

*Expectation Versus Reality in  
The Joy of Motherhood*

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## Chapter IV

### **Expectation Versus Reality in *The Joy of Motherhood***

In the novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist Nnu Ego is a traditional African woman caught between the traditional Igbo society and the modern colonised Nigeria. Eustace Palmer describes *The Joys of Motherhood* as the first work in African literature, “to present the female point of view in registering its disgust at male chauvinism and patriarchy's satisfaction with an unfair or oppressive system towards women” (Palmer 157).

Nnu Ego is represented as a conservative, subservient woman submissively accepting and adapting to the norms of the society. She was born to Agbadi, the chief of Ibuza and Ona, his mistress. Agbadi was a renowned hunter and authoritative leader of his commune. His mistress, Ona is equally proud and lives in the same traditional village Ibuza. It was a polygamous society and Agbadi had many wives. He is ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of acquiring Ona. “Nwokocha Agbadi would not have minded sending all his wives away just to live with this one woman” (JM 12).

Most of the women of his village and the neighbouring village craved to get the attention of Agbadi, but Ona is the only woman who wounded his pride. Ona is equally proud and she is also determined and arrogant. She is the only lady who declines to marry Agbadi. Agbadi loves to have a lady who is egotistical rather than submissive in nature. “Most of the women he chose as his wives and even slaves were those who could match his arrogance, his biting sarcasm, his painful jokes, and also when the mood called, his human tenderness” (JM 10). He believes, “A woman who gave in to a man without first fighting for her honour was never respected” (JM 10).

Ona asserts her independence by trying to gain a position for her own in the patriarchal world. Her father, Obi Umunna, a great chief like Agbadi, has no sons; so, his only daughter, Ona is considered as equal to a first son. Though this is one of the reasons for Ona's refusal to marry Agbadi, she also wants to preserve her sexual and economic independence. Ona has her own passion for Agbadi, and loves teasing Agbadi whenever she gets an opportunity. She struggles between her duty towards her father and her love for Agbadi. Laura Dubek opines thus; "In *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta's portrait of Ona highlights the negative aspects of traditional Igbo culture for women, suggesting that the principle of 'male daughter' denies women independence and personal happiness by alienating them from other women" (JM 207).

The courageous and egotistical lovers unite through an accident. Once Agbadi was wounded and was near to death. When Ona was informed about his illness, she could not continue the disguise longer. She runs to his household and starts to take care of him to the astonishment of his wives and villagers. The affection and care provided by Ona steadily improves the health of Agbadi. When he is halfway towards his recovery he manages to attract her and she surrenders. Since she is not permitted to marry she remained as a mistress without the title of a wife till her end. She also makes an agreement with Agbadi that if she gives birth to a son, he will belong to her father and if a daughter is born then she would be Agbadi's. She is not in position to live with Agbadi as her father has not taken a bride price from him. Nnu Ego is the child born as a representation of the love between Agbadi and Ona. When Agbadi sees his child, Nnu Ego, he says, "This child is priceless more than twenty bags of cowries. I think that should really be her name; because she is mine, yes 'Nnu Ego' twenty bags of cowries" (JM 26).

Ona leads a laissez-faire life, but she is surrounded by patriarchal forces such that her freedom and life were controlled and subjugated by her father. She is loyal to her father and was ready to sacrifice her desires. Being a wife was a respectable position but Ona exhibited individuality by remaining as a mistress to Agbadi. Ona had an authority over Agbadi, which Agunwa, Agbadi's senior wife regarded it as an unforgivable sin. According to Agunwa women should be subservient and should be at men's service.

According to their Ibo custom, if a chief's wife dies, her slave would be buried along with her to accompany her in the next world. During the burial of Agbadi's senior wife, her young slave girl opposed the custom and refused to be murdered. When the crowd stood stunned to the reaction of the slave girl, Agbadi pities her and tried to show sympathy. Annoyed by the empathy of his father towards the slave girl, Agbadi's eldest son gives her a strong blow. She was pushed into the grave. The slave girl as a mark of her gratitude thanked Agbadi for his sympathy, before she is thrown into the grave. She remarks, "I shall come back to your household, but as a legitimate daughter, I shall come back ..." (JM 23). She comes to the household of Agbadi as she has promised with great supremacy as Nnu Ego's Chi.

Ona, as per her agreement with Agbadi, only after her father's death, she comes to Agbadi's house to live with him and her daughter. Soon after, Ona dies during the next child birth. On her death bed, Ona tells Agbadi, "You see that I was not destined to live with you. But you are stubborn, my father was stubborn and I am stubborn too. Please don't mourn me for long; and see however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego you allow her to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman" (JM 28). Agbadi carried out the request of his beloved mistress. Ona expects her daughter

to lead her life as an independent individual. Agbadi decides that after his daughter achieve's womanhood, she must be married and she should become a mother of sons and she must admit herself to the authority of her father and her future husband.

Nnu Ego was cherished by her father and he brought her up like a princess in his house. Being the most beloved daughter and the precious treasure to Agbadi, she was always enquired about her preference. Nnu Ego is well-known for her beauty. She has a slim physique and long neck like her vivacious mother Ona. Her life in her father's house seems to be a golden period for her. When she attained her age of marriage, with due consent of Nnu Ego she was married to a farmer Amatokwu. Agbadi chose a good husband for his daughter and was ready to spend anything for her. No father in Ibuza would provide such support to their daughters. Agbadi informs his loving daughter during her marriage, "Don't worry, daughter. If you find life unbearable, you can always come here to live" (JM 33). His happiness knew no bounds when the in-laws' family reciprocated him with kegs of palm wine to inform about his daughter's virginity. They had a grand merriment in her father's compound. Agbadi and his friend Idayi drank to their fullest. Idayi declares, "There is nothing that makes a man prouder than to hear that his daughter is virtuous. I don't like visiting families where the wedding kegs of palm wine are half filled, telling everybody that the bride has allowed herself to be tampered with." (JM 31)

Nnu Ego, who was pampered and lived a life that no girl in Ibuza has dreamt of undergoes infinite distress after her marriage. Once she steps into matrimonial association, there begins her bad time. She underwent a lot of miseries in her marital life; the prime reason is her infertility. In Igbo society, a woman would be respected only if she gives birth to a child, so she craves to become a mother.

The craving to have a child, which has been considered mistakenly to originate from an innate “maternal instinct”, actually stems from an unconscious response to pressures that still predominantly define a woman’s role and being in terms of motherhood. These pressures are both open and disguised; they are of religious, societal, and family origin. (Alizade 18)

When she was married to Amatokwu, Nnu Ego was expected to conceive but unfortunately that did not happen. In the beginning, she discusses with her husband and informs her father to perform some sacrifice to her Chi in order to beget children. Nnu Ego fails to conceive for a couple of years. She pleads to her Chi in anguish, “Please pity me. I feel that my husband’s people are already looking for a new wife for him, they cannot wait for me forever, he is the first of the family and his people want an heir from him as soon as possible please help me (JM 32).” But all her prayers go in vain; Amatokwu becomes irritated with her inability to conceive. He is a product of his conventional society and starts to trust that “When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive” (JM 31). Slowly the entire society starts to charge her as a failed woman. The society blames her for being barren. Katherine Frank says, “The only power a woman possesses is her procreative power, and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable both in her own eyes and those of her culture” (7). Amatokwu consents to the compulsion of his parents and relations and marries another woman disregarding Nnu Ego’s feelings. Nnu Ego is totally broken by the rejection of her husband and becomes psychologically upset.

Nnu Ego’s condition becomes worse as the new bride becomes pregnant. The pregnancy of the new bride shackles the position of Nnu Ego. The entire household

of Amatokwu starts to treat her like a drudge. Her husband informs her to take care of their crops, "... if you can't produce sons, at least you can harvest yams" (JM 33). Nnu Ego accepts all the torments and remains in the house of her husband. The second wife gives birth to a child. When the second wife of Amatokwu spends time with him, it's Nnu Ego's duty to take care of the baby.

One day, unable to bear the cry of the hungry child, Nnu Ego nurses the child and it becomes a routine. She was once found by Amatokwu while nursing the baby. The brutal and savage husband could not understand the motherly affection behind her action. He beats her and drives her to her father's house. Being degraded, she returns to her father in shame. In Igbo society motherhood is given prime importance, "First it is means of propagating the clan, next it consolidates the position in her matrimonial family, and finally, it serves as a sure gift that her old age will be blissful." (Ugwueze 72). Ngcobo further states:

This all important need for children has led to the institutionalizing of motherhood through fertility rites, taboos and beliefs and has acquired some religious significance. For a man it has become a sacred duty towards his whole lineage. Failure to immortalize the ancestors is taboo and a shame that a man cannot bear. As a result, childlessness is associated with women, for the alternative is unthinkable. (Olaniyan and Quayson 534)

The chief Agbadi understands the position of his beloved daughter and he decides to find her another husband. The painful experiences she had undergone in her first husband's household provokes Nnu Ego to long for a child more. The thought that she is rejected by her first husband Amatokwu because she is barren makes her dejected. "Ona's idea of

womanhood ran counter to the general notion that African women equate womanhood or selfhood with motherhood ... Ona wants Nnu Ego to be the master of her own fate, the subject of her actions rather than the object of other people's actions and decisions" (Nnoromele 182).

Nnaife Owulum was chosen as her second husband by Agbadi. When her consent of marrying Nnaife was asked, she willingly consented to marry because, "When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children and your parents have gone, who can you call your own?" (JM 38). Nnaife was living in Lagos and her brother-in-law senior Owulum accompanied her to Lagos. She bid farewell to her beloved father and she guarantees her father that "... shall come with a string of children" (JM 39). Nnu Ego travels to Lagos psychologically wrecked and with low self-confidence to live in a diverse society which is completely new to her. When she arrived at Lagos, Nnu Ego was disappointed to see her husband Nnaife.

Nnaife was short and fleshy, resembled a tub. More than his sickening appearance, she disliked him for the menial work that he did in the White master's house. She is disgusted by his job and feels it as highly humiliating to be a washer man washing the clothes of a white family. In Lagos, jobs like this are popular and also Nnaife has no other alternative to support his new bride. Being brought up and accustomed to the traditional setting, Nnu Ego felt it difficult to accept Nnaife's profession. Nnaife came to Lagos in search of a job, being illiterate, he got a job as a washerman. He and his wife convert to Christianity in order to please his white master, Dr. Meers. He convinces Nnu, "If I do not marry you in a church they will remove our names from the church



register and Madam here will not like it. I may even lose my job” (JM 50). They had to forget their customs and accept the new religion that was thrust upon them.

Shifting from the traditional background to the new colonial lifestyle itself is a major anguish for women in Africa. Nnu Ego is one such victim; she is not able to enjoy any traditional privileges as she is culturally displaced. Igbo women are accustomed to earn money through farming and selling farm products in the market. The new environment in Lagos is confusing and she is not in position to take decisions boldly.

When Nnu Ego thinks about motherhood, she automatically feels happy and prays that her dream should come true. Her prayers and expectations were answered soon, and she became pregnant. Her dream comes true and she begins to adjust with Nnaife and his unsophisticated way of living. The thought and proof that she is not infertile provided her great joy. It is for the first time in her life Nnu Ego feels elated as she gives birth to a baby boy. She celebrated his birth and christened him as Ngozi. Nnu Ego starts caring for Nnaife because he’s the one who has recognized her womanhood and has confirmed her capacity to reproduce. She feels indebted to her husband, “He has made me into a real woman all I want to be, a woman and a mother, so why should I hate him now?” (JM 53)

After the birth of her son, Nnu Ego considers herself a “real woman” and is pleased with the thought that she has a baby to call her “mother” (JM 54). But her joy is short-lived as her baby dies within a few months. She is too depressed and tries to commit suicide by trying to fall from a busy bridge, but luckily she is saved by the passer-by. Those who saved her reprimanded her thus, “you mean you have a baby at home yet you come here disgracing the man who paid for you to be brought into this town’! I don't know what our

people are becoming; as soon as they step near the coast, they think they own themselves and forget the tradition of our fathers”(JM 61-62). A spectator comments, “She has only just lost the baby that told the world that she was not barren” (JM 62).

Nnu Ego slowly recovers from her sorrow, in order to divert her thoughts, she starts trading. It provides a change of mind; this trading is also necessary for women in Lagos to support their family expenses. Nnaife does not have any insight regarding his future and his income is not sufficient enough, so Nnu has to deal with their financial problems. “She had to work. She provided the food from her husband’s meagre housekeeping money, but finding money for clothes, for any kind of comforts, in some cases the children’s school fees, was on her shoulders” (JM 52- 53). Nnu Ego is delighted when she realized that she is pregnant for the second time, and now she is sure that she is capable of having children. She is conscious of her pregnancy this time and considers motherhood as a sacred duty. She is ready to stop her trading and prays to God, “Please God, let this child stay with me and fulfill all these future hopes and joys” (JM 79), the baby is named Oshia. Her neighbors console her thus, “He will grow soon and clothe you and farm for you, so that your old age will be sweet” (JM 80).

Nnu Ego’s ability to bear children not only satisfies her maternal longings but also fulfils social expectations by providing her the identity of motherhood. When the second child was born the family received shocking news that the employer of Nnaife, Dr.Meers, had to go back to their country and consequently Nnaife lost his job. When the meagre salary which Nnaife gets has been stopped, it becomes extremely difficult for them to cope with the situation. The money that was offered for a period of time did not serve their needs. So, Nnaife goes to Fernandopo to join as a domestic servant in a European family.

In the absence of Nnaife, due to meagre income, Oshia becomes undernourished and is reduced to a skeleton. Nnu Ego is unable to see her beloved son starve, she decides to sell her clothes “ She sold all her clothes at a fraction of their costs to Fulani street-walkers, telling herself that if her sons should live and grow, they would buy all the clothes she would ever need” (JM 104). Nnu Ego is so worried and cries to Oshia: “Please stay and be my joy, be my father and my brother and my husband... please don’t die and go away too” (JM 104). The timely help of her generous neighbours help her and Oshia to recover. One day suddenly Nnaife returns with money and his return is celebrated. After his arrival Nnu Ego gives birth to another boy baby and named him as Adim.

Nnaife takes the job of workman in railroad, though the job is hard for him, he manages to do so that he would get more monetary benefits. Soon Nnaife is kidnapped by the authorities and is forced to join as a soldier in army to serve during the Second World War. Nnaife believes that he will benefit as a soldier and would be paid more. He was told that twenty pounds would be paid to his family to meet their expenses, and that his wife would be receiving money from time to time. He is unaware that he is a victim of capitalism and the colonial powers. The expectations of the family were not fulfilled, the money did not arrive at regular intervals as they expected.

In his absence, Nnu Ego had to take care of their children. She gets a loan of five shillings from the Ibuza women’s society and begins a trade to support her and the boys, adding to her misery, she and her children are suddenly asked to vacate the house, Nnu Ego after much difficulty arranges a single bedroom for her and her children. She fails to make both ends meet and is unable to provide for the children.

Nnu Ego and her children almost die of malnutrition. “More importantly, they were told, when they returned they would all be promoted in their places of work. Nnaife, for example, would move into the workshop and be apprenticed to a trade; on a higher income ... This was a chance to pull their families out of the kind of life they had been living” (JM 146). He was a soldier and was provided well but the money he sent does not fulfill the needs of his family, as the family expenditure was more. When he returns with money, he spends lavishly on palm wine by giving a party to his acquaintances.

The sudden death of Nnaife’s elder brother brings another severe blow to Nnu Ego. In Igbo custom when the senior brother dies his wife has to be marry his brother as per their tradition. Nnaife’s elder brother’s wife Adaku comes to Lagos and Nnaife has to accept her as it is their norm. Adaku along with her four-year-old girl child comes as Nnaife’s second wife; this addition brings monetary constraints. Adaku addresses Nnu Ego as ‘Senior Wife’.

Nnu Ego stared at her. She had so lost contact with her people that the voice of this person addressing her as ‘senior wife’ made her feel not only old but completely out of, as if she was an outcast. She resented it. It was one thing to be thus addressed in Ibuza, where people gained a great deal by seniority; here in Lagos, though the same belief still held, it was to a different degree. (JM 118)

Adaku’s is ambitious and starts a profitable business in the market. Adaku never cares about the worries and sorrows of Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego hates her for her attractive appearance as she fears that her beauty might definitely attract Nnaife. Adaku protests for her rights and does not remain passive as Nnu Ego. The income of Nnaife is not sufficient right from the time Nnu Ego is married to him. When Adaku joins them, the amount he provides is not adequate to feed the children and to take care of the family.

Both Adaku and Nnu suffer a lot to manage the household expenses, at one point of time they do not have anything to provide for their children, which makes both the mothers broken and Adaku started to cry due to their pathetic situation, Nnu Ego has no rights to even complain, though she is also in the same state of mind as Adaku: “She too was close to tears. She was frightened as well but her culture did not permit her to give in to her fears. She was supposed to be strong, being senior wife, to behave more like a man than a woman. As men were not permitted open grief, she had to learn to hide hers as well. She heard Adaku crying, and she envied her freedom” (JM 140).

Adaku and Nnu Ego refuse to cook for Nnaife, so that he would provide more money for their household expenses. “She [Nnu Ego] had undertaken to talk to Nnaife about all of Adaku’s grievances, the guilt apart, but Adaku insisted that the only way to bring home to him the fact that they needed more housekeeping money was to stop cooking for their husband” (JM 133). When Nnu Ego hears of the plan she is afraid that Nnaife would get angry but finally accepts Adaku’s plan. Though Nnu Ego initially refused to cook, soon she surrendered to Nnaife without informing her intention to Adaku. Thus, Nnu Ego puts an end to the protest, which has been initiated by Adaku. When Adaku becomes aware of it she replies, “He wouldn’t let us starve. He would have given in the end ... Anyway, it’s not your right for you two to make up somewhere in secret and leave me in the dark. When a man starts showing preference to one wife then he’s asking for trouble. I’m going to wait for him here and have it out with him this evening” (JM 138).

Teresa Derrickson comments, “The resounding failure of the novel’s cooking strike demonstrates that her new role as trapped housewife divests her of virtually all political power within the home neither she nor Adaku are in any position to make

demands as to how their home will be run” (48). Their strike does not affect the routine life of Nnaife much, as he is not residing in his traditional village, he is in Lagos, so he did not depend entirely on his wives cooking alone, and he is able to fulfil his hunger by sharing food from his co-workers or by buying his food. Adaku did not feel defeated; she has faith in her resolution and is not afraid to voice her rights.

Adaku’s ability to combine traditional and urban values is no match for Nnu Ego. For example, when Adaku astutely convinces Nnu Ego, the senior wife that they boycott serving their husband food as a measure to force him to increase their food allowance, Nnu Ego agrees, but defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory when Nnu Ego gives in at the last minute, under the pretext that unlike her co-wife, she has children to feed. This battle for more rights for themselves as women, wives, and mothers is used by Nnu Ego as a weapon against Adaku. Her ‘crime,’ in Nnu Ego’s eyes is her personal ambition and her independence, a free spirit that Nnu Ego both dreads and secretly covets. (Nfah-Abbenyi 44)

When Nnaife joined the army, the sole responsibility of taking care of the family fell on the ladies. In his absence Nnu Ego continues to invest the little money left by him in trivial trade, while Adaku cleverly uses the money to start a stall at the market. She plans to earn more profit thereby to gain economic independence. Nnu Ego is afraid that if she starts a stall then she would not be able to take care of her children. During Nnaife’s absence, it was intimated to Nnu Ego that her father Agbadi was sick. She goes to her native place to see her dying father. She is so happy that she has succeeded in her promise, as she has indeed come “with a string of children” (JM 39). Nnu Ego was welcomed by her family members, and much attention was given to her as now she was a mother of several sons.

Agbadi dies soon after seeing Nnu Ego, implying as if he has waited for her arrival.

After the mourning, she extends her stay in her native Ibuza, forgetting her life at Lagos.

Adankwo, the senior wife of Nnaife's brother Owulum, reminds Nnu Ego of her responsibility as senior wife and advises her to control the younger wife. Nnu Ego realises her mistake and returns with her sons to Lagos. Nnu Ego learns that in the meanwhile, Nnaife had paid a short visit and left money with Adaku for Nnu Ego and accuses Adaku of using the money that was due to her,

'Yes, I can see you have been busy making money. Look at all your wares, look at your stalls. I'm sure Nnaife's money went into building your trade.' Adaku gives a sharp reply to her and defends herself as 'That is not true, senior wife. I didn't ask you to go home in the first place. You insisted on it, so don't blame me if you've lost your foothold in Lagos. Here are your five pounds. I didn't use it for my business, as you seem to think.' (JM 160)

Adaku becomes a successful entrepreneur and an independent woman while Nnu Ego remains a dutiful mother. Adaku starts to send her daughters to school. She firmly believed that an educated woman will be able to earn money equal to man so her daughters can lead a prosperous life in future. "Adaku thinks in revolutionary and positive terms about herself as a woman; about herself as a wife; and about herself as a mother of daughters whose future she is determined to change, instead of letting that future be mapped out by a blatantly discriminating cultural script" (Nfah-Abbenyi 45). Nnu Ego decides that her girl children do not need education; they are worth only for their bride price.

As Nnu Ego failed to invest enough money in trade she faced a great financial crisis. Her slim budget does not afford enough to the educational requirements of her sons and daughters. Nnu Ego understood the importance of education, “She and her husband were ill-prepared for a life like this, when only pen and not mouth could really talk. Her children must learn” (JM 179). She decides to educate her sons and practises her daughter’s to take care of her petty trade. When her daughters pleaded Nnu to send them to school, she said, “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” (JM 176).

Adaku’s success in trade made Nnu Ego dejected and she forgets her position as senior wife. One day when the well-dressed guest of Adaku came to meet her, Nnu Ego and her children were in tattered dresses and this heightens her resentfulness, “Look at her, look at the expensive shoes she is wearing, look at the head tie, and even a gold chain. All this just to come and see her relative Adaku, and in this rain! God, the cost of that headtie! Whatever she paid for it would feed me and the children for a whole month, and she is the daughter of nobody! Yet look at me, the daughter of a well-known chief, reduced to this ...” (JM 163).

Nnu Ego could not bear her poverty while Adaku is becoming prosperous. Adaku’s guests mockingly question Nnu and provoke her feelings, “Are you all right, Nnaife’s wife? Why do you look at me like that? I am not your enemy, eh?” (JM 164). Nnu Ego becomes wild at her sarcastic words and she replies ruthlessly, “Shut up! Shut up and go away! You can’t stand here, my baby is crying go away” (JM 164) and she immediately orders her children to get inside the house and bangs the door shut, and thus treats the new guests harshly.



Adaku calls elderly persons of their community for judgment as Nnu Ego had been impolite and discourteous towards her relatives. To her surprise the elders supported Nnu Ego as she was the mother of three sons and in turn advised Adaku to remain calm. During the argument the chiefs say to Nnu, “You are the mother of the men, children that made him into a man. If Adaku dies today, her people, not her husband's, will come for her body. It is not so with you” (JM 159). Igbo society gives preference to the mother of male children. It is the reason that they favour Nnu as she is the provider of male heir to her husband’s family. Nnu Ego is conferred a higher status in the society because a woman who begets sons is considered superior than a woman who has only daughters. This makes her think, “... because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty in her nail biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags... it was a confusing world” (JM 167). The elders say,

Don’t you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this round of his visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years’ time will go and help build another man’s immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. (JM 166)

Adaku was not able to accept the unfair treatment and favouritism of the elderly persons towards Nnu Ego. This incident makes her understand her substandard position as the junior wife and decides to leave the household. She revolts the unjust practice which guards the senior wife because of the only reason that she is the mother of boys,

enraged she declares to Nnu Ego that she could not remain a captive. Adaku says, “Everybody accuses me of making money all the time. What else is there for me to do? 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.” (JM 168)

Though the decision taken by Adaku is a choice that is totally against their custom, “Adaku turns out to be a remarkably resourceful young woman who is capable of branching out on her own, defying her husband and succeeding in a male oriented world” (Palmer, of *War and Women*, 97). Adaku chooses to educate her daughters to put an end to the sadistic cycle of enslaving women to patriarchal norms. She enrolled her daughters in private school and informed Nnu Ego that she going to be independent. Adaku says,

As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in this world. I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband. One would think I'd never had one before. People forget that. Well, If my daughters can't forgive me when they grow up, that will be too bad. I'm going to be thrown away when I'm dead, in-any case, whereas people like you, senior wife, have formed roots, as they say. You will be properly buried in Nnaife's compound. (JM 168-169)

According to Nnu Ego, “Adaku turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom she did not like” (JM 124). After Adaku has left them, whenever Nnaife sends money, Nnu spends it for her son’s education, but soon she feels insufficient after

the arrival of her new twin daughters, Abiageli and Malachi. Though Nnu Ego is the mother of seven children instead of being happy she is filled with hopelessness.

Adaku comes to meet Nnu Ego after she has given birth to twin daughters and remarks happily, “Your first set of twin girls, senior wife,” (JM 126) Nnu replies sadly, “Hm, I know, but I doubt if our husband will like them very much. One can hardly afford to have one girl in a town like this, to say nothing of two” (JM 126-127). She enquires about the education of her girl children, for which Nnu replies:

Oh, no, they only attended for a couple of years. We have Adim and Nnamdio to think of and, with Oshia’s big school fees, we cannot afford fees for the twins.

I think they can read a little. I personally do not regret it. They will be married in a few years. They can earn an added income by trading. The most important thing is for them to get good husbands. (JM 189)

Adaku criticises Nnu Ego for being traditional in the modern world: “Oh, senior wife, I think you are sometimes more traditional than people at home in Ibuza. You worry too much to please our husband” (JM 127). Nnu agrees to her comment and she accepts her ignorance. She sadly replies to Adaku, “You are right. The trouble with me is that I find it difficult to change” (JM 127). When Nnaife comes back from the army and finds the twin daughters he becomes anxious. Adaku says “In twelve years’ time, when their bride prices start rolling in, you’ll begin to sing another tune” (JM 127), this answer changes the attitude of Nnaife.

Nnaife demonstrates a typical Igbo attitude of male chauvinism at home. He celebrates the birth of the boy babies but least cares about the twin baby girls and doesn’t even care

to choose names for them. It is Nnu who gives them names; she consoles herself and says regretfully: “Twins don’t deserve special names” (JM 127). She is a typical Igbo woman who readily subjugates herself to patriarchy. Gender inequality in Igbo society is so ingrained in their consciousness that they consider the male child as a blessing and girl child as a liability.

Nnu Ego feels inferior to Adaku but she inherently pacifies herself by thinking that one day she will be better than Adaku because of her children, “This was a life Nnu Ego did not know how to cope with . . . Nnu Ego accepted her lot, taking comfort in the fact that one day her boys would be men. But to be so reduced in status as to be almost a maid to a junior wife, and an inherited wife at that, dampened her spirit” (JM 161). When the money Nnaife provided was inadequate Nnu manages by selling petty things like cigarettes and matches. Even though she tried her level best to meet the needs, she is not able to provide food and education to her children. During difficult times Nnaife said, “It’s your responsibility to feed your children...” (JM 136) and this was “... the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her” (JM 137).

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. (JM 137)

Nnu Ego expects that her sons would take care of her in her old age. She believes that her sons will protect her and she will lead a prosperous life. There is no surprise in

the treatment and privilege shown by Nnu towards her sons rather than her daughters. Nnaife showcased his patriarchal power and considered himself as the dictator of his family and harassed her. “One thing was sure: he gained the respect and even the fear of his wife Nnu Ego. He could even now offer to beat her up if she went beyond the limits he could stand. He gave her a little housekeeping money which bought a bag of garri (*cassava* flour) for the month and some yams; she would have to make up the rest from her trading profits” (JM 117).

In the absence of Nnaife, when the family had no money Nnu had to stop Oshia’s education for a while and asked him to collect firewood for her trade. After Nnaife’s return, when Oshia is sent to school, he believes that it is his father who has been taking care of his educational needs, but actually it is Nnu Ego who has spent all the money on Oshia’s education. She informs neighbours and her children that it is Nnaife who is providing money for her son’s education in order to save Nnaife’s reputation. The greatest mistake is that though she has taken all pains to educate them, she made them believe that Nnaife provided money for the family. As a traditional woman she believed that it is her duty to create a good impression of her husband to her sons. This has made the boys feel that their mother has not done anything distinguishable; it is their father who has suffered a lot in bringing them up. If they had understood or known that their mother was the real provider of their life and the hardships that she has encountered for their wellbeing, they would have understood her better. A few years later when Oshia insists his parents to send him to a grammar school, Nnu Ego enquires about the scholarship,

‘Why did you not win a scholarship like other boys?’ Nnu Ego demanded. ‘Only a few people win scholarships, and they have to be very clever.’ ‘Then why aren’t

you clever?’ retorted Nnaife. ‘Maybe if I had a peaceful childhood, and not had to spend my young days selling paraffin and carrying firewood . . . Nnaife laughed and said, ‘You answer your father back, eh, son? Well, maybe if your mother was not so keen on getting money, maybe you would have won a scholarship. I had to go and fight. I did not choose to go.’ (JM 185)

Nnu Ego had brought up Oshia without informing about the real situation that she faced. Right from his childhood Oshia believed that he is a man and he should not involve himself in household chores. He has witnessed his sisters helping his mother in trade. He considers it as the duty of girl child, when he was called to help them he immediately answers “I am a boy. Why should I help with cooking? That’s a woman’s job” (JM 128). Nnu has taken care of his needs, and cared for him more than her other children. Oshia’s outlook of life is that man is a leader of the family and the women have no rights to dictate terms. Nnu Ego was broken when she heard her beloved son’s comments about her, she feels,

It was all so hopeless that Nnu Ego simply broke down and gave in to self-pity. Oshia, her son, blaming her as well. Of course to him his father was a hero. He was a soldier. He was a fighter. He brought money into the family. All the poor boy had ever seen of her was a nagging and worrying woman. Oh, God, please kill her with these babies she was carrying, rather than let the children she had hoped for so much pour sand into her eyes. (JM 185-186)

Nnaife’s presence at home was less when Oshia and Adim grew up, all they have witnessed is the irritating and worrying mother who was always in need of money.

They could not understand the real situation prevailing in their household. Nnaife, on the other hand, had not set a good example of himself. He used to behave arrogantly and roughly at home. The children grew up without realising the difficulty faced by their mother. Nnu Ego is startled when she accompanied Oshia for his college admission at Warri,

Her heart sank when they arrived. Here were the sons of very rich men, one could see from the cars that brought them. She called Oshia gently and said: “You must not go the way of these rich boys. They have so much money in their families.

Son, I wish you did not have to come to this school. I wish you had chosen one of those in Lagos where things are cheaper and you meet ordinary people. (JM 190)

Nnu’s intention and desire is that she has to provide her sons a good education, so that they could get a good job and get settled in life. She has never cared about her daughters because she strongly believed that once her sons got settled they would take care of their sister’s life by marrying them to right persons. She is afraid that the atmosphere would change the attitude of Oshia and that he might become self-centered.

Nnu showered her affection equally on her sons, when her son Adim approached her for his education, she pacifies him and promises him that she will surely manage to send him for his higher studies as she has done for Oshia: “... if you pass into one of the local schools, I will try and meet your fees somehow, if not, you will have to stay till you get to standard six and then go and learn a trade” (JM 190). She pays his fees as she has promised when he gets admission in St .Gregory College. While she provides education for her sons she involves her daughters in trade so that it will help them to support their families.

Nnu Ego is completely shocked when Oshia informs her that he is going to America for his higher studies. “They told us that you were going to be a great man, that you would help us in our old age, just like sons in Ibuza used to help their parents” (JM 193). Oshia smiled at her ignorance and was not even ready to explain to her about his innate intentions. M.J. Daymond rightly comments Nnu as, “In raising her children in the belief that her sons must be educated in Western fashion if they are to rise in the new urban world, Nnu Ego does not see that the education she struggles to provide will in fact alienate her sons from her” (278). Nnu Ego’s only intention of providing a good education for her sons is that they would help her in her old days, but she has failed to notice her sons’ indifferent attitude. They were selfish and they never looked back at the difficulty undergone by their mother to educate them.

Nnu Ego suffered for her children, trying to provide her children all they needed, never caring about herself and her suffering. She considers her sons to be her real asset; she is ready to sacrifice anything for them. She believes that her sons will earn well and she could return to her native village as a successful woman and spend the rest of her life. Love for their children is the greatest weakness for women and that has been the reason for Nnu Ego’s suffering.

Usually, women subjugate themselves to the traditional values as they consider that these norms help them to retain their sense of belongingness but they are not able to understand that these customs are invisible strings, which will make them victims. When she realises that her sons were more concerned with pursuing their own studies and do not have any intention to shoulder their family responsibilities, she was wrecked to



pieces. They are too keen in following their ideals and desires in life rather than taking care of their mother as a result she does not enjoy the fruits of her labour.

Nnaife is unable to show his power towards his sons, he was not there with them when they were young, when he returned and settled with them they were already grown up and educated than him, so they are not ready to accept his views and commands. In the anticipation towards their sons, both Nnu and Nnaife are in the same boat, their desires and expectations are never fulfilled.

Nnaife plans to return to his native Ibuza, when he becomes aged. He is eagerly waiting for the time when Oshia would take care of the family. Oshia gets a job at the Technical Institute. Nnaife rejoices in Oshia's success. Nwakusor praises Nnu Ego for producing such brilliant sons who would take care of them and that Nnaife's retirement life would be peaceful. Oshia's ideas differed from his parents, he wished to continue university education in America. Contrary to the hopes of his parents, Oshia informs Nnaife about the scholarship that he has been provided in the United States to continue his studies. His announcement to continue his studies instead of taking care of the family responsibilities infuriates Nnaife, he accuses Oshia for betraying his duties as the first son of the family. Nnaife started to feel that he was betrayed by Oshia and he was shattered to the core. Nnu Ego is broken by the attitude of her children as they gave priority to their self-fulfillment. Adim questions his mother about the selfish attitude of his elder brother. Nnu Ego says, "Some fathers, especially those with many children from different wives, can reject a bad son, a master can reject his evil servant, a wife can even leave a bad husband, but a mother can never, never reject her son. If he is damned, she is damned with him..." (JM 214)

Nnaife fixes marriage for his daughter Taiwo with a young man who is working as a clerk in Ibuza. Nnaife feels pleased that he has settled Taiwo's marriage and her bride price has also been agreed. Nnaife never cares for his daughters but cares for his sons. "For the first time, Nnaife really looked at Kehinde. He had one planned for and had sleepless nights over boys; girls, on the other hand, were to help in running the house and be disposed of as soon as possible, unless one was asking for trouble" (JM 204). Nnaife plans for Kehinde's marriage with a young man working at the railways. Kehinde expresses her wish to marry Aremu, the butcher's son who resides nearby their house. Aremu belongs to Yoruba community and is a Muslim. It is customary that an Ibo should marry only a person from Ibuza and are not allowed to marry a Yoruba.

Nnu Ego is frustrated by her children's deeds, at one side her sons are not ready to take up the responsibility on the other hand her grown up daughter is going away from their custom. Kehinde elopes with Aremu. Nnaife takes his cutlass and rushes towards the Yoruba family. Nnaife enters into the butcher's compound and shouts that his daughter might be dead rather than marrying a Yoruba man. Nnaife hits the Yuroba man on his shoulder with his cutlass. Police arrived at the spot and they arrested Nnaife.

During the trial, the lawyer cleverly cross examines Nnu Ego, she speaks the truth which has an adverse effect on Nnaife. Initially Nnu starts her interaction with the open statement to the court that her husband Nnaife is the best in taking care of his children and his wives. Nnu Ego reveals that though Nnaife was paying the children's school fees, the money was earned by her, since as per the custom the wife's money belongs to the husband. Her statement makes the entire court laugh at her. She is unaware that her words are turning against Nnaife. She foolishly accepts that her husband has rights to

drink, to beat his wives and also to marry as many wives he likes because he owns them all. The members of the court and the judge are amazed by the traditional mindset of Nnu. Nnu Ego's words hit the nail on the head and the court ordered five years imprisonment for Nnaife. Nnu Ego who lived in compliance with the traditional value system was at a loss to cope with the morale's of the postcolonial society; "How was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children would face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman?" (JM 219).

Nnu Ego was blamed for Nnaife's imprisonment, but she could not understand why she is to be blamed. Later Aduku explained her that in modern Nigeria, nobody is slave to another; even the husband and wife are considered equal. Nnu Ego realises that she has not understood the changes that happened in the society. Nnu decides to leave to Ibuza, she has no strength to struggle more in Lagos. She immediately settles marriage to Taiwo, in agreement with the bride's approval; she hands over the bride price to Adim. She then informs him to utilise the bride price for his further studies and to save money for his future until he gets a good job.

After the marriage Nnu Ego decides to leave to Ibuza. She is not welcomed by the Nnaife's family members as they considered that she is the reason behind Nnaife's imprisonment. In a short while after that Nnaife returns to Ibuza he starts his life with his younger wife Okpo. Nnu Ego's daughter sends her money regularly, but she is broken when she gets news that Oshia has got married to a white woman in America and Adim has left for Canada without informing her.

Nnu Ego's health condition has started to deteriorate slowly and one day she dies alone on the roadside. Though a mother of nine children, she has none to hold her hand when she dies. All the children come to Ibuza and her elder son Oshia gives her a funeral that Ibuza had never seen, as an appropriate reciprocal for her sacrifices as a mother. Her children built a shrine for her. Nnu Ego has never blessed or answered to anyone who has prayed to her to make them fertile. Marie A. Umeh rightly says, "Buchi Emecheta records the troubled and chaotic moments in a mother's life. Apart from the positive aspects of motherhood, author Emecheta records the turmoil and anguish of women who long for children and of mothers who worry about their children" (41).

Nnu Ego's ambition in her life is to attain motherhood and be the mother of many children. She struggles hard and sacrifices her priorities for the benefit of her children yet Nnu remains the same till her end. She firmly believes the old saying that "money and children don't go together: if you spend all your time making money and getting rich, the gods wouldn't give you any children; if you wanted children, you had to forget money and be content to be poor" (JM 80). The unconditional and enduring love she has for her children makes her emotionally oppressed from which her escape has become inevitable. Nnu feels dejected as her children had failed to live up to her expectations. She realises that her children have their own life to live and she says,

I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them. I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: it will be hailed as a good spirit so

long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free? (JM 186-7)

Nnu Ego realises her fault very late for she says, “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” (JM 187). Nnu feels that in future Nigerian women will progress, “I am beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women. I saw many young women teaching in schools. It would be really something for a woman to be able to earn some money monthly like a man” (JM). The novelist laments women’s fate, and questions in anguish, “God when will you create a woman-child who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?” (JM 186). According to Marie A. Umeh, Nnu Ego reflects feminist ideals as “... in death becomes spiritually committed to heightening the consciousness of the African Woman” (44).

Emecheta, through Nnu Ego, records the struggle of all women who strive to be emancipated from patriarchal oppression. Nnu Ego is an embodiment of motherhood; she lives for her children, a symbol of self-sacrifice. She is ready to accept any type of suffering but provides her utmost care for her children. When her eldest son left for America, she realised that as a mother, “Her joy was to know that she had brought up her children when they had started out with nothing, and that those same children might rub shoulders one day with the great men of Nigeria. That was the reward she expected” (JM 202). Nnu strongly believes that the joy of motherhood is in sacrificing everything for their children.

Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes the challenges and discriminations the African woman faces in the patriarchal society. She suggests that motherhood is not the ultimate source of a woman's happiness as such it should not be a woman's only aim in life. Andrea O' Reilly considers motherhood to be a part of the patriarchal institution, "Within motherhood studies the term *motherhood* is used to signify the patriarchal institution of motherhood, while *mothering* refers to women's lived experiences of childbearing as they both confirm to and/or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology" (2). Nnu Ego's struggle as a mother and her miserable death clearly teaches this lesson to the readers. Ernest N. Emenyonu comments, "The Joys of Motherhood is not only an ironic commentary, on the destinies of African womanhood, it is also a parable on the misplaced values of life in general, in Africa as elsewhere" (140).