

## Intragender Subjugation and Ideological Construction of Motherhood in Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk*

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**Abstract:** *The compounded issues surrounding the experiences of women in Africa consciously put women in a state of suffering and undue pressure. These rising level of challenges connected with women are detrimental to their wellbeing at various levels of society. Whereas most scholarly works have traced the numerous misdeeds against women by their male counterparts, only a few have dealt with intra-gender concerns. This work concentrate on the fact that inter-gender socialisation thrives on intra-gender collaborations. This paper seeks to reveal the extent to which intra-gender insensitivities aggressively intensify women's subjugation. Also, it criticises African worldview of motherhood which only emphasise on natal proclivity which is an ideological construction. Motherhood cannot only be judged on the principle of childbirth. This paper is premised on Acholonu's Motherism; a strand of feminist theory which is concerned with human phenomenon as love, nurture, care and the general wellbeing of humans and by extension the natural environment. It is within this thought frame that this paper examines Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk* and exposes the African mindset of motherhood that causes physical, psychological and emotional abuse on women without their biological children. This paper recommends that any form of negative depiction of women by women themselves should be avoided as it creates opportunities for women's oppression. It further states that there is a need for proper re-orientation of members of African societies on the thinking of childbirth as the only qualification for womanhood and by extension, motherhood.*

**Keywords:** *Intra-gender, Subjugation, Ideological construction, Motherhood, Womanhood*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender disparity has become a global phenomenon and demands keen interest from the government, political, religious, cultural, patriarchal, economic, and matrimonial spaces. The female gender have definitely faced challenges that posed threats on them .Consequent upon the importance given to women issues, creativity and scholarship on women have taken many dimensions. Evidently, the Feminist movement based on women's subordination and the struggle for equality has been expressed in many rational ways. While some writer's consider appropriate radical feminism, others write about gender balance or accommodation feminism. There are also others who try to avoid the concept of feminism by coming up with their own alternative concepts like Womanism and Motherism. Some writers' particularly female authors are interested in the study of how male playwrights represent women in their texts as well as how female playwrights portray their fellow woman in their plays. Mabel Evwierhoma rightly avers that "feminist ideology is a protest ideology, opposed to the hem lining of women but desirous of their emancipation in all spheres of life. In decrying the negative stereotypical roles women are made to play in texts scripted by men..." (15). Therefore, from birth women have been controlled by existing philosophies and social system that regulate their every actions and inactions.

Women face criticism for many reasons including that of childbirth. They are treated with disdain on the subject of childbirth especially by their fellow women. Apparently, those of them privileged to have children of their own. The opposition is informed by the thinking that women are most likely responsible for their delay or inability to conceive. In traditional African society for instance, few years into the marriage, there is already agitation if the woman has not given birth to at least a child.

Pressure begins to set in from all angles; mother, sister in-laws and other female neighbours constitute major clogs of opposition necessitated by their incessant pressure that promote oppressive traditions. It is this thinking that informs Peoples' (women) mockery of their victim, with actions to frustrate their target; who is already devastated by her predicament.

Put simply, nothing causes agitation and anxiety in African marriages as much as the issue of childbirth. The idealisation of motherhood has led to women exploring several options including Adoption, Surrogacy and In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) among other methods. Quite clearly, these options are explored to survive the possible backlashes that the condition may attract. Having made such great effort to become a mother, society still makes a distinction between mothers who naturally conceive and those believed to be incapable of conceiving naturally without the aforementioned measures. Society; specifically women would label such mothers as less-of-women. In some gatherings, conditions that set boundaries would be created and their opinion may not count. They are forbidden from identifying themselves as women because of the belief that they lack the experience of child birth especially those who adopted. It is upon this consciousness, that this study is rested on intra-gender studies and the ideological construction of motherhood in Africa. This work gives a view contrary to the regular myopic belief that connects motherhood to childbirth and dwells on the virtues of a mother and her responsibility as caregiver to children in her care irrespective. Thus, the nature of motherhood in this discourse focuses on the role of a mother to be more primarily pertinent than the reality of childbirth.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theory adopted for the study is Catherine Acholonu's Motherism; it is a strand of feminist theory that is multidimensional. It is a theory that places premium on virtues like loving, caring-giving, tolerant, courageous and the unassuming nature of humanity. The theory does not look at motherhood from the narrow point of biological childbirth. Rather, it focuses on the willingness to add value to human life at all levels of human endeavours and other supportive attributes one possesses and expresses in relation to humanity and the natural environment. The theory resonates many of the immediate experiences of women from the social life to childbirth and to the experience of subjugation which are all part of the issues that impede on womanhood.

## **3. RETHINKING MOTHERHOOD**

Motherhood is not a new phenomenon in human history, but the way and manner in which motherhood is constructed within social praxis has encouraged unnecessary subjugation of childless women. It is true that childbirth may appear to be the obvious means of a woman becoming a mother, but it is an injustice and a denial of the right to motherhood of women who have carried out the responsibility of raising children who are not biologically theirs. When we talk about a mother, the focus of this discourse is on a woman with a child in her care, regardless of the condition or circumstance through which she becomes one. "A mother is a female parent of a child. A woman may be considered a mother by virtue of having given birth, by raising a child who may or may not be her biological offspring..." ( [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) This justifies the fact that even a sister can be called a mother to her siblings on account of her commitment to the wellbeing of her siblings. Therefore, limiting motherhood to the primary condition of conception and childbirth is a demonstration of insensitivity to mothers without biological children. The lack of understanding of this concept has made society to discriminate and treat women without biological children badly. Motherhood is more of a responsibility than an entitlement but surprisingly, society tends to disregard women who have faithfully carried out the responsibility of caring, nurturing and protecting children as mothers due to social orders. This social configuration has made society turn blind eyes to the sacrificial and selfless services rendered by some women to children who are not birthed by them and have concentrated exclusively on a woman's ineffectuality.

Of course, the issue of motherhood is recurrent phenomenon in African society; it has brought about low self esteem in some women, while some others have even committed suicide due to social mockery. This negatively promoted practice in society especially by women, creates psychological

mayhem in the everyday life of other women. Consequently, plays have been written to highlight the sensitive issue of motherhood and create awareness in the society from which this biased tendencies emerge. It is rightly observed by Tracy Utoh that:

It is no coincidence that these plays which come inform of dramatic parables are created in tune with the happenings in the society and serve as platforms for articulating the yearnings and aspiration of the people and also as majors to combat oppressive forces with the aim of initiating lasting solutions (Cited by Ojukwu,602).

The above position informs the social vision of Osita Ezenwanebe the author of the select play text analysed in this discourse. She has utilised the medium of drama to thoroughly investigate the issue of intragender subjugation as well as the ideological construction of motherhood in African society in her play *Egg without Yolk*.

#### **4. ISSUES OF MOTHERHOOD IN OSITA EZENWANEBE'S EGG WITHOUT YOLK**

Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk* clearly captures the story of Udemma, an educated woman confronted with the challenge of barrenness. All attempts made towards having children, has proven abortive. To make matters worse, societal criticism sets in. Worthy of note is the fact that the majority of the criticism and opposition emanated from women at various levels of her life. Udemma suffers abuse and dehumanising experiences of sardonic actions by her fellow women, not because of any crime she committed. Clearly the reason (s) for the cause of Udemma's bitter experiences that turns out to be her reality throughout the text, is solely rested on her inability to conceive and make babies of her own. This predicament made people to completely overlook her sacrifices for humanity and have her self-worth judged as resultant effect of childlessness. Our study of intra-gender prejudices will be drawn from the activities of three female characters in the text who vented their aggression on Udemma, the pivotal character, as well as the position of the women group.

Firstly, it is opposition from Nnebuihe; who is sarcastic about Udemma's predicament. She says to her; "You know it is said that when a woman outgrows 'whose daughter is this'? She answers 'whose wife is this!' And when she outstays whose wife is this? She answers 'whose mother is this!'" (Ezenwanebe10). Let us dissect this statement in two parts. Beginning with the ideology of a woman outgrowing whose daughter is this to whose wife is this? This is in tendon with what Emake Nwabueze in his book describes as "the conception of women as appendages...individuals with little or no independence, who pass from the control of the father to that of the husband." (142). This is one major challenge the girl child faces in Africa. As soon as she begins to grow into maturity, the mother and others in society begins to mount pressure on her over the need to get married. It doesn't matter if she has a job, a degree or a skill. Nobody seems to care about what impact she has to make in society. On the contrary, criticism set in over her single status, as a matter fact, the antagonism is worse, for the educated ones. As a result, anxiety sets in for some women who then end up rush into unsafe relationships to satisfy societal expectations and experience further troubles. While a few others remain focused, damn the consequences and continued to develop themselves and still gets married at the right time without parental or societal pressure. The point must be stressed that a woman's life and relevance does not only revolve around the triangular structure spelt out for the African woman as mentioned by Nnebuihe.

Also, the aspect of outgrowing whose wife is this to whose mother is this? You can see that at every level of the triangle trouble awaits the African woman. After escaping the criticism at the level of singlehood, another awaits the woman in marriage. In fact, the trouble in this phase of her life is far more challenging in Africa. Women will make jest of you and flaunt their babies before you. You cannot sincerely rebuke another woman's child over wrong conduct; else you will be openly rebuked. Clearly, society will constrain you into a woman of few words.

The dialogue between Udemma and Nnebuihe reveals that Nnebuihe is coming from the point of view of an African woman who understands the above scenario. Nnebuihe's statement also shows that Udemma has not been able to fulfil her socio-cultural responsibility of childbirth. To crown it up, Nnebuihe declares that the only good thing that can come from a woman is having a child for her husband. She represents the generality of women who believe that a woman's existence could only be appreciated when a child is involved. She asks Udemma "of what use is a woman if she cannot marry

and give children to her husband and his people? What if there are no human beings for her to serve with the so-called knowledge and skills (Ezenwanebe, 12). This is an indication that African women are defined by the specification of having a husband and then children. Udemma educational achievements were viewed as nothing even by her own gender.

Nnebuli's basis of opposing Udemma is influenced by the social patterns from time immemorial. Even though by virtue of her profession as a teacher Udemma has impacted on lives, her educational feat and success as a career person still appears inconsequential. It won't be farfetched to say that more value is placed on a woman with a child than the one with a certificate in traditional African society.

Secondly, Uche Udemma's sister-in-law suggests that she indulge in extra-marital affairs, to ascertain the infertile one between herself and the husband. She says "...There is something you can do, why don't Mma try somewhere else? Maybe it will work" (Ezenwanebe 29); This suggestion if succumbed to; will be further used against her as being unfaithful to her spouse. Culturally, she will be required to do some cleansing and purification to obtain forgiveness from the unseen forces because cultural authorisation of infidelity does not exempt women but men. It can be claimed that this sort of advice is a well laid out trap to destroy the reputation of Udemma. This shows the length at which women can mount pressure on one of their kind when it comes to childbirth. Pressures that if succumbed to, will further lead to blackmail and the victim will eventually be thrown out of the very home she was trying to keep; with no one to make reference to the pressure from the mother-in-law, sister-in-law, friends and neighbours who are predominantly women. Rather the pressurised woman will be blacklisted amongst women. Thirdly, Dozie's mother Nwakego is another example of a woman subjugating her fellow woman to physical and emotional trauma. Believing that Udemma is responsible for her son's childless condition, Nwakego did not hesitate to get a replacement. She brings in a woman that she considers fertile, just as expected of an average African mother. This same act if carried out by the husband or father-in-law would have been regarded as male chauvinism, is championed by a woman who ought to understand the feeling of a fellow woman. It is pertinent to note that the various levels of opposition in the text were brought on Udemma by women respectively. Fourthly, the position of women in the women group in which Udemma identifies with reveals another atmosphere of unfriendliness and antagonism. This is a group led by women; who should have been the supposedly understanding ones. Apparently, they failed to understand her plight; they are not concerned with her wellbeing either mentally or physically. Ideally, such women gathering should promote solidarity rather; it turns out to be opium to oppress a childless woman because the prioritisation of childbirth as chief-factor of motherhood was a common practice amongst them. Therefore, Udemma's childless state comes with inhuman consequences ranging from discrimination, intolerance, mockery, name-calling, gossip, quarrels, fights and rising insecurity amongst others. The position of this group of women represents the opinion of the larger African society. The criticism from these unsupportive women is aimed at reducing the self-worth of Udemma and has her ostracised from the Umuachi Women Association (UWA) as an unqualified mother. On the contrary, rather than breaking down, Udemma accords herself more honour with a title of 'the dignity of womanhood' in the face of opposition. Her words says it all:

...I refuse to be intimidated by public scorn. It is good and desirable for a woman or a man to give birth: but a woman who does not give birth is no less a woman. She can live a fulfilled life if you can give her a chance (Ezewanebe 22).

Ezenwanebe in *Egg without Yolk* clearly resonates that childbirth is not and should not be an ultimate determiner of womanhood or motherhood. Thus, the ideological construct of motherhood, from the perspective of childbirth faces great opposition by the dramatist. She reiterate that:

...motherhood does not refer only to women who have given birth. It refers also to those qualities of resilience, gentleness, tenderness and care with which our women are known for. And we know that any woman with those qualities of nurture can have to her credit as many children as possible. (Ezenwanebe, 20).

This may not be in conformity with the traditional belief of motherhood but finds legitimacy in Acholonu's motherism theory which projects the dignity of womanhood that 'stems from her common humanity' rather than on child reproduction as it culturally connotes in Africa. It is safe to say at this point that, women subjugation of their fellow women produce far more negative effects than the opposition from the male gender because they associate more closely. While the patriarchal is often accused of pervasion of African cultural values and practices, we cannot rule out the fact that women are the tools used to enforce most of these barbaric practices against women and their vulnerability is traceable to their competitive nature and cruel disposition towards one another. A common reason in Udemma's case could be, you have the degrees and we have the children. Why hasn't your university degree given you children? Thoughts of this kind arouse frequent competition amongst women.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

While Feminists make conscious attempt to dismantle women's subjugation arising from patriarchal hegemony, this work seeks to draw attention to an opposition that is within. This in our local parlance is described as 'a rat in the house inviting the one outside that there is food in the kitchen.' If there is unity between women; the sweeping negative influences of patriarchy that have indoctrinated societal putrescence, which have become the strongholds of African culture, serving as disturbance to women in many aspects would not have gained recognition. Thus, intra-gender prejudices are key injurious branches that serve as stumbling blocks to the much desired outcome of the feminist movement in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. For Women's quest for a new narrative to yield the needed result, any form of intra-gender prejudices must be abhorred. Generally, women must be resistant to intra-gender biases that promote policies and opinions that are unfavourable to womanhood.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the forgoing, it is clear that the battle amongst women is what their counterparts have utilised to disconnect women in the national course of action. Emanating from this study, it is recommended that women see it as a duty to support and encourage one another in times of distress. Women should guide their hearts jealously because subjugation would not be possible without first subduing the mind with fear. In view of the disturbing issue of childbirth as the approved medium of womanhood, this work admonishes women to change the mindset of seeing themselves as worthy women only on the basis of childbirth and rise above psychological manipulations. As such, women should promote togetherness rather than promote opposition and prejudice as this is paramount to women's development as anticipated by the feminists' movement.

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