Conceptualizing the contrast of Marriage in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime.*

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Abstract

This study is a critical evaluation of the ambiguous rewards of marriage in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood and Asare Konadu's A Woman in Her Prime. It is an examination of the image of the woman and her place in the African society in which traditions hold in high regard a married woman through her motherhood. However, in both novels, we experience the disillusionment of the protagonists. The hope of Nnu Ego's motherhood in The Joys of Motherhood becomes an irony as her dream to live a happy life is not fulfilled. For Pokuwaa, in A Woman in her Prime, her worth resides in her struggle to become a mother. This study purports to investigate the meaning of marriage in the African context. It also focuses on the irony of motherhood. From the angles of socio-criticism and feminist perspectives on motherhood and reproduction we expect to show that marriage and motherhood bear controversial meanings as related to the happiness of the couples in the novels under study.

Key words: contrast, irony, joy, Marriage, motherhood.

Résumé

Cette étude est une évaluation critique des récompenses ambiguës du mariage dans Les joies de la maternité de Buchi Emecheta et Une femme dans la fleur de l'âge d'Asare Konadu. Il est donc question d'examiner l'image de la femme et sa place dans la société africaine dans laquelle les traditions valorisent la femme mariée à travers sa maternité. Cependant, dans les deux romans, nous faisons l'expérience de la désillusion des protagonistes. L'espoir de la maternité de Nnu Ego dans Les joies de la maternité devient une ironie car son rêve de vivre une vie heureuse n'est pas réalisé. Pour Pokuwaa, dans une femme dans la fleur de l'âge, sa valeur réside dans sa lutte pour devenir mère. Cette étude prétend étudier la signification du mariage dans le contexte africain. Il met également l'accent sur l'ironie de la maternité. Sous l'angle de la sociocritique et du feminisme, nous espérons montrer que le mariage et la maternité ont des significations controversées en ce qui concerne les couples et leur bonheur dans les romans étudiés.

Introduction

Marriage is a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners. It accords status to their offspring. Critics and scholars raised concern on this issue and its impacts on the couples in African context. Capo-Chichi (2008, p.200) has dealt with the matter by discussing "Toward a new conception of marriage and sexuality". Meanwhile, Boukari (2012, p.65) considers in her book that "in most societies, marriage signifies adulthood and potential parenthood". Quoting Peter Murphy, Ngezem (2008, p, 57) states that "custom and habit are understood to be the determining factors in the way we perceive gender difference, and only by exposing those prejudices, can change occur to equalize relations between the sexes." This demonstrates the traumatic environment where widows are exposed to the menacing stiffness of resilient traditionalists. By the same token, Kammampoal (2014, p.2) examines how the discourse of power is handled with ambivalence by both male and female characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Then, there is a room to discuss these grim conditions of women as a consequence of hurtful conventions and attitudes of the society.

This study purports to investigate the meaning of marriage in the African context. How is a married woman without any children perceived? Does barrenness mean marriage failure? It also focuses on the irony of motherhood from the angles of socio-criticism and feminism. Therefore, it is a critical evaluation of the enigmatic achievements of marriage in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime.* This equivocal attainment of the partners' union will be assessed right through the plight of both protagonists, Nnu Ego and Pokuwaa. Moreover, the work will examine the woman's image and her place in the African society whereby traditions consider a married woman through her motherhood. In fact, in traditional African culture, the significant role of the female gender is defined by her society and restricted to the home. In this respect, we experience the disappointment of the protagonists in both novels. The causes of this

sadness and displeasure and the non fulfilment of the protagonists' expectations are also at the core of this analysis. This work, eventually, shows the ambition of Nnu Ego's motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* and how it conveys contempt and the failure of the realization of her dream. Also, the study appraises and set Pokuwaa,'s heart on her struggle to become a mother.

Through the use of socio-criticism and feminism, we expect to show that marriage and motherhood bear controversial meanings as related to the happiness couples in the novels under study. Given that literature is produced in social context, some values may be affirmed or criticized. Then, socio-criticism is "the focus that could be on the issues such as family problems, polygamy, skin bleaching and other social issues" Geraldo (2005, 2). Thereupon, it is assumed that social context is rooted in the artistic works dealing with social norms and the influence of social factors on individual and group way of behaving. In this regard Agyekum (2013, p.219) states that

"*in effect, it is the social context that serves as the raw material for the production and understanding of literary works. The social set-ups and the institutions in the society at any point in time combine to exert some major influence in the works of the artists. Sociological critics focus on the norms and values of society and how those values are reflected in the literary works"*

Henceforth, Emecheta and Konadu's novels are about love, family, African traditional religion and their effect on women. These attitudes involve obligation, prohibition, fitness, and licitness. As an approach that helps the literary critic learn more about society, Kasimi (2010) quoting the words of Ruth Amossi opines that sociocriticism is an instrumental revealing what the texts teach us about society. Thus, the plight of Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* and that of Pokuwaa in *A woman in her Prime* are issues questioning the misconception of the society on a housewife and her prerogatives or prohibitions.

Moreover, maternal feminism, the belief on many feminists that women are mothers and caregivers had an important but distinctive role to play in society. It embodies the removal of abuses and combines the concepts of maternalism and feminism. In this regard, (Corea et al. 1987, p.168) maintain that "this decomposition of motherhood devalues motherhood and women, creates new and

unprecedented cleavages and exploitative hierarchies among women." It is the viewpoint of African traditionalists who consider child bearing as the cornerstone of the woman's existence. So, the only thing that can hold woman in a high esteem is fertility. This is the plight of the characters in both novels whereby the male chauvinistic society, even some females put child bearing as their head start. Therefore, there is a call for putting an end to social impulse that leads to the hegemonic society's narrow-mindedness. Given what has been said, Pasque and Wimmer, 2011 argue that there is a need to eliminate "all social forces that instigate discrimination, oppression and exploitation." Then, an attention is drawn to patterns of thought, behaviour, moral principles and power in connection. As a result, feminists view motherhood as a means through which "woman fully achieves her psychological destiny, and that the maternity is [woman's] 'natural' vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of species. (De Beauvoir, 1953) Since, in some African customs, motherhood enslaves women as wives while it emancipates men from this gender-based enslavement, Emecheta and Konadu deem it necessary to raise their voices in order to avoid this state of affairs. As a matter of fact, these novelists evolve the condition of African women and their marital status on a daily basis. Quoting Michelle Rosaldo, (Ashcroft, 1995, 2063) states:

".....woman's place in social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does for even less, a function of what biologically, she is but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions (Rosaldo, 1980, 400). That woman mother in variety of societies is not significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one-one that needs to be made and analysed contextually"

Throughout the analysis of the novels, some issues will show matter in question raised above. It also involves discussion about the marginalisation and suffering of women in patriarchal society where barren women are treated with contempt. This work will discuss the conception of marriage in traditional Africa and the contended meaning of marriage and motherhood.

1- The Concept of Marriage in African Context in *the Joys of Motherhood* and *A Woman in her Prime*

In African context, women's roles as a wife are to serve their husbands, take care of them, bear children and take care of them. These responsibilities as reproductive, productive and community managing role let society have more regard for women and made them carry a heavy load when comes the time to give an appreciation of any marriage. In an analysis of feminist perspective on motherhood and reproduction, (Gerda and Laura, 2011, pp.2) made a point that "reproduction and motherhood have been at the core of the feminists and women's movements ever since their emergence. And from the start, reproduction and motherhood have been highly contested issues- both within the feminist movements and beyond." Through African communities' beliefs of marriage on procreation and providing children, one can infer that it is the criterion of society foundation in this environment. Indeed, fertility and marriage are interwoven. Subsequently, the issue of bearing children becomes a bothersome engagement, and one who fails in this duty is considered as a nonentity. So, people are ready to use any means to be fulfilled. Daouda Loum backs this point when he writes:

"*She quickly manages to overcome this state of mind by investing in her son, Basil, as much love as her father used to present her with: "My bed hasn't been empty since Basil was born" (WBP, p.38). This concern propels the child at the heart of his mother's new life. In addition to being Mattie Michael's blood and flesh. Basil becomes her "raison de vivre" for without him she would hardly find anyone to find satisfaction in. Expressing her pride in begetting Basil and the emotional void the latter fills around her, she firmly declares: "I ain't lookin for nothing. Etta. She started down at her son.' "I got everything I need right here. And I'm content to stay put with what God gave me.' (WBP, p.26) (Loum, 2008, pp122-123)"*

The previous quotation shows the determination and the devotion of a woman after her motherhood. In this manner a child is considered like a mother's raison d'être and necessary for her satisfaction. Thus, a child is all that a mother needs after a union. It is proclaimed that she got everything she needs. The appraisal of this misconception of

motherhood and womanhood is the prerogative of African society. It is the reason why African women have always been victims of prejudice when they faced with the difficulties linked to motherhood. On this point, it is put that "African traditional civilization was an agricultural one. Therefore, the role of women is characterised by motherhood, hospitality and life with man" (Kala-Lobe, 1972, p. 92). In both novels, *The Joys of motherhood* and *A Woman* in *her Prime* some issues are developed within reach. This is the misfortune of the protagonists Pokuwaa and Nnu Ego. The childlessness has brought dissatisfaction in couples and families. And women who are victims of this plight are qualified as cursed persons because, what is important is not marriage as such but a child and a marriage is not honoured without children. (Begun, 2006, p.116) Then, African traditionalists acknowledge that a woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman. Females in this situation fall short of expectations in a significant way.

This is the attitude shown in *A Woman in her Prime* when it is stated that 'to be barren was the worst that could happen to a woman' (Konadu, 1967, p. 34) a reason for which Pokuwaa pines away. This is a double and opposing valuation of a child as "historically, the woman prided the identity for the ethnic group as well as the descendance and the means of production' 'palmgroves'" (Memel-Fpté, 1972, p.141). Thereupon, procreation is the purpose of any marriage in traditional Africa. So, females' feelings of being good enough, loving, or being happy about the person they have become is related to the progeny they brought to their family. Only this criterion confers a woman a true identity in African context. Furthermore, reproduction is a factor that determines the failure or the success of any marriage, in so doing African woman is oppressed in her community and she is not only suspected of being infertile but also treated as a nonentity, property or commodity.

The society's thought of couple union, infertility and womanhood are what Pokuwaa acknowledges. The latter is compared to a sinner who can be cursed for being found guilty. Talking of the notion of motherhood, Sameema Zahra revisiting Simone de Beauvoir (2021, pp.86-87) states that:

"*Motherhood, along with all uniquely feminine experiences, is viewed by patriarchal as a natural process and thus a purely immanent fact*

of being. As such, motherhood is expressive of our animality and not our freedom…The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth, but to the one that kills."

The above lines show the conception of De Beauvoir on the way women are treated in the context of motherhood. This state of being mother is no more an expression of freedom but that of animality. But under normal circumstances, the motherhood should be the quality considered to be natural or characteristic of a woman, that "woman in her prime" or the child quest of the traditional woman Pokuwaa. In fact, fecundity is a sign of happiness in a couple, and marriage and issue of motherhood are essential in African context. In this regard, it is argued that "en principe, dans les écrits pré-coloniaux et coloniaux d'Achebe, la sexualité de la femme a pour fonction essentielle la procréation » (Capo-Chichi 2008, p 187) Then, in Achebe's pre-colonial and colonial writings, the essential function of women's sexuality is procreation. And then, couples experience distress when they cannot get satisfaction.

This is the reason why Kwadwo is a great help to Pokuwaa in her quest for child. It is my contention that childlessness is a factor of divorce after so many years of marriage. In that respect, Pokuwaa has divorced two husbands because she has had no child from them. Kofi Dafo and Kwaku Fosu did not meet Pokuwa's expectations. Expounding on this matter, it is stated that "Already she has divorced two men for failing to give her a child. The third husband lives with her in her own home, and is worried that he may be divorced like the two before him if Pokuwaa does not have a child from him" (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al 2010, p.341). This can show how African women are depressed because of this situation of childless. In this circumstance, they undergo misfortune and dreadful events in their society.

It is also obvious that the idea of marriage and motherhood is related and when the expectations are fulfilled the couple lives in happiness. To some extent, Africans are tied to this traditional reality. The writers reveal the preciousness of children and the huge challenge of the

parenthood in traditional Africa. So, the narrative in the novel is very telling.

"*Kwadwo Fordwo! He came through the downpour. He brought out a bundle tied in a piece of white cloth, and said, 'Untie it Pokuwaa' She unwrapped a beautiful Kente cloth*
'I will not wait for the day of our child's naming ceremony to bring you gifts' he said, smiling. 'Take it , it is yours' Pokuwaa picked up the lamp and went close to him where he was standing drying himself. She lifted the lamp to his face and asked, 'Kwadwo, what are you going to call our child?'
Isn't that to be revealed at the naming ceremony?
'Well, by this gift you have already anticipated the day,' she said
Kwadwo laughed. 'It is going to be a girl, 'he said. It is going to be a girl, and she will be called Adwoa'.
'Don't say Adwoa Pokuwaa', she laughed…
'And if it is a boy?' Asked Pokuwaa. 'If it is a boy?'
He saw that she was smiling brightly at him, and that her eyes were the eyes of a woman who loved him. (Konadu, 1967, p, 106-107) »

In fact, when Kwadwo has realized that Pokuwaa was pregnant he showed his joy through his attitude and manifested his mood by materializing this by a gift to his wife. It is clear that their life was happy enough in such a circumstance because a husband and a wife are happy, in this atmosphere. We acknowledge that Kwadwo offers a present to his wife and during the same occasion they are planning the naming ceremony where the name of the child will be revealed depending upon the sex. Also, love between the couple grows more and more. This restful position brings enjoying and well-being. But once the woman is in difficulty to beget children she is ill-treated. The problem lies in the beliefs and cultures of her community whereby a woman of such a culture and unfortunate build is considered as an unlucky one. This is the case of Pokuwaa when she was struggling to have a child. The passage below is illustrative:

"Coming from a culture which considers a woman without a child as luckless fellow, Pokuwaa struggles to have her own child. Her anxiety is further heightened by the fact that she is materially blessed, she being a good farmer. Not to have her own offspring means that her

old age would be doomed to loneliness" (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al 2010, p.319)

Childlessness has become the worry of a woman in the traditional African community. And, the female protagonist is considered as an individual who is luckless in this society and alone whose progeny is limited. Perpetuating the image of womanhood one can argue that women are merely subjugated by men and their essential role is to cope with the needs of their men and bear children. But once they fail to procreate, they are turned into the victims of domination. In this context, women identity is compared to female gender wavers. Likewise, the person living in this condition is in sorrow and loneliness. In order to calm this situation whereby African woman is considered provided she has children; Emecheta and Konadu highlight the impact of the burden of womanhood on African female characters. So that this challenge of the use of authority that men are endowed with in the African context be banned. Accordingly, the exposure of the plight of female characters is a way of conceptualizing marriage in African perspectives. Then, it is beyond doubt that the act or process of carrying and giving birth to a child is of particular importance. In the process of valuing child bearing and motherhood, it is opined that "[*Pokuwaa] is worried because without child of one's own, her old age will be very lonely one. Moreover, there will be "no grandchild to warm her compound and no issue of her blood at all to mourn at her death" (Konadu, 1967, p.13) Pokuwaa's mother is equally driven to a passion by her own daughter's seeming barrenness. "You see, my child, you should have children. You are my only daughter, and unless you have a child our lives will end miserably (Konadu, 1967, p.28). Without a child of her own, Pokuwaa's life is already a miserable one, we are told that her friends 'knew how depressed she was with her misfortune and they came in to comfort her" (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al 2010, p.238-239))"*

The foregoing analysis depicts how childbearing has become the essential foundation and pillar of any mother. In this respect, it is considered that "the concern propels the child at the heart of his mother's new life" (Loum, 2008, p.121) *A Woman in Her Prime* shows how important a woman's role is in a society, as a woman's pure nature is to be able to produce a child, but Pokuwaa who was unable to have children underwent frustration in her attempt

to get pregnant, she even changed her male partners -Kofi Daafo, Kwaku Fosu and her third marriage with Kwadwo Fordwuo- and consults diviners for assistance as "she struggles to make the demands made of her at Tanofie"(Konadu, 1967,p.39). Hinting at the diviner's consultation, one can infer that beliefs and rituals of African community are involved in the search for lineage in families. In this matter of concern, Gyekye, (1996, p.4) posits that "to be born into the African society is to be born into a culture that is intensely and pervasively religious that means and requires participating in the religious beliefs and rituals of the community".

By emphasizing the traditional religious sacrifices and gender norms Pokuwaa goes through as she's trying to conceive, Konadu allows room for commentary on the psychological toll infertility can take on a woman and her partner. Furthermore, women braveness is shown. Through the state of being a mother, we experience maternal ambivalence in *The Joy of Motherhood* whereby loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side. Here again, African women are affected as there are social change, psychological and environmental forces. Elaborating on the sorry condition of African women, it is argued that

"Nnu Ego passes through many painful trials during her life in the city: she suffers from a lack of family and tribal support, she must fight to adjust to the city's economic structure, finally she is exposed to an intimidating series of social and cultural practices which differ from those of the village life….Emecheta establishes Nnu Ego's tradition-consciousness. She suffers from the guilt of her first marriage which failed because she did not give her husband a child. There [are] also the separation from her traditional village, an unhappy marriage with a fat-ugly man who is her inferior and the death of her first-born son. (Sarr, 2006, p.65-67)"

The abstract above shows clearly the impediment of barren women in their areas. Passing through "painful trials", "suffering from the guilt of her first marriage", the protagonist in *the Joys of* Motherhood underwent affliction and bad luck calamity. It is crystal clear that this state of distress is inherent to the ill-treatment and underestimation of female characters.

Nevertheless, the unfolding events reveal the downside of that reality. The writer displays her protagonist with hope. In this context, the

protagonist was enjoying herself relying on her son who gave her a sense of fulfilment for the first time in her life. Nnu Ego's feeling and attitude can be perceived in this excerpt "She was now sure, as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy, that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as "mother" (Emecheta 1979,p.52)

The foregoing expresses the satisfaction and joy of the protagonist. But, against all odds, her dream becomes a nightmare as her baby died on the way to sell her wares at the railway yard (Emecheta 1979, p.52). One can see how motherhood is related to marital life and childbearing because this misfortune lets Nnu Ego in lamentations and look as a failed woman" (Emecheta 1979, p.54). The quotation below could tell more:

"*But I am not a woman any more! I am not a mother any more. The child is there, dead on the mat. My chi has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her…It was then that people understood the reason for her irrational behavior. Even some of the men had tears of pity in their eyes. Pieces of advice and consolation poured from people she had never seen before and would never see again. Many took the time to tell her their own stories. Even the woman who has slapped her told her that out of six pregnancies she only had two children alive, yet she was still living. She reminded Nnu Ego that she was still very young and said that once babies started coming, they came in great numbers. She is not mad after all "the woman took it upon herself to inform the crowd in her imperfect Yoruba. She has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren." And they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman. (Emecheta 1979, p. 60)"*

The abstract above says more about the despair and humiliation of women in African society. We experience the sorrowful situation of Nnu Ego at the death of her son. In her lamentation, she proclaims that she is no more a woman because she is not a mother. This is how a woman is relegated to the low rank, less than a human being because of motherhood. As the narrator states, the protagonist has lost the child that told the world that she is not barren. It is clear that, in addition to the value given to children that bring joy, African women are victim of insults and demise when they are not able to have ones.

As social constraints and moral duties, marriage and womanhood become women's challenge because they are most of the time brought to believe that they are the ones who are sources of misfortune or evils in the society. Thus, some voices should raise and avoid the blaming of women. On this basis, Asare Konadu and Buchi Emecheta depict their protagonists who meet the plight of the constraints of motherhood in various ways. Unlike Pokuwaa who experienced bareness, Nnu-Ego revolves around her children and through them, she seems to gain the respect of her community. Unfortunately, in this context, the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to her children without any reward. Then, one can deduce that marriage and motherhood are issues represented as a form of idea. So, the contrast of marriage is a conceptualization.

It is evident that African society forms an idea or principle of marriage and womanhood in their mind but there is a heated disagreement in this view. Then, the controversy around this issue of marriage and motherhood arises.

2- Marriage and Motherhood, controversial meaning in *the Joys of Motherhood* and *A Woman in her Prime*

Motherhood is "the state of being a mother" (Hornby, 2015, p,1009). One can also refer to the social expectations, experiences, and structures associated with being a mother. And it means that the joyful family is that in which there is love and peace. In this atmosphere, it is necessary to have some qualities that African society requires. In this regard, a female gender should get married and have a family by giving birth to children. Thus, maternity and motherliness should follow the marriage of a couple in African context. This misconception of marriage and motherhood brings about uncertainty in women's daily life. It is the case in a *Woman in her Prime* whereby the essence of children is the only concern. And most of the time women who are not able to fulfil this dream face many disturbances, psychologically, morally, economically. The controversial meaning of marriage and motherhood is a matter that gives rise to the controversy or African society disagreement.

Ambiguity is defined as the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness or ambivalence, or "the state of being

difficult to understand or explain because of involving many different aspects" (Hornby, 2009, p.45). Thus, this difference of opinion gives rise to an uncertainty and contrast which are raised in *A Woman in her Prime* and *The Joys of Motherhood.* It is my belief that marriage is seen as an institution where childbearing is the ultimate achievement of the wife whether she is happy or not so, a woman's identity and her life is viewed as incomplete or even unjustified unless she has had children.

The vision of contrast is perceived from several angles. On the one hand, marriage becomes a torment when a woman is barren, on the other hand, motherhood does not repay properly. The social ideals are to be a mother when you get married but the experience of Nnu-Ego shows that a mother can give all her effort to nurse and educate her children with a great cost and reap so little profit. This contradicts maternity and the bliss becomes an irony and here, one can assume that Nnu-Ego regrets having children. This excerpt in which the controversial meaning of motherhood is exhibited reads:

Nnu Ego dried her tears and said primly, "Oh, I haven't just got daughters, I have a son in 'Emelika', a boy in grammar school, and another who is going to be a farmer"

"Oh, you are rich madam, "the driver said, "you must tell me where you stay; I like to know important people. You see when you talk with them, they give you ideas of how they made it. A son in America? Goodness, you must be full of joy, madam!"

...Nnu Ego closed her eyes; her head was aching a little. She eased Malachi on her lap, for the child's weight was making her stiff. She listened with one ear to the driver's monologue.

This life is very unfair... [Nnu Ego] used to go to the sandy square.... After such wandering on one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside. She quietly died there with no child with to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother (Emecheta, 1979, p.223)

Clearly, motherhood which should be a source of happiness and fulfilment brings about emotional hardship and obstacles. The motherhood does not bring any joy instead, it brings pain and sorrow and ordeal. After being exposed to many obstacles because of being unable to bear children in marriage, Nnu Ego, could not be delighted.

She even died alone 'with no child'. So, the pain that comes after the experience of motherhood is unfulfilled hope. The narrative abounds with references and allusions to this bitterness in the life of Nnu Ego. She was busy building up her pride as a mother but unfortunately, she has no honour at her old age till her death. To evidence the outcome of the action taken that causes harm to Nnu Ego, Sarr (2006, p.69) specifies:

"Nnu Ego is a victim of circumstances as the values of her country, her people and her tribe have changed drastically in her life-time. She has been brought to believe that children make a woman. She went through many difficulties to have children and to provide for them. She was a slave to the traditional role of motherhood. She believed that a mother gives everything to her children and she did; her children were her raison d'être. When the children grow up, they are expected to take care of their mother.

Since the values of her people have changed, it did not always work like that. A woman with many children could face a lonely old age and may die a miserable death, all alone, just like a barren woman. This was what happened to Nnu Ego."

Perpetuating the controversy surrounding the joy and reward of motherhood, one comes to the conclusion that Nnu Ego admits disillusionment and desperation and is victim of unpleasant situations. So, it is crystal clear that "'motherhood' is an irony in which the novelist presents oppression, suffering and loneliness in patriarchal society." (Balatavbhai, 2020) Her society views that only children can make a woman. It is my contention that one should not ignore the merits of children education because there is no point in having children without instilling in them a good education. Only this will make them good citizens capable of taking care of their parents. Notwithstanding, the irony of fate of Nu Ego, a woman with many children is compared to a barren one as she has a sad end, living in loneliness in her old age and dying a sorrowful death. Similarly, Ndiawar Sarr has a close look at Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and the role assigned to her protagonist and maintains that:

"It may be fitting to conclude by speaking of catharsis, for this is the final part of the formula for a modern tragedy. Emecheta's novel most

definitely, brings to consciousness the dilemma of defining motherhood. Her novel is not uniquely African, in attempting to answer the question, it is universal. This marks the writer's growth into an accomplished novelist. Nnu Ego's bravery, persistence and generosity as part of a transitional generation made it possible for her children and grandchildren to lead new and different lives. It is the universality which enables any reader to craw into Nnu Ego's pitiful life and to experience her pain as she, the mother of many, dies alone in the final pages. (Sarr, 2006, 70-71)"

Indeed, as a role model, Nnu Ego shows herself to be a woman devoted in the task of motherhood and the household. Yet, she is not rewarded duly. As a result of this event, Emecheta is raising people awareness on the belief and illusion of marriage and motherhood. Throughout all what had just been said above, one can infer that fertility is very vital in African society, but children are not only an essential social security system but also a dissatisfaction in a marriage. Then, the child is considered as the destiny and is supposed to be the goal of African women. It is my contention that motherhood after marriage should bring joy but there are contented views whereby children bearing does not bring any welfare. Corroborating this idea, Kandji (2006, p.32) quoted Kine Lam who said that

"*marriage is sexual warefare and once the woman has children she is defeated. Indeed, many women stay in a bad marriage and suffer hell for the sake of children. It is common knowledge that children from broken homes are in general, assumed to be exposed to the worst social ills; hence they are viewed as potential problem children"*

An analysis of the misapprehension of marriage and maternity, in the passage above, reveals the difficulties of women in their marriage though they have children. They even suffer hell and a bad marriage. The controversial meaning is that the society and female gender expect fulfilment after having a progeny but sometimes it turns bad. This is the case when the couple has a bad marriage that can lead children to broken homes. A good marriage requires understanding and harmony. This implication is not felt in *A Woman in her Prime* when we have a glance at Koramoa and her husband. She is not at ease because of her husband misconduct. For example, the discussion between Koramoa and Pokuwaa is indicative:

"'*We must try and keep in touch', said Pokuwaa, 'as human beings should do.'*
You are very nice', praised Koramoa. I was thinking of coming to see you, but what with the rains and this boy… I want to discuss with you Kofi Deede's behaviour recently. He has started giving me trouble again over women. Only last night, when I was sitting here waiting for him, someone came to tell me that he was in the hut of Akosua Seewaa. I went there and caught them together.
'So where is he now?" asked Pokuwaa.
'He has gone out again', said her friend. 'He is so ashamed he cannot look at my face. You see, I had seen him with her once, but when I asked him questions, he denied having anything to do with her. Now I hear he wants to marry her. If that is true, I shall divorce him" (Konadu, 1967, p. 34-35)

With Kofi Deede's attitude, it is obvious that some husbands do not reinforce the union for a happy marriage and tranquillity of their wife through their behaviour. In fact, it is a typical attitude that can lead a couple to divorce because it gives trouble to any partner. In other words, unfaithfulness is not conducive to peace in the marital home. Such an instance might have prompted Asare Konadu to decry women right abuses.
What's more, the meaning of marriage, happiness and bitterness is not well founded as the protagonist in *the Joys of Motherhood* and that of *A Woman in her Prime* divorce their husbands. In this spot, marriage as a union of both male and female gender has no fulfilment without any child. Nnu Ego divorces her first husband Amatokwu who takes her virginity, whereas Pokuwaa divorces her first husband Kofi Daafo. We are also informed about the marital atmosphere of Pokuwaa and her first husband from the beginning of their love affairs. It is stated that their love grew from 'childlike affairs' and becomes a 'serious reality' (Konadu, 1967, p.27) which is marriage. But we get to know that Pokuwaa later divorces him because he has failed to give her a child. In order to satisfy her needs, she contracts another marriage with Kwaku Fosu. To foreground this point, it is observed that Pokuwaa "had been fond of that man, but there was no child, and she divorced him" (Konadu, 1967, p.28). The fact of being affected by marital

instability, it is clear that childlessness has transformed the character who takes further actions.

Another issue raised is that of the desire for children, for Nnu Ego the signification of marriage is having children for a better love, and higher status. "Unfortunately for her, this is not how it plays out in real life, even though this is the line her society has fed her about motherhood" (Bijl, 2024, no p). Here again, the controversy lies because the meaning of motherhood in African context is in contrast. Getting illumination from this standpoint, one can infer that, African patriarchal society identifies women with their natural gift and criticizes them or dispossesses them of their true identity of womanhood.

Furthermore, the treatment of the great Tano by Pokuwaa who suddenly rebels against him in a way that it had never happened before is another point reflecting this contention. She continues till she becomes pregnant in spite of irreverent undertaking. What is amazing is that against all odds, Pokuwaa's marital status has undergone a metamorphosis. Here, Konadu seems to deny the power of gods.

Again, the contrasting attitudes of women to childbearing is seen through the incapacity of the divinities to satisfy the need of Pokuwaa. It is believed that in African context, divinities are capable of satisfying the need of anyone. To illustrate this contention, a traditional healer puts: "All women who have come to this world are able to conceive. Even if the doctors have given, God can still make you conceive" (Okekunle, 2023, p.65). In this perspective, Pokuwaa struggles to meet the need of the society as far as child begetting is concerned and offered countless sacrifices to the great Tano and consults priests for worthless rituals. It shows the limit of traditional medicine and how society has made female gender so desperate to meet the society standards.

In this sense, it is elucidated that "Brenhoma society emphasizes having children as it ensures the continuity of a family lineage, thus the protagonist, Pokuwaa is worried because without a child of her own her old age will be a very lonely one" (Okekunle, 2023, p.73). However, the fate of Nnu Ego shows the contrary. Nnu Ego's plight is laid bare through the following quotation:

"*Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace! Still, many agreed that she had given all to her children. The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said.*
And the reward? Did she not have greatest funeral Ibuza had ever seen? It took Oshia three years to pay off the money he had borrowed to show the world what a good son he was. That was why people failed to understand why she did not answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who could give her a decent burial" (Emecheta,1979, p224)

This crucial passage speaks for itself. Through the foregoing, the meaning of marriage as a happy adventure and motherhood as the merit of marriage for a happy ending of an aging mother is a complete failure and a humiliating one. Then, it can be referred to "the double but contrasting values or meanings given to or possessed an event, a situation, an activity or even someone's appearance or deeds" (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al 2010, p.364). In *A Woman in her Prime*, ambiguity arises in various forms. Making mention of this ambivalence, in this novel, the power of divinities and the sacrifices required are necessary to appease Pokuwaa's desire. However, the rituals that Pokuwa was in need of do not happen. This lies in *A Woman in her Prime* when one had thought that whatever the black hen brought to Tano would be used for would succeed but this does not happen. This sense of indefiniteness, is more obvious as some events are opened to many interpretations, bringing uncertainty in Pokuwaa and Tano Priest's mind. For instance, we have just learnt that the black hen is not swallowed by a black snake as expected. This hen, which is the vital element for the sacrifice escaped. It is also assumed that the act of being saved from being sacrificed bears a dangerous meaning for that tamed animal. Eventually, the state of things makes the sacrifice fetches no child. Throughout this interpretation of the rituals in the house of Tano, -the priest- ceremonial which was not successful; it is crystal clear that there is a polemical meaning.

Moreover, some characters such as Pokuwaa and Koramoa are portrayed with some attitude expressing imprecision and unclearness. At any rate, any woman should rejoice once she has a chance to bear children. Regardless what seems strange in this context, there is the

expression of disgust of these characters mentioned above and due to some moral or psychological dissent. It must be noted that, this behavior is a contrasting attitude to childbearing. It is tedious, and dull even repugnant to be in motherhood as it consumes the energy on passion, and these women are fed up. In this respect, it is put:

"Pokuwaa took the opportunity to visit Koramoa. She found her cooking. Her child, now a toddler, was waddling about, splashing mud over himself, falling down and struggling up again. He was clearly enjoying learning to walk and refused to sit down. When Koramoa caught him to wash his feet he let out shrill cries and wriggled to get down.

Koramoa regretted that the days had made their meetings so irregular, and complained about the naughtiness of her child. (Konadu, 1967, p.34)"

Given what has been said, one can infer that the motherhood brings regret in addition to gladness. This is clear when one examines the complaint of the mother Koramoa about the bad behavior of her kid. Likewise, there is a double and opposing estimation of the kid. In this respect, Pokuwaa wonders that "she was equally fed up and bored with life because she had no child. If a mother was fed up because she had children, then what life was this? (Konadu, 1967, p.34)".

Still, the old age of Nnu Ego bears a meaning that one can not accept. Any mother pours herself in her children raising to have a joyful end. But the aging mother in this situation is abandoned by her family. Though she was a devoted mother in the education of her children the latter turn their back on her without daring look after her until her pitiful death. The irony lies there because Nnu Ego was awkward during her life but after her death her children has erected a sanctuary in her memoriam, to represent fertility and motherhood. The controversial meaning of the joy of the motherhood after marriage is voiced as it is illustrated in the following passage:

"When her children heard of her sudden death, they all, even Oshia came home. They were all sorry she had died before they were in a position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen and a shrine was made in her

name so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren (Emecheta, 1979 pp.223-224)"

In the same token, (Capo-Chichi, 2008, p202) posits that "Le ceremonial du mariage n'est plus une valeur sociale, encore moins une promotion sociale. L'essentiel est de pouvoir survivre dans l'espace." Accordingly, the marriage ceremony which is for long time vital is no longer a social value, even less a social promotion; the main thing is to be able to survive in space. Thereupon, it is stated that

« La femme est seule modèle du devenir …en mettant au monde des enfants. Ainsi elle gère son corps, c'est-à-dire ses pulsions…Elles n'est donc pas objet dont se servent les hommes pour avoir une progéniture nombreuse. Elle participe pleinement de la logique qui fait de la sexualité l'équivalent de la procréation » (Capo-Chichi, 2008, p204).

Thus, the woman is the only model of future, by giving birth to children. In so doing, she manages her body, that is to say her impulse. She is therefore not an object used by men to have numerous offspring. It fully participates in the logic that makes sexuality the equivalent of procreation. Talking of the controversy in the meaning of marriage and motherhood Kandji (2006, pp. 15-16) argues that

"*The marital bliss is illusory. Yet it seeps out of the conversation of the two friends that marriage proves evil, notwithstanding the fact that it is indisputably shifting. Women are trapped in matrimony since society has no patience with the single woman who represents a threat to integrity of the community….The challenge the…women are faced with is about making the right choices, whether to conform to the expectations of society, to endure all the plights in passive suffering, to compromise for the sake of survival or to be radical, brave ostracism and resign themselves to living in separateness , a life without men.*

In Africa, where marriage, motherhood, hard work and stoicism are yardsticks with which women are assessed…irony pervades as women experience the dichotomy between appearance and reality, deception onward looks, that is, the prominent figure they project, the way the outside world perceives…"

What can be inferred from this quotation is that the marital ecstasy is delusive and many women encounter chasm between appearance and

reality while they endure their plight. As 'the joys of motherhood', a marriage is a union of a couple who has worked hard at keeping happiness in their lives. Henceforth, there is an understanding, care and devotion that keep two people committed to each other.

The contrast, lies in the fact that the protagonist in *the Joys of Motherhood* faced her husband's irresponsibility as she struggled her whole life to make ends meet. Her children, Emelika and Oshia were sort of a disappointment and even her husband. On this point it is said that Nnu Ego brought her children up without the help of her partner. She used to do petty works like selling woods. Only this can help her save money and pay school fees. This afflictive life is illustrative as she cries in these words. "On my life I have to work myself to the bone to look after them; I have to give them all. And if I'm lucky enough to die in peace, I have given them my soul." (Emecheta, 1979 p.186) In this vein, Adaku states that mothers cannot expect to gain happiness from only their children. This is the case of Nnu Ego who unfortunately had a bad fate with childbearing. N'diawar Sarr recalls this predicament of Nnu Ego's life in the following terms:

"*Nnu Ego bears all her sorrows alone and blames no one despite her occasional reference to her chi……Indeed, as the story unravels we see the central character emerge with a new ego which causes great conflict with her traditional upbringing. Emecheta refers to that conflict what the role of a woman is to be-in what might be considered an ironic way in the tittle she chose for her novel, the Joys of Motherhood" (Sarr, 2006 p.67)*

Apparently, the cases show that African women represent figures that are trapped in matrimony as the society overestimate motherhood after any marriage. Our understanding of the traditional African culture, has revealed that the significant role of the female gender is defined by her society and confined to home. By conceptualizing marriage and motherhood, the woman's image and her position in the African patriachal society are pledged. Then, traditional customs and principles which value only a married woman through her motherhood should be revisited. Henceforward, men are compelled to cease women mistreatment and promote their empowerment.

Conclusion

The concern of this article has been to explore the meaning of marriage in the African context. It has also examined African misconception of a married woman without any children and focused on the irony of motherhood. Furthermore, it has examined the extent to which barrenness means marriage failure. The emphasis has been made on the enigmatic achievements of marriage in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime.* As this study has highlighted it, the equivocal attainment of the partners' union has been assessed through the plight of both protagonists, Nnu Ego and Pokuwaa. It has examined the woman's position whereby customs and beliefs demise womanhood in patriarchal society. The study has also shown the disappointment that the protagonists experience in both novels. The causes of this sadness and displeasure and the non fulfilment of the protagonists' expectations have also been at the core of this analysis. This work, has eventually shown the ambition of Nnu Ego's motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* and how it conveys contempt and the failure of the realization of her dream.

Through the use of socio-criticism and feminist perspective on motherhood and reproduction; this study has found that marriage and motherhood bear controversial meanings as it is related to the happiness of the couples in the novels under study. In addition, this analysis has demonstrated that there are issues that are "Conceptualizing the contrast of Marriage". Thus, begetting children after the marriage is the utmost importance of a woman in African society. For Nnu Ego and Pokuwaa, children represent joy and happiness in marriage. Through the plight of both protagonists it comes out that motherhood is a double-edge sword. Yet also pain and sorrow can be found. Then, we have found out that bearing children may not determine the fulfilment of a marriage because a couple can conceive and be happy or unhappy. Afterwards, we have to lay bare children education and socialization in order to focus on children's development. This study has demonstrated that marriage and reproduction, as a mental concept is an essential component of demographic and social reproduction that defines offspring. So, there

is a need to argue for a reform in mentality and attitudes toward women in order to redefine husband and wife interrelationship. The analysis has proved that there are social facts in African society and we should correct misconception about African culture, beliefs and customs related to the oppression between man and womankind. So, this involves all members of society on economic, political, psychological and spiritual fields. This work has been a warning to the African people, to avoid conceiving the idea of marriage as synonym of reproduction but rather accept this fate and contribute to nation building by helping orphans and building humanity.

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