

Motherhood Reimagined: Identity, Labour, Sacrifice, Ideology and Resistance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta occupies a distinctive position in African feminist writing for her sustained interrogation of the institution of motherhood within the intersecting structures of patriarchy, colonialism and indigenous tradition. Unlike radical Western feminist discourse that frequently positions motherhood as an oppressive social institution demanding rejection, Emecheta neither glorifies nor dismisses motherhood. Instead, she redefines it through the lived experiences of African women whose identities are simultaneously shaped by culture, gender, economic deprivation and colonial modernity. *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) dismantles the romanticized myth of motherhood by exposing its contradictions, emotional burdens and ideological functions within Igbo society. Through the tragic life of Nnu Ego, Emecheta demonstrates how motherhood, celebrated as the highest fulfilment of womanhood, often becomes a site of relentless labour, emotional deprivation and personal erasure.

This paper argues that Emecheta reconceptualises motherhood through five interconnected movements: motherhood as identity, motherhood as labour, motherhood as sacrifice, motherhood as ideological control, and motherhood as resistance. Rather than presenting Nnu Ego merely as a victim of patriarchy, the novel foregrounds her remarkable endurance while simultaneously exposing the cultural structures that transform maternal love into an instrument of female exploitation. By situating motherhood within the larger contexts of colonial capitalism, gendered labour and African communitarian ethics, Emecheta moves beyond binary feminist formulations. Her feminism described by herself as “feminism with a small f”—emerges as culturally rooted, socially responsible and deeply humane.

Drawing upon close textual analysis, African feminist theory, and critical interventions by Adrienne Rich, Julia Kristeva, Kate Millett and other feminist scholars, the paper demonstrates that *The Joys of Motherhood* is not simply a narrative about motherhood but a profound critique of patriarchal ideologies that define women solely through reproduction. Ultimately, Emecheta transforms motherhood from a biological destiny into a contested political and cultural discourse, thereby establishing herself as one of the most significant voices in African feminist literature..

Keywords African Feminism, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Womanism, Identity, Labour, Sacrifice , Resistance , Alienation, Joy...

Introduction

African women's writing has consistently challenged literary traditions that either silenced women's experiences or represented them through patriarchal assumptions. Among the pioneers who transformed the landscape of African literature, Buchi Emecheta occupies a singular position because she made ordinary African women the centre of her fictional universe. Unlike many earlier African novelists whose nationalist concerns often relegated women to symbolic or peripheral roles, Emecheta foregrounded women's everyday struggles, revealing how private suffering is deeply embedded within larger social, cultural and political structures.

Perhaps more than any other African novelist, Emecheta interrogates motherhood—not as an unquestioned ideal but as a complex institution that simultaneously nurtures and destroys women. While motherhood has traditionally been celebrated in African societies as the highest expression of feminine fulfilment, *The Joys of Motherhood* questions the assumptions underlying this celebration. The novel exposes the irony that the very institution which promises honour, security and social acceptance often becomes the source of women's greatest suffering.

The central character, Nnu Ego, embodies this paradox. Her identity, self-worth and social legitimacy are almost entirely determined by her capacity to bear children. Initially childless and therefore considered incomplete, she eventually becomes the mother of nine children, seven of whom survive. Ironically, the fulfilment of this cherished cultural ideal brings neither happiness nor security. Instead, motherhood demands endless sacrifice, unceasing labour and complete self-abnegation until, in old age, Nnu Ego dies alone by the roadside—abandoned by the very children for whom she has sacrificed her entire existence (Emecheta 224).

The title itself is profoundly ironic. The “joys” promised by motherhood gradually dissolve into exhaustion, poverty, loneliness and emotional neglect. Maternal love, instead of empowering Nnu Ego, becomes the mechanism through which patriarchal society continuously exploits her emotional and physical labour. Emecheta thereby dismantles the sentimental glorification of motherhood without dismissing its emotional significance. She distinguishes between motherhood as a deeply personal experience and motherhood as a social institution designed to regulate women’s lives.

Emecheta herself rejected militant labels while remaining unequivocal about her commitment to women’s experiences. In her celebrated essay “Feminism with a Small f,” she writes:

“Being a woman, and an African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f” (Emecheta 1988:175).

This statement is fundamental to understanding her literary philosophy. Emecheta neither reproduces Western feminist paradigms uncritically nor accepts patriarchal traditions unquestioningly. Her feminism emerges from lived African realities where women negotiate multiple systems of oppression gender, colonialism, class and tradition—while continuing to sustain families and communities.

Critics have repeatedly observed that Emecheta’s protagonists reject stereotypical representations of African women as passive, submissive and voiceless. Instead, they are “vital and viable” individuals who struggle to define their own identities while contributing meaningfully to society (Suri 60). Living between Africa and England, Emecheta was uniquely positioned to expose the contradictions of both societies. As an African writer residing in Britain, she negotiated two cultural worlds simultaneously, enabling her to critique both Western misconceptions about African women and indigenous patriarchal practices that denied women autonomy.

Unlike Western liberal feminism, which often associates women’s liberation with individual autonomy outside familial structures, Emecheta’s vision remains deeply rooted in community. She values family, motherhood and social responsibility, yet refuses to romanticise the enormous sacrifices demanded of women. As the critical study observes, her work “strikes a balance between the egocentric individualism of Western feminism and the communality of African womanism” (68). This balance enables Emecheta to challenge oppressive traditions while preserving those cultural values that sustain collective life.

This paper therefore departs from plot-based readings of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Instead, it proposes that the novel is best understood through five conceptual movements that progressively reveal Emecheta’s reconstruction of motherhood: motherhood as identity, motherhood as labour, motherhood as sacrifice, motherhood as ideological control, and motherhood as resistance. These categories are not isolated themes but overlapping dimensions through which Emecheta interrogates the cultural production of motherhood in colonial Nigeria. Together they demonstrate that motherhood in the novel is simultaneously an emotional experience, an economic burden, a political institution and, paradoxically, a site of female resilience.

Rather than asking whether motherhood liberates or oppresses women, Emecheta compels readers to ask a more profound question: Who benefits from the idealisation of motherhood, and at whose cost?

Motherhood as Identity

The first and perhaps the most significant movement in *The Joys of Motherhood* is the construction of motherhood as the very foundation of feminine identity. In the patriarchal Igbo society portrayed by Buchi Emecheta, womanhood acquires meaning only through maternity. Marriage alone does not confer social legitimacy upon a woman; rather, it is childbirth—particularly the birth of sons—that determines her worth, respectability and identity. The tragedy of Nnu Ego begins not with poverty or widowhood but with her inability to conceive, a condition that renders her socially invisible despite her beauty, intelligence and privileged upbringing. Through this cultural premise, Emecheta questions a society that equates female existence exclusively with biological reproduction.

From the very beginning, the novel establishes that motherhood is not merely a biological function but a cultural identity imposed upon women. Nnu Ego herself internalises this belief. When her first marriage ends because she is unable to bear children, she does not question the patriarchal value system; instead, she questions her own existence. Childlessness becomes synonymous with failure, shame and incompleteness. Emecheta thus reveals how patriarchal ideology operates most effectively when women themselves begin to measure their value through standards created by men.

The critical study rightly observes that in African society “a woman’s worth is assessed” not through her individuality but through her reproductive capacity (64). Love, happiness and social respect “are not contingent upon marriage but upon the birth of a child, especially a male one” (64). Motherhood therefore functions not simply as a personal aspiration but as the primary determinant of female identity.

Nnu Ego’s desperation to become a mother reflects this internalised ideology. Her second marriage to Nnaife, despite his unattractive appearance and humble occupation as a washerman in the service of a white colonial family, is accepted because it offers another opportunity to attain motherhood. Emecheta records Nnu Ego’s emotional transformation after the birth of her son Adim:

“...with this son, I am going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman—all I want to be, a woman and a mother. So, why should I hate him now?” (Emecheta 53).

The passage is profoundly revealing. Nnu Ego does not celebrate the child merely because she has become a mother; rather, she believes that motherhood has finally made her “a real woman.” Her identity depends entirely upon the successful performance of reproductive expectations. The statement simultaneously exposes both her joy and her tragedy, for her selfhood is defined not by personal aspirations but by patriarchal validation.

Emecheta carefully demonstrates that such beliefs are socially manufactured rather than naturally inherent. The critical commentary notes that “She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman” (68). This single sentence encapsulates the ideological conditioning that governs Nnu Ego’s entire life. Motherhood is presented as destiny, while childlessness is interpreted as a moral and social deficiency. Consequently, women willingly submit themselves to enormous suffering because society has convinced them that motherhood alone grants them recognition.

The irony becomes even sharper when one considers the paradox of Nnu Ego’s life. Having eventually borne nine children, seven of whom survive, she nevertheless experiences neither fulfilment nor security. Reflecting upon her own life, she painfully realises:

“She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman. She had had children, nine in all, and luckily seven were alive. Still, how was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically to the extent where a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and may be a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman” (Emecheta 219).

The tragic irony of this reflection lies in its reversal of the very ideology that had governed her life. Nnu Ego had spent years believing that motherhood guaranteed security in old age, yet she discovers that changing social and economic realities under colonial modernity have rendered this belief obsolete. Motherhood, therefore, ceases to be an assurance of dignity and becomes instead an uncertain emotional investment. Emecheta suggests that the institution itself has failed to evolve even though society has undergone radical transformation.

This transformation is closely linked with colonialism. The migration from the traditional village of Ibuza to the urban landscape of Lagos fundamentally alters familial relationships. The communal structures that once supported mothers are gradually replaced by capitalist individualism, wage labour and economic insecurity. Children increasingly become independent individuals rather than custodians of collective family obligations. Nnu Ego, however, continues to subscribe to traditional expectations, creating an irreconcilable conflict between inherited cultural values and emerging social realities.

Kanwar aptly observes that *The Joys of Motherhood* “is a satirical title as it unveils the bitter experiences of Nnu Ego, the protagonist who sacrifices her life in grooming her children who eventually abandon her in old age. Her children diminish her hopes and aspirations of fending for her and her joys actually become her sorrows as she experiences being a mother” (68). This observation foregrounds the central paradox of the novel: the identity that society glorifies ultimately becomes the source of profound alienation.

Motherhood also becomes the basis upon which women evaluate one another. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that women themselves perpetuate patriarchal values by measuring female worth through fertility. Nnu Ego’s childlessness attracts ridicule from other women as much as from men. Later, after becoming the mother of sons, she unconsciously reproduces the same hierarchical attitudes toward Adaku, whose inability to bear male children places her in an inferior position within the polygamous household. Emecheta thereby illustrates how patriarchal ideology survives not merely through male authority but through its internalisation by women themselves.

The contrast between Nnu Ego and Adaku is particularly significant. While Nnu Ego derives her identity almost exclusively from motherhood, Adaku gradually refuses to define herself through male approval or reproductive success. Unable to produce sons, she is repeatedly humiliated, yet she ultimately rejects the system that devalues her. Declaring her determination to pursue economic independence, she asserts:

“I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So, I have to set my own” (169).

This declaration marks one of the earliest moments in the novel where female identity begins to separate itself from motherhood. Adaku’s decision to educate her daughters and establish herself as an independent trader represents an alternative model of womanhood—one based on self-respect rather than reproductive validation. In

contrast, Nnu Ego remains emotionally imprisoned within the traditional ideal of motherhood, believing that maternal sacrifice alone will ultimately be rewarded.

The significance of Ona, Nnu Ego's mother, further enriches Emecheta's exploration of identity. Unlike her daughter, Ona is portrayed as an unconventional woman who resists patriarchal authority. The critical study notes that Ona "is projected as strong and independent-minded" and, before her death, pleads with Agbadi to allow Nnu Ego "to lead her own life unlike her own which was dictated by her father" (69). Ona thus leaves her daughter a legacy of self-assertion. Tragically, Nnu Ego is unable to inherit that legacy because the cultural expectations surrounding motherhood prove stronger than her mother's example.

Emecheta also dismantles the widespread assumption that motherhood naturally produces female fulfilment. Rather, fulfilment itself is shown to be a social construct. Nnu Ego repeatedly postpones her personal desires because she believes that her identity exists only in relation to her children. Every sacrifice appears meaningful because it promises future recognition. Yet the anticipated reward never materialises. Her individuality gradually disappears beneath the endless responsibilities of childcare, domestic labour and economic survival. Motherhood thus ceases to be an expression of identity and becomes its complete substitution.

Julia Kristeva's observation that the mother is "the filter, the passage, the threshold on which nature and culture confront each other" (Kristeva 158) offers an illuminating framework for understanding Nnu Ego's predicament. She becomes the site upon which biological reproduction is transformed into cultural obligation. Her body belongs to nature, but her identity is entirely produced by culture. Consequently, motherhood is less an instinctive experience than a carefully regulated social institution.

By presenting motherhood as the primary source of female identity while simultaneously exposing its inherent contradictions, Emecheta initiates the central argument of the novel. Identity founded exclusively upon reproduction inevitably denies women independent subjectivity. Nnu Ego's tragedy is therefore not that she becomes a mother; it is that she is never permitted to become anything beyond a mother. The woman disappears behind the maternal role until even her personal happiness becomes secondary to the expectations imposed upon her.

Having established motherhood as the foundation of feminine identity, Emecheta proceeds to expose the enormous physical, emotional and economic demands that sustain this identity. Motherhood, in her fictional universe, is never merely symbolic; it is ceaseless work. The next section therefore examines motherhood as labour, where maternal love becomes inseparable from unending physical toil, economic exploitation and invisible domestic work.

Motherhood as Labour

One of Buchi Emecheta's most significant interventions in *The Joys of Motherhood* is her transformation of motherhood from an idealised emotional experience into a form of relentless labour. While African society glorifies motherhood as the highest fulfilment of womanhood, the novel systematically exposes the invisible physical, emotional and economic work that sustains this institution. Maternal devotion is neither spontaneous nor romantic; it is achieved through endless sacrifice, unpaid domestic work and the complete exhaustion of the female body. Emecheta therefore redefines motherhood as labour labour that remains socially indispensable yet culturally unacknowledged.

Unlike patriarchal discourse, which celebrates mothers as symbols of nurture and selflessness, Emecheta presents motherhood as a continuous process of production. Mothers produce not merely children but the very social order that depends upon their invisible labour. Every meal prepared, every journey undertaken to secure food, every sacrifice made for a child's education becomes part of an economy that refuses to recognise maternal work as work.

Nnu Ego's life in Lagos illustrates this reality with painful clarity. Removed from the communal support systems of Ibuza and thrust into the harsh realities of colonial urban life, she is compelled to assume multiple responsibilities simultaneously. She bears children, nurses them, feeds them, trades in the market, manages the household and continually supplements the inadequate earnings of Nnaife. Motherhood, therefore, is not confined to biological reproduction but extends into ceaseless economic survival. Love itself becomes labour.

The novel demonstrates that maternal work has no boundaries of time or space. Pregnancy is immediately followed by childcare; childcare is followed by market labour; market labour is followed by domestic responsibilities. There is no moment at which Nnu Ego exists simply as herself. Her entire identity is absorbed into work performed for others.

The critical study succinctly captures this transformation:

"Motherhood is prime in the African culture but Emecheta has vehemently exposed the veiled picture of the tormented mother who fights and suffers all her life looking after her children, sending them to good schools, suffering humiliation at home and at work and finally, she is deserted by her children who imbibe the western values and find it degrading to return to their mothers and families" (68).

The significance of this observation lies in its recognition that motherhood extends far beyond childbirth. It encompasses years of physical exertion, emotional endurance and financial responsibility, none of which receives social recognition. The “joy” promised by motherhood is sustained through labour that remains invisible precisely because it is performed by women.

Emecheta repeatedly emphasises the economic dimension of maternal labour. Nnaife’s irregular employment and meagre wages compel Nnu Ego to become an income earner despite the demands of raising a large family. She begins trading in cigarettes and food, carrying babies on her back while simultaneously attempting to earn enough money to educate her children. Colonial Lagos transforms motherhood into a struggle for survival where maternal affection alone is insufficient. Economic productivity becomes an essential extension of maternal responsibility. Yet this labour remains profoundly gendered. While Nnaife participates in wage labour outside the home, Nnu Ego performs both productive and reproductive labour simultaneously. She contributes financially to the household without being relieved of domestic duties. The double burden placed upon African women reveals that motherhood functions as an institution sustained by unequal divisions of labour rather than by mutual familial cooperation.

The emotional consequences of this endless work gradually become evident. As the family expands, Nnu Ego’s aspirations steadily diminish. She no longer dreams for herself; she dreams only through her children. Every sacrifice appears justified because it is imagined as an investment in their future. She repeatedly denies herself food, comfort and personal fulfilment in order to provide opportunities that she herself never possessed.

Her hope is poignantly expressed in the belief that education will secure a better future for her children:

“Her joy was to know that she had brought up her children when they had started out with nothing and that those same children might rub shoulders with the great and the near-great one day”(Emecheta 202).

This simple aspiration encapsulates Nnu Ego’s understanding of motherhood. Her personal ambitions are completely subsumed within the future she imagines for her children. Their success becomes the only tangible reward for years of unremitting labour. Emecheta deliberately contrasts the mother’s impoverished present with the imagined prosperity of the next generation, exposing the emotional economy that sustains maternal sacrifice. Nnu Ego measures her own fulfilment not by what she possesses but by what she enables others to achieve.

Yet the novel steadily undermines this hope. The children whose education justifies every sacrifice increasingly become detached from the traditional values that had once governed familial relationships. Colonial education equips them for social mobility, but it simultaneously distances them from the communal ethos that demanded reciprocal responsibility towards parents. The irony is unmistakable: the very education for which Nnu Ego labours becomes the force that separates her from the emotional security she expects in old age. Motherhood, once imagined as an investment that would ensure dignity and care, yields only loneliness and disappointment.

The physical consequences of this labour are equally significant. Emecheta repeatedly portrays Nnu Ego’s body as the site upon which motherhood is inscribed. Successive pregnancies, constant breastfeeding, sleepless nights, long hours in the market and chronic malnutrition gradually exhaust her strength. The maternal body is not romanticised; it is represented as a working body that bears the visible marks of continuous toil. In this respect, Emecheta departs from sentimental representations of motherhood and foregrounds its material realities. The mother’s body becomes the silent archive of sacrifices that society celebrates but rarely acknowledges.

Adrienne Rich’s distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood is particularly illuminating here. Rich argues that while maternal love may be deeply fulfilling, the institution of motherhood has historically required women to subordinate their identities to the needs of others. Emecheta dramatizes this distinction through Nnu Ego. Her love for her children is unquestionable, yet the institution within which she mothers transforms affection into obligation and obligation into relentless labour. The tragedy lies not in motherhood itself but in the social structures that demand its performance without recognising its cost.

The novel also exposes the unequal distribution of labour within the patriarchal household. Although Nnaife remains the nominal head of the family, the practical responsibility for maintaining the household increasingly falls upon Nnu Ego. His authority is preserved, but her labour sustains the family. This imbalance is not presented as the result of individual failure alone; rather, it reflects a social order that naturalises women’s work while assigning men the status of providers, even when economic realities prove otherwise. Emecheta thus questions the cultural assumptions that render women’s labour invisible by defining it as an extension of feminine duty rather than productive work.

The contrast between Nnu Ego and Adaku once again sharpens the novel’s critique. Both women work tirelessly to support their families, yet they respond differently to the demands placed upon them. Whereas Nnu Ego accepts labour as the inevitable consequence of motherhood, Adaku gradually transforms labour into a means of self-determination. Her commercial success enables her to imagine a future independent of patriarchal approval. Labour, for Adaku, becomes a source of agency; for Nnu Ego, it remains a burden accepted in the hope of future recognition. Through this contrast, Emecheta suggests that the significance of women’s work depends upon the social meanings attached to it. Labour that reinforces dependence perpetuates oppression, while labour that creates autonomy opens the possibility of resistance.

The cumulative effect of maternal labour is emotional depletion. As years pass, Nnu Ego begins to recognise the impossible demands placed upon mothers. Reflecting upon the expectations that govern women's lives, she observes:

"I realised that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another." (Emecheta 168–69).

This moment marks an important shift in her consciousness. For the first time, Nnu Ego perceives that motherhood is sustained not merely through male authority but also through cultural values internalised by women themselves. Mothers, wives and senior women become custodians of ideals that demand endless endurance and self-denial. Emecheta's critique therefore extends beyond patriarchy as a system of male domination to include the cultural processes through which women themselves participate in reproducing its values.

By redefining motherhood as labour, Emecheta fundamentally alters its literary representation. Maternal devotion is no longer an abstract virtue but a continuous process of physical work, emotional resilience and economic survival. The idealised image of the nurturing mother gives way to the lived reality of a woman whose existence is consumed by responsibilities that remain largely invisible to those who benefit from them. Labour, once accepted as the natural extension of motherhood, gradually evolves into sacrifice. What begins as love becomes obligation, and obligation ultimately demands the complete renunciation of the self. It is this transformation of labour into sacrifice that constitutes the next stage of Emecheta's interrogation of motherhood.

Motherhood as Sacrificial Ideal

If labour defines the everyday reality of Nnu Ego's existence, sacrifice becomes the moral principle through which that labour acquires meaning. Emecheta demonstrates that patriarchal society not only expects women to sacrifice themselves for their families but also elevates such sacrifice into the highest expression of feminine virtue. A "good" mother is measured not by her happiness or personal fulfilment but by her willingness to endure deprivation without complaint. The institution of motherhood therefore transforms sacrifice from an act of love into a social obligation. Nnu Ego gradually internalises this ideal until her own desires become insignificant before the demands of her children.

Throughout the novel, Nnu Ego's life is marked by an uninterrupted series of renunciations. She willingly deprives herself of food so that her children may eat, works beyond the limits of physical endurance to finance their education, suppresses personal ambitions and accepts emotional neglect as the inevitable consequence of motherhood. Every hardship is justified by the belief that maternal sacrifice will ultimately secure both her children's future and her own dignity. Emecheta, however, persistently questions the validity of this belief by exposing the widening gap between cultural ideals and lived reality.

The education of her children becomes the most visible manifestation of this sacrificial ideal. For Nnu Ego, education symbolises hope, mobility and freedom from the poverty that has dominated her own life. It is an investment in a future she will never personally enjoy. Every coin she earns in the market, every physical hardship she endures and every personal comfort she denies herself is directed towards this single objective. Maternal love is translated into continuous labour because she believes that the success of her children will eventually justify her sacrifices.

Yet the novel repeatedly exposes the irony of this expectation. The children who benefit from their mother's sacrifices gradually become detached from the traditional obligations that once governed family life. Colonial education equips them to pursue individual success rather than collective responsibility. Nnu Ego's sacrifices therefore produce a generation whose aspirations increasingly diverge from the communal values that had given meaning to motherhood. The more successful her children become, the more distant they grow from the mother who made that success possible.

The emotional climax of this disillusionment occurs when Nnu Ego reflects upon her life with painful honesty:

"I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them. I have to give them all I have. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I shall be free. But I doubt if I shall ever be free." (Emecheta 186–87).

This passage constitutes the ideological centre of the novel. It is here that the myth of motherhood collapses under the weight of lived experience. The repeated use of the first person—"I was born alone... I have to work... I have to give..."—reveals a woman who momentarily recovers her own voice after years of existing almost exclusively through others. For perhaps the first time, Nnu Ego asks not what she owes her children but what motherhood has demanded of her.

The significance of the phrase "I have to give them all I have" becomes clearer when read alongside the earlier assertion that "The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children" (100). The repetition of "giving all" forms a deliberate structural pattern within the novel. Initially, it expresses fulfilment and emotional abundance; later, it becomes the language of depletion and exhaustion. What once appeared as voluntary

generosity is revealed as compulsory self-erasure. Emecheta thus transforms the vocabulary of maternal devotion into an indictment of the patriarchal ideology that equates love with limitless sacrifice.

Equally significant is Nnu Ego's haunting question: "What have I gained from all this?" The question is rhetorical because the answer has already become painfully apparent. She has gained neither economic security nor emotional companionship. Her sacrifices have secured the futures of others while leaving her own life impoverished. Motherhood has demanded everything but has guaranteed nothing. Emecheta thereby exposes the asymmetrical relationship between maternal giving and social recognition. Society celebrates the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother while remaining indifferent to the material and emotional conditions of actual mothers.

The novel also reveals that sacrifice is sustained through cultural expectations shared by women themselves. Nnu Ego repeatedly measures her success according to standards imposed by older women and reinforced within the domestic sphere. Mothers are expected to endure silently, wives are expected to subordinate themselves to husbands, and women derive moral authority from the extent of their sacrifices. These expectations become so deeply internalised that resistance appears almost unimaginable. Sacrifice is no longer experienced as a burden but as the defining characteristic of feminine virtue.

Adaku's departure from Nnaife's household therefore acquires renewed significance. Unlike Nnu Ego, she refuses to believe that endless sacrifice is the only legitimate expression of motherhood. Her decision to establish an independent livelihood is not a rejection of maternal responsibility but a rejection of the cultural assumption that motherhood must necessarily involve self-annihilation. She refuses to sacrifice her future to preserve a social order that denies her dignity. Through Adaku, Emecheta demonstrates that another model of motherhood is possible one that values care without demanding complete self-effacement.

The tragic irony is that Nnu Ego herself never fully escapes the ideology of sacrifice. Even in moments of profound despair, she continues to evaluate her worth through the welfare of her children. Her suffering is endured because she believes that motherhood has no alternative. This inability to imagine life beyond maternal obligation distinguishes her from Adaku and ultimately determines the course of her tragedy. Emecheta does not condemn Nnu Ego for this belief; instead, she reveals how deeply patriarchal values have become embedded within female consciousness.

By presenting sacrifice as the inevitable consequence of idealised motherhood, Emecheta dismantles one of the most enduring myths surrounding women's lives. Sacrifice, she suggests, cannot remain the sole measure of maternal love, for a society that glorifies women's suffering while ignoring their humanity transforms motherhood into an instrument of oppression. The mother is celebrated only insofar as she continues to give; the moment she asks what she has received, the ideological foundations of patriarchy begin to crumble.

The movement from labour to sacrifice prepares the ground for the novel's most penetrating insight. Once sacrifice is accepted as natural and inevitable, it ceases to appear as a personal choice and becomes an unquestioned cultural value. Motherhood is no longer simply an experience; it becomes an ideology that regulates women's identities, expectations and relationships. It is this ideological dimension that Emecheta explores in the next phase of the novel, where motherhood functions as one of the most powerful instruments through which patriarchal society perpetuates itself.

Motherhood as Patriarchal Ideology

Having established motherhood as identity, labour and sacrifice, Emecheta proceeds to expose its ideological dimension. The novel demonstrates that the oppression of women does not arise solely from individual acts of male domination but from a deeply embedded cultural system that persuades women to equate motherhood with the totality of their existence. Motherhood becomes an ideology precisely because it appears natural, inevitable and morally unquestionable. Women are taught from childhood that fulfilment lies in marriage, fertility and maternal devotion; consequently, they begin to regulate themselves according to standards they neither formulate nor critically examine. The most enduring power of patriarchy, Emecheta suggests, lies not in coercion but in consent.

Nnu Ego's life exemplifies this process of ideological internalisation. Her aspirations, fears and disappointments are all mediated through motherhood. She never questions whether motherhood should define her life; she questions only whether she has succeeded in performing it adequately. Even when faced with poverty, exhaustion and emotional neglect, she continues to believe that a good mother must endure without complaint. Patriarchy has become so deeply embedded within her consciousness that self-sacrifice appears synonymous with love, while personal fulfilment appears almost selfish.

The novel repeatedly reveals that women themselves become custodians of this ideology. Mothers instruct daughters in the virtues of obedience and endurance; senior wives measure younger women according to fertility; female respectability is determined by the ability to produce sons. Patriarchy therefore survives not merely because men exercise authority but because women, often unconsciously, reproduce its values across generations. Nnu Ego herself, despite experiencing the painful consequences of these expectations, evaluates her own success

according to the same standards that once oppressed her. Emecheta's critique is therefore directed at an entire cultural discourse rather than at individual men alone.

The preference for sons illustrates this ideological conditioning with particular clarity. Throughout the novel, male children are regarded as the continuation of lineage, the inheritors of property and the guarantors of parental security in old age. Daughters, by contrast, are considered temporary members of the household whose primary destiny lies elsewhere. Nnu Ego accepts this distinction without hesitation, investing greater emotional hope in the futures of her sons because she believes they will eventually fulfil their filial obligations. Yet the narrative quietly dismantles this belief. The sons who embody patriarchal expectations become increasingly distant, while the daughters display greater emotional sensitivity towards their mother. Through this ironic reversal, Emecheta challenges one of the most deeply rooted assumptions of patriarchal culture without resorting to overt didacticism. The relationship between Nnu Ego and Adaku further exposes the ideological character of motherhood. Both women inhabit the same household, endure comparable economic hardships and shoulder similar domestic responsibilities. Yet their responses to patriarchal expectations differ significantly. Nnu Ego continues to define herself through motherhood, believing that maternal endurance constitutes the highest form of feminine virtue. Adaku, however, gradually recognises that such ideals perpetuate rather than alleviate women's suffering. Refusing to accept a subordinate position because she has borne only daughters, she chooses to leave Nnaife's household and establish herself independently. Her decision represents not a rejection of motherhood but a rejection of the ideology that values women according to their reproductive performance.

Adaku's declaration marks one of the novel's most significant feminist interventions

"I realised that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own." (Emecheta 168–69)

These words constitute a decisive break from patriarchal ideology. Unlike Nnu Ego, Adaku refuses to evaluate herself according to standards established by others. Her recognition that women participate in sustaining oppressive expectations shifts the focus of the novel from external domination to internalised belief. Liberation, Emecheta implies, begins with the ability to question inherited values rather than merely endure them.

Nnaife's character also requires careful consideration within this ideological framework. Although he frequently exercises patriarchal authority, Emecheta avoids presenting him as a one-dimensional oppressor. Colonialism has already diminished his status by reducing him to the position of a domestic servant in a European household. His authority within the family often functions as compensation for the humiliation he experiences within the colonial order. This complexity broadens the novel's critique. Patriarchy and colonialism are shown to operate simultaneously, each reinforcing the other and together producing a social environment in which women bear the greatest burden of survival. Nnaife is both an agent and a victim of larger historical forces, while Nnu Ego becomes the point at which these forces converge.

The ideological nature of motherhood becomes increasingly evident as Nnu Ego ages. Despite decades of sacrifice, she continues to believe that her fulfilment depends upon the success of her children. Even when they fail to reciprocate her devotion, she does not question the institution of motherhood itself. Her disappointment is directed inward rather than outward. She assumes that she has somehow failed to achieve the ideal of perfect motherhood rather than recognising that the ideal itself is fundamentally unattainable. This inability to distinguish between maternal love and patriarchal expectation constitutes the deepest tragedy of her life.

Emecheta's representation of motherhood thus transcends conventional feminist oppositions between men and women. The novel interrogates the cultural narratives through which motherhood is idealised, revealing how these narratives shape women's identities long before they become mothers themselves. Motherhood functions as an ideological apparatus that naturalises female self-denial, legitimises unequal divisions of labour and transforms sacrifice into moral obligation. By exposing these mechanisms, Emecheta dismantles the myth that motherhood is an instinctive destiny untouched by history or politics.

Yet the novel refuses to end with ideological imprisonment. Alongside Nnu Ego's tragic inability to imagine an alternative, Emecheta introduces women such as Ona and Adaku whose choices suggest that motherhood need not be synonymous with self-annihilation. These women point towards a redefinition of female identity in which motherhood becomes one aspect of womanhood rather than its exclusive determinant. Through them, the novel gestures towards the possibility of resistance—a resistance rooted not in the rejection of African culture but in its ethical reimagining.

The final movement of the novel, therefore, shifts from critique to reconstruction. Having exposed motherhood as an instrument of patriarchal ideology, Emecheta proceeds to reclaim it as a relationship capable of coexisting with female dignity, agency and selfhood. It is this movement towards a more humane understanding of motherhood that constitutes the enduring achievement of *The Joys of Motherhood* and forms the basis of its African feminist vision.

Reclaiming Womanhood: Motherhood as Resistance

Although *The Joys of Motherhood* is often read as a tragic narrative, its concluding movement is not one of despair but of cautious hope. Having exposed motherhood as identity, labour, sacrifice and ideology, Emecheta finally reconstructs it through the possibility of resistance. Significantly, this resistance is neither militant nor revolutionary. It does not advocate the rejection of motherhood, family or African cultural traditions. Instead, it seeks to redefine motherhood by restoring visibility to the woman whose individuality has long remained submerged beneath her maternal role. Emecheta's African feminism thus emerges as a philosophy of negotiation rather than confrontation, of reconstruction rather than destruction.

The most compelling embodiment of this resistance is Adaku. Throughout the novel, Adaku refuses to remain imprisoned within the patriarchal logic that measures a woman's worth by her ability to produce sons. Her decision to leave Nnaife's household after years of humiliation marks a decisive break with conventional expectations. Unlike Nnu Ego, who continues to believe that maternal sacrifice will eventually secure recognition, Adaku recognises that no amount of sacrifice can transform an unjust system. She therefore chooses economic independence and determines to educate her daughters, thereby investing in a future that challenges rather than reproduces patriarchal values.

The significance of Adaku's decision lies in its affirmation of female agency. She refuses to define herself solely as wife or mother and instead reconstructs her identity through productive labour and personal autonomy. Although society condemns her choice, Emecheta presents it sympathetically, suggesting that dignity sometimes requires women to reject inherited expectations. Adaku's resistance is therefore not directed against motherhood but against the ideology that transforms motherhood into a woman's exclusive destiny.

Equally significant is Emecheta's treatment of daughters. Within the patriarchal structure of the novel, daughters are frequently regarded as less valuable than sons because they cannot perpetuate the family lineage. Yet it is through daughters that Emecheta imagines social transformation. Adaku's commitment to educating her girls represents a rejection of cultural assumptions that privilege male inheritance. Education becomes a means of breaking the cycle through which patriarchal values are transmitted from one generation to the next. In investing in her daughters, Adaku invests in a future where women may define themselves beyond reproductive expectations.

Ona, though absent for much of the narrative, also contributes to this discourse of resistance. Her refusal to become merely another wife in Agbadi's household reflects an independent spirit that distinguishes her from many women in the novel. As the critical study observes, Ona "is projected as strong and independent-minded" and wishes that Nnu Ego should "lead her own life unlike her own which was dictated by her father" (Suri 69). Although Ona herself remains constrained by the social realities of her time, her character anticipates the more conscious resistance embodied by Adaku. Together these women suggest that African womanhood contains within itself the resources necessary for its own transformation.

Nnu Ego, however, represents the painful cost of remaining imprisoned within patriarchal ideals. Her tragedy lies not in becoming a mother but in allowing motherhood to consume every other dimension of her existence. She survives poverty, repeated pregnancies, bereavement and economic hardship with extraordinary courage, yet she never imagines a life beyond maternal obligation. Her endurance commands admiration, but Emecheta carefully distinguishes endurance from liberation. Endurance enables survival; liberation requires the recognition that motherhood cannot constitute the totality of female identity.

The culmination of this tragedy is conveyed with remarkable restraint in the closing pages of the novel. After a lifetime devoted to her children, Nnu Ego dies alone:

"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 224)

This passage is perhaps the most devastating irony in the novel. The woman who spent her entire life nurturing others dies without companionship, while the children for whom she sacrificed everything are absent. The phrase "building up her joys as a mother" recalls the title itself and transforms it into a profound irony. The "joys" of motherhood are revealed not as lived experiences but as cultural expectations that remain tragically unfulfilled. Emecheta does not deny Nnu Ego's love for her children; rather, she questions a society that celebrates maternal devotion while failing to care for mothers themselves.

The irony deepens with the elaborate funeral arranged after Nnu Ego's death. In accordance with tradition, she receives the honour denied to her in life. The community praises her as an exemplary mother, and her children perform the rituals expected of dutiful offspring. Yet these public gestures cannot erase the loneliness and neglect that characterised her final years. Honour arrives only after the woman herself has disappeared. Emecheta thus exposes the contradiction at the heart of patriarchal culture: it reveres the symbolic figure of the mother while neglecting the actual lives of mothers.

The concluding episode acquires additional significance through the legend that develops around Nnu Ego after her death. The novel observes that despite the elaborate funeral, her spirit was believed to have become "a wicked woman" because she refused to answer the prayers of barren women seeking children (224). This ending is profoundly symbolic. The woman who had sacrificed everything for motherhood can no longer offer motherhood

as a blessing. Her silence becomes the novel's final critique of an institution that demanded absolute devotion while offering little in return.

Yet Emecheta does not leave the reader with despair alone. The juxtaposition of Nnu Ego's tragedy with Adaku's assertion of independence suggests that alternatives remain possible within African society itself. Resistance does not require the abandonment of motherhood but its redefinition. Maternal love need not entail the annihilation of the self; family need not depend upon female subordination; and African cultural values need not remain frozen within patriarchal interpretations. By recovering the woman behind the mother, Emecheta reconstructs motherhood as a relationship grounded in mutual care, dignity and respect rather than unilateral sacrifice.

Ultimately, *The Joys of Motherhood* challenges readers to distinguish between motherhood as a deeply human experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution. Nnu Ego's life demonstrates the devastating consequences of confusing the two. Adaku's choices, by contrast, point towards a future in which motherhood coexists with female autonomy and selfhood. It is within this tension between continuity and change that Emecheta locates the transformative potential of African feminism. Her vision neither rejects motherhood nor romanticises it; instead, it insists that motherhood can become meaningful only when the woman herself is recognised as a complete human being.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* remains one of the most compelling critiques of the institution of motherhood in African literature because it interrogates not motherhood itself but the cultural and ideological assumptions that define it. The novel compels readers to distinguish between motherhood as an intimate human experience and motherhood as a patriarchal institution that regulates female identity. Through Nnu Ego's life, Emecheta demonstrates that while maternal love is profound and life-affirming, the social structures within which it is enacted often transform that love into relentless labour, unending sacrifice and emotional deprivation. The tragedy of Nnu Ego, therefore, lies not in becoming a mother but in inhabiting a society where motherhood is celebrated while the mother herself remains invisible.

This study has examined the novel through five interconnected movements—motherhood as identity, motherhood as labour, motherhood as sacrifice, motherhood as patriarchal ideology and motherhood as resistance. These movements reveal that motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* is not a fixed biological condition but an evolving ideological construct. Initially, motherhood confers identity and social legitimacy upon Nnu Ego, enabling her to recover the dignity denied to her during her childless first marriage. Yet the same identity gradually becomes inseparable from unrecognised labour, compelling her to shoulder the physical, emotional and economic responsibilities of sustaining an increasingly fragile household. Labour subsequently acquires the moral force of sacrifice, demanding complete self-abnegation in the name of maternal devotion. Finally, sacrifice itself is naturalised as ideology, persuading women to internalise values that measure their worth through endurance rather than individuality.

Emecheta's achievement lies in exposing the contradictions embedded within these cultural assumptions without dismissing the emotional significance of motherhood itself. The novel neither romanticises nor repudiates maternal experience. Instead, it interrogates the patriarchal discourse that transforms motherhood into the exclusive criterion of female identity. Nnu Ego's repeated acts of sacrifice are presented with compassion and dignity, yet the narrative simultaneously reveals the profound loneliness and emotional emptiness that accompany such unquestioning self-denial. The irony of the title is thus sustained throughout the novel. The promised "joys" of motherhood remain overshadowed by poverty, exhaustion and abandonment, culminating in the painful image of Nnu Ego dying alone despite having devoted her entire life to her children (Emecheta 224).

Equally significant is Emecheta's refusal to present African women as passive victims. Through Ona and, more decisively, Adaku, she introduces alternative possibilities of female existence that challenge patriarchal definitions of womanhood without rejecting African cultural identity. Adaku's decision to seek economic independence and educate her daughters demonstrates that motherhood need not demand the annihilation of the self. Her resistance is not directed against family or motherhood but against the ideological structures that deny women autonomy and dignity. In this sense, Emecheta's feminism remains profoundly African in its emphasis on negotiation, resilience and communal responsibility while simultaneously insisting upon women's right to selfhood.

The novel also demonstrates that colonialism intensifies rather than diminishes patriarchal oppression. The migration from Iboza to Lagos disrupts traditional communal structures without replacing them with institutions capable of supporting women. Colonial modernity produces new forms of economic hardship, individualism and social mobility that fundamentally alter family relationships. The children for whom Nnu Ego sacrifices everything embrace values that gradually distance them from their mother, revealing the tragic incompatibility between inherited cultural expectations and changing historical realities. Motherhood, once regarded as security for old age, becomes increasingly uncertain within a rapidly transforming colonial society.

Perhaps the most enduring contribution of *The Joys of Motherhood* lies in its insistence that motherhood cannot remain the sole determinant of female identity. Emecheta restores visibility to the woman behind the mother by exposing the human cost of reducing women to reproductive and nurturing functions. Nnu Ego's life compels readers to recognise that maternal love loses its liberating potential when it is appropriated by patriarchal ideology and transformed into an instrument of endless obligation. The novel therefore invites a reconsideration of motherhood not as biological destiny but as a relationship that must coexist with dignity, reciprocity and personal fulfilment.

Ultimately, Emecheta's vision transcends the boundaries of feminist protest to become a profound humanistic meditation on identity, love and survival. She neither condemns motherhood nor glorifies it; rather, she liberates it from ideological distortions that deny women their humanity. By distinguishing between maternal experience and patriarchal constructions of motherhood, Emecheta reclaims womanhood from restrictive cultural definitions and affirms the woman's right to exist as an autonomous individual beyond her reproductive role. In doing so, *The Joys of Motherhood* continues to speak with remarkable urgency to contemporary debates on gender, care, family and female agency, confirming its place as one of the foundational texts of African feminist literature..

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