‘A Full Human Being’: Rewriting Womanhood Through the Body in *The Joys of Motherhood*

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The extensive critical reception of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) has established the novel as a foundational text in African feminist literary discourse, with scholarly attention predominantly focused on its searing indictment of patriarchal institutions, its exploration of maternal ambivalence, and its depiction of cultural dislocation within colonial modernity. Seminal studies by Umeh (1987) and Bazin (1986) effectively delineated the novel’s critique of what Rich (1976) termed “the institution of motherhood” while Derrickson’s (2002) influential work elucidated the complex ways in which Nigerian women became caught between traditional and colonial patriarchal systems, “exchanging one form of patriarchy for another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones” (p. 5). More recent scholarship has continued to explore these themes, with critics like Ogunrotimi and Owoeye (2019) examining notions of alienation in motherhood, and Blay and Annin. (2022) analyzing characters like Adaku through feminist frameworks.

However, despite this robust critical tradition, a significant gap persists in the scholarly engagement with Emecheta’s novel: namely, a sustained theoretical attention to the *female body* as the fundamental locus where these intersecting systems of power are imposed, experienced, and contested. While numerous critics acknowledge the physical suffering of characters like Nnu Ego, few have positioned the body itself as the primary analytical category through which Emecheta’s feminist critique operates. This article seeks to address this critical lacuna by arguing that the female body in *The Joys of Motherhood* is not merely a passive site of oppression, but rather the essential medium through which alternative narratives of womanhood are physically inscribed and enacted. The novel’s profound political statement emerges precisely from its meticulous documentation of how patriarchal and colonial ideologies operate directly upon women’s bodies, and conversely, how women utilize their embodied existence as a resource for resistance, memory, and self-definition.

The research problem this article addresses, therefore, is twofold: first, to demonstrate how existing critiques of patriarchy and colonialism in the novel are fundamentally corporeal in nature, operating through the specific manipulation and regulation of female bodies; and second, to illuminate how characters like Nnu Ego and Adaku develop distinct modes of embodied resistance that constitute powerful counter-narratives to dominant gender ideologies. This study contends that Emecheta’s

literary innovation lies in her ability to translate abstract systems of power into visceral, bodily experiences, thereby grounding her feminist critique in the material reality of hunger, exhaustion, childbirth, and sexual agency.

To advance this argument, the article is structured into several interconnected sections. First, it establishes a theoretical framework that synthesizes African feminist thought (Nnaemeka, 2004) with theories of the body as a site of biopower (Foucault, 1977). This framework provides the conceptual vocabulary for analyzing how "womanhood," "motherhood," and the "body" function as socially constructed categories within the novel's specific cultural context. The subsequent analysis then divides into two major parts: a detailed examination of Nnu Ego's trajectory of bodily suffering and silent, tragic resistance, followed by an exploration of Adaku's radical reclamation of bodily autonomy and economic agency. A crucial intervening section examines the character of Nnaife as embodying the opportunistic fusion of traditional and colonial patriarchies, demonstrating how this hybrid system intensifies its control over women's bodies. The article concludes by synthesizing these bodily counter-narratives, arguing that together they form a complex and powerful challenge to patriarchal definitions of female identity and value.

Through this embodied reading, the study ultimately reveals Emecheta's novel to be a profound meditation on the possibilities and limitations of resistance within intersecting systems of oppression. It argues that both Nnu Ego's internalized suffering and Adaku's overt rebellion, though radically different in form, represent crucial strategies of survival and defiance written directly onto the female body. While the novel centers on women negotiating patriarchal, colonial, and traditional systems that define female worth through motherhood and marriage, its female characters – Nnu Ego and Adaku – respond in contrasting ways, illuminating different modes of resistance to hegemonic power. Nnu Ego internalizes traditional expectations, accepting motherhood as her sole path to value and purpose. Her suffering, however, reveals the hollowness of that ideal in a society fractured by the intersection of patriarchal and colonial capitalism. Her slow disintegration illustrates the violence of patriarchal manipulation under colonial transformation. In contrast, Adaku refuses to be confined by such definitions. Her narrative is one of open defiance, rejecting not only the institutions that marginalize her, but also the cultural silence imposed on women. Her act of resistance by becoming a prostitute becomes a radical form of self-definition. This article argues that these narratives function as counter-stories that resist dominant histories of male heroism in colonial contexts. The female body becomes both a site of trauma and a medium through which memory is preserved and power renegotiated. By centralizing marginalized voices and struggles, this article aims to disrupt masculinist revolutionary discourse. Ultimately, the study shows that women's self-perception acts as a strategy of survival and political resistance where they make efforts to place themselves at the center by presenting counter-stories. In doing so,

the article not only contributes a new critical perspective to the rich scholarship on *The Joys of Motherhood*, but also highlights the enduring relevance of Emecheta's work for contemporary discussions about agency, resistance, and the bodily dimensions of power and identity.

Theoretical Foundations: Womanhood, Motherhood, and the Body as Loci of Power and Resistance

To adequately analyze the corporeal dimensions of power and resistance in *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is essential to first define the key conceptual categories that underpin this study: womanhood, motherhood, and the body. Rather than treating these as natural or self-evident essences, this analysis follows constructivist theories that understand them as discursively produced and politically charged sites of contestation. Within the specific context of Emecheta's novel, these categories are inextricably linked to the intersecting systems of traditional Igbo patriarchy and British colonial modernity, each imposing its own regulatory ideals upon female existence.

The concept of "womanhood" in the novel is predominantly a patriarchal construct that rigorously equates female value with reproductive utility. This aligns with African feminist scholar Nnaemeka's (1995) insistence that gender constructs must be analyzed within their specific cultural and historical contexts, rather than through the imposition of Western feminist frameworks. Nnaemeka's work, particularly her concept of "nego-feminism," (p. 360) which emphasizes negotiation and complementarity, provides a crucial lens for understanding the complex terrain that Emecheta's characters navigate. For Nnu Ego, womanhood is defined by the cultural mandate from her Ibuza tradition to become a mother, specifically a mother of sons. Her initial barrenness renders her a failed woman, an identity crisis that is both socially enforced and deeply internalized. Her value is contingent upon her womb's productivity, reducing her complex humanity to a single biological function. This definition is not passively accepted by all characters, however, and the novel's central conflict arises from the clash between this hegemonic definition and the alternative conceptions of womanhood sought by its female characters.

Closely linked to this construct of womanhood is the institution of "motherhood." Following Adrienne Rich's seminal distinction (as cited in Bazin, 1986), the novel critiques not the potential experience of mothering, but "the institution of motherhood" – the patriarchal political system that controls and exploits female reproduction. Bazin (1986) correctly identifies that Emecheta explores "the evils not of motherhood but of what Adrienne Rich calls 'the institution of motherhood' – that is, the way in which a woman's role as mother is used to render her an inferior, second-class citizen" (p. 37). This institution, in the context of the

novel, is a hegemonic power structure that seamlessly blends traditional Igbo expectations with the economic pressures of colonial urban life in Lagos. It demands endless sacrifice while offering diminishing returns, trapping women like Nnu Ego in a cycle of exploitation where their love for their children becomes the very mechanism of their enslavement.

It is upon the "body" that these ideologies of womanhood and motherhood are forcibly inscribed and physically experienced. To theorize the body in this context, this article draws on Foucault's (1977) concept of "docile bodies" and his broader concept of biopower, which describes how modern states and institutions exercise power by regulating and controlling the biological lives of populations – their bodies, health, reproduction, and mortality (p. 136). The female body in Emecheta's novel is a quintessential site of biopower: it is disciplined through hunger and exhaustion; its reproductive capacities are monitored and controlled by both family and community; its movements are constrained by economic necessity and social expectation. Nnu Ego's body, in particular, becomes a living document recording the violence of this regulatory regime – her physical deterioration maps the cumulative impact of patriarchal exploitation.

However, following feminist engagements with Foucault, this analysis also recognizes that the body is not merely a passive surface for disciplinary inscription. It is also a potential source of agency and resistance. As feminist philosopher Bartky (1988) elaborates in her feminist reading of Foucault, while the female body is undoubtedly a site of patriarchal discipline, the very practices of that discipline can generate sites of resistance. This dual potential is vividly illustrated in the novel. Nnu Ego's body, though broken, maintains a form of agency through its very suffering, which serves as a silent testimony to injustice. Adaku's body, conversely, becomes an instrument of active rebellion as she seizes control of its sexual and economic utility. Their embodied experiences – of pain, desire, exhaustion, and rebellion – become a form of knowledge and a language of protest that exist outside of official, male-dominated discourses.

Furthermore, the body functions as a crucial repository of memory and identity amidst the dislocations of colonialism and urbanization. For Nnu Ego, the remembered traditions of Ibuza are not abstract concepts but are felt in her body's expectations and rhythms, which are constantly frustrated by the harsh realities of Lagos. Her physical yearning for a different life is a form of corporeal memory. This aligns with Connerton's (1989) work on how societies remember, particularly his concept of "incorporating practices" – how rituals and habits are stored in and performed by the body. The characters' struggles are, thus, not merely ideological but are embodied in the most visceral sense.

By synthesizing African feminist thought with theories of embodied power and resistance, this theoretical framework provides the necessary tools for a nuanced reading of Emecheta's novel. It allows us to see how the personal, physical suffering of characters like Nnu Ego is indeed

political – a direct manifestation of systemic oppression. Simultaneously, it illuminates how acts of resistance, from silent endurance to overt rebellion, are fundamentally corporeal acts, written on and through the body. This embodied lens reveals the full depth of Emecheta's feminist critique, showing how the struggle to become "a full human being" is ultimately a struggle for control over one's own physical existence.

Situating the Embodied Critique

A comprehensive understanding of the corporeal dimensions of *The Joys of Motherhood* requires situating this analysis within the existing scholarly discourse, which has largely focused on thematic and institutional critiques. Umeh's (1987) foundational work frames the novel as "a study of the victimisation and enslavement of traditional Igbo women to the dictates of traditional Igbo culture," effectively establishing the central conflict between individual female desire and communal patriarchal expectation (p. 31). Umeh's emphasis on victimization, however, often overlooks the nuanced ways in which victimhood itself becomes a complex site of resistance and agency through bodily suffering.

Bazin (1986) provides a crucial feminist lens by introducing Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and institution, arguing that Emecheta critiques the latter – "the way in which a woman's role as mother is used to render her an inferior, second-class citizen" (p. 37). Bazin's work is indispensable for understanding the political structure Nnu Ego confronts, yet it tends to treat the institution as an abstract force rather than one that operates through specific, material practices upon the body – through hunger, reproductive pressure, and physical exhaustion.

Derrickson's (2002) seminal article, "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context," significantly advances the conversation by foregrounding the colonial economic transition as a key factor exacerbating women's oppression. Her argument that Nigerian women "exchanged one form of patriarchy with another, while being stripped of former privileges and denied the right to new ones" (p. 5) provides the essential socioeconomic context for the novel's events. This article builds directly on Derrickson's thesis, but seeks to ground it more firmly in the lived, bodily experience of this exchange, examining *how* the loss of privileges like economic agency and communal support manifests physically in the daily struggles of Nnu Ego and Adaku.

More recent scholarship has begun to explore these complexities with greater nuance. Ogunrotimi and Owoeye (2019) examine the "notions of alienation and motherhood" (p. 95), focusing on the psychological and emotional estrangement Nnu Ego experiences. Their work touches on the physical dimension of this alienation – the feeling of being a prisoner to her children – but does not fully develop the concept of the body as the primary locus of this alienating experience. Similarly, Blay and Annin (2022) offer a valuable analysis of Adaku's rebellion, classifying her decision as a feminist act that advocates for "the need for equity between

men and women, and removal of all entrenched practices that elevate men above women" (p. 336). Their analysis, however, focuses on the social and economic outcomes of her choice rather than the fundamental bodily reclamation that enables it – the decision to treat her body as her own capital.

While these studies provide an essential foundation, they consistently stop short of making the body itself the central subject of analysis. The physical reality of Nnu Ego's hunger, the exhaustion that wears down her body, the reproductive anxiety that haunts her, and the visceral nature of Adaku's rebellion are often treated as symptoms of larger themes rather than as the very substance of Emecheta's political critique. This article argues that the body is not merely a passive reflector of oppression, but the active, primary text upon which the novel's drama of power and resistance is written. By synthesizing the insights of previous scholarship with a sustained focus on embodiment, this analysis aims to reveal a deeper layer of meaning in Emecheta's work, showing how the struggle for personhood is ultimately waged through the material reality of the physical self.

The Patriarchal Bargain: Nnu Ego's Body as a Site of Inscription and Silent Revolt

This article examines the intersection of patriarchy and colonization and their combined role in marginalizing the female figure by exploiting the institution of motherhood. The difference between Nnu Ego's traditional Ibuza world and Lagos' colonial urbanized setting sets the stage for Nnu Ego's exploitation as a mother by agents of patriarchy using the difference between these worlds to their advantage. Nnu Ego's transition from Ibuza to Lagos introduces multiple challenges to her traditional definition of being a mother. In the colonial and urbanized setting of Lagos, Nnu Ego is burdened with fulfilling her role as a mother as well as adjusting herself to the newly formed patriarchal and colonial structures. I argue that Nnu Ego's life as a mother in Lagos becomes a constant struggle between tradition and modernity mainly because of patriarchy's functioning as a hegemonic power structure that exploits a colonial setting while creating different forms of control over women by adapting to times of transition. Nnu Ego's trajectory in the novel represents one of the most poignant literary explorations of how patriarchal ideology succeeds by persuading women to invest their own bodies in the service of their oppression. Her story is not merely one of external coercion, but of deep internalization, where societal expectations become inseparable from personal desire, and where the body becomes the living record of this conflicted investment. Her initial value, within the economy of Ibuza, is entirely determined by her reproductive potential. Her first marriage to Amatokwu ends in despair not because of a lack of affection but because of her body's failure to perform its designated cultural function. Her plea, "What am I going to do

Amatokwu? she cries to her husband after the disappointment of another month" (p. 31), is a cry of anguish from a body that has betrayed its primary purpose, rendering her identity nullified.

This internalized pressure culminates in the brutal bodily bargain she strikes upon her marriage to Nnaife, a man whose "bulging belly and lethargic ways" (p. 44) repulse her. Her prayer to her *chi* reveals the profound corporeal transaction at the heart of her identity: "O my chi," she prayed as she rolled painfully to her other side on the raffia bed, "O my dear mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance" (pp. 44-45). Here, she explicitly offers her body's compliance and her emotional submission in exchange for its reproductive success. Her body is the currency with which she purchases social validity, and motherhood becomes the coveted commodity.

With Nnaife, Nnu Ego experiences the joy of being a mother and her life reflects the irony of the joy that comes with motherhood. Being in urban Lagos, Nnu Ego found that her notion of being a traditional woman was tested. Nnaife served a Christian family and since he did not marry Nnu Ego at a church, their marriage was void. This is where Nnu Ego's traditional values started clashing with the values of urban Lagos. While she remains a traditional Igbo woman, Nnaife emerges as the man of Lagos: "What will they say in the church? We have not been married there. . . so keep it quiet, will you?" (p. 50). The news of birth thus highlights the conflict between Nnu Ego's tradition and Nnaife's urbanized ways in a colonial world. This conflict exposes Nnu Ego's suffering: the impracticality of her traditional values becomes stark in Lagos and she is left with the difficulty of unlearning the demands of her tradition while learning about the stresses of urban Lagos. Nnu Ego's predicament reiterates Umeh's (1987) assertion that the novel "is a study of the victimization and enslavement of traditional Igbo women to the dictates of traditional Igbo culture" (p. 31) which are exploited to benefit patriarchy. Umeh is right in pointing out that Nnu Ego's troubles multiply because patriarchal norms expect her to behave as a traditional woman in urban Lagos. The incompatibility of Nnu Ego's traditional behavior and Lagos' urbanized ways leaves Nnu Ego as a victim and allows Nnaife to exploit her identity as a mother to his advantage.

Patriarchal tradition in the case of motherhood becomes a two-edged sword for Nnu Ego where she is marginalized if she is barren and burdened with back-breaking responsibilities when she becomes a mother. The institutionalization of motherhood paves the way for patriarchal exploitation that results in the marginalization and victimization of women like Nnu Ego especially when they are placed in a colonial setup. This institutionalization creates patriarchal motherhood that eliminates the element of empowerment and turns motherhood into a self-sacrificing service that favors patriarchy – a hegemonic power structure. This version of imposed motherhood manipulates women's role in the family structure

and reinforces a form of patriarchal control rendering women inferior and "second-class citizens."

The physical exploitation of this bargain intensifies dramatically in the colonial urban setting of Lagos. Derrickson's (2002) thesis about the exchange of patriarchies is enacted upon Nnu Ego's body with visceral cruelty. In Ibuza, a woman's agricultural labor, while demanding, granted her a degree of economic agency and was integrated into a communal support structure. In Lagos, this agency is obliterated. Nnaife's inconsistent income as a laundryman for a colonial family forces Nnu Ego's body into a relentless, isolated cycle of petty trading and childcare, perpetually on the brink of starvation. The novel is replete with descriptions of her physical state: the gnawing hunger in her stomach, the bone-deep fatigue, the constant anxiety that manifests as physical tension. The supposed "joy" of motherhood transforms into a physical ordeal of perpetual lack and exhaustion. This is starkly emphasized after the birth of her twins, when Nnaife's reaction is not joy but a reproach for her body's production of the "wrong" kind of children: "'Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? So where will we all sleep? How will they eat?' ... He didn't even mention their names" (p. 141). Ordu and Odukwu (2022) rightly classify this as "a reprimand for his older wife's failure to bear male offspring" and note that by "withholding their names, Nnaife denies responsibility for their well-being" (p. 9). This moment represents the ultimate patriarchal betrayal: her body has finally achieved its reproductive purpose, yet the fruits of that labor are deemed worthless, and the physical burden of sustaining them remains hers alone.

Nnu Ego's resistance, therefore, cannot manifest as the overt rebellion of Adaku. Instead, it takes the form of a slow, internal, and deeply embodied awakening – a silent revolt written in the language of somatic realization. Her pivotal moment of consciousness is not an intellectual epiphany but a corporeal one, arising from the sheer physical reality of her imprisonment:

> It occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as a 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)

This internal monologue is the core of her counter-narrative. It is a realization forged not in abstract thought but in physical suffering – in the feeling of the raffia bed, the emptiness of her stomach, and the weight of her children. Her body, in its constant state of deprivation, becomes a living archive of patriarchal injustice, its very condition a form of

testimony. Despite her adherence to patriarchal injustice that works under the guise of tradition, Nnu Ego understands the constant exploitation of her motherhood. She realizes that "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, in her cramped room" (emphasis mine, p. 167).

This embodied resistance culminates not only in her physical death but in her symbolic actions in the afterlife. The community's stories that she became a "wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make woman fertile, she never did" is her final, powerful act of bodily refusal (p. 224). The realization of her own exploitation throughout her life materialized in the form of her final word of refusal. Nnu Ego's counter-narrative was not only a statement of the injustices recorded through her agonies but also a testament of the memories of the past. Nnu Ego's denial of people's wishes for children was also the refusal to let the patriarchal narrative of motherhood function. Having been valued only for her womb's function in life, she withholds that function in death. This is far more than spite; it is a profound discursive resistance – a warning etched into spiritual legend about the soul-destroying nature of the institution that consumed her. It is the ultimate, tragic extension of her embodied counter-story: a final "no" spoken from beyond the grave through the very organ that defined her existence.

The Opportunistic Fusion: Nnaife and the Mechanics of Hybrid Patriarchy

Nnu Ego's suffering greatly depends on the ability of traditional patriarchy to exploit the colonial setting. This mechanism is perfectly embodied in the character of Nnaife, who functions not as a powerful patriarch but as a weak, opportunistic agent of a hybrid patriarchal system that is more volatile and damaging than either of its constituent parts. Nnaife's power derives not from his personal strength but from his ability to strategically switch allegiances between traditional Ibuza law and the new colonial/Christian order, always choosing the system that best serves his immediate interests and justifies his shirking of responsibility.

He eagerly embraces his identity within the colonial hierarchy as a laundryman for the Meers, a position that grants him a wage and a sliver of status, however, this identity becomes a shield against traditional obligations. When Nnu Ego expects the traditional celebration for the birth of their first son, Nnaife hides behind his adopted Christian identity: "We have not been married there. . . so keep it quiet, will you?" (p. 50). Here, colonial Christianity provides the excuse for neglecting traditional (and financially burdensome) rites. His identity is fluid and self-serving.

However, when tradition serves his desires, he adopts it with equal fervor. Using his position as a patriarch, Nnaife makes Nnu Ego's

traditional role as a woman doubly challenging by embracing polygamy. While Nnu Ego constantly maneuvers her role as a woman and a mother in Lagos, Nnaife exploits traditional values as he pleases. The death of his elder brother provides the opportunity to inherit his wives and children, a tradition that promises him a younger, new wife (Adaku). He seamlessly reverts to Ibuza custom, imposing this new financial and emotional burden on his household without consultation. The incompatibility between his Christian job and this traditional practice is irrelevant; patriarchy, in its hybrid form, provides him with a toolkit of justifications. This imposition of polygamy was a challenge to Nnu Ego's identity as a wife. In this regard, it was Nnaife's right given to him by traditional Ibuza customs and Nnu Ego's job as a wife was to accept. The leverage given to Nnaife by traditional customs deprive Nnu Ego of all forms of agency. While Nnaife was never questioned for working under Christian employers, Nnu Ego was expected to conform to the customary laws that granted Nnaife the right to inherit wives. In this case, the opportunities afforded to Nnaife leave Nnu Ego marginalized depicting her second-class subordinate status as compared to Nnaife's elevated patriarchal status.

Nnaife's opportunism is most blatant during the "strike" staged by Nnu Ego and Adaku. Janet E. Pool in her study "A Cross-Comparative Study of Aspects of Conjugal Behavior among Women of Three West African Countries" (1972) explains that co-wives often "form[ed] a power-bloc within the family" that allowed them to convince their stubborn husbands into doing things they otherwise would not (p. 252). Nnu Ego and Adaku attempted to rely on their traditional power structure that polygamy would allow in Ibuza. Explaining the role of female solidarity through strikes in Igbo culture, Judith van Allen in her chapter "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women" (1972) states that

> "Sitting on a man" or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the wome"s main weapons. To "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question. (p. 170)

When Nnu Ego and Adaku refuse to cook in protest of his inadequate provision, he abandons all pretense of being a "provider," a role central to both traditional and colonial masculinities. Instead, he weaponizes a distorted version of tradition to absolve himself: "You'd better carry on the way you started. It's your responsibility to feed your children as best as you can . . . Sell your lappas. You [Nnu Ego] are the chief wife. Use your head . . . My chi has taught you a lesson" (pp. 136-137). Here, he

cherry-picks a patriarchal norm – the senior wife's managerial role – to evade the core patriarchal responsibility of provision.

Nnaife's character demonstrates that traditional patriarchy does not merely coexist with colonial modernity; it actively exploits its disruptions. The fluidity and uncertainty of the colonial urban setting create a power vacuum where figures like Nnaife can manipulate both systems to their advantage. He is a patriarch by proxy, his authority amplified by the very chaos of the colonial transition that was supposed to modernize society. For Nnu Ego and Adaku, this creates a terrifying instability. There is no consistent rulebook to appeal to, no stable ground from which to claim rights or privileges, as Derrickson (2002) observed. The system becomes a moving target, and its oppressive force is intensified because it is unpredictable and arbitrary, always reconfigured to serve male interests at the direct expense of women's bodily and economic well-being.

Radical Reclamation: Adaku's Body as Instrument of Counter-Narrative

If Nnu Ego's narrative charts the tragic cost of internalizing patriarchal bodily norms, then Adaku's trajectory constitutes a direct and pragmatic refusal of those same norms. With two daughters and her failure to produce a son, Adaku did not fit the definition of a traditional woman from the very beginning and her body is already deemed inadequate within the traditional economy of value. This very marginalizing, however, becomes the catalyst for her radical act of self-redefinition. Where Nnu Ego's body is a site of inscription, Adaku's becomes a tool for active rewriting, a conscious instrument deployed to seize agency within an oppressive system. Her rebellion is not ideological in the abstract but is fundamentally corporeal and economic, a calculated decision to reclaim ownership of her physical self and its capacities.

As opposed to Nnu Ego's blind adherence to tradition, Adaku views tradition critically. While patriarchal and colonial power structures exploit Nnu Ego as a mother and manipulate her into giving all she has, Adaku does not allow this manipulation. Umeh (1982) expresses a similar idea explaining that "Adaku's independent character is juxtaposed to Nnu Ego's subservient nature. In promoting the feminist's cause, Emecheta balances Nnu Ego's traditionalism with Adaku's tendencies toward female emancipation" (p. 5). Looking at Nnu Ego's worries, Adaku observes: "Oh, senior wife, I think you are sometimes more traditional than people at home in Ibuza. You worry too much to please our husband" (p. 127). For Nnu Ego, pleasing Nnaife means providing food for her children, whereas Adaku believes in negotiating with traditional beliefs and creating a space that centers her subjectivity as a woman. However, Adaku soon realizes that developing her subjectivity in a world that rendered her marginalized was not possible.

The violence of her marginalization is made explicit in the confrontation with Nwakusor, who dismisses her lineage and worth by referring to her as "Adaku, *the daughter of whoever you are*" (p. 166). This moment of symbolic erasure is pivotal. As Blay and Annin. (2022) argue, her subsequent action is "in line with the African feminist's goal of advocating for the need for equity between men and women, and removal of all entrenched practices that elevate men above women" (p. 336). However, this feminist act begins with a stark bodily realization: her value within the traditional system is irrevocably null. This rejection, rather than crushing her, functions as a perverse liberation, severing her ties to a system that offers her nothing. It frees her from the obligation to seek its validation, allowing her to perceive her body not as a failed reproductive vessel but as a form of capital that can be leveraged within the different economy of colonial Lagos.

Her declaration of intent to Nnu Ego is thus a manifesto of bodily reclamation: "'I'm leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife ... I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi* !" (p. 169). This statement is rich with symbolic meaning. Leaving the "stuffy room" is a literal and metaphorical move towards physical and existential space. The choice of prostitution is a deliberate and shocking transgression, a total rejection of the patriarchal control of female sexuality, which is meant to be confined to marriage and reproduction. By choosing to sell sex, she seizes control of its economic utility, transforming it from a source of her subjugation (through mandatory childbirth) into a source of her independence. Most powerfully, "Damn my *chi*" is an act of profound blasphemy against the very spiritual force that is believed to dictate one's destiny. It is the ultimate act of self-authorization, a declaration that she, not the gods or tradition, will henceforth determine the fate of her body and her life. As Ogunrotimi and Owoeye (2019) note, she is "radicalized by an unquenchable desire for personal freedom as an individual" (p. 101).

The success of her rebellion is measured in visibly embodied terms. Nnu Ego, the novel's keen observer of physical detail, notes the transformation: "Nnu Ego noticed that Adaku was better dressed – not that she wore anything new, but she put on her good clothes even on ordinary market days. She laughed a lot now; Nnu Ego had never known her to have such a sense of humour" (p. 171). This description is crucial. Her improved dress signifies newfound economic agency, while her laughter signals a liberation of spirit that manifests physically. Her body is no longer a locus of anxiety and lack but becomes a signifier of confidence and self-possession.

Furthermore, Adaku's rebellion is not solely individualistic; it is intergenerational. Her primary motivation is to use the economic capital generated by her body to secure a different future for her daughters, thereby breaking the cycle of patriarchal dependence. She explicitly tells Nnu Ego of her plan to enroll them in school: "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" (p. 168). This decision is revolutionary. In a society where girls are valued only for their bride price, Adaku invests in their minds, redefining their value through education rather than marriage. Her body, once devalued for producing daughters, becomes the very instrument of their liberation. In this, she fulfills the meaning of her name, "daughter of wealth," not through inheritance from a man, but through wealth she generates and controls herself. She articulates this new identity to Nnu Ego: "'I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship'" (p. 171). This statement encapsulates her pragmatic feminism: she rejects the institution of marriage but not necessarily men, seeking "companionship" on her own terms while maintaining her autonomy and dignity.

Adaku's narrative does not romanticize prostitution as an easy escape. Emecheta is clear-eyed about the compromises and stigma involved. However, by centering on Adaku's agency, calculation, and ultimate success, the novel presents her path as a valid and powerful form of counter-narrative. She crafts a new definition of womanhood "contrary to societally constructed feminine labels" (Edebor, p. 196), one that is self-authored, economically grounded, and focused on securing a future free from the oppressive institutions that destroyed Nnu Ego. She becomes the embodiment of the woman Nnu Ego could only dream of: "a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage" (p. 186).

Conclusion: Embodied Counter-Histories and the Struggle for a "Full Human Being"

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* endures as a classic of African literature not simply because it documents oppression, but because it meticulously charts the complex and varied textures of resistance that emerge from within it. Through the starkly contrasted yet equally powerful embodied narratives of Nnu Ego and Adaku, Emecheta constructs a sophisticated feminist critique that refuses simplistic binaries of victimhood and liberation. The novel demonstrates that resistance is not a monolithic act but a spectrum of responses, each shaped by the constraints and possibilities of the body within intersecting systems of power.

Nnu Ego's resistance, though internalized and tragic, is no less significant. Her slow somatic realization of her own imprisonment, her silent endurance that serves as a living indictment of the institution of motherhood, and her final, supernatural act of refusal in the afterlife, together form a potent counter-narrative of suffering. Her body becomes an archive of pain, a testament to the devastating cost of patriarchal bargains. Her story ensures that this cost is not forgotten, etched into the collective memory of the community through the legend of her "wicked"

ghost. Hers is the resistance of the witness, whose very physical disintegration speaks volumes about the system that consumed her.

Adaku's resistance, by contrast, is external, pragmatic, and focused on futurity. Her radical reclamation of her body from the reproductive economy to the commercial economy, her blasphemous rejection of predetermined destiny, and her strategic investment in her daughters' education constitute a counter-narrative of audacious self-authorization. Her body transforms from a site of marginalization into a source of capital and a tool for liberation. She represents the possibility of crafting a new existence outside the traditional boundaries of womanhood, defining dignity on her own terms.

Read together, these two embodied journeys form a complete and devastating critique. They show that whether one submits or rebels, the system itself is pathological, forcing women into impossible choices that exact a tremendous toll, whether through physical disintegration or social transgression. The novel's title, *The Joys of Motherhood*, thus resonates with profound irony, pointing not to a natural state of fulfillment but to a cruel ideological construct that masks a structure of exploitation.

Ultimately, Emecheta's literary project is to center women's embodied experiences as a form of history itself – a counter-history to the dominant narratives of male heroism, colonial progress, and patriarchal tradition. The female body in her novel is the fundamental site where these grand narratives are tested, experienced, and ultimately rewritten. It is a medium of memory, preserving the pain of the past; a site of power, where autonomy is fiercely negotiated; and a source of transformation, offering the potential for new futures, as seen in Adaku's daughters.

The novel's enduring power lies in its unwavering focus on the question Nnu Ego poses in a moment of desperate clarity: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (p. 186). Emecheta's answer is that such a woman is not created by God or tradition but must create herself. This self-creation is the ultimate political act, and as Nnu Ego and Adaku demonstrate, it is a struggle waged first and foremost within and through the material reality of the body itself. Their stories, in all their tragedy and triumph, remain a powerful testament to the relentless human quest to become, against all odds, that "full human being."

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