first marriage, finds that even after birthing children, the end result is that she is joyless. After a life of selfless devotion to her children, Nnu Ego finds herself abandoned by her children. Therefore, if Nnu Ego were asked to respond to the question of whether motherhood is a joy, I suppose that her answer would fluctuate between “yes” and “no”, for at various times in her life, motherhood did in fact have some positive qualities. Ultimately, though, she would probably answer a resounding “no.”

The women writers from Africa and the diaspora whose works were discussed in this paper provide us with a spectrum of images of mothers who would probably give varied answers to this question. In many cases, the answer could not be a simple “yes” or “no.” To understand the plethora of answers, one has to understand the many faces of the African mother: She is the selfless Nnu Ego, who placed the welfare of her children above her own. She is Aidoo’s (1991) independent, career-minded Esi, whose daughter was cared for primarily by her father and his people, her daughter visiting her only periodically. She is Ba’s (1981) open-minded, permissive Ramatoulaye who placed few restrictions on her daughter, allowed them to wear western trousers, and encouraged them to develop healthy, uninhibited feelings towards their own sexuality.

She is Marshall’s (1981) resilient, hard-working Silla who showers little affection on her daughters. And, she is Maraire’s (1996) self-confident, articulate Amai Zenzele, who loves her daughter so much that she pens a long letter to her so that she finds strength in her African culture to sustain herself during her travels abroad to be educated.

Nnu Ego feels that she has been a failure as a mother since her children abandoned her once they became educated abroad. Esi seems indifferent to motherhood, seldom mentioning her daughter Ogyaanowa. Ramatoulaye questions her childrearing practices and wonders if her children would have turned out differently had she been less permissive: one becomes pregnant before marriage, while two experiment with smoking. Like Nnu Ego, Silla feels that she has failed as a mother because both her children abandon her to pursue their own dreams and ambitions. Yet, Amai Zenzele seems to feel so self-assured as a mother that she passes on to her daughter a rich legacy of words by which to live.

As one can see from the various descriptions of the mothers of African descent, she has changed from the stereotypical mother who accepts her culturally and socially prescribed role as mother unquestionably. Though in many instances, she is proud and happy as mother, she has other facets of life to pursue.

Ramatoulaye wonderfully exemplifies the spirit of the joys of motherhood. A university-educated woman, she realizes that her role as mother does not dictate the totality of her being. It does not determine who she is, nor does it act as the sole determinant of her happiness. For at the conclusion of the book she actively vows to reconstruct a new life for herself by going out and searching

for happiness (Ba, 1981: 89).

Likewise, Amai Zenzele offers hope to her daughter by viewing herself as a “link between the past and the future” (Maraire, 1996: 192). She concludes that one of her major contributions to the world was the hand that she had in bringing her daughter into the world. As a result, her “conscience rests joyously with this knowledge” (193). By equipping her daughter with cultural knowledge and values expedient for her own patriarchal liberation, Amai Zenzele is able to transcend the confining circumstances in her life to carve a new identity for herself. Clearly, the joys of motherhood for many of these women are the richness of experiences that they have undergone as they have struggled to forge lives for themselves and their children, in spite of the many pitfalls and obstacles that they have managed to overcome.

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