

Book Reviews

The Joys of Motherhood

Buchi Emecheta
Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series), 1979

Reviewed by Merryl Hammond

This book, somewhat ironically titled *The Joys of Motherhood*, tells the difficult life-story of a strong-minded but very traditional Nigerian woman, Nnu Ego. Born in a rural village, Nnu Ego is married off to a man she has never met, who lives in Lagos, a rapidly changing urban centre.

We follow her story through frequent pregnancies, the deaths of two children and grinding poverty. She copes alone, while her husband is a soldier in World War II, adjusts to being the “senior wife,” when her husband takes other wives, and manages the stresses of living under colonialism, where new values clash with the old.

The story describes as arranged marriages, bride prices, polygamy, naming ceremonies, tribal prejudices, family violence, medicine men, racism, and sexism. A girl is, quite literally, the property first of her father and then her husband. (“Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us.”) Initially, schooling for girls is unheard of. A wife is expected merely to “bear children, keep his [husband’s] room clean and wash his clothes.” (If she were “beautiful and quiet he calculated [that] as an added bonus.”) Giving birth to a girl-child is considered a waste of time and energy. A girl’s only use is to help her mother and bring a good bride price in an arranged marriage. Only by birthing a son does woman become “a real woman.” Motherhood is the only legitimate aspiration for women. A woman who works outside the home for a meagre income (hawking firewood, for example) is often judged to be neglecting her children.

The author uses aptly poetic language: “His tongue was biting like the edge of a circumcision blade”, “those breasts, two beautiful firm mounds on her chest looking like calabashes turned upside-down”, “her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery.”

Many mothers will identify with Nnu Ego's wry observations: "When the children were good they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother", "If you don't have children the longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you", "Some fathers... can reject a bad son, a master can reject his evil servant, a wife can even leave a bad husband, but a mother can never, never reject her son. If he is damned, she is damned with him", and about a woman staying in a loveless marriage, "We tolerate each other for the children, just for the children."

Woven throughout the story are the author's own reflections on traditional African society's view of women as second-class citizens. Her feminism is clear in the thoughts she ascribes to Nnu Ego: "I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband—and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build."

"When We Chose Canada": A Mother and Daughter Share Stories That Shaped Their Lives In Their New Homeland.

Sherry Ramrattan Smith and Rose Bickram Ramrattan
Waterloo: Pandora Press 1999.

Reviewed by Laura Thomas

In 1969 the Ramrattan family – mother, father, daughter, and son – left politically unstable Trinidad to find a better home in Canada. In this self-published excerpt from her Master's thesis, Sherry Ramrattan Smith shares her story and her mother Rose's story about adjusting to life in Canada as immigrant women of colour. In the tradition of feminist collaborative research, Ramrattan Smith analyzes how daughter and mother adapted to and constructed meaning in a hegemonic, white society by juxtaposing and including simultaneously a "daughter's take" and a "mother's snapshot" of their experiences. Through this exploratory, qualitative, approach she is able to tease out of these personal narratives issues such as perceptions of freedom, acceptance and identity, emotional trauma, "Canadian-ness," and skin hue in relation to citizenship.

Along with the personal desire to live and express agency, voice and empowerment, a major purpose of this work is to help educators understand the special needs, particularly self-esteem issues, of immigrant students of colour and their parents. The author does this by including a thought-provoking