



Nnu Ego's *Chi*, Subaltern Trauma and the Politics of Gendered Suffering in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract— *The objective of this paper is to analyze the strategic significance of Chi in The Joys of Motherhood and how it has been employed by Buchi Emecheta in the text to highlight gender inequality by chronicling Nnu Ego's plight in trying to adhere to the constructed, delimiting, normative notions and expectations of femininity, this paper aims to elucidate how Nnu Ego's Chi, serves as a symbolic or metaphorical manifestation of the way female suffering gets reduced to non-being; using 'trauma theory' this paper underscores how through her, subaltern trauma is reified and reiterated and how she becomes a means of registering a new form of resistance to patriarchal injustice.*

Keywords— *Gender, patriarchy, resistance, subaltern, suffering, trauma.*

I. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The presence and use of *Chi* as a trope is endemic to the literary works dealing with the representation of the Igbo community, by writers such as Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, etc. It does not only function as an occult element to lend a work its exotic appeal but its implications transcend such superficial and simplistic derivations and go way deeper, as *Chi*, which translates to guiding spirit with its close associations with spirituality, God, is intricately intertwined with cosmic and divine interplay which involves an interrelationship between an individual and her deeds, governed by causality, justice, destiny and punitive authority, which in turn governs the life of an individual, and sometimes through an individual, that of the whole community. It has its significance both when viewed in light of being rooted in religious customs and also in its wider secular, traditional and cultural aspects and purview. It also adds to the distinct ethnic quintessential quality found in African literary works dealing with the depiction of the Igbo community. However this status that it has, also contributes towards it being ignored or simply dismissed as incidental or an appendage not occupying a major space in the narrative and thus often escaping critical scrutiny. The aim

of this paper is to examine the strategic significance of *chi* in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, wherein its not merely interpolated in the narrative to lend it an ethnic quintessential charm, but as a means that serves to expose the gendered aspect and politics of suffering in a patriarchal society and its hegemonic hold on women and all its subjects and how such a universal, ontological reality as suffering is reduced to a mere nothingness or a state of non-being for women, who are made to view it as something natural so much so, that the realm of suffering becomes for the female characters in the novel, a depoliticized space denying them the prerogative of resistance, binding and tethering them to their restrictive, normative gender roles assigned to them and orchestrated by patriarchy.

II. THESIS

This paper argues that Nnu Ego's *chi*, who is said to be the slave woman returned in new form, functions as a symbolic or metaphorical manifestation of the gendered aspect of suffering, where suffering is reduced to non-being for women and as testimony to the inequalities and pain that women have to face in context of the Igbo society, by deploying Cathy

Caruth's 'trauma theory', this paper also argues that through Nnu Ego's *chi*, an articulation of subaltern trauma is effected, which contributes towards registering a kind of resistance to patriarchal injustice.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study involved a close scrutiny and critical perusal of the primary text in order to arrive at all the different instances in and various aspects of, the text that might substantiate the argument, apart from the primary text, various secondary sources like articles, research papers and journals were instrumental in analyzing the text and in forming and sustaining the argument, additionally to also know about the important status of *chi* in Igbo culture as well as literature. Cathy Caruth's 'trauma theory' has been deployed in this paper to delineate the ways in which subaltern trauma can be discerned in the text.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A veritable plethora of research work has already been done on Buchi Emecheta and *The Joys of Motherhood*, and also *Chi* symbolism in African literary works but most of the research work related to the text has focused around gender, patriarchy, identity and postcolonial aspects, the forces of tradition and modernity but the significance of *chi* in the text has more or less been ignored and pushed to the periphery, Stephane Robolin has undertaken a cursory study of *chi* in "Gendered Hauntings: The Joys of Motherhood Interpretive Acts, and

Postcolonial theory", in order to underscore the sexual politics of interpretation, Robolin however has focused more on Bhabha's theory and instances of liminality in the text. Research has also revolved around discerning trauma in the text but independently of *Chi*, it has not been looked at as a means of iterating trauma or registering resistance, this paper intends to locate Nnu Ego's *Chi* as a site of relaying subaltern trauma and offering resistance by building up on the work that has already been done.

V. DISCUSSION

The Joys of Motherhood follows the story of Nnu Ego, a woman caught in between the disparate forces of tradition and modernity, individual desires, suffering and normative familial and social obligations and how she carves out her own niche for survival. She is displaced psychologically, emotionally and physically, in a repetitive cycle from her own desires or ideals which get sublimated into filial and feminine responsibilities or duties; navigating a constantly changing space and conditions under colonial

rule, she represents the struggles that attend a woman who is expected to cater to the demands of society, of being a mother, daughter and wife and the plight of one who fails to do so. Even though its difficult to criticize or simplistically place the practices of or the position offered to women in, Igbo culture and society on any plane of hierarchy based on or offered by the Western discourse of feminism, as it might prove to be very reductive, it nonetheless can't be denied that "the position women had in the traditional Igbo society may have been flexible, but that did not guarantee instant respect and equality with men. Old rhetoric was masculine and old Igbo proverbs for instance reveal prejudice and hostility towards women in social discourse" (Vesanummi 21). This text exposes the shortcomings in the normative, deeply entrenched, constructed but flawed ideals of manhood and womanhood which are also interlinked to one's position in the social hierarchy, in Igbo society. By foregrounding the plight of Nnu Ego, in trying to adhere to and fit the mould of the 'ideal woman', a complete woman, the daughter of an important chief, Emecheta underscores the burdensome responsibility that's thrust on her shoulders to maintain a feminine identity which is constituted by motherhood, obeisance and subservience.

During the course of the journey she undertakes in her life, she undergoes trials and ordeals that are said to be caused by her *Chi*, who was a slave woman sacrificed against her will as per custom for Agbadi's wife, even though her *Chi* remains as a sort of metaphysical entity, an absent presence throughout the narrative, her vengeance is poured upon Nnu Ego with all its force and intensity, although the *chi* figures as an abstract idea and is spoken of as a spirit not having a palpable existence, its very tangible, destructive power is felt by Nnu Ego as she is constantly plagued by it, and thwarted at every step of her life repeatedly, her *Chi* plays a very important and in fact a decisive role in directing her life and the kind of fate that would fall in her lot. It can be argued that her *Chi* functions as a metaphorical manifestation of how female suffering in society is deconstructed and treated as something absent, reduced to nonbeing, just like her insidious *Chi*; the root of all her trouble lies in her *chi*'s manoeuvres but ultimately, she remains elusive, torturing her in her dreams, in reality, omnipresent but paradoxically absent too, ruining her life from within an indiscernible realm and penumbra. It attests to the fact that in society this kind of tortuous suffering is naturalized for women, not simply as an inevitable reality but something that is meant for a woman, something a woman is destined for, and therefore deemed inconsequential and depoliticized, it remains unaddressed and is trivialized and a woman is made to silently undergo such tribulations sans resistance or complaint.

Many instances from the text can be cited, as is seen in the relationship between

Agbadi and Ona, and in the turbulent liminal space between love and hate that it inhabits, Agbadi consistently humiliates and insults Ona, demeans her, just to win over her womanhood and prove the superiority of and to legitimize his hypermasculinity, and Ona, despite being strong and fierce, ultimately surrenders herself to her husband's and father's desires at the expense of her own. The saying, "a man is never ugly" (Emecheta 64) uttered by the female characters in the text almost as an aphorism implying that a man is never in the wrong, is emblematic of the way differential gender politics operate in society. Nnu Ego is not allowed to grieve and mourn for the loss of her child explicitly as it risks her being deemed hysterical, it can be argued on the basis of the interpersonal dynamics of male-female relationships in the text, that women, despite inhabiting a respectful and dignified space of their own as long as they cater to their 'responsibilities' and gender roles, still serve only to complement the (hyper) masculinity of men and solidify their superiority. However, it doesn't imply that men are not victims to these constructed ideals of manhood, womanhood and glorified hypermasculinity, just because Nnaife doesn't fit Nnu Ego's internalized ideals of masculinity, he becomes subject to her constant vitriolic and degrading outpourings, she accuses him of effeminacy because of the nature of his work, entirely forgetting its pragmatic significance in providing them their livelihood.

It's also important to note that it's a dysfunctional relationship that exists between Nnu Ego and her *chi*, as the supposedly punitive measures carried out by her *Chi*, make her suffer for something she was entirely not responsible for, which is not the way in which an individual's *chi* works, "traditionally, according to Mbiti, "when punishment comes, it comes in the present life. For this reason, misfortunes may be interpreted as indicating that the sufferer has broken some moral or ritual conduct against God, the spirits, the elders or other members of his society" (Robolin 78) but in this case, Nnu Ego is made to bear the brunt of her father's and his son's misdeeds instead of those who had actually perpetrated the injustice that is, the forced killing by Agbadi's sons in order to sacrifice the slave woman and this "twist in the otherwise simple schema" (Robolin 78) as Stephane Robolin notes, "attests to the unjust displacement of responsibilities onto women, whereby the misfortunes of a woman are foisted upon the subsequent generation" (78).

However, there's one more factor involved that further complicates the relationship between Nnu Ego and her *Chi* and which serves a crucial role in the narrative and holds the key to the formulaic inversion in the cosmic

workings of the *chi* as mentioned formerly and it will be explored in this paper. The *dibia* (medicine-man) announces about Nnu Ego, owing to the abnormal lump on her head that "the child is the slave woman who died with your senior wife

Agunwa. She promised to come back as a daughter. Now here she is" (Emecheta 28). "The slave woman figures not simply as the guiding spirit of Nnu Ego, she *is* Nnu Ego" (Robolin

78). It is then, the reincarnation of the slave woman who had been killed, that's manifested at two levels, one, in the corporeal form of Agbadi's daughter, and another, in the incorporeal form of his daughter's *Chi*. It is as if the slave woman came back to avenge the misdeeds committed upon her, but most importantly to make that, which was unknown, known, that is making Agbadi realize the burden of his wrongdoings, he, who had made a slave out of a woman who had been promised to the river goddess and who had been brutally killed despite much pleading in order to sanctify a ritual and to mark respect for Agbadi's senior wife Agunwa who obviously held a much higher place in the echelons of the social hierarchy. It is precisely the slave woman's status as a subaltern that allowed her brutal killing to be justified and normalized, it is her socially engendered inability to resist against that injustice as a subaltern that makes her return with ferocious powers to articulate this unspoken trauma registered by the fatal wound, not only physical but also psychological which she was unable to make known through her subject position. As Caruth notes, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise not available. The truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth 4). This also explains the vicious repetitive cycle of traumatic incidents in which Nnu Ego gets enmeshed throughout the narrative as Caruth and Freud both talk about the repetitive reenactment of the original, ungraspable wound or impact. Also, Nnu Ego and her *Chi*'s connected being opens up an interstitial space, that, as Robolin mentions "conjoins the condition of slavehood and the condition of Womanhood" (79). Again, foregrounding the subservient position that women are relegated to, in society. Caruth also talks about the way trauma becomes a site for intersubjective exchange, and hence a way of connecting with the other.

But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the

trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound (8).

So Nnu Ego becomes the embodiment of the slave woman's trauma, a subaltern trauma, and simultaneously both site and subject, upon which the manifestations of trauma play out and through whom Agbadi is made to realize and submit himself to the greater powers of the slave woman he had killed, and hence his hyper masculinity and authority get undermined and subverted, as is apparent in the elaborate rituals, sacrifices and ways in which he tries to appease and pacify her *Chi*; respectively. It is a radical reimagining of resistance, through the margins of the literary space and the society that it represents, the subaltern rises to downplay the power of those who wronged and silenced her, and Emecheta materializes this not simply by appropriating that subaltern experience in her own words or by any sort of 'epistemic violence', but by portraying the significant cyclical recurrence of and powerful pronouncements of the vestiges of the slave woman's trauma. As Bell Hooks in her essay, 'Choosing the Margin as a

Space of Radical Openness', says, "Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (26) and Emecheta in this text precisely does that, the margins that the character of the slave woman occupies, transform into a site of resistance that regulates and entwines Agbadi and others implicitly into a subversive narrative, woven around retributive justice, exposing the intransigent, nonegalitarian foundation of tradition itself, the inflexibility of which makes it immune to progressive change in the face of evolving sociopolitical changes and volatile times; and that makes them aware of their complicity in an inhumane and utterly degrading, dehumanizing act that turns their lives into a sort of perpetual penitentiary. It reconstructs and restructures her stature in the hierarchy. Even though Nnu Ego as a reincarnation of the slave woman, suffers too, she never gives up, never surrenders, rather challenges her position from time to time and transcends the immobility, the vulnerable, precarious position allotted and elliptically alluded to by dint of her intimate connection with the slave woman, at birth.

VI. CONCLUSION

Throughout the novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, there are plenty of instances where the highly divergent ways in which the male and female characters deal with the

experience of suffering and trauma is made apparent. The text chronicles and points to the ambivalence in the treatment meted out to the men and women of the Igbo community, and the societal and communal expectations of them. It exposes the double standards inherent in that system. It is the story of the victimization of a woman and also how that woman challenges that victimization and finds opportunities for mobility instead of passivity.

It is the story of a woman's struggle in coming to terms with her reality as much as it's a story of her attempt at rewriting her reality through her relentless devotion and ceaseless hardwork.

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