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The Joys of Motherhood

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta covers themes of colonialism, nationalism, and feminism. Emecheta uses the shift from life in Ibuza to life in Lagos to show the contrast between traditional Ibo values and modern colonial values. Colonialism changes the societal structure, economic structure, and cultural values. Emecheta embraces the values of African nationalism and feminism through an exploration of the changes from traditional to colonial society.

Colonialism makes Ibo people dependent on outsiders instead of just each other. In Ibuza, men are farmers. In Lagos, men are employed by colonists. Nnaife is dependent on Dr. Meers. “Nnaife had not recovered from the financial loss incurred during the Meers’ last leave” (84). When the Meers leave, Nnaife has to find another job. As Nnu Ego points out, “You must have a master first” (85). Without colonialism, Ibo people were self-sufficient. With colonialism, Ibo people had to rely on colonists. Nnaife struggles to find a master. He gets a job on a ship, a job cutting grass, and then he is recruited into the army. He wonders, “We don’t have slavery any more, so why should grown men be captured in broad daylight?” (145). In Ibo culture, being a soldier is unacceptable. However, Nnaife needs a job and he needs money, and he sees the war as his best chance for getting what he needs. Ubani laments, “The British own us, just like God does, and just like God they are free to take any of us when they wish” (148).

Modernity changes Ibo culture by making men and women strive for money. As Cordelia notes, “Men here are too busy being white men’s servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame is that they don’t know it. All they see is the money, shining white man’s money” (51). When Nnaife and his colleagues are recruited into the war, they are promised more income and better opportunities. “This was a chance to pull their families out of the kind of life they had been living; it had never occurred to them before that this was poverty” (146). Men are not the only ones concerned with making money. Adaku is always going into the markets. “She would stay away all day at market, coming in late at night, so there was no point in Nnu Ego waiting for her; nor did Adaku herself ask for food when she came back, so presumably she and her children ate in the market” (161). She wants to provide for her kids, and she thinks that the best way to provide for them is by making more money.

Modernity causes a shift of focus from community to individuals. In traditional Ibo culture, children are expected to support their parents financially. Nnaife asks this of Oshia: “Now, young man, when are you going to take on your family responsibilities? Have you not sense enough to know that a father shouldn’t have to ask that of his son, he should do it automatically?” (200). However, Oshia wants education and focuses solely on that. “Education is a lifelong project. If I stop now, I shall only help them half the way. I intended to go go further after leaving school. Say four to five years after that… then I shall be able to do something for them. Not now” (192). He feels that he needs to get the highest education to benefit himself and that he needs to do that first before he can help his family. Oshia has bought into the idea of striving for perfection. There will always be another goal for him to reach. In contrast, Adim struggles to reconcile the traditional values with the modern values. ~~Adim knows that as the second son, he is overlooked. “Is it my fault that I am a second son? Everything in this house is Oshia’s. He must have the best of everything. You answer to his every whim, Mother. Sometimes I think we the rest of your children don’t exist for you at all.” (190).~~ He wants to help his family. “Adim worked hard both at school and at home. He asked himself many times if his brother Oshia was right in his attitude of aiming for the highest peak in whatever profession he was going to choose before stopping to look back and help the other children.” (192). Adim seeks to further his individual education while also still considering his family.

This book is also an African feminist novel. Feminism is a movement for women’s rights and equality emphasizing seeking economic equality, access to resources, and inclusion. The novel gives the perspective of female characters such as Nnu Ego and Adaku. Emecheta shows how Nnu Ego and Adaku struggle with being seen as equal and struggle for economic equality. She also shows the way Nnu Ego’s and Adaku’s understanding of the world as male-dominated affects the way they act towards their daughters.

Women are trying to find their own worth outside of a man. Traditional values put a woman’s value in the ability to bear children, especially sons, for her husband. When Nnaife is disappointed that Nnu Ego has given birth to twin girls, Nnu Ego expresses her frustration with these ideals. “The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That’s why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband -- and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build.” (187). Nnu Ego recognizes the standards that put men in charge.

Nnu Ego and Adaku also seek economic equality. Colonialism enforces the structure of patriarchy with men as the sole providers. This makes a woman economically dependent on her husband. Nnu Ego and Adaku both struggle with the way Nnaife assumes his position as the person in charge of the household. Nnu Ego notes that “Since he had come back [from Fernando Po], Nnaife had suddenly assumed the role of the lord and master” (112). He doesn’t give them enough money. They want economic equality so they can provide for their children. As Adaku notes, “I am sure he spends more than we get on his drink.” (134). When they start a strike as a way to tell him this, he doesn’t respond well. Adaku is beaten, and Nnu Ego is yelled at. “On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman of her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her.” (137). Nnu Ego recognizes the way men’s expectations limit women. She is not expected to speak out for herself, nor is she allowed to ask for more money or rights. Nnu Ego and Adaku are both frustrated with these norms, but their responses are different.

Nnu Ego doesn’t know how to change the misogynistic structure, so she perpetuates the same misogynistic ideas that she herself is frustrated with, much to the dismay of her daughters. “But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you.” (176). She tells the girls that their value is only in their bride price and their marriages. They don’t get to go to school, switching to private lessons instead, because the boys’ education is valued higher. They are not supported and are ignored. “While Nnu Ego and her husband were busy planning and scraping for their sons, they took it for granted that the girls… would automatically take care of themselves” (203). The girls are expected to grow up well so that they will get good husbands and good bride prices. However, Kehinde rejects this idea and wants to marry the man she likes. “Father, I want to marry and live with Lapido, the butcher’s son. I don’t want an Ibuza man!” (204). Kehinde is rejecting the traditional idea of marrying the man chosen by her parents. This rejection is an example of modernity in that she is placing her own happiness above her family’s expectations. It is also an example of feminism in that Kehinde wants to make her own choices rather than being dependent on a man.

In contrast to Nnu Ego, Adaku is intentional about refusing to conform to misogynistic structures. Instead of staying with Nnaife, she leaves with her daughters. “I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future. Many rich Yoruba families send their daughters to school these days; I shall do the same with mine.” (168). Adaku is choosing to put herself and her daughters before any man. She wants to raise strong, independent women.

In addition, this book is an African nationalist novel. Nationalist novels are told from the perspective of the oppressed and show the negative effects of colonialism. The focus of the novel is on Ibo people and how their lives are changed by colonialism. This novel shows colonialism as an interference, a negative presence, and a change for the worse. Colonialism has a negative effect on the economy in Lagos. The economic situation is already more difficult in Lagos because of capitalism, but this becomes even more true during the war as employers leave and goods become more expensive. Colonialism also has negative effects on individual characters. Nnaife becomes more and more angry as time goes on and he cannot cope with the changes in the societal and economic structures caused by colonialism. Taiwo notices that her parents are having arguments more frequently: “First it had been over their brother Oshia; then over their father’s pension; two days before it had been over Adim” (207). Nnaife even goes so far as to attempt to murder Kehinde’s Yoruba boyfriend.

In this book, Emecheta shows the effects of colonialism as it changes Ibo culture in terms of societal structure, economic structure, and cultural values. Colonialism has many negative effects on Ibo culture including causing massive disruption to families and previously established economic patterns. The novel is told from the perspectives of the oppressed; the Ibo people are oppressed by colonialism, and the women are oppressed by the men. These themes of African nationalism and feminism pervade this novel.