

NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU AND BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complexities of motherhood and identity in Nigerian literature through a comparative analysis of *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa and *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta. Using textual analysis and drawing from Intersectional Feminism and Identity Negotiation Theory, the study examines how gender, race, and class intersect to shape women's identity. Both novels portray motherhood as a layered identity shaped by societal expectations. In *Efuru*, the protagonist asserts her individuality despite cultural norms that prioritize maternal roles. In contrast, *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals how the protagonist Nnu Ego's identity is reduced to motherhood alone. The findings suggest that while motherhood is revered, it often restricts women's agency, forcing them to constantly negotiate their identities.

Keywords: barrenness, identity, intersectional feminism, motherhood, Nigerian literature

INTRODUCTION

In African literature, female characters are often not given as much importance as their male counterparts, and their good actions are not often acknowledged. This way of thinking comes from the belief that men are more important than women, which causes

difficulties for women both in real life and in the stories written, particularly by male authors. Women were often seen as inferior and didn't have a voice in society. De Beauvoir (1949) posited that women have been subjected to a state of inferiority within a society that men

predominantly control. Although women may be granted rights in theory, deeply embedded cultural norms and traditions often prevent them from fully realizing these rights. De Beauvoir's argument that women's oppression lies in their social and cultural construction as others is true in the African context too.

Consequently, the concept of motherhood is always attached to a "woman". In most African societies, motherhood is one of the most important titles a woman can experience. Mothers are seen as the primary caregivers, responsible for the physical, emotional, and moral upbringing of their children. Throughout history, mothers have fulfilled multiple roles and responsibilities. However, scholars argued that motherhood is often associated with societal expectations and ideals, and it is considered a crucial aspect of female identity. Women lose their individuality and status as these are often tied to their role as mothers, leaving those without children with no significant status (Chukwuma, 1990). Similarly, to keep marriage intact, women often make painful sacrifices, losing their individuality and autonomy as marriage itself becomes a site of subordination (Sharma & Verma, 2022).

Women were often made docile by tradition and cultural conventions, as early male writers depicted traditional African society as a man's world where women had little chance or attention (Kapuka, 2019, p. 15). However, many women have sought their place through writing, with resistance to patriarchy and the belief in women's autonomy being popular themes. African writers like Ama Atta Aidoo, Bessie Head, Calixthe Beyala, and Chimamanda Adichie, among others, have paved the way for these voices, capturing multifaceted experiences of Nigerian women navigating motherhood (Ordu & Odukwu, 2022). Literature has become a tool for women to share their struggles and assert their agency. However, existing literature on motherhood often overlooks the intersecting social factors and fails to capture the multifaceted experiences of Nigerian women navigating motherhood.

This study aimed to analyze and draw comparisons in the portrayal of motherhood in two Nigerian novels: "Efuru" by Flora Nwapa and "The Joys of Motherhood" by Buchi Emecheta, through the lens of intersectional feminism and identity negotiation theory. Through the lenses of intersectional feminist and identity negotiation

approaches as the basis of the analysis, the study specifically aimed to answer what the intersecting social categories (such as gender, race, and class) that shaped the maternal functions exemplified in the two novels? How did the protagonists from

both texts negotiate these “maternal functions”? And how did these maternal functions shape their identities, particularly as a “mother” and/or “woman” in Nigerian society?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Traditionally, women look after their homestead while men find jobs outside the home. Moreover, taking care of children, the sick, the elderly, and all the males in the household is considered the sole responsibility of a woman (Kapuka, 2019, p. 12). In many African traditions, a woman's social status and respect are often tied to her marital status. This is why a woman who is not married has practically no role in society, in the view of African tradition (Phiri & Nadar, 2009). Chukwuma (1990) argues that African women are expected to marry, submit to their husbands, and bear children, which restricts their individuality. A woman's power and status are often defined by her children, and without them, she may struggle to attain meaningful status. In African societies, a marriage is considered successful if it produces children, and those without offspring are often viewed as unfortunate, often leading to divorce (Buah, 1980). In

this society, women who bear children are revered and idealized, while those who do not are stigmatized as barren. As such, a woman without a child is incomplete and becomes the definition of the “end point” of human existence, not only in terms of ancestry but also in terms of personal satisfaction (Mbiti, 1970, p.144). This highlights the deep-rooted societal belief that a woman's purpose and fulfillment are closely tied to her ability to bear children. The absence of motherhood is seen as a significant loss, both in terms of continuing the family lineage and in the woman's sense of identity and purpose.

The concept of motherhood entailed embracing the societal expectations of an idealized version of motherhood, which includes self-sacrifice, relinquishing one's own needs, possessing inherent goodness, unwavering love, and being dutifully present (O'Reilly, 2010). Akujobi (2011) defines motherhood as an automatic set of feelings and behaviors

triggered by pregnancy and childbirth, profoundly shaped by social context and culture. It is also perceived as a moral shift, in which a woman transitions from being an independent individual to being closely identified with her role as a mother. This definition emphasizes the biological, social, and cultural dimensions of motherhood, recognizing the automatic nature of maternal feelings and behaviors, the influence of societal context, and the moral transformation that occurs when a woman becomes a mother.

Motherhood encompasses biological, social, and cultural dimensions, with maternal feelings and behaviors triggered automatically by pregnancy and childbirth. This transformation is influenced by societal context and culture. Rich (1976) supports this view, suggesting that men have convinced women that motherhood is a prerequisite for true womanhood. Women often internalize blame for infertility and feel it as a personal failure. Mutunda (2016) adds that in many African societies, procreation is so vital that a husband may marry a second wife if his first wife is barren.

Additionally, it refers to the existence of an institution that seeks to maintain male dominance by ensuring that

women's reproductive potential and their overall autonomy remain under male control; as such, several studies have categorized motherhood into four themes of inquiry: motherhood as experience, motherhood as an institution, motherhood as subjectivity or identity, and motherhood as an agency. The category of motherhood as subjectivity or identity examines how women feel and see themselves being affected by the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood (Jiao, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism, according to Crenshaw (1989), is a framework that recognizes the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, and how these intersections can impact various aspects of women's lives, including motherhood. Race, class, gender, and sexuality can be understood as interconnected systems that perpetuate oppression (Weber, 2010).

New interdisciplinary and intersectional research on women as mothers, challenges normative societal assumptions and broadens understandings of women as mothers, mothering, and

motherhood. This research showcases the diversity of mothering experiences, highlights the complexities of contemporary mothering, and demonstrates the benefits of an intersectional feminist perspective. It makes visible their lived experiences of mothers and challenges dominant imaginings and service responses to women as mothers (Buchanan & Zufferey, 2020).

Identity Negotiation Theory

The origin of identity negotiation is attributed to Mead's (1934) Theory of Symbolic Interactionism, which posited that individuals develop self-knowledge through social interaction. Building on this, Stryker and Statham (1985) emphasized that repeated engagement in specific roles fosters self-conceptions tied to those roles. These ideas laid the groundwork for Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, which likened people to actors in a play. Goffman (1959) asserted that the first order of business in social interaction is establishing a "working consensus" or agreement regarding the roles each person will assume.

In social psychology, ideas related to identity negotiation were introduced by

Secord and Backman (1965) and elaborated by Swann (1987) and Schlenker (1985). Swann and Bosson's (2008) identity negotiation processes refer to those activities through which people establish, maintain, and change their identities. They point out that the identity negotiation process begins when people enter social interactions and strive to establish "who is who." During this process, individuals unconsciously follow a set of behavioral principles to negotiate identities that align with their pre-existing self-perceptions. However, under certain circumstances, individuals may adjust or transform their identities to adapt to new social contexts. Consequently, although identity negotiation often serves to maintain stable identities, it can also result in identity transformation when particular conditions are present. Thus, as proposed by Swann and Bosson (2008), identity negotiation theory focuses on how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities through interactions with others and the social context. It seeks to understand how the character's identity in a narrative is established, maintained, or changed through their interaction and relationship with others, the social norms, and the cultural expectations.

METHODS

This qualitative research used textual analysis—a method for describing the content, structure, and functions of messages in texts (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999)—and close reading—a strategy for understanding challenging texts by focusing on specific details and elements (Boyles, 2012/2013; Fisher & Frey, 2013)—as literary techniques to gain insights into the portrayal of motherhood and identity negotiation in “Efuru” and “The Joys of Motherhood,” the primary data. The researchers closely read, analyzed, and compared the texts and identified relevant themes, plot points, and patterns that pertained to maternal functions and identity negotiation through the lenses of Intersectional Feminism and

Identity Negotiation Theory. The researcher gathered the collected textual data, including quotes, descriptions, and narrative events that highlighted the shaping of maternal functions by intersecting categories. Then, they analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and connections between the social categories and maternal functions, while examining how the protagonists negotiated these maternal functions and identities. This study, limited to the two selected novels, primarily focused on the experiences of the protagonists; thus, other perspectives may exist that are not included that may not capture the diverse range of experiences and perspectives of Nigerian women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Summary of “The Joys of Motherhood”

“The Joys of Motherhood” by Buchi Emecheta follows the life of Nnu Ego, an Igbo woman in Nigeria. Growing up in the traditional Ibuza

community, her upbringing was marked by her community's customs, beliefs, and familial influences. At fifteen, she was married off to a man chosen by her family and was expected to find joy and fulfillment in her role as a wife and

mother. However, her first marriage was deemed a failure to conceive a child, which resulted in separation. As the narrative unfolds, Nigeria undergoes changes due to colonialism and urbanization, introducing new dynamics and challenges to traditional life. Nnu Ego is sent from her hometown of Ibuza to Lagos, the capital, to marry her second husband, Nnaife, a washman for the white master. Her new life in Lagos is difficult, as she faces numerous challenges, including the deaths of some of her children, economic difficulties, and the changing social landscape. The novel explores Nnu Ego's struggles and sacrifices as she tries to grapple with the expectations placed upon her as a woman and mother.

Summary of “Efuru”

The novel “Efuru” follows Efuru, a strong and beautiful Igbo woman. She is the daughter of a well-known hero and leader of their tribe, Nwashike Ogene. She marries Adizua despite not following the traditional custom of a bride price. She moved and lived with her husband and mother-in-law. Efuru also contributes to the family's income through trading. She successfully gives birth to a baby girl

named Ogonim, bringing immense joy; however, her happiness is short-lived as her husband leaves her for another woman, and tragically, their only child dies. To escape shame, Efuru returns to her home and later meets Gilbert Eneberi, who becomes her second husband. Unfortunately, since she is unable to conceive, she consented to Gilbert taking another wife. Her anguish deepened upon learning that Gilbert already has a son with another woman, and it is compounded by her father's death. She was even accused by Gilbert of Efuru of adultery, prompting a separation. Regaining her health, Efuru returned to her father's house and devoted herself to serving Uhamiri, the lake goddess who is also childless.

Maternal Functions Shaped by Intersecting Social Categories

In traditional African society, gender roles are often characterized by certain expectations and responsibilities that are assigned to individuals. These roles are generally perceived as rigid and deeply rooted in cultural and social norms. The allocation of roles frequently reinforces stereotypes, unequal power dynamics, and the devaluation of women's rights and is evident in the prevailing belief that men typically hold dominant

and authoritative positions, while women are often assigned inferior roles. Getting married and becoming a mother is a necessity, a role that is highly idealized and becomes a social recognition for women (Phiri & Nadar, 2009). This notion presents motherhood as a role that comes with societal expectations and ideals. By projecting women into these conventions, society places them under men's subjugation, depriving them of autonomy. In this context, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional feminism provides a critical lens for understanding the various intersecting categories that shape women's identity. The approach also emphasizes that women's struggles are not determined by gender alone but are compounded with social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity that profoundly affect experiences as a woman and/or mother.

Maternal Functions in "The Joys of Motherhood"

Emecheta's "The Joys of Motherhood" brings to our attention how women in traditional Nigerian society have long been associated with maternal roles, as they are seen as biologically capable of giving birth and nurturing infants. In Emecheta's work, it depicts the Ibo women's lives being tightly controlled by

traditional gender roles, resulting often in confined motherhood and fertility norms. Nnu Ego's character is deeply entwined with the role of motherhood and the societal pressures that accompany it. As the text asserts, "a woman, in order to become complete, must become a wife" (p. 169). She is thus expected to marry the man chosen by her family and, most importantly, to bear children, particularly sons. This expectation is highlighted in the conversation of Nnu Ego's father, Agbadi, and his friend:

Your daughter's mind is not here. She dreams of her man and her own home. Don't let her dream in vain. After all, her age-mates are already having their first and second babies. Stop rejecting young men, Agbadi; let one of them marry her (p. 30).

Agbadi responds to this: "I have promised Amatokwu that I will think about his son. He is one of those out there" (p. 30). This conversation signifies the expectations placed on women, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing marriage and motherhood. Women in the Ibo community were brought up with the knowledge that only motherhood can make

them a woman and bring fulfillment and joy to their lives, and so they must carry out their duty as a wife and mother. The narrator underscores this when Nnu Ego resumes her trading activities after recovering her strength from giving birth to her first son:

Then she would come home to feed her child and lay him down to sleep while she hurried through her housework. In the afternoon her husband came in for lunch, and later she would "back" her baby again in time for the evening rush of workers (p. 54).

As mentioned above, apart from the domestic responsibilities assigned to Nnu Ego, she also did some work outside the house, such as running her trading business. Besides exposing the oppressive nature of traditional Ibo society in Nigeria, Emecheta's work also highlights how colonialism brought about many changes for Nigeria.

Race, class, gender, and sexuality are interconnected systems that perpetuate oppression (Weber, 2010). Oppression occurs when a group historically exploits the labor and lives of other groups to obtain power and control over resources,

then uses those resources to maintain that power and influence in the future. Within a society dominated by white colonizers, Nnu Ego's experience of motherhood has become a more complicated journey as she confronts these limitations imposed on marginalized individuals like her. With a lack of resources and limited economic opportunities, it places additional burdens on women as they navigate their roles as mothers. Nnu Ego found herself caught between the expectations of her indigenous culture and the pressures of the new economic system. This becomes apparent during a conversation between Nnu Ego and their friend Ubanni, who is another Ibo man. While reflecting on his situation, he says that he finds himself speaking like an old slave and that he is just grateful that he's been given a living (p. 117). In response, Nnu Ego's voice trembles as she replies:

Ubani, you are a lucky man, and I am glad for you. The money may be small, and the work slave labour, but at least your wife's mind is at rest knowing that at the end of the month she gets some money to feed her children and you. What

more does a woman want?

(p. 117).

Women are disproportionately affected by the lack of resources and opportunities. Nnu Ego's statement reveals the significant role of the intersection of gender, race, and class in shaping social life and the experiences of individuals. This underscores the concept of intersectional feminism, which recognizes the interconnected nature of these systems of oppression.

Emecheta's portrayal relates to the pervasive presence of power dynamics and hierarchical structures within Nigerian society under British colonial rule. In Lagos, bearing the brunt of systemic inequalities perpetuated by both traditional and colonial structures, Nnu Ego does her best to look after her children. Besides her domestic work, she has to do other petty work in order to supplement her husband's small earnings and meet the needs of her family. As the narrator explains,

In Lagos a wife would not have time. She had to work. She provided the food from her husband's meagre housekeeping money, but finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comforts, in some cases for

the children's school fees,

was on her shoulders (p.

53).

Once she says, "On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them; I have to give them my all" (p. 186). This monologue reflects the expectations placed upon Nnu Ego in her role as a mother that she has to make every effort for her children's needs.

Additionally, when she demands her husband more money to feed her children, Nnaife responds cruelly, "It's your responsibility to feed your children as best you can" (p. 136). Buchi Emecheta has highlighted here that it is women who are constantly burdened and constrained due to the multiple responsibilities they need to juggle and work outside the home to make ends meet as mothers in the colonial context of Nigeria.

Maternal Functions in "Efuru"

In Flora Nwapa's novel "Efuru," the author also highlights the traditional roles of mothers and wives that confine women. In the text, Efuru, the protagonist, and the experiences of other women illustrate intersecting identities such as gender, class, and ethnicity, and the associated cultural norms and expectations

shape the maternal functions expected of them.

Efuru, as an Igbo woman, is obligated to marry and bear children in order not to be called incomplete and a man, implying that a barren woman is not less different from a man. In her role as a wife, Efuru is expected to manage the house and take care of her husband, whom she has to welcome with food upon arrival. Efuru, as an Igbo woman, is expected to marry and bear children in order not to be called incomplete and a man, implying that a barren woman is not less different from a man. In her role as a wife, Efuru is expected to manage the house and take care of her husband, whom she has to welcome with food upon arrival. More than that, her ultimate duty is to bear him children, especially sons. That is why, after a year without signs of pregnancy, her husband's family was worried and even began planning to look for another wife for him. Efuru's neighbors even began to call her a man, saying, "Efuru is a man since she could not reproduce" (p. 24). It made her weep, and she questioned herself:

Am I going to be like my mother? But if I am going to like her, then I too will have a daughter like her. But what if that is denied

me? What if that also is denied me? What will I do? Oh, what will I do? (p. 24).

This reveals how women are pressured to bear children, and apart from all the taunting and worries, Efuru continues to serve her husband: "In the morning, she was very weak, but she got up early all the same, did her housework, and went to market to buy and to sell" (p. 50). In the Oguta community, where Efuru lives, women were also brought up with the knowledge that only motherhood is the primary thing that can bring fulfillment and joy to their lives, and so women must achieve this. The narrator underscores this when Efuru was very happy when she was finally pregnant:

but our ancestors were kind enough to bless me with a daughter and the joy of having a baby, the realization that I was not barren filled me with happiness that I did not think of getting a wife for him any more (p. 63)

She even follows instructions religiously just to keep her pregnancy successful. It is clear that her ethnicity also plays a significant role in shaping her maternal functions. These motherhood

expectations were deeply embedded in her community's cultures and traditions, which have a great impact on societal perceptions of her success and value as a woman.

As Efuru takes on the role of motherhood, she is committed to fulfilling all responsibilities toward her children. Within Igbo culture, women are expected to be hardworking and effective in their roles, dutiful wives, and fruitful mothers. Aside from feeding and nursing her baby, Efuru also supports her family by selling various goods at the local market. The novel was also set during a time of transition, when British colonial administration had taken root in the region. With the external pressures of colonialism, women in the novel, like Efuru, face an additional burden in their roles as mothers. Government regulations limited the types of goods that could be traded and controlled their distribution, disrupting commerce among the Igbo in specific regions. Due to this, women had to double their efforts in working hard to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers and to supplement their husbands' small income from farming. Women from lower economic backgrounds, such as Nwabata, the mother of Efuru's maid Ogea, are an example of how one's economic background can affect the experience of

motherhood. As a woman from a lower class, she grapples with the expectations towards her and her duty as a mother. When her husband got sick, it was her: "Nwabata who was heavy with child, nursed him" (p. 95). In this passage, Nwapa emphasizes how women are often faced with a great burden in their roles as mothers in a traditional patriarchal society and the ongoing effects of colonialism. Women have to work hard at many things while grappling with the societal and cultural expectations placed on them.

Emecheta's and Nwapa's depiction of the Ibo women living under oppressive conditions imposed by traditional gender roles and existing social inequalities underscores Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectional Feminism, which argues that women's overlapping identities can impact the way they experience discrimination. Buchanan and Zuffrey (2020), in their study, challenge normative societal assumptions about motherhood and emphasize it not as a monolithic concept but rather as a complex and multifaceted experience. Moreover, they note that the experience of motherhood can be shaped by various factors, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and cultural norms. The roles and responsibilities of mothers, as

well as their experiences and outcomes in motherhood, are shaped by these different social categories. The two novels highlight how the protagonists' intersecting identities within the rapidly changing environment of Nigeria add layers of challenges and expectations to the maternal functions they are expected to fulfill, ultimately shaping the complexities of motherhood. Emecheta and Nwapa call attention to the importance of recognizing the influence of these social categories in understanding the complexities of motherhood and the diverse ways in which mothers navigate their roles and responsibilities.

Negotiating Maternal Functions and Shaping of Identity

Motherhood is often regarded as a central aspect of a woman's identity in many African societies. The concept of motherhood entails embracing the societal expectations of an idealized version of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2010). These expectations often include nurturing, selflessness, and prioritizing the well-being of children. This societal norm obligates women to fulfil these roles, often at the expense of their individuality, as they are primarily defined by their roles as wives and mothers. Chukwuma (1990)

argued that the institution of marriage poses a challenge by restricting women's individuality. Individuality, in this context, means having the freedom to express one's true self and maintain personal control over one's choices. Chukwuma further maintains that marriage proposes that women's identities are closely connected to the social environment in which they exist. Additionally, Swann and Bosson's (2008) Identity Negotiation Theory posits that individuals undergo an identity negotiation process- a process that seeks to establish, maintain, and change their identities based on their interactions and relationships with others, as well as social norms and cultural expectations.

The novels of Emecheta and Nwapa explore women's identity within the institution of motherhood. Using Swann and Bosson's theory, each protagonist's identity is examined as they navigate societal expectations tied to women and motherhood.

Nnu Ego

Nnu Ego is introduced as a woman shaped by a community that immensely values motherhood and fertility. With these expectations in mind, she learns that arranged marriages prioritize family outweighs personal choice and that her

worth depends on her ability to marry and bear children. With this framework, any woman who fails to procreate is, therefore, is deemed incomplete and taught that it is only through motherhood that one can experience true joy and fulfilment. As Jiao (2019) proffers that motherhood as subjectivity or identity reflects how women perceive themselves through both the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood. For Nnu Ego, the failure of her first marriage compels her into another marriage to prove her fertility and fulfil expectations. In text context, Nnu Ego's decisions and sought validation exemplify what Swann and Bosson (2008) contend that identity negotiation occurs through social interactions. Nnu Ego thought:

Additionally, when she met Nnaife, her second husband, she accepted him as her husband and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance (p. 45) because she believed he could fulfill her desire to become a "real" woman by giving her children.

Nnu Ego manifested this when she said, "But, you see, only now with this son

am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman—all I want to be, a woman and a mother" (p. 53).

Nnu Ego strives to shape her identity in a way that aligns with her existing self-perceptions and the societal norms associated with her roles as a wife, daughter, and mother. Swann and Bosson (2008) posit that under certain circumstances, individuals may adjust or transform their identities to adapt to new social contexts. Amidst the cultural and societal expectations, Nnu Ego came to realize that her perspective on motherhood had radically modified from what she previously cherished. Furthermore, as she grows older and becomes more immersed in motherhood, she begins to recognize the constraints and limitations placed upon her. These realizations surfaced as revealed in this passage:

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 in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children (p. 137).

The experience of motherhood, with its physical and emotional demands, reinforces their embodiment and ties them to the biological processes of reproduction (De Beauvoir, 1949). In the narrative, Nnu Ego is tied to her responsibility as a mother, and she has no way out from the start. She also imagined how her father, Agbadi, would react if ever she returned home claiming ill treatment experienced from her husband, contemplating: “she would be chased in disgrace back to her responsibility” (p. 137). This notion reinforces the sense of entrapment, where voicing is not an option, as these roles are obligatory for being a wife and a mother. Considering this, it presents the unfair position of Nigerian women in marriage. The narrator solidifies this concept by asserting “her love and duty for her

children were like her chain of slavery” (p. 186). This succeeding passage showcases Nnu Ego's growing awareness, in her retrospect:

Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? 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 (p. 188).

While Nnu Ego portrays the ever-obedient wife and mother, she also longs for a journey for personal fulfilment and a sense of self-worth beyond her maternal role. Emecheta's work marks that confinement to traditional roles erodes

women's true identity. This idea coincides with what De Beauvoir (1949) argues that motherhood is an incarnation, for this kind of embodiment binds women's freedom and agency by binding them to the needs of their bodies and the care of their children. As such, only by challenging the concept that motherhood is women's ultimate fulfilment. Nnu Ego's sense of self-worth thus becomes inseparable from societal expectations. This is evident when she hesitates to leave her daughters with their husbands in Lagos, until her eldest son, Adim, intervenes:

Look, Mother, Magnus is an enlightened man. He will see to it that Obiageli is well brought up. She'll be better off in Lagos. What's more, you need a little rest, Mother. You have worked too hard all your life. You have to join your age-group at home, dress up on Eke days and go and dance in the markets. It's going to be a good life for you. Don't saddle yourself with so many children (p. 22).

Nnu Ego responded in tears:

But that's it. I don't know how to be anything else but

a mother. How will I talk to a woman with no children? Taking the children from me is like taking away the life I have always known, the life I am used to (p. 222).

This reveals the extent to which she has identified herself solely as a mother and the worries she experiences when faced with the possibility of a different life.

Efuru

Within the Igbo, Efuru confronts societal norms concerning motherhood and family, a journey where she balances tradition with her aspirations. Her interactions with her children, notably her daughter Ogonim, delve into the intricate nature of motherhood, blending traditional values with individual fulfilment. In the text, Efuru's quest is to redefine motherhood accord for herself; she challenged customs and expectations along the way.

From the very start, Efuru already challenged the norm by choosing whom to marry. Coming from a reputable family, she did not hesitate to marry someone of a different status. "Her husband was not known and people wondered why she

married him” (p. 7). From this line, Efuru breaks conventions by marrying a poor farmer named Adizua without her father's consent, demonstrating her independence and determination. Life after marriage was quite peaceful until Efuru was unable to conceive in her first year, making her the subject of neighbor's gossip:

according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce (24).

Nwapa's narrative reinforces the notion that a woman's identity remains closely linked to marriage and motherhood, reflecting an alternative depiction of Igbo cultural norms. The idea that Efuru is "a man" due to her incapacity to procreate highlights the significance society places on women's duties as primary child bearers. On this idea, Rich (1976) notes that “men have convinced women that unless a woman is a mother, she is not really a woman” (p.13). However, these stereotypes surrounding women and their ability to procreate are unfounded. Thus, from this point forward, Efuru's happiness relies on her fulfillment of these roles and expectations. The writer also illustrates that Efuru lacks self-awareness during birthing, as seen in her

words: “Tell me how it happened. I was fast asleep” (p. 32). This significant line shows that Efuru has progressed as a female member, unconscious of the role she has taken. She questions:

Is this happening to me or someone I know. Is that baby mine or somebody else's? Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I am a woman after all (p. 31)

The preceding lines reveal conflict, as shown by how Efuru questions her reality and identity in the face of societal expectations and norms. It reflects her struggle to reconcile her personal experiences with the societal constructs of womanhood and motherhood. Additionally, the discourse also foreshadows the death of Efuru's daughter. Similar to Nnu Ego, Efuru becomes deeply emotionally invested in her child and is confronted with the unsettling awareness of the possibility of her death: “What will I do if I lose her?” she thought. “If she dies, that will mean the end of me” (p. 66). Efuru's child is an essential part of her existence, and losing her would have a profound impact on her being. Her determination to remain optimistic about motherhood reflects a defiance against

societal pressure and gives off a positive outlook despite having no children:

A year passed, and no child came. Efurú did not despair. 'I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood,' she often said to herself (p. 24).

Efurú's faith demonstrates her agency in defining her maternal identity. Maintaining hope and trust in her ability to experience motherhood involves a blend of personal resilience, cultural beliefs, and a sense of agency in shaping her identity as a potential mother. When Efurú learns that her husband has taken a second wife, she firmly asserts her objection, declaring, "I do object to being relegated to the background. I want to keep my position as the first wife, for it is my right" (p. 53). It is in this statement that Efurú expresses her desire to retain her position as the first wife, which is crucial for her role as a mother. By emphasizing her status as the first wife, she is asserting her significance and asserting her entitlement to fulfill her maternal responsibilities within the family structure. This demonstrates her advocacy for herself as a mother and her assertion of her worth in the family dynamics. Consequently, Efurú also contemplates her desire to have another child. She expresses

her concern about her husband's lack of intimacy and contemplates having another child:

And my daughter is nearly two years old now,' Efurú continued in her thought. 'And there is no sign that I am going to have another baby. But how can I have another baby when for nearly six months my husband has not slept with me. How then can I be pregnant when I am and always will be a faithful wife (p. 53)

This passage highlights the conflict Efurú faces as she navigates her role as a wife and her longing for motherhood.

I know I am capable of suffering for greater things. But to suffer for a truant husband, an irresponsible husband like Adizua is to debase suffering. My own suffering will be noble. When Adizua comes back, I shall leave him. And what about my daughter? (p. 61-62)

Efurú reflects her determination to prioritize her well-being and that of her

daughter over her relationship with her irresponsible husband, Adizua. Despite her willingness to endure hardships for noble causes, she refuses to suffer for a husband who neglects his responsibilities, considering it a degradation of the concept of suffering itself. Her decision to leave Adizua upon his return demonstrates her independence and ability to assert her own needs and her daughter's welfare. Despite the difficulty of the choice, she is willing to make it to shield herself and her child from the negative consequences of an unhealthy relationship. This showcases her dedication to being a responsible and nurturing mother, placing her daughter's well-being as her top priority. Efuru deeply understands the significance of motherhood, and she feels that without it, life itself can lose its meaning. That's what she felt when her child Ogonim died, which is reflected in this line:

Ogonim has killed me. My
only child has killed me.
Why should I live? . . . Oh,
my chi, why have you dealt
with me in this way?"(p.
73).

After that incident, Efuru's husband, Adizua, began to treat her badly, but she handled it well. She wanted to leave him, and despite his mother's

attempts to convince her to stay, she refused and replied:

'No, I will not stay,' Efuru said. 'I am sorry but I have to disappoint you. Adizua does not want me any more. It is so obvious. Do you want me to stay until he comes home and tells me to pack. That will be very shameful. You don't want this to happen to your daughter (p. 88).

The statement "You don't want this to happen to your daughter" implies that if Ajanupu's daughter were in Efuru's shoes, she would likely advise her daughter to leave that man, just like what Efuru decided. Subsequently, Efuru married for the second time to a man named Gilbert. He treated her with love and respect, while she made sure to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife. Unfortunately, two years into her second marriage, Efuru remained childless, again making her the target of social judgment. According to their community,

It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of

nature. It was regarded as a failure (p. 165)

The failure to conceive led to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and social stigma, affecting a woman's self-esteem and identity. The emphasis on maternity as a distinguishing feature of womanhood perpetuates traditional gender roles and societal standards. Nnu Ego's journey sheds light on the discursive configurations of motherhood and the costs of sacrifices that accompany her experience as a mother and wife. It offers a compelling exploration of how cultural and societal norms often restrict women's opportunities for finding their purpose and fulfillment, as they are chained to the responsibilities assigned to them, limiting their ability to fully engage in other aspects of life beyond motherhood. Efuru's journey into motherhood, on the other hand, is marked by the struggle of infertility, societal expectations, and personal growth. Efuru resisted the stigma of infertility, a prevalent issue in her community, and refused to conform to the conventional role of women solely as mothers. Despite the sorrow of losing her daughter and her inability to have more children, she demonstrated her independence by managing multiple

marriages according to her own choices, deciding whom to marry and when to end a marriage that no longer suited her. Through these actions, she challenged male dominance, redefined womanhood beyond traditional expectations, and displayed her strength, resilience, and autonomy in a society that often restricted women's empowerment and freedom.

Both novels serve as examples that prove the theory of identity negotiation put forth by Swann and Bosson (2008), which suggests that individuals engage in the process of navigating and negotiating their identities in response to social and cultural expectations. They underscore how a character's identity in a narrative is shaped, maintained, or transformed through their interactions and relationships with others, as well as the influence of social norms and cultural expectations. Through Nnu Ego and Efuru's characters, the texts show the portrayal of the enslavement of women in traditional patriarchal roles and how it hampers or facilitates every attempt at individuality. The author challenges traditional notions of motherhood and recognizes the importance of individual agency and self-fulfillment for women. Furthermore, the writers of these texts present the need to move away from the

oppressive and stereotypical assumptions that mothering by bearing children is the ultimate way to happiness, fulfillment, and a sense of identity. Instead, it is important to emphasize that women are capable of finding joy and fulfillment beyond

CONCLUSIONS

As illustrated in the selected texts, the study concludes that motherhood in Nigerian society is a complex and culture-defined identity that tends to restrict women's freedom. While motherhood is traditionally revered, it is also wielded as a tool of societal control that confines women to narrowly defined roles. Efurū and Nnu Ego's portrayals illustrate how gender, class, custom, and colonial authorities converge to shape women's lives and eventually restrict their freedom. Efurū

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traditional roles and recognition and value outside motherhood.

challenges traditional norms to assert her independence and finally redefine her identity beyond her reproductive capacity. In contrast, Nnu Ego initially conforms to expectations but later questions the worth of her sacrifices. These experiences accentuate the constant negotiation that African women must engage in to resist the stringent conventions and reclaim their identity.

dedicated to Nigerian women, whose strength, resilience, and wisdom inspire and serve as a beacon of courage and determination.

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