

Nigerian culture: the joys of motherhood and the present day



The idea that childbirth can test a woman and perhaps lead to self-awareness serves as a major theme for Buchi Emecheta's Nigerian novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which a young Ibo woman marries twice, the first marriage highlighting her infertility. In her second marriage, Nnu Ego has surprisingly little difficulty in reproducing; however, she faces many challenges in raising her children and maintaining her marriage. The author describes Nigerian life through the eyes of men, women, children, and various ethnic groups under British rule in the mid 1900s. It is clear that family life, gender roles, and religious beliefs in the novel are similar to that of post-colonial Nigerian culture today.

To begin, Buchi Emecheta, author of *The Joys of Motherhood*, was born to Ibo parents in Lagos, Nigeria, in the year of 1944. These facts are especially important due to the story being held primarily in Ibo and Lagos, cities Emecheta is highly familiar with. According to the *Encyclopedia of World Writers*, Emecheta got engaged and married as early as sixteen years old, and she later gave birth to five children (Diamond, "Emecheta, Buchi"). In her time, it was very common for women to have multiple children. Regarding her literary work, Emecheta has published many novels in which she uses fictional characters to live out her struggles as an oppressed and underprivileged wife, mother, and emigrant. To support this, Diamond states that Emecheta's "brave approach to writing about the unspoken has set her apart from other African writers", and she "[adds] a voice that speaks to the specific issues of women from developing countries" (*Encyclopedia of World Writers*, "Emecheta, Buchi"). In other words, Emecheta brought herself to write about a society that faced hardships, herself included. Although she

passed away in January, 2017, Buchi Emecheta's novels will forever hold true the life she lived, and they may even teach people in more liberal countries to appreciate the "easy life".

Additionally, *The Joys of Motherhood* depicts the lifestyle of a fictional character, Nnu Ego, who struggles to find her way in life. She lives a somewhat easy life in Ibuza, but she is still expected to marry young and produce many children, as this is custom to her people. Unfortunately, Nnu Ego fails to reproduce by her handsome husband, which leads to the disappointment of many. She marries again, this time to an ugly man in a foreign city, and ironically produces nine children, of which only seven survive. According to CultureGrams Online Edition, "An urban couple often has between three and five children, while a rural family may have as many as seven to ten" (Nigeria: Family). Although having many children brings Nnu Ego and her husband Nnaife an honorable reputation, they soon find parenthood both a blessing and a curse. They are a low income family, and after Nnaife is forced by the British to fight in the civil war for more than a year, his wife is left to fend for her family when market prices rise and women cannot easily find work. In this novel, Nnu Ego portrays the blood, sweat, and tears that Emecheta and other Nigerian women put in for their children to become successful and have a better life. Emecheta does well at describing the amount of effort it takes to survive in a developing country, especially as poor emigrants under foreign rule.

First, *The Joys of Motherhood* portrays the importance of marriage and children in Nigeria. In many cases, Nigerians have polygamous families. In reference to CultureGrams, a Nigerian "man can have as many as four wives <https://assignbuster.com/nigerian-culture-the-joys-of-motherhood-and-the-present-day/>

as long as he has the consent of his wives and provided he can support each wife equally (Nigeria: Dating and Marriage). Sometimes men even inherit the wives and children that a deceased relative leaves behind. For example, in the novel, Nnaife's older brother passes away and, with Nnaife being the oldest son left, he has the responsibility to take in his brother's family through marriage. Although Nnaife is to gain consent from Nnu Ego, she does not like when the new wife Aduku moves in, bringing her child along; however, Nnu Ego is now a senior wife and must behave as such (Emecheta, 117-118).

Additionally, children are of great significance to the Nigerian family. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, sons are highly favored over daughters. According to *Countries and their Cultures*, "modern Nigeria is a patriarchal society [and] men are dominant over women" (Curry, "Nigeria"). So, it is common for women to produce until they have a son, and that explains why Nnu Ego gives birth to nine children, each time hoping for a son. Because of the patriarchal society of Nigeria in the novel, males overall have more power and tend to be more dedicated to their family since they will always carry the family name. On the other hand, a daughter is not thought of as completely useless. In the novel and in modern Nigeria, a daughter marries young, and her family receives a bride price in return. According to *CultureGrams*, "the groom is expected to give money, property (such as kola nuts, food, drinks, and clothing), or service to the family of the bride as compensation for the loss of their daughter" (Nigeria: Dating and Marriage). In the novel, for example, Adaku suggests that their daughters' bride prices should be used to help pay for the boys' schooling. (Emecheta, 127). So, by

marrying off their daughters, the bride price helps relieve low income families of their financial situations. Overall, family life relates closely to that of modern Nigeria.

Second, gender role in Nigeria is very distinct in families. Men and women have their own responsibilities; however, there is a strict line between the two genders. According to CultureGrams, men make the most important decisions for the family, and women are important for childbirth and taking care of the house (Nigeria: Family). This conception holds true in *The Joys of Motherhood*, as Nnu Ego stays home to nurse the children, prepare meals, and clean. Although women in the story are not expected to bring home a major source of income, Nnu Ego's family is poor, so she must go out to the market each day to trade. When her son is old enough, Nnu Ego even sends him out to watch her stall where she trades items for money (Emecheta, 103). Moreover, "in lower-income families, boys and girls may work to support the family, often by trading in the market" (Nigeria: Family). So, for that matter, the roles of children in the novel go hand in hand with the reality of Nigeria. Also, regarding the fact that Nigerian women are seen as important for childbirth and little else, readers may have sympathy for Nnu Ego once infertility and the death of her children fill her life with pain and uncertainty. Finally, sons are more privileged than daughters. For example, Nnu Ego decides to use her daughter's bride price to pay for her son's schooling (Emecheta, 127). This goes to show that Nigeria truly consists of a patriarchal society in which males dominate. Furthermore, CultureGrams states that "many families do not send their girls to school because of a belief that learning to be good mothers and wives is more important than

formal education” (Nigeria: Family). Hence, men and women are not thought of as complete equals in Nigeria.

Lastly, some religious and mythological beliefs in the Nigerian novel remain the same in reality today. People of the Ibo tribe, including Nnaife and Nnu Ego, believe in their own chi. According to *World Literature and Its Times*, “the chi [is not] solely a spiritual force but also a person, perhaps an ancestor or other village inhabitant, who has been reincarnated in an individual at birth” (Franey, “The Joys of Motherhood”). Basically, each person has their own personal god. With this in mind, Nnu Ego’s chi is a slave who was put to death after her mistress died, a common ritual performed when someone of high importance passes away. She had begged for her life, and yet it was taken from her by one of Nnu Ego’s relatives (Emecheta, 23). The slave woman comes back as Nnu Ego’s chi, and when her infertility becomes quite obvious, a dibia claims that Nnu Ego’s chi is punishing her for her death. Furthermore, Nnu Ego and her family must offer sacrifices to her chi to lessen the burden.

On another note, Nigerians put their rested assurance in dibias, a “generic word for doctors” (*Martial Arts of the World*, “Animals and Power”). Notably, these dibias aren’t average doctors. For example, Nnu Ego’s son places a rat inside of a guitar, and one night the guitar seems to magically play by itself; however, Nnu Ego does not know the rat is inside of the guitar, so she consults a dibia to learn the meaning behind this. The dibia suggests that her husband plays the guitar without skill, and that this has summoned the spirits from the dead to come get rid of his instrument (Emecheta, 33). With that being said, Nigerians do place their trust in dibias for help. Now, when it <https://assignbuster.com/nigerian-culture-the-joys-of-motherhood-and-the-present-day/>

comes to religion, the novel stays close to reality. In Nigeria, most people are either Christian or Muslim. While Nnaife works as a slave for the British, he becomes accustomed to Christianity and often attends church; however, it could be argued that Nnaife is not Christian since he practices polygamy, something of Islamic culture. Though, according to CultureGrams, “ Many non-Muslim men also practice polygamy” (Mattison, “ Marriage). So, all in all, *The Joys of Motherhood* sticks close to Nigerian views and beliefs.

The Joys of Motherhood stays true to the culture of Nigeria today. With that being said, reading historically accurate novels, especially those written by Buchi Emecheta, can be helpful for someone interested in learning about cultures of other countries. Emecheta can be praised for her credibility, as she took her life experiences and placed them inside a book for the world to understand the hardships that she and many other Nigerians actually endured.

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