Matrescence and the Patriarchal African Culture: A Critical Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of matrescence, the developmental process of becoming a mother within the context of patriarchal African culture, as depicted in Buchi Emecheta's seminal novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Through literary analysis, this study examines how traditional African patriarchal systems impede the formation of women's maternal identities, showing that motherhood can simultaneously empower and oppress women. Using close reading methods and theories about how women change when they become mothers, this research looks at how cultural expectations about maternal sacrifice affect women's independence and psychological growth. The study focuses on Emecheta's main character, Nnu Ego, to understand how women form their identity as mothers in societies that both honour and limit motherhood. The research uses feminist literary criticism and postcolonial approaches to examine the

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Mojisola Ogbeide-Ihama

complex relationship between what culture expects from mothers and women's personal freedom. The findings show that motherhood is complex; it can both restrict women and empower them, as traditional gender roles both limit and create opportunities for women to act independently. This research adds to academic discussions about gender, culture, and maternal identity in postcolonial African literature, providing clear insights into how feminist theory and cultural representation work together in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Matrescence, African Literature, Patriarchy, Motherhood, Feminist Literary Criticism, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

The transition to motherhood, conceptualised by anthropologist Dana Raphael (1973) as "matrescence," represents a fundamental transformation in a woman's identity, psychology, and social position. This developmental process, comparable to adolescence in its scope and significance, involves profound physical, emotional, and psychological changes that extend far beyond the biological act of giving birth (Stern, 1998). Within the context of traditional African societies, matrescence occurs within complex patriarchal frameworks that simultaneously celebrate and constrain maternal identity, creating what Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta masterfully explores in her 1979 novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) explains that Emecheta's work stands as a powerful critique of the romanticised notion of African motherhood, revealing the psychological and social costs of patriarchal expectations placed upon women. Through the narrative trajectory of her protagonist, Nnu Ego, Emecheta illuminates the ideological contradictions embedded within a patriarchal framework that constructs female subjectivity predominantly through reproductive function while systematically negating women's autonomous control over their corporeal and existential domains. This paper examines how the process of matrescence unfolds within patriarchal African culture as depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood*; it

analyses the ways in which traditional gender roles and cultural expectations shape, complicate, and often distort women's maternal identity formation. The importance of this analysis goes beyond literary studies, adding to wider conversations about motherhood, cultural restrictions, and women's independence in postcolonial African societies. By examining Emecheta's detailed depiction of motherhood, this study reveals the difficult choices women face between personal fulfilment and adherence to cultural norms, and between individual identity and communal expectations.

Literature Review
Matrescence: Theoretical Foundations and Development
The concept of matrescence, first introduced by medical anthropologist Dana Raphael in 1973, represents a significant change in how we understand the transition to motherhood. Raphael (1973) originally defined matrescence as "the process of becoming a mother, the steps or stages involved in achieving maternal identity." This foundational work challenged common beliefs that motherhood was a natural instinct rather than a developmental process, laying the foundation for modern maternal studies.

Building upon Raphael's pioneering work, psychoanalyst Daniel Stern revolutionised the field through his comprehensive analysis of maternal psychological development. Stern (1998) describes matrescence as involving "a reorganisation of a woman's identity, her redefinition of her relationships with others, and a shift in her priorities and concerns". His research emphasises that this transformation involves multiple aspects at the same time: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual changes. Stern's model identifies four specific psychological changes that happen during matrescence: the development of maternal identity, changes in relationship patterns, shifts in how time is perceived, and changes in personal control and decision-making (Stern, 1998). Contemporary scholars Aurelie Athan and Lisa Reel have further refined matrescence theory by emphasising its developmental and lifelong nature. Athan and Reel (2015) argue that "becoming a mother involves identity integration that continues throughout the lifecycle, challenging linear models of psychological development". Their long-term research shows that developing a maternal identity goes well beyond pregnancy and birth, involving ongoing negotiations between who

Mojisola Ogbeide-Ihama

women were before becoming mothers and who they are as mothers. This perspective is especially important for understanding how cultural factors can either support or hinder this continuous developmental process.

Researchers such as Pilyoung Kim and James Swain have explored the neurobiological dimensions of matrescence, revealing the significant brain changes that accompany maternal transition. Their work demonstrates that "maternal brain plasticity during the transition to motherhood involves structural and functional changes in regions associated with empathy, anxiety, and sensory processing" (Kim *et al*. 2015). These findings indicate that matrescence encompasses fundamental neurological reorganisation that parallels psychological transformation, thereby providing biological evidence for conceptualising maternal transition as a developmental rather than merely social process. Research across different cultures has shown major differences in how various societies help or limit the process of matrescence. Darvill *et al*. (2010) show that "cultural beliefs about motherhood profoundly influence the psychological experience of maternal transition, with some cultures providing extensive support while others impose isolating expectations". This research highlights the need to study matrescence within specific cultural settings rather than assuming that all women experience the same developmental patterns.

African Motherhood: Traditional Concepts and Colonial Disruptions
Traditional African concepts of motherhood present a complex picture that cannot be easily simplified. Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that pre-colonial Yoruba society, for example, operated on principles that valued women's various roles rather than limiting them only to having children. Her analysis shows that "traditional Yoruba culture recognised women as traders, political leaders, and spiritual authorities in addition to mothers, creating more multifaceted identities". This historical view challenges assumptions about African women's traditional lack of power and suggests that current restrictions may come from colonial rather than traditional influences. However, research on African motherhood also shows complex male-dominated structures that existed before colonial rule. Amadiume (1987) argues that while African cultures often position mothers as powerful figures, this power is "circumscribed within patriarchal boundaries that ultimately

743

serve male interests rather than promoting genuine female autonomy". Her field research among the Igbo people shows how traditional gender systems could both empower and limit women at the same time, creating what she calls "flexible gender arrangements" that allowed female authority within male-dominated systems (Amadiume, 1987).

Feminist scholars have extensively documented how colonialism affected African motherhood, arguing that colonial governments systematically destroyed women's traditional authority while keeping patriarchal restrictions in place. Steady (1981) provides a detailed analysis of how "colonial policies deliberately excluded women from new economic opportunities while maintaining their domestic responsibilities, creating unprecedented burdens for African mothers." Her research shows that colonialism did not simply force European gender rules but created mixed systems that combined the worst parts of both traditional and colonial male dominance. Postcolonial research has examined how these colonial disruptions continue to affect modern African motherhood. Mama (2001) argues that "postcolonial African states have largely failed to address the dual burden of traditional and colonial patriarchal constraints, leaving women to navigate increasingly complex expectations around maternal identity." This analysis suggests that contemporary African women face unique challenges in developing authentic maternal identities within cultural contexts that colonial intervention has deeply disrupted. Scholars examining how structural adjustment programmes and globalisation have affected women's maternal experiences have given particular attention to the economic aspects of African motherhood. Bakker (1994) shows that "economic liberalisation policies have increased women's domestic labour while reducing access to social services, making motherhood more challenging for African women." This research reveals how global economic forces combine with local cultural expectations to create especially difficult conditions for maternal development.

Patriarchal Structures and Maternal Identity Formation
The relationship between male-dominated social structures and how women develop their identities as mothers is a central focus in contemporary feminist research. Chodorow (2005) provides foundational analysis of how patriarchal family structures influence maternal psychology, arguing that "women's

maternal identity is shaped by their own experiences of being mothered within male-dominated systems." Her psychoanalytic approach shows how patriarchal structures can become internalised and passed down through maternal relationships, creating cycles of oppression that continue across generations. Rich (1976) distinguishes between the "experience" and "institution" of motherhood, arguing that patriarchal societies have turned a natural relationship into a system of control. Rich (1976) argues that "patriarchal motherhood requires women to sacrifice their individuality for culturally prescribed maternal roles that ultimately serve male interests". This analysis has been influential in feminist critiques of idealised motherhood stories that hide the real limitations mothers face. The concept of "intensive mothering" has become a key framework for understanding how patriarchal expectations shape contemporary maternal identity. Hays (1996) argues that modern motherhood is characterised by "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive" practices that place impossible demands on mothers. While Hays' analysis focuses mainly on Western contexts, her insights have been used to understand how global cultural influences spread intensive mothering ideologies to different cultural contexts.

African feminist scholars have offered distinctive perspectives on patriarchal motherhood that challenge the universal tendencies in Western feminist theory. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) introduces the concept of "matricentric patriarchy" to describe systems that "appear to celebrate women while actually constraining their autonomy within narrow maternal roles". This framework helps explain the apparent contradiction between cultural respect for mothers and systematic oppression of women in many African societies. Intersectional feminist analysis has explored how patriarchal structures combine with other systems of oppression. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates how "race, class, and gender oppression interact to create unique experiences for women of colour that cannot be understood through single-axis analysis". This intersectional approach is particularly important for understanding African women's maternal experiences, which happen within contexts shaped by racism, economic marginalisation, and gender oppression at the same time.

745

Buchi Emecheta and Feminist Literary Criticism

Scholars who recognise Buchi Emecheta's unique contribution to feminist literary discussion have extensively documented her position as a pioneering voice in African women's literature. Frank (1982) argues that Emecheta's work represents "a radical departure from romanticised portrayals of African womanhood, offering instead unflinching examinations of women's lived experiences within patriarchal structures". Frank's analysis emphasises how Emecheta's novels challenge both Western stereotypes about African women and African male writers' representations of femininity. The feminist aspects of Emecheta's work have been subjected to considerable scholarly debate, with some critics questioning whether her writing aligns with Western feminist frameworks. Acholonu (1995) argues that Emecheta's feminism is "distinctly African in its concerns with community welfare rather than individual liberation." This perspective suggests that Emecheta's critique of patriarchal motherhood should be understood within African rather than Western feminist contexts.

However, other scholars argue for the universal relevance of Emecheta's feminist insights. Ogunyemi (1996) contends that while Emecheta's work is grounded in African experience, it addresses "fundamental questions about women's agency and autonomy that transcend cultural boundaries". Ogunyemi's analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* emphasises how Emecheta "subverts traditional narratives about motherhood by revealing the psychological costs of cultural expectations that prioritise reproduction over individual development." Feminist literary critics have provided detailed analyses of the literary techniques Emecheta uses to critique patriarchal motherhood. Umeh (1995) examines how Emecheta uses "irony and narrative structure to expose the contradictions between cultural rhetoric about motherhood and women's actual experiences". This analysis reveals how Emecheta's artistic choices serve her feminist political agenda by making visible the usually hidden costs of patriarchal maternal expectations. Moreso, comparative analysis has placed Emecheta's work within broader contexts of women's writing about motherhood. Ward (1990) argues that Emecheta's treatment of maternal themes parallels developments in "feminist literature globally, as women writers increasingly challenge idealised representations of motherhood." This comparative perspective

highlights the international significance of Emecheta's contribution to feminist literary discourse.

Contemporary Debates and Theoretical Developments

Recent scholarship in maternal studies has increasingly emphasised the diversity of maternal experiences and the limitations of universal theoretical frameworks. O'Reilly (2004) argues for "matricentric feminism" that places mothers' experiences and perspectives at the centre of feminist analysis rather than treating motherhood as secondary to women's liberation. This approach challenges traditional feminist distrust of motherhood while maintaining critical awareness of patriarchal constraints (O'Reilly, 2004). The emergence of "*new momism*" as a cultural phenomenon has generated significant scholarly attention. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that contemporary culture promotes "intensive mothering ideologies that are even more demanding than previous generations' expectations, creating new forms of maternal pressure disguised as empowerment." While this analysis focuses on Western contexts, globalisation has spread these ideologies internationally, creating new challenges for women in diverse cultural contexts.

Digital age developments have created new aspects of maternal experience that require theoretical attention. Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) examine how "social media platforms create new forms of maternal surveillance and judgment while also providing opportunities for connection and support." This research suggests that contemporary motherhood occurs within increasingly complex technological environments that both support and complicate maternal identity development. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated new research on how crisis conditions affect maternal experiences. Power (2020) documents how "pandemic conditions have intensified existing inequalities in domestic labour while making women's unpaid care work more visible to policy makers and researchers." This research provides important insights into the structural factors that shape maternal experiences across different cultural contexts.

747

Methodology
This study employs close textual analysis combined with feminist literary criticism to examine the portrayal of matrescence in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The analysis focuses on key scenes and character developments that illuminate the protagonist's maternal journey, paying particular attention to moments of tension between personal desire and cultural expectation. The theoretical framework draws primarily from matrescence theory as developed by Stern (1998) and Athan and Reel (2015), while incorporating insights from African feminist scholars, including Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Amadiume (1987), and Steady (1981). This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how universal aspects of maternal development intersect with specific cultural contexts.

Analysis and Discussion
The Cultural Construction of Maternal Identity
Emecheta's portrayal of Nnu Ego's early experiences with motherhood reveals how patriarchal African culture shapes maternal identity from the beginning. The novel opens with a scene that immediately shows the high stakes of maternal success: Nnu Ego's thoughts of suicide following the death of her infant son (Emecheta, 1979). This dramatic opening emphasises how completely Nnu Ego's sense of self-worth has become connected to her reproductive success, showing what matrescence theorist Stern (1998) describes as the "identity fusion that can occur when cultural expectations overwhelm individual psychological development." The cultural pressure Nnu Ego faces affects not just her but spans generations. Emecheta traces the influence of Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, whose own unconventional life serves as both inspiration and warning. Ona's refusal to marry, despite having children, represents a form of maternal independence that becomes increasingly impossible for Nnu Ego to achieve (Emecheta, 1979). This comparison between generations highlights how patriarchal structures can become stronger over time, making the matrescence process more limiting for later generations.

Mojisola Ogbeide-Ihama

The Economics of Motherhood

One of Emecheta's most powerful insights concerns the economic aspects of patriarchal motherhood. Nnu Ego's repeated pregnancies occur within a context of increasing financial strain, yet cultural expectations demand that she continue having children regardless of economic circumstances. The novel shows how "the cultural valorisation of large families conflicts with the practical realities of urban poverty" (Emecheta, 1979), creating untenable choices for mothers. This economic pressure complicates the matrescence process by adding survival concerns to the already complex task of identity formation. Nnu Ego must simultaneously adapt to maternal identity while managing household finances, often through informal work that goes unrecognised by her husband and community. Emecheta's portrayal reveals how patriarchal structures extract economic as well as reproductive work from women, making maternal development a form of what Silvia Federici (2004) would later call "reproductive labour" that sustains capitalism while remaining invisible and uncompensated.

Maternal Sacrifice and Self-Erasure

Perhaps the most psychologically complex aspect of Emecheta's analysis concerns the cultural expectation of maternal self-sacrifice. Nnu Ego's gradual loss of personal identity occurs not through dramatic moments but through daily acts of self-denial that grew over time. The novel traces how "each sacrifice imposed by cultural expectations further diminished Nnu Ego's sense of individual identity" (Emecheta, 1979), until she becomes, in her own words, "a shell of a woman" (p. 267). This process directly goes against healthy matrescence as described by contemporary theorists. While Stern (1998) emphasises that successful maternal development involves "integration rather than erasure of pre-maternal identity", Nnu Ego's experience shows how patriarchal cultural expectations can force women to choose between maternal success and personal authenticity.

Emecheta's novel also explores how patriarchal motherhood can become deeply isolating. Despite living within extended family networks, Nnu Ego experiences increased emotional and social isolation as her maternal responsibilities grow. The novel shows how traditional support systems for mothers can break down when economic pressures and cultural changes

749

strain community bonds (Emecheta, 1979:189). This isolation contradicts anthropological evidence about traditional African motherhood, which typically occurred within supportive community contexts. Amadiume (1987) notes that "traditional African societies provided extensive networks of maternal support that facilitated healthy identity development." Emecheta's portrayal suggests that colonialism and urbanisation have disrupted these support systems while keeping patriarchal expectations, producing especially challenging conditions for maternal development.

Children as Extensions of Patriarchal Control

One of the novel's most disturbing insights concerns how children can become instruments of patriarchal control rather than sources of maternal fulfilment. Nnu Ego's adult children, particularly her sons, often treat her with the same dismissive attitude displayed by her husband. The novel's conclusion, in which Nnu Ego dies alone despite having borne numerous children, powerfully illustrates the ultimate failure of patriarchal promises about motherhood (Emecheta, 1979:334). This outcome reveals the cruel irony at the heart of patriarchal motherhood: women are told that children will provide security and fulfilment, yet the patriarchal structures that create these expectations also ensure that children prioritise male authority over maternal needs. As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) observes, "patriarchal motherhood ultimately serves to reproduce the very systems that constrain women."

Matrescence Disrupted

The analysis reveals that patriarchal African culture, as depicted by Emecheta, fundamentally disrupts healthy matrescence processes. Rather than supporting women's developmental journey into maternal identity, cultural expectations force women into predetermined roles that deny individual agency and psychological complexity. This disruption has profound implications for both individual well-being and broader social health. The novel demonstrates how cultural pressure can transform what should be a natural developmental process into a form of psychological violence. Nnu Ego's experience suggests that when cultural expectations override individual development, the result is not authentic motherhood but rather a performance of maternal identity that ultimately satisfies no one: not mothers, not children, and not communities.

The Paradox of Maternal Power

Emecheta's work reveals a central contradiction in patriarchal views of motherhood: cultures that claim to honour mothers often create conditions that make genuine maternal development impossible. This contradiction reflects what feminist theorists have identified as a broader pattern in patriarchal societies, the simultaneous idealisation and oppression of women. The novel suggests that genuine respect for motherhood would require supporting women's full human development, including their intellectual, creative, and spiritual abilities. Instead, patriarchal cultures often reduce women to their reproductive function while claiming this reduction represents honour and respect.

This analysis has important implications for contemporary maternal studies, particularly in postcolonial contexts. It suggests that understanding matrescence requires careful attention to cultural limitations that may appear as cultural support. The novel's portrayal shows that traditional practices are not automatically beneficial for women and that critical analysis is necessary to distinguish between customs that support healthy development and those that limit it. Furthermore, Emecheta's work suggests that economic factors play a crucial role in maternal development that has been underexplored in many matrescence theories. The intersection of economic pressure and cultural expectations creates particularly difficult conditions for maternal identity formation that deserve greater theoretical attention.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* offers a powerful critique of how patriarchal African culture can distort and limit the natural process of matrescence. Through the tragic journey of Nnu Ego, the novel reveals the psychological and social costs of cultural systems that claim to honour motherhood while undermining women's capacity for genuine maternal development. The analysis shows that healthy matrescence requires cultural contexts that support women's full human development, not just their reproductive capacity. When cultural expectations override individual psychological needs, the result is not genuine motherhood but rather a performance of maternal identity that ultimately fails both women and their

children. This study contributes to ongoing discussions about maternal identity, cultural constraints, and women's agency by revealing the specific ways that patriarchal structures can interfere with natural developmental processes. The findings suggest that supporting authentic motherhood requires fundamental changes in cultural attitudes toward women's independence and complexity.

Future research might explore how contemporary African women negotiate these challenges, examining both the persistence of patriarchal constraints and the emergence of new forms of maternal agency. Additionally, comparative studies examining matrescence across different cultural contexts could further illuminate the relationship between culture and maternal development.

Ultimately, Emecheta's work reminds us that true respect for motherhood requires respecting the full humanity of mothers, their intelligence, creativity, ambition, and individuality. Only within such contexts can the profound transformation of matrescence unfold in ways that genuinely serve both women and their children.

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