



Gender Violence as Masculine Strategy in Buchi Emecheta's *the Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

*Men studies deal with the study of boys' and men's behaviours. It is a field that has been designed to explore and explain why men engage in behaviours that are harmful to women and themselves. The paper seeks to investigate the various strategies that male characters use when they feel their masculinity is threatened as presented in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Emecheta. The paper employs qualitative research methodology with textual analysis as the principal mode of data collection, description and interpretation. The study assesses the role of the unconscious and human relationships in the manifested behaviours of the male characters through the lens of psychoanalysis. Some of the strategies discovered include: violence, alcoholism, sexual domination, compensation, divorce, and polygyny. Also, marginalized male characters attempt to compensate for their subordinated status by resisting hegemonic manhood and enacting alternative forms of masculinity.*

Keywords: *Masculinity, Unconscious, Domination, Compensation, and Hegemony*

Introduction

In his book *Manhood in the Making*, (Gilmore, 1990) asks: "Are men everywhere alike in their concern for being 'manly'? If so why? Why is the demand for male to "be a man" or "act

like a man" voiced in so many places? And why are boys and youths so often tested or indoctrinated before being awarded their manhood?" These questions are not openly asked

especially in African cultures. However, this paper examines their significance in analyzing the male character's social gender construction in order to understand their roles in the society. This should hopefully reveal why not all male characters attain the status of the "ideal manhood" in the selected texts. Therefore, male characters must make a personal decision and live by societal norms of social gender construction designated by the community in which they live. Though such qualities and attributes or images often become psychic nuances or psychological traits, and for most men, they can serve as a foundation for selfhood and self-respect. Similarly, Gilmore further posits that there is a belief that real manhood is different from simple biological maleness. Hence, maleness is not a physiological state that just occurs to a male character through biological designation; however, it is a social training that compels young males to struggle and win against their opponents. In case of failure, such an individual may be the subject of ridicule and despair among his age group. Attaining ideal manhood is an impossible fantasy in almost all societies, and this causes threats to one's self-esteem that need urgent reconstruction. Thus, depending on strict principles of significant action many men become breadwinners, domestic servants, farmers, protectors, and warriors in order to enact their concept of maleness. This is an exclusive status; hence there are always male characters who will fail to live up to the challenge. These male characters are the negative examples, the emasculated men -- men who are subjugated by other men, held up disdainfully to enthrone compliance to the acceptable ideal (Gilmore, 1990). Male characters that belong to this group include Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood*. They are men whose egos have been weakened due to their bad choices in life or by fear of taking risks like their age mates.

Male characters and violence

Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) argues that people are instinctively forced by an impulse to "kill". He classifies two types of instincts which direct the individual mind: life instincts (Eros) which drive a person to look for pleasure of essential needs or gratification, and death instincts (Thanatos) which are aggressive and goaded to obliterate. These assumptions tally with the research premise that male characters use violence to assert their manhood even if that could lead to their demise. For example, in *A Woman in her Prime*, (1967) the narrator states that the death of Yaw Boakye is as a result of his effort to defend

his manhood in a masculine combat where the stronger would batter the weaker one to death. Similarly, it is assumed that when male characters are deprived of social influence and wealth necessary for enacting ideal manhood, they must search for other ways of constructing gender roles that authenticate their maleness (Messerschmidt, 1993). As such, to construct hegemonic masculinity, physical power and aggression are needed for structuring, negotiating and sustaining it, particularly among male characters. For example, Nnaife becomes annoyed when his wife keeps comparing him with her former husband, making Nnaife less than a man. So, on one occasion, he threatens to beat her: “The day you mention Amatokwu’s name in this house again I shall give you the greatest beating you ever had. You spoilt, selfish woman! You who put Amatokwu’s manhood in question so that he had to marry again quickly and have children in quick succession” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 49).

Aggression is thus one of the devices serving as a means for male characters to reaffirm their maleness. It is that fear, as put by Freud in *Oedipus Rex* (2007) – the anxiety that one’s masculine identity can be castrated that has enormous psychological repercussions on men. For example, when Kehinde in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), refuses to accept Nnaife’s choice of a husband, she runs to a man of her choice; this action consequently, angers and threatens Nnaife’s status as a man and father. His reaction clearly spells doom: Nnaife runs out from his house cutlass in hand and on reaching the butcher’s house, “Nnaife’s cutlass landed once on the young man’s shoulder and he let out a piercing scream. The cutlass then slashed at the wriggling man the second time” (p. 209). Nnaife does this to avenge the pain that his daughter’s abductors caused him. This shows how a person is willing to kill another man to protect his family’s name without minding the consequences of his action.

Violence, as a masculine trait is thus manifested when Nnaife’s honour is at stake. He subconsciously resorts to his village masculinity by threatening people, “But I came from my village! If my daughter has been touched by your son, know this: that when these people leave, I shall kill you” (p. 210). As a result, the police come to arrest him for violating the societal ethics since he could not listen to the voice of his superego.

Sexual domination by male characters

Sexual domination is another aspect of male character which, in the Freudian way of interpretation is called phallogocentric by many contemporary thinkers.

This is because, for Freud, the unconscious always wishes to fulfill the desires of the phallus (penis). Male characters are fearful of castration -- losing their manhood to the other. Females are always aspiring to have a phallus -- an unachievable craving. Hence, male children dislike their father for fear of castration and female children covet the phallus. For Freud, craving is always linked to the negative feelings of lack - you always covet what you do not have or what you are not and it is very doubtful that you will accomplish this aspiration. Sexual domination is therefore seen as the commonest device utilized by male characters to assert their manhood especially on their female partners. According to Berkowitz, (1992), sexually aggressive acts involve a range of behaviours including disregard and neglect of one's partner indicating that intimacy is not reciprocal, threatening violence, or use of power to obtain sexual gratification (p. 175). This attitude is captured in *The Joys of Motherhood* where the narrator reports that – at times Agbadi's young wives would show signs of sexual neglect; until he would be reminded to do his duty by them, and then when they become pregnant he would not be seen in their huts till the time to mate them again (Emecheta, pp. 12 – 13). This act alone is tantamount to sexual neglect, control and manipulation. The man is at liberty to engage with any woman he desires; on the other hand, he starves his wives of conjugal intimacy.

Saida Grundy, (2014) in her work, "The Making of Men..." posits that:

There are points in the process where men don't arrange themselves in relation to each other via individual competition or categorical domination over subordinate groups of men. At these points, male hegemony is universal because all men can access patriarchal hegemony over women. (p. 165)

As a consequence, male characters whose masculinity is challenged or those who want to prove their manhood may use the strength of their phallus to dominate their partners. For example, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the narrator reports that Ibuza people say that Ona, Agbadi's mistress has bewitched him, that she has a kind of power over him. They lament about how a man in his right mind can leave his big spacious house where women are willing to worship him and serve him in all ways, and go after an egocentric woman like Ona. However, for Agbadi to prove people wrong and to dominate Ona, he waits for the right chance. This comes when Ona decides to nurse him after almost getting killed

by an angry elephant in a hunting expedition. One night while she is sleeping, Agbadi slides from his goatskin mat to join her and makes love to her. After conquering her sexually, Ona hates Agbadi by stating that “All this show [making her scream] just for your people, Agbadi”? Thereafter, unable to control herself Ona weeps and sobs quietly from self pity (Emecheta, pp. 20-21). This proves that men use their sexuality to not only dominate women but to equally humiliate them.

Another instance is when Nnaife senses that his new bride does not approve of him as an ideal ‘husband’, because at first glance, “She despised him on that first night, especially when people began to take their exaggerated leave” (pp. 43-44). However, in line with Freudian phallus domination, to assert his manhood “[Nnaife] demanded his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind. She had thought she would be allowed to rest at least on the first night after her arrival before being pounced upon by this hungry man, her new husband” (p. 44). After that experience, the next morning Nnu Ego feels humiliated, “She knew she must have cried all night long and that the older Owulum had been there listening, congratulating his brother in his heart” (Emecheta, p. 44). Her thoughts, therefore, conform to Freudian concepts of the Ego; because this experience leaves Nnaife feeling fulfilled as a man, and his brother full of gratitude that his younger one has not disappointed him.

Alcoholism by male characters

Sigmund Freud stresses that humans are born "polymorphously perverse", meaning that any number of objects could be a source of pleasure. He further argues that, as children develop, they become obsessed with diverse and specific objects through their stages of maturity—as in the oral stage which is demonstrated by an infant's pleasure in suckling, then in the anal stage which is demonstrated by a child's pleasure in toileting, and then in the phallic stage. Majors and Billson, (1992), suggest that compulsive masculinity can lead toward substance abuse such as smoking, drug and alcohol consumption, hostility, sexual manipulation, control and intimidation. Pyke, (1996), also agrees that emasculated men who brazenly use drugs, alcohol, and sexual gratification do so as a form of cover for their lost self-worth. Alcoholism, thus, has been the trend for male characters as a form of male socialization strategy as well as a succor for dumping any threats to their status.

Wine and tobacco are acceptable pass-time delicacies of the male characters in Ibuza. For instance, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the narrator explains that for Nnaife to subdue his frustrations and anger, he always seeks solace in alcohol. For example, when Kehinde declares that she will only marry a Yoruba man, Nnaife goes behind the curtain in their room and has a glass of chilled palm wine to subdue his anger. Similarly, some of the female characters have become accustomed to this strategy as used by their men especially under psychological pressure. The narrator further reports that whenever Cordelia and Nnu Ego have squabbles, their husbands normally seek refuge in wine: Nnu Ego says, “I bet the men pray we quarrel often, since they usually settle our differences with palm wine. My Nnaife looks for any opportunity to buy himself some.” (Emecheta, p 87)

The study corroborates a research in the United States of America which found that young males used drugs and alcohol to advance their public images (Bonnie and O’Connell, 2003). In many settings, male characters’ drinking promotes team spirit and kindles bravery. Drinking is also a group ritual as well as an entertaining behaviour that brings together all the male characters in the community. This is shown by the narrator in *The Joys of Motherhood*, when he reports that two days after Nnu Ego’s wedding, her in-laws bring wine to Agbadi’s household to thank them for raising such a precious daughter: “They did so with six full kegs of palm wine. Agbadi smiled contentedly and invited everybody in his own compound to drink” (Emecheta, p. 31). Simultaneously, local women are persuaded to tolerate male characters’ drunkenness as part of masculine traits. Indeed, male characters tend to respond to stressful or threatening events with externalizing behaviours such as alcohol and tobacco use. Also, some men drink so that drunkenness can be assumed to be the excuse for their incapacity to satisfy their women.

Compensation by male characters

According to Freud, defence mechanisms are the devices by which the ego can mediate between the super-ego and the id. The use of defence mechanisms may attenuate the conflict between the id and super-ego, but when inappropriately used, they can lead to either apprehension or remorse, which may result in emotional disorders such as despair. Compensation is one of Sigmund Freud’s defence mechanisms. Compensation is the process of masking perceived depressing self-worth by developing positive behavior or what might reinstate

individual self-esteem to make up for and to cover apparent depressing self-concepts. Freud's defence mechanisms are used on pride, ego, and self-worth. Compensation, therefore, saves the ego from dishonour and humiliation. Alfred Adler, a psychologist also suggests that whenever people experience feelings of inadequacy, they involuntarily experience a compensatory desire to struggle for dominance. As a result, male characters push themselves to conquer their subjugations and attain their aspirations. These assertions, therefore, corroborate the researcher's finding that male characters whose manhood is challenged apply compensation as a defence mechanism to suppress their negative feelings of inferiority.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the narrator explains that when Nnaife loses his job, he stays at home and looks after their child while Nnu Ego goes to her stall. This arrangement makes Nnaife feel that it robs him of his status as a man, and a provider and turns him into a redundant man who has to rely on his wife. However, to compensate and exert his manhood, "[Nnaife] would find any excuse to pick a quarrel with Nnu Ego" and threaten her with violence (Emecheta, p. 87). Additionally, when Nnaife's pride as a husband is hurt because Adaku, his second wife has abdicated her matrimonial duties and is doing well without his support, he decides to go for Adankwo in his village. After establishing and claiming his conjugal right, he brings back to Lagos a new wife Okpo. This singular act buttresses Nnaife's ego and affirms his pride among men, to the consternation of his senior wife (p. 184).

Divorce by male characters

Any psychological process in analyzing masculinity has to do with male psychic development. This is based directly on traditional interpretations of Freudian *Oedipus complex* and its resultant castration apprehension. For example, male characters fear being labeled as impotent due to their inability to impregnate their wives, because this could lead to either their being divorced by their partners or being forced to take another wife. For instance, in the case of Amatokwu in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the narrator reports that Nnu Ego is the first to express her fear for failing to conceive: "What am I going to do Amatokwu?" Amatokwu advises her to "Just make sacrifices" (p. 31). However, when his father begins to look at him in a strange way, Amatokwu begins to fear too; lest people consider him impotent. After awhile, he tells his wife casually, "I am sorry, Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people." Being the

first son of the family, his people need him to produce the next set of offspring that would carry the name of the family. As a result, they get him a new bride and eventually divorces Nnu Ego (p. 32). Therefore, male characters who feel that they are not living up to their masculine calling fear emasculation, which corroborates Freudian fear of castration.

Thus, the research finds that failure to impregnate one's wife constitute a serious threat to the male characters' manhood which may consequently lead to taking an additional wife or to an outright divorce.

Male characters' income status

Civitelli S. Janet, (2015), in an article "The Role of the Unconscious in Career Development" observes that many people have problems in their places of work and these difficulties can be as a result of unconscious impulses. Often, people are oblivious of why they encounter the dilemma that they face. The study finds that male characters use their economic status to gain respect among peers and family as well. Failure to meet one's fiscal responsibility is detested and such individuals lose the respect of their partners and children. According to some studies (Aboim, 2008 and Groes-Green, 2009), situations where male characters are not essentially the main breadwinners have challenged customary concepts of manhood. Traditionally, male characters' authority over womenfolk is based on the man's fiscal authority and ability to support one's family. However, due to poverty and joblessness, many male characters have not been able to conform to this ideal of maleness. Therefore, men are using sexuality to compensate for this 'loss' of social respect (Lango, 2014, p. 3).

In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, male characters who leave their villages recall that "it was better to go and work for a master or a company rather than stay on their own farms where income depended upon the whims of the weather and upon their own physical strength" (p. 141). Such characters later discover that the city has robbed them of their basic masculine responsibility as breadwinners. No wonder, the narrator reports that when Nnaife loses his job, his temper is always rising due to his frustrations. One day he warns his wife that if she does not stop screaming, he would hit her. Eventually, when Nnu Ego fails to heed the warning, Nnaife loses his temper and bangs an old guitar against her head (p. 91).

For the purpose of applying Freudian psychoanalysis in "making the unconscious, conscious", Civitelli, (2015) gives some instances on when to

apply psychoanalysis. For example, in an occupation that is filled with many activities, each activity can cause an individual to feel bored, discontented, or exhausted. Therefore, Nnaife has an unstable income; despite being employed as a domestic servant, a grass cutter, a soldier, and finally as a foreman, he cannot get job satisfaction. Nnaife's lack of satisfaction can be attributed to his anxiety and lack of confidence in himself right from when he was a child, which hinders him from going out to seek for a better and more fulfilling job as an adult. He runs away from being engaged in what is traditionally a man's job – on the farm -- to work in a city without any skills. As a result, Nnaife continues to feel guilty and pessimistic in life. When he loses his job as a washer man and is unable to secure another, yet he cannot go back to Ibuza and admit failure, he resorts to violence. Hence, he rationalizes his predicament to repress his failure by saying that, "There were many of their people there [Lagos] without jobs and some had been like that for years, so he was not the only one" (Emecheta, p. 89). Nevertheless, despite the challenges, Nnaife decides to continue living in the city.

In this context, sexuality and aggression are responses to this 'dilemma' in traditional manhood in order for the male characters to compensate for their financial inadequacy. These men attempt to keep their maleness by sexually controlling their partners, being adulterous, or polygamous and living a life of promiscuity. Cruelty against females is also an obvious option to not having fiscal control, particularly for male characters that cannot provide for their partners (Groes-Green, 2009). The idea behind this trend is that if an individual is not financially accomplished at least he is better in manipulating women sexually and he can offer erotic gratifications through good sexual acts and expertise. Thus, emasculated male characters try to preserve some control over women through sexual domination due to their financial inadequacy.

Oshia's decision to pursue education as a career different from his father's might be interpreted to be as a result of his parental predicaments. Even though he made his career decisions quite unconsciously, his early education -- though indisputably demanding at the time -- offered a useful guide for a rewarding educational experience. One day in an encounter with his parents, Oshia retorts to his mother that he would not like to be like his father and complains that maybe if he had a peaceful childhood and had not had to spend his young days selling paraffin and carrying firewood he would have been a better person (Emecheta, p. 185).

Occupation also provides a diverse stratification among the male characters because, “occasionally, Nnaife would see this Okafor [a senior clerk] and shout, ‘Good morning sah!’ and [Okafor] would grunt his reply, no one expected a “big man” to be too familiar with such subordinates as labourers and grass-cutters” (p. 142). Masculinity affects the sense of male characters’ choice of acceptable vocation and can determine individual earnings. This profession-based notion of self can be satisfactory until one loses one’s job, which can lead to emotional distress. The stresses of the breadwinner role are a burden for most male characters, especially those who leave their villages to work in the city. When the choice of job is limited, male characters face very difficult conditions in the city because they would not like to go back to their villages.

While fiscal support is essential, it is often the only role many male characters play in taking care of their households. Greater marital insecurity, and sometimes long-distance migration for labour, has weakened male characters’ co-habitations with their wives and children, restraining their ability to support in ways other than monetary. This is evident when Nnu Ego contemplates the financial status of her husband by simply lamenting to her son when he is refused entry at a feast on the birthday of his age mate, Folorunsho: “This is Lagos, Oshia, and we are immigrants here. For Folorunsho it is different. This is their part of the country. They own Lagos” (Emecheta, p. 173). This scenario is especially common in urban areas where male characters have migrated to in search of work. When male characters remarry or take more partners, the chances that they will support their earlier families reduce drastically, as they face new demands on their time and fiscal resources. This, however, could not deter Nnaife from impregnating many women and taking a new wife to boost his masculine ego.

Polygyny by male characters

Frodwa Wahove Immaculate, (2014) in “Margaret Ogala’s Imagination of Masculinities in Three Novels” states that polygyny has been used to suppress women for many years in African societies. It permits male characters to have sexual intercourse with several women at will, but it does not allow women to sexually interact with other male characters who are not their lawful spouses (p. 90). As such, polygyny can be referred to as the cultural practice where a man can have multiple sexual partners who might be his legitimate wives or mistresses. This, therefore, applies to most male characters in the selected novel.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the phallus is the ultimate representation of male power and of female lack. “Phallocentrism” is an expression used mainly by feminist activists to symbolize the persistent privilege of the male characters within the social system of the society. The term was first invented by Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst, in allusion to the dominance of the phallus in Sigmund Freud’s theories. Freud (1965-1933) describes a phallic stage in childhood growth, as a period during which sexual variation is first noticed. In this phase, the difference between the sexes is noticed mainly through the genitalia, particularly the penis, which, according to Freud is first realized as a symbol of power and authority. Portraying the clitoris as a penis counterpart, Freud envisages the basis of female sexuality in terms of the male phallus. It is at the phallic stage that children recognize that their mother does not have a penis and thus, she appears to be effeminate. To the male child, this obvious castration spurs the oedipal predicament, while in girls, it spawns castration apprehension, prompting a rejection of the mother figure and attraction toward the father as the source of phallic supremacy. Rejecting her clitoral phallus as subordinated, the female child displays Freud’s contentious concept of penis desire, wherein she recognizes her lack and seeks to gain access to the phallus by having a baby boy.

Langa, J. (2016), in an essay “Notions of Sex, Masculinity and Manhood in African Cultures” notes that male characters’ sexual carousing with multiple partners is one of the most noticeable consequences of the phallocentric representation of manhood in Africa. By exercising their phallic influence, male characters tend to show the purpose of their penises by having numerous sex partners. Consequently, this may result in having many children, and can even lead to sexual aggression on young females. Therefore, this paper identifies why male characters seek to dominate and assert their manhood whenever they feel insecure. For example, Agbadi Nwokocha in *The Joys of Motherhood* has several wives including some captured women who live in his household. These women help in boosting Agbadi’s phallic ego, which makes him proud among men. However, there is one woman who threatens and challenges his manhood by refusing to marry him. Ona, the daughter of Obi Umunna, despite having a secret affection for Agbadi, snubs his advances.

Hence, Ona grows to fulfill her father’s expectation because she maintains that she must never marry: the narrator explains that Obi vows that his daughter is never going to stoop to any man (Emecheta, p. 11). Consequently, Ona presents

a great challenge to Agbadi's manhood who now vows to conquer her by all means. The opportunity comes when Ona is nursing him. Driven by sexual desire; he waits until Ona falls asleep, and then caresses her and challenges her astuteness until "She felt like screaming to let free the burning of her body". Ona laments on her weakness thus: "How could one's body betray one so!" (p. 20). Later, Ona could not resist the temptation so she succumbs to Agbadi's seduction: "She melted and could not say [a word]. She wept and sobbed as she was trying to suppress her frustration that shook her whole being. [Agbadi] felt it, chuckled and remarked thickly, 'please, Ona, don't wake the whole household'" (p. 20). This singular action gives Agbadi the chance he has been looking for to subdue Ona and at last he succeeds in achieving his goal.

Similarly, when Nnaife's manhood is challenged by Adaku, his second wife by inheritance, he travels back to Ibuza to claim his conjugal rights with the senior widow, Adankwo, who initially refuses to relocate to Lagos. However, after claiming and impregnating Adankwo, who still refuses to follow him to Lagos, Nnaife decides to get himself a new bride and returns in style, "with his new wife Okpo and his new confidence, to Lagos, and to an angry Nnu Ego" (p. 184). Even though Nnaife has not made any prior preparations for his new bride in terms of feeding and accommodation, nevertheless, he goes ahead and marries her.

From the foregoing discussion, the researcher believes that male characters who feel that their manhood is challenged prove and assert their masculinity by taking more partners as mistresses or wives.

Conclusion

Marginalized male characters may attempt to compensate for their subordinated status by resisting hegemonic manhood and enacting alternative forms of masculinity. Based upon personal situations, a male character may use a cutlass, his fists, his sexuality, a divorce, alcohol, physical labour, or economic strength to enact his particular form of masculinity. While the male characters presented in the novel evolve as a result of how they have been socialized within a broad set of social institutions, it should never be forgotten that through the same practice of gender construction, it is possible to unlearn social roles and masculinity myths. Besides, social institutions can also be changed through generational dynamics as seen above.

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