

THE ENIGMA OF TRAUMATIZED ‘WOMANHOOD’ IN BUCHI EMECHETA’S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD* AND ALICE WALKER’S *THE COLOUR PURPLE*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract– Literature, to speak the term momentarily, mostly tends to portray the patriarchal ideology as it has been dominated by male master-narratives since time immemorial. Even if the male narratives speak in terms of the domination of women, it seems to explore from the male perspective which is very scanty and restricted, as the experience of men and the experience of women are poles apart. It is only after the emergence of the female writers who raised their voice against the master narratives, the plight of women can be closely understood. The two black women writers; Buchi Emecheta from African- Nigerian literature and Alice Walker from African- American literature are considered as the instigators of women's authorization in the literary genre. *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Colour Purple* are the two seminal works credited to them respectively, which reflects the plight of women in their respective patriarchal society. Representative of the women of African/African-American literature, these narratives deal with themes like trauma, identity, and community affiliation in African Nigerian and African-American society respectively. Highlighting the fractured and displaced nation-state as the site of a radical absurdity between individual fulfilment and communal harmony, this article postulates the theme of ‘womanhood’ and the traumatic situation they had to undergo to attain the ambiguous stages of it. The level of thematic content and characterization in these novels is an aesthetic condition of the African/African-American literature as it strives to narrate the openness and undecidability of the postcolonial condition and the fundamental instability of history and identity-formation in their contemporary society.

Keywords - Trauma, Pain, Black Feminism, Violence, Motherhood, Womanism, Womanist.

The feminist movement was initially a middle-class white women’s movement to fight against the oppression of women. Although it addresses and fights for gender equality and the rights of women, it rarely included women of colour. In the first wave, which is in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they fought for suffrage rights for white women and the second wave was on cultural and social rights which involved sexuality, family laws, work, and reproductive rights. Nowhere had it explicitly or overtly included the rights and equality for women of colour. During that period, these women of colour, especially the African and African-American women were not only suffering from political and social inequalities

similar to the white women but also racially due to their skin colour and ethnicity. This is why many women could not associate themselves with the feminist movement and they found themselves identified and related to this new term 'womanist' first introduced by the African- American novelist Alice Walker. Another difference that can be marked out between feminists and womanists is that some white women find men as their enemy for their fight for equality and on the other hand, womanists not only fight for themselves but also against the oppression of the African-American men as both men and women have faced oppression in terms of race and class. Correspondingly, Buchi Emecheta also deals with the two-fold oppression of women in her works. Quoting her work "Feminism with a Small 'f'",

I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f. (175)

Though Emecheta objects herself of being projected as a feminist but her ideas as represented in her works forces her to be called as Feminist with a big 'F'. Her works are considerably loud and clear about her ideas as a feminist. Her portrayal of women characters gives the reader a lens through which one can get a clear view of what Nigerian society is made of.

Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History* discussed the theory of trauma in detail. According to her, 'trauma' is wound that is inflicted on the mind/psyche rather than the heart and also interpreted 'trauma' as a double injury because of the wound of the psyche, is an event that is originally experienced too unexpectedly and overwhelmingly to be fully known, and is unavailable to the unconscious until it inflicts itself again in repetitive actions and nightmares of the survivor. The theory of 'trauma' was first implemented by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, but later he abandoned his theory and shifted to the realm of psychoanalysis.

'Trauma' theory has its origin from the early 1960s, from various social concern such as "recognition of the prevalence of violence against women and children (rape, battering, incest); identification of the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder in (Vietnam) war veterans; and awareness of the psychic scar inflicted by torture and genocide, especially in regard to Holocaust" (Sprengnether 250). The ideas of trauma, memories of trauma are fundamentally important in shaping one individual as it causes further damage to the psyche. 'Trauma' is usually defined as an injury to the body or psyche by some type of shock, violence or unanticipated incident and it usually results from adverse life experiences that devastate an individual's capacity to cope with a threat they may be faced with (Van der kolk, 1996). And usually, there are diverse types of trauma such as complex trauma that includes exposure to traumatic events which are usually severe and invasive; post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma caused by sexual abuse, etc. Both the female protagonist that is taken for study undergoes various traumatic events caused by the prevalent patriarchal society.

In relevance to it, the theory of 'trauma' is inter-related to the notion of 'abjection' and 'pain'. In her work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry talks about the 'creators' and 'sufferers' of pain. According to her 'pain' resists language and destroys it, as a result sounds like cry, groan etc. forms replacing language. The protagonist, Celie in the novel *The Colour Purple* breaks language by adopting the mode of writing. Her use of writing as a mode of resistance helped her to transform from a voiceless to a woman with a voice. Moreover the concept of 'abjection' as deployed by Julia Kristeva in her ground-breaking work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. According to Bataille's analysis, the terms 'abject' and 'abjection' existed in various languages but had not been used in scholarship. Epistemologically the word 'Abjection' comes from the Latin *abicere*, which means 'to throw away' or 'to cast off, away, or out'. In English the term 'abject' is listed as an adjective which has two similar meanings: (1) Extremely unpleasant and degrading: living in abject poverty. (2) Completely without pride or dignity: an abject apology (OED, p. 3).² From the above definitions we see that the terms 'abject' and 'abjection' can be used in different but related senses to refer to an operation (to make abject) and a condition (abjection).

Thus both these novels explore the theme of 'womanhood' and the traumatic situation they had to undergo to attain the ambiguous stages of it. Therefore, taking the above critical theory as base, this article studies the two female protagonists, Nnu Ego and Celie, of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta and *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker respectively and their struggles of being a woman in the prevalent patriarchal society. It also attempts to show the condition of women through the experience of black female protagonists who is doubly colonized, first at the hands of patriarchy and second by the colonial masters.

Florence Onyebuchi "Buchi" Emecheta was famously known as Buchi Emecheta. She is a Nigerian novelist born on 21st July 1944 to a 'igbo' family in Lagos. She is famous for portraying the plight of women in the patriarchal 'igbo' society in her works which include: *In the Ditch* (1972), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Wrestling Match* (1980), *The Moonlight Bride* (1980), *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Naira Power* (1982), *Double Yolke* (1989), *The Family* (1990), *Head Above Water* (1994), *Second Class Citizen* (1994), and *Kehinde* (1994) including some short stories. Her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979 shows the experience of a woman born in the patriarchal 'igbo' society. Through the female protagonist, Nnu Ego, this novel shows the pre and post-motherhood circumstances of a woman in the prevalent society. It also demonstrates the amount of excessive fear of not attaining motherhood and the fear of loss of her identity, ultimately leaving traumatic traces on her. Most of Emecheta's novels dramatize the traumatic circumstances that African women typically encounter in a traditional, male-oriented society. The themes in her works include gender violence, child marriage, virginity cult, and objectification of womanhood, sexual harassment, and most importantly the necessity of being fertile.

Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* shows the life of a Nigerian woman named Nnu Ego whose mother was Ona and father Nwokocha Agbadi. Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief who had seven wives and many mistresses but did not have a male heir. Agbadi wished to marry Ona, the daughter of the village chief Obi Umunna who eventually refused him according to her father's wish. But after many attempts of impressing Ona with his brave personality, she agreed to marry Agbadi at last. But their marriage was set with the condition that if Ona gives birth to a boy child, it will be inherited by her father and if she gives birth to a girl Agbadi will rear it. In due course, after the marriage of Agbadi and Ona, a girl, Nnu Ego was born which is to be reared by Agbadi. As Agbadi was the chief of his village, he owned many wives and slaves, along with many children, but Nnu Ego was his favorite. The prominent aspect that this novel portrays is the 'trauma' of motherhood. One of the important incidents that are described is the tragic death of one of Agbadi's slave girl, who was captured during the war. She was a beautiful slave girl named Agunwa, who was forced to die when Agbadi's senior wife died. It was the tradition of the society that if the owner of the slave dies, the slave had to sacrifice its life and had to be buried so that the owner would not face any kind of difficulty in the other world. The slave girl Agunwa was supposed to jump into the grave willingly with Agbadi's wife, but as she refused to do so, she was hit on her head by Agbadi's son and she died by continuously cursing Agbadi and promising to come back. This shows the violence faced by the slave women within its domestic boundary. The male bodies have the ultimate authority to decide the fate of a woman. This incident is connected to the life of Agbadi's beloved daughter Nnu Ego, who was born with a lump on her head. The locals and the village 'dibia' (the native doctor) believed that the lump of Nnu Ego's head is on the exact place where the slave girl Agunwa was hit and that the chi or the spirit of the slave girl would continuously antagonize Nnu Ego.

As Nnu Ego grows up she was hitched to a handsome man named Amatokwu at the age of 17. After their marriage Nnu Ego was unable to conceive which led her to live a traumatic life. In the Nigerian- Igbo society, to be precise, fertility is one of the most important aspects of a woman's life, and a woman without a child is considered to be a curse. They believed that the more the woman is productive, the more she is sacred. And failing to conceive after various attempts made her face humiliation in her course of the marriage. The concept of motherhood and fertility is a society based concept rather than the choice of an individual. The thought of attaining the state of a perfect woman; that is by giving birth to a child and being mother haunted her. As a result, Amatokwu takes a second wife who gives birth to a son very soon after her introduction to the household. Though jealous of the second wife, Nnu Ego is very much attracted to the child, she even breast-feeds him during the second wife's absence. When Amatokwu beats Nnu Ego after witnessing the tenderness between her and the child, Nnu Ego's father comes to the compound and takes Nnu Ego home with him. This portrays how violence takes place within marital boundaries. The male has the power to physically abuse the female without any explanation. African women are subjected to psychological violence and pressure when they cannot meet some socially established rules in their community. This implies that a man, and even by the entire community, can complain about her wife when she fails to give birth. Nnu Ego was not

surprised when Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. “My father is desperate. It is now known that your chi came from the people down by the river. Their women are said to be very strong. I am sorry; Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people (*The Joys of Motherhood* 30). He also comments “I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line” (*The Joys of Motherhood* 31). From the above-made comments, it can be perceived that women are married only to give birth and an infertile woman does not belong to the category of the human being.

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* depicts violence perpetrated against women in a highly patriarchal society. The novel successfully portrays the rules of the African Igbo society where the male society is provided with the ultimate power. Here, two types of violence are portrayed, internally and externally, that is, psychological and physical. In a general way, violence is interpreted as abuse by intimate partners and other family members and is manifested through physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, economic deprivation, and acts of omission. Physical violence is an extremely forceful action that is intended to hurt. It includes unfair or cruel treatment of somebody and can take many forms, such as physical aggression or assault, that is to say, hitting, kicking, biting, slapping, shoving, etc. Psychological violence on the other hand is the effects some words and behaviors of male characters may have on female ones. The recurring events of ‘pain’ that is inflicted on her led her to break the silence by committing ‘suicide’.

The practice of polygamy and domestic slavery also shows the violence against women in the relevant Igbo society. According to their society, a man can marry as many wives and live with them, and violence against women is also a part of masculine power. A man was allowed to marry new wives if their former ones fail them to produce children or becomes old enough to satisfy their needs. Women in this society were pressurized or forced to be a mother to proof their purpose of living. If a woman is infertile, she is considered as a shame and an ‘object’ and the husband is legally free to marry once again. The women after then become psychologically traumatized when taunted by the society which leads to torture,

Agbadi brings Nnu Ego back and marries her to another man called NnaifeOwulum, an overweight, homely man who lives in Lagos and launders clothes for a white couple named Meers. Nnaife, Nnu Ego’s second husband, also exerts psychological violence on her during sexual intercourse that very night she has come to Lagos to join him. With him, Nnu finally gives birth to a child but dies after a few weeks. Disappointed by the fact she tries to commit suicide because she thought herself incapable of fulfilling the needs of society. But later she conceived many children. When Nnu Ego gives born to a twin, two baby girls, Nnaife even doesn’t choose their names. Nnu Ego says disappointedly: “they don’t deserve a suitable name” (p. 14). She names one of them Taiwo-she who came first- and the second one Kehinde. Accordingly, Emecheta is depicting a society in which it is gender which determines the value of human beings. Female characters are regarded as the subject of double oppression by the intersection of oppressive forces of race, gender, and class. They are created just to serve men.

In the context of the society of Lagos, it is difficult for husbands to maintain that sense of responsibility that they previously acquired in their tribal community. Women are victims that are victimized by their husbands as they (men) are unable to provide for their families regularly. They are away for long and mothers have to work to secure a better livelihood. Men are either working as servants for white families or are forced to join the colonizers' army to fight in wars as mercenaries. On the other hand, women are forced to leave their houses and go to the market to work to be able to sustain their families. Nnu Ego too after finally giving birth to many children goes to the market to earn while Nnaife was away to fight for the colonizers. After his brother's death, Nnaife had to inherit his last wife Adaku which he brings with himself to Lagos to live with Nnu Ego and their children. It is the rule of Igbo society that if one a man dies, his younger sibling had to inherit all his wealth including his wife and children. This concludes into a rivalry between Nnu Ego and Adaku. Adaku, who had two daughters, finally chooses her life into prostitution. This also shows the condition of a woman's life in colonial Nigeria, where women had limited choices regarding their livelihood.

Correspondently Alice Walker's novel, *The Colour Purple*, which is an outstanding portrayal of the epistolary style, exhibits the narrative of the life of a woman in the African-American society. The novel's protagonist, Celie is a black woman who lives in rural Georgia in the 1930's. The novel unapologetically celebrates black women who challenge authority while also recounting the immense pains and abuse suffered at the hands of unequal relations exacerbated by dominant patriarchy. The story revolves around Celie and her sister Nettie. Walker exposes the prevalent patriarchy and how men – in this case, even the disenfranchised black men – dominate women. It is about the trials and tribulations faced by a black woman under extreme abuse, violence, and oppression and her journey are one of self-discovery and resilience to attain a sense of identity, and freedom under extremely difficult and hostile conditions. The novel is also praised for its eloquent use of language and the depth of its female characters.

The narrative of the novel revolves around the character of Celie, who, as her character is introduced, is a black girl of fourteen and lives in the state of Georgia. She has been raped and impregnated by her father twice and the children were taken away by her father and sold. Celie is shown to have experienced abuse at the hands of both her father and her husband, whom she addresses as 'Mister' throughout the novel. Her sister Nettie had a great influence in her character as she helped her to learn how to read and write and it is through her, she was able to explore the world outside her simultaneously malevolent and banal sphere. And the arrival of Shug Avery, the former lover of Mister changed her life from a weak and submissive woman to a strong and independent woman, even as this process is initiated by Sofia, another strong and independent but reactionary character. Almost all the female characters have contributed to transforming her life, as the story unfolds, for the better. At the end of the novel, Celie becomes independent and possesses great emotional strength and power to define herself. As a poor African-American woman in rural Georgia and a victim of domestic abuse, Celie is almost completely invisible as an individual.

Walker's use of Celie's own voice, however underdeveloped allows Walker to tell the history of black women in the rural south realistically.

The novel begins as Celie writing a letter to God, Celie was threatened by her father and was forced to come into physical relationship with her father. Celie who is a silent character at the beginning of the novel tells her story through letters. Almost all her letters have been addressed to God, as her father told her, "You better not never tell nobody but God" (*The Colour Purple*7). The fact that the letter is addressed to God, rather than to a human, emphasizes the idea that Celie is entirely alone and isolated. Celie assumes that God will understand her situation and somehow intervene to help her. This has given a voice to a silent character who got silenced by patriarchy and is uneducated.

After Celie gave birth to her first child, she says it was taken away by God and killed, and the second child, a son was taken away by her father and sold. She expresses her grief for not being able to experience motherhood. Despite giving birth, motherhood was taken away from her by the patriarchal force. The repetitive physical and psychological 'trauma' she faced at the hands of her worsened when was married to a man whom she calls Mister.

Alice Walker, who was famously attributed to the word 'womanist' was first introduced in her prose work, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: A Womanist Prose*.

First, Walker says,

Womanist is from the southern folk expression "womanish". It usually refers to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression "You are trying to be grown" Responsible. In charge. Serious.(1983: xi).

To give light to this aspect of Womanism, the novel has characters like Nettie, Sofia and Shug Avery. Sofia, the wife of Harpo, is a strong female character who is determined to assert her independence by rejecting traditional ideas about a woman's role in African-American society. Living in a domestic sphere, she is the one who holds the house rather than her husband. She even has a natural ability in 'manly' activities like heavy outdoor work and domestic repairs and she takes all the domestic decisions, subverting the traditional male-female hierarchy and she wants a partnership relationship in their marriage, not a master-servant relationship. Her character is outrageous and courageous as she rejects completely the systematic oppression that engulfed the position of the black woman. She even slaps and knocks down the mayor who is a white man, which finally brings her misfortune. Similarly, Nettie and Shug are also courageous and audacious. Nettie by her education and Shug by her independent character shows this aspect of womanism throughout the novel. Later on, Celie also realizes to adopt this "womanish" attitude with the help of these women characters. It is to be marked that all these characters are not considered as 'good' by society and are victimized for not falling under the stereotypical women of their society. All these characters, especially Celie grows up as the growth of the novel. With Shug, Celie finds her own voice

and leaves her husband and in Memphis, she starts her own business by sewing pants. She learned that women can be equal to men in knowledge, power, and finance. When Celie returns to Georgia, she is no longer weak and submissive instead she has become independent and skilled with a voice of her own. Thus the synthesis of their individual struggles results in a resolution that makes all the women succeed at the end because of their “womanish” behavior.

Secondly, Alice Walker writes,

A womanist is a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to the survival of and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally, Universalist. (1983: xi).

Alice Walker shows the relationship between the women characters and their way of celebrating womanhood. She shows the motherly, sisterly, and womanly relationship between them. Walker refers to Celie’s and Nettie’s relationship as motherly more than a sisterly relationship. At the very beginning of the novel, when Celie was pregnant by her father and the child was taken away from her, Nettie was always there for her. Similarly, when their mother passed away, Celie played the role of mother and protected Nettie from her father and after marriage from her husband. Celie didn’t wish Nettie to be like her and used to send her to school. On the other hand, Nettie helped Celie to read and write. Even when both the sisters were separated by Mr. they were connected through the medium of letters. Through her letters, Nettie tries to give Celie the knowledge of the outer world and through her journey as a missionary, Nettie encourages her to be more enthusiastic and optimistic about life. During the time of distress, pain, and depression, writing letters became their only option. These letters are confessions of those moments of powerlessness wherein she has no one to talk to.

Alice Walker has shown the women coming together both sexually and non-sexually. Celie is shown sexually attached to Shug Avery and emotionally attached to Sofia and her sister Nettie. The relationship between Shug and Celie is also very important throughout the novel. When Celie first lays eyes on Shug, in her husband’s house, she thinks Shug looks glamorous and instantly begins to take a liking to her. She says’ “First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man”(*The Colour Purple* 35). Shug and Celie’s relationship is based on shared experiences and were the help of each other. ‘Lesbianism’ is one of the sub-themes of the novel and the relationship between Shug and Celie does have lesbian traits. Lesbianism is a manner that symbolizes counter-revolution against the male privileged society and the dominant hetero-normative arc that positions Celie and the other women in positions of inferiority and vulnerability. It refuses male authority in the sexual regime. And as the black women were used as slaves by the patriarchal society, the women found themselves secured on the company of another woman. It is after the arrival of Shug that Celie’s life seems to transform. Shug helps Celie to fight and to explore her beauty, which leads to an intimate

relationship with Shug. Through Shug, she learns to love herself as a woman and gradually tries to have a voice of her own. And after Celie left her husband's house, it is Shug who helps Celie who takes much care of Celie and guides her in her journey as an independent woman. With Shug, she was able to express her hidden talent for making clothes. The novel at the end focuses on a female-defined community, where the one who was pushed aside became the center and equal with the patriarchal society.

Next, Walker defines,

A womanist as the one who loves music. Loves Dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless (1983: xii).

Walker has incorporated this aspect of Womanism by showing the love and affection overpowering the struggles of their life. Walker believes that doing something to achieve one's own identity is not a matter of shame. The novel focuses on the trauma of the women working hard in search of her own identity. Quilt-making, needle-works, sewing, singing, and dancing are shown as qualities that are stereotyped with a woman to discriminate them from the man. But using these qualities to give voice to a voiceless makes the females of the novel a womanist. In the novel, we see Shug Avery as a Blues singer who sings open stage without fearing the society. In the end, Celie too becomes an independent woman by sewing pants for women which was rather rebelling because women in the 1930s did not wear pants. The novel also focuses on the power of writing, that too by a woman. Celie who is a silent character at the beginning of the novel tells her story through letters. Almost all her letters have been addressed to God, as her father told her, "You better not never tell nobody but God" (*The Colour Purple*7). The fact that the letter is addressed to God, rather than to a human, emphasizes the idea that Celie is entirely alone and isolated. Celie assumes that God will understand her situation and somehow intervene to help her. This has given a voice to a silent character who is silenced by patriarchy and is uneducated.

This shows that a woman loves everything and everyone in a way to empower herself. The female characters of the novel are seen happy to live by surpassing all the struggles in their life. Thus in the last letter Celie addresses and thanks to everyone and everything, "Dear God, Dear Stars, Dear Trees, Dear Sky, Dear Peoples, Dear Everything"(*The Colour Purple*130). This is how Walker celebrates Womanhood in this novel.

Finally, she notes, "Womanist is to Feminist as purple is to lavender." (1983: xii).

Alice Walker uses the color 'purple' for womanist and 'lavender' for feminist to suggest that Womanism is a darker shade of Feminism. It is the movement for women of darker color. The title of the text focuses on this aspect of Womanism. In fact, the color 'purple' has several connotations throughout the novel. Purple, here can be associated with beauty and independence. Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it"(*The Colour Purple*98) and teaches Celie that God has created little things like the color 'purple' to make them happy. She motivates her to

enjoy life and herself as a woman because God wants them to do so. At the beginning of the novel, Celie does not prefer wearing purple but at the end of the novel, when Celie possesses a house of her own, she wanted everything in purple color. This suggests the color 'purple' emerged in association with independence. It also signifies equality between men and women when Celie's husband gifts her a purple frog.

Thus it can be concluded by saying that women are always objected to the norms of patriarchal society. In both the novels, Emecheta and Walker have created characters who challenge the so-called norms of society who are surrounded by restrictive discourses, which turn them into the ultimate other wherever they go. Both the protagonists, Celie and Nnu Ego were dominated by the white English community due to her ethnic origins and colonial roots, and by the black community due to their desires. The recurring moments of 'trauma' and 'pain' which ultimately turned them as 'abjects' of their society later counter-revolves and turns their character into an empowered one.

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