ABSTRACT

This study has highlighted the root causes of women’s quandary in post-colonial African fiction. It explores two giant Nigerian women-authored novels. Analyses have revealed that women’s suffering is basically due to the patriarchal ideology that governs most African societies. Barrenness, motherhood, and poverty are other major factors. Further analysis of these factors shows that the last three aspects are in connection with the first. As a result, one can assume that the excessive patriarchal philosophy is a leading reason for women’s predicaments. For an objective, we have used a qualitative data analysis approach. We have applied feminism and post-colonial theories in the analyses.

Keywords: Barrenness, motherhood, patriarchy, quandary.

1. Introduction

Gender troubles in modern societies are a central concern for a great number of contemporary writers, namely female novelists. In fact, in Africa, as well as in other parts of the world, the problem of patriarchal genderisation is diversely tackled. Scholars and women’s rights activists tackle the question according to the realities of their respective societies. This male-dominated social system is adopted in almost every sphere of daily life in most civilisations because it profits to men. Sultana (2012) clearly states that “patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development” (p. 1). She furthers her theory by saying:

“Patriarchy is a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. The subordination that we experience at a daily level, regardless of the class we might belong to, takes various forms—discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence—within the family, at the place of work in society.” (Sultana, 2012, p. 7).

Those joint quotations show that boys, men and fathers have the absolute power of control over women and most of the family affairs.

In both of the fictions under study, it is crystal clear that the adoption of a patriarchal system as the ground for social life is the main cause of women’s poor conditions in their communities. This system is fuelled by the issues of barrenness, motherhood and poverty. These factors negatively influence the lives of female characters in the corpus novels. Specifically, Nnu Ego, Adaku, Kehinde, Taiwo, Efuru, Ossai, Nnona, and Ogea have variously undergone the side effects of patriarchy.

1.1. Patriarchy and its Influences on Women’s Conditions

Patriarchy is a system of dominance that is established in both traditional and modern families that gives boys, men and fathers every power to the detriment of girls, women and mothers. A patriarchal system is one “which strongly upholds and preaches the supremacy of the males over females. Hence, women are regarded as subordinate, dependent, weak and less important than men”
Furthermore, Taiwo and Kehinde’s marriage is not a hazard. If they have been given the possibility to
spelling ‘Emelika’ shows a great mispronunciation and the level of the person who is uttering the word.


In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, which is written in an African patriarchal setting, the
unimportant placement of female children in favour of male children illustrates the negative elements
of patriarchy in societies. Once Nnaife is in prison, Nnu Ego gives Adim the place of the head of
the family to receive Taiwo’s bride price. Adim stands for his father in jail: “[…] the suitor said he
wanted to marry Taiwo straight if Nnu Ego had no objection to a quiet wedding. The bride price
was quickly paid; it belonged to Nnaife, so Nnu Ego made sure that she let it be paid to Nnaife’s
representative, Adim” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 249). As we can see, Adim, Taiwo’s brother, sits down and
collects her sister’s bride’s price as if he were Taiwo’s father. In fact, boys or men are always given
the superior position. Adim is lifted up into the position of family representative because he is a boy. And
in patriarchal societies, boys are the most important children. A boy is even considered as worthy more
than ten times a girl. One day, Adaku is complaining about the death of her son. Oshia, the eldest
of Nnu Ego’s sons, tells her that she still has Dumbi. Surprisingly enough, Adaku answers back in a way
that downplays Dumbi’s existence as a child:

“[…] ‘you [Nnu Ego] can say that now. Do you remember how sad you were, senior wife, when
you had the two girls? You would have been happier if they turned out to be boys instead. Now
I had a boy, my only son, and he died not live. O God, why did you not take one of the girls and
leave me with my male child? My only man child.’
‘But you still have Dumbi,’ Oshia said uninvited.
‘You are worth more than ten Dumbis,’ Adaku snapped at the boy.
‘Go out and play, Oshia, and stop listening to female gossip.’ Oshia had heard enough to make
him realise that he and his brother Adim were rare commodities and that he, being the older, was
rarer still.” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 142).

All in all, Adaku does not want to have a girl child. She would prefer the girl’s death to her son’s. Also,
the boy does realise males are more valued than females in the family circle. Boys inherit everything
from their fathers, lands and other properties. They are even said to be the heirs and the family owners.
Enu Ego reminds Dumbi that she owes Oshia respect as he is the future representative of their father.
The extradiegetic narrator points out “to Dumbi that she must respect Oshia, as he was the heir and the
future owner of the family” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 136). When girls are taught from a young age that they
belong to their brothers and later their husbands own all the power, they become lost in society. Seen
through a feminist perspective, these statements show that Emecheta is denouncing patriarchal-based
families that are damaging to female children.

Another way male dominance over women is shown in Emecheta’s work is by only boys having
a chance at formal education. The fact that only boys are sent to school is evidence of patriarchal
implementation in the educational field. The patriarchal society forbids girls’ education, and without
education, girls are limited in many domains of social and professional life. In modern societies, people
without formal education cannot work in the administration of their country. If Emecheta and Nwapa
and many other African female writers like Darko Amma, Aidoo Ata and Adichie Chimamanda Ngozi
happen to publish novels, articles and other books, it is because they were given the opportunity to
go to school. Nnu Ego, Adaku, Efuru, Nwabata and other main female characters in the two books
under study are not described as well-educated women. For instance, when the autodiegetic narrator,
Nnu Ego, says, “I have a son in ‘Emelika,’ a boy in grammar school, and another who is going to be
a farmer” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 252), everyone can realise the illiteracy of Nnu Ego at that point. The
spelling ‘Emelika’ shows a great mispronunciation and the level of the person who is uttering the word.
Furthermore, Taiwo and Kehinde’s marriage is not a hazard. If they have been given the possibility to

Facio, 2013). From this definition, one can clearly notice that a place of lesser importance is made for young girls,

women and mothers in a patriarchal society. Authority is concentrated in the hands of boys, men, and

fathers. This system is unfair to women folk as it causes them troubles and suffering of all kinds. In the
two novels under study, this system is shown in different ways.

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further their study as it is given to Oshia and Adim, they will stay at school longer. So, the denial of education to girls is a way to prepare boys, the men to be, to take over women in the future.

Moreover, patriarchal society does not allow women the right to speech. Women's opinions are rarely welcome in a male-dominated society. Women should simply obey orders from men without giving their opinion, without any comments or questions. Mothers are even denied the right to talk when men are leading a discussion or debate. While Nnaife and Oshia are talking, Nnu Ego, Oshia's mother, should go to her cooking instead of seeking to intervene (Emecheta, 1979, p. 225). Elsewhere, Achebe's first novel depicts the major character, Okonkwo, who has had the same attitude as his senior wife, Nwoye's mother, the day when he comes home with Ikemefuna. As he comes home with the boy, he calls Nwoye's mother and says:

“'He belongs to the clan,' 'So look after him,' and the wife asked: 'Is he staying long with us?' 'Then the patriarch Okonkwo thundered and stammered': 'Do what you are told, woman'. 'When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?','"

And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions” (Achebe, 1958, p. 12). In sum, very limited esteem is given to women in a patriarchal society. The only thing they can do is obey without questions, whether they like it or not.

In addition to Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa’s Efuru describes the exploitation parents make of their female children. When Nwosu and Nwabata give the hand of Ogea as a guarantee for a debt, this boldness from the side of the parents has its roots in the patriarchal system in which girls and women are not considered important. This way of commodifying young girls finds its roots in the fact that patriarchy gives no esteem to women folk.

In other cases, men lay their hands on their wives. The fact that Amatokwu slapped Nnu Ego because she is not bearing a child is the fault of patriarchy. This system makes it an obligation for a couple to have children, and this obligation is especially high for men. When a man does not have a child in such a society, he is regarded as impotent and useless. Amatokwu and Nnu Ego are a good couple, and so the accumulation of anger leads the man one day to beat his wife (Emecheta, 1979, p. 33). Physical violence is a daily issue in patriarchal societies.

1.2. Barrenness and Women’s Suffering

Barrenness is the inability of a woman to reproduce or to bear a child. This situation is not accepted in patriarchal society because, in such societies, a woman’s social position depends on how reproductive they are. When women are in such a situation, their lives are doomed to suffer.

According to Nwankwor (2012), “Barrenness is the state (usually of a woman) of having no children or being unable to conceive and have children. It is the state of being unable to produce offspring; in a woman, it is an inability to conceive and bear children. For Africans, it is the quality of being unproductive, sterile or unfruitful” (p. 17). Whereas in the African context, childbearing is what Mbiti (1969) calls “personal immortality” (p. 131). In this perspective, the barren woman, who does not give her husband the possibility to live forever is good for nothing in African traditional communities. She is exposed to all sufferings.

Women’s inability to bear a child is a major factor in their sufferings in society as well as in their households. The real woman is the one who can bear as many children as her womb can shelter. A woman who cannot give her husband a child is called a barren one. As Gbaguidi et al. (2022) posit, “childlessness is a situation that creates many troubles such as trauma, stress, and depression in marriage” (p. 65). It means that a married woman who is not a mother is a disgrace in African societies, and she is not respected.

Nnaife’s senior wife does not escape moral torturing in her first fruitless marriage with Amatokwu. They are a very happy couple in the beginning, but when Nnu Ego fails sequentially to bear a child, everything changes. First of all, Nnu Ego loses her place as a senior wife, with all its attributions. The narrator exposes a scene that takes place in the course of the yam reap: “‘During the yam harvest Amatokwu, who only spoke to her (Nnu Ego) when it was necessary, said crisply ‘You will go and work with me on the farm today. Your young mate may be having my child any time now. She will stay at home with my mother’” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 31). So, the very coveted and the most beautiful of womankind is now going to play the role of a housemaid. She helps Amatokwu on the farm while her young mate stays at home because she has to care for Amatokwu’s child. Had she had a child of her own, she would not have undergone such humiliation and moral torture. It is very painful for anyone to lose his first place or to be down looked upon. This moral suffering of Nnu Ego is the result of her barrenness. When this is not enough, Amatokwu finds another opportunity to humiliate and punish her once on the farm. The narrator continues more seriously:

“At the farm, Amatokwu kept ordering her about it as he would any farm help. She stood in the middle of the farm and said abruptly, ‘Amatokwu, remember when I first came to your house?
Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? What happened to us, Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? Do you think I don’t suffer too?” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 31).

To this question, the proud man answers: “I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don’t appeal to me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman, he wants to be cooled, not to be scratched by a nervy female who is all bones” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 31). This treatment, such insults and heartless words prove that Amatokwu is no longer in real need of Nnu Ego except if she is ready to play the role of a housemaid. This careless treatment shows that the husband is now fed up with his wife. Nnu Ego understands the message, and Buchi Emecheta’s voice, through her words, expresses a terrible desperation. She is a hopeless and lost wife. She can guess what her fate will be like that of an abandoned wife. The situation has reached a level where Amatokwu has enough courage to lay violent hands on her. The scene goes as follows:

“All the eve of the day, Amatokwu’s second wife was giving birth, [. . .] When she (Nnu Ego) thought no one was looking, she took the boy and went into her own inner room, forgetting to lock her door. She began to appeal to the bot to either be her child or send her some of his friends from the other world. Not knowing she was being watched, she put the child to her breasts. The next thing she felt was a double blow from behind. She almost died of shock to see her husband there.

The child was snatched from her, and her father, Agbadi, was summoned. He took only one look at his daughter, then said: ‘Amatokwu, I don’t blame you for beating her so badly. We will not quarrel, . . . let me take her to my house so that she can rest for a while, and I can look after her. . . let her stay with me for a while.” (Emecheta, 1979, pp. 33–34).

This passage shows that childless wives in the Ibo community do not deserve any respect from their husbands. It even seems that Nnu Ego’s father has witnessed the scene in which his daughter has been battered and humiliated by her husband. It is impossible for Nnu Ego to enjoy a free and calm life with Nnaife. She is not bearing a child. When Agbadi says: “let me take her to my house so that she can rest for a while”, after Amatokwu has given his daughter a double blow, this means that she is permanently tortured and chastised because of her inability to bear a child.

Flora Nwapa also portrays the life of infertile women in Efuru through the eponymous character of Efuru. Adizua has left Efuru alone at home despite her beauty, money and femininity for another woman because of Efuru’s inability to bear a child. It took a long time after their marriage for Efuru to bear a female child, who later died. This situation brings lots of moral troubles to the protagonist. The fact that Adizua starts coming back home very late at night, spending nights outside the household, and abandoning Efuru’s food till one day he disappears with another adventuress woman is very degrading and disconcerting for her. Because Efuru is a very respectful and hardworking woman, her mother-in-law always comforts her whenever she falls into anxiety. The main trouble barren women face in patriarchal societies is the judgement and gossip of the society. Although Efuru’s in-laws are patient and kind with her, other women of the society gossip about her status. The extradiegetic narrator expresses the attachment of Ossai, Adizua’s mother and worries, “When Efuru was sad, she consoled her, told her that child would come when God willed it. Neighbours talked as they were bound to do. They express a terrible desperation. She is a hopeless and lost wife. She can guess what her fate will be like that of an abandoned wife. The situation has reached a level where Amatokwu has enough courage to lay violent hands on her. The scene goes as follows:

All in all, despite Efuru’s beauty, wealth, morality, generosity, and being praised by the entire community, the hardworking woman cannot have a peaceful and lasting marriage because she is barren.
From the above view, one can conclude with Helen Chukwuma that “Women in the cultural context achieve status through marriage and become fulfilled through motherhood” (Chukwuma, 1989, p. 133) and (Nwankwor, 2012, p. 24). But who says that only women with children should be happy? Nnu Ego has children of both sexes, but her dream of the joys of motherhood is utopic. “Motherhood, as described earlier, refers to a woman who has a child. It is supposed to be a great source of joy and satisfaction to have achieved a complete life. A woman is complete or full when she is a mother. That’s what Nnu Ego’s father, chief Agbadi, shows through these words: “...stand up and let me look at you. Yes... magnificent. A full woman, full of children. It is well. Ona, I told you it would be well...” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 170). Agbadi asserts that his daughter is now a full woman because she is full of children. She has now acquired the status of mother.

1.3. **Motherhood and Women’s Sufferings**

Motherhood is one of the most important characteristics of being a true woman in every society, namely in patriarchy. Paradoxically, here is why it is that the most desired achievement of every woman is, at the same moment, a factor in their suffering. Emecheta Buchi and Nwapa Flora have shown in their works that it is sometimes hell for women who have achieved the dream of motherhood.

Motherhood, as described earlier, refers to a woman who has a child. It is supposed to be a great source of joy and satisfaction to have achieved a complete life. A woman is complete or full when she is a mother. That’s what Nnu Ego’s father, chief Agbadi, shows through these words: “...stand up and let me look at you. Yes... magnificent. A full woman, full of children. It is well. Ona, I told you it would be well...” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 170). Agbadi asserts that his daughter is now a full woman because she is full of children. She has now acquired the status of mother. More importantly, it is believed that when a child is born, old age care of the parents is guaranteed. Thinking of her future life, Nnu Ego points out: “When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children, and your parents have gone, who will you call your own?” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 38) to continue, “Nnu Ego accepted her lot, taking comfort in the fact that one day her boys would be men” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 180). For the reason of fake hope, women refuse anything, whether it hurts them or not. In this regard, a mother’s love for her children is a chain that imprisons her. Women are obliged to bear violence and men’s whims without a claim for fairness (Emecheta, 1979, p. 153). Those beliefs lead women to accept everything. In other words, women sacrifice a lot of their lives to have children. But, later, they become a huge burden for her personal blossoming. All the sufferings Nnu Ego has gone through are connected to her motherhood. When her first son with Nnaife passes away, Nnu Ego attempts suicide. She loses hope in life and prefers death to life. This impact is due to the child she has lost. Her obsession with having a child and being a mother causes her trouble.

Moreover, the beginning of Nnu Ego’s marriage with Nnaife is like a straitjacket for her. She knows nothing about the man till she has gone to his house in the town as a wife. Her disappointment at seeing Nnaife and the words of dissatisfaction she uses show that she is not for the marriage. The description she makes of the man proves that she is not going to stay with him. Yet, the willingness to try again with another man and the possibility of being a mother forces her to stay with the man. The point here is the fact of accepting to spend her whole life with a person who is not her choice and whom she does not desire. This constitutes moral suffering that the woman has endured. The hope and the motivation of Nnu Ego in accepting this new arrangement of marriage with an unknown man is to be a mother. She thinks she will come back soon with a string of children, which is also her father’s prayer because her previous marriage with Amatokwu has been unfruitful and a total disgrace for her and her family. So, this new marriage is both for her and her father. Agbadi does not allow her to wave goodbye to anyone before going to Nnaife, but her anger does not last as she is given a new chance to be the mother “A slightly pained look momentarily passed over Nnu Ego’s face, but she cheered herself by saying lightly: ‘Maybe the next time I come back, I shall come with a string of children.’ That is our prayer, and I am sure it will be like that’, Agbadi said in all seriousness.” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 38). In the light of these words Father and daughter share, it clearly appears that the only motive of the marriage here is to seek to be a mother and to show the Amatokwu that Nnu Ego is reproductive. As a result, the sufferings that have started at home with her father are patiently endured.

Moreover, all the life Nnu Ego and her husband, Nnaife, have spent together has nothing to do with love and couple life. They are together only like partners in bearing children. Nnaife sometimes does not have the minimum to feed her family. But Enu Ego, the daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi, an important person in the village, a wealthy man who owns seven wives and properties, chooses to live in the gloom. The true clash with the family occurs after Nnaife’s imprisonment. This is because Kehinde, one of her daughters, wants to marry a Yoruba man, but Nnaife, an Ibo, refuses. As she has said, “Even in his sleep he (Nnaife) hates me, ... we tolerate each other for the children just for the children” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 235). This means that children sometimes are the basis of trouble in families. But then again, since Nnu Ego is having children with Nnaife, she needs nothing else. The children are her achievements and source of self-satisfaction. For her, no sacrifice is huge enough for children. Hephziber Ifunanya Obiorah, a Senior Financial Analyst and a Former Tutor at the Writing Center at the American University of Nigeria has also recognised through her “Complex and Differential Experiences of Slavery Portrayed in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*” (1979) that motherhood deteriorates Nnu Ego and makes her older than her age. The scholar describes Nnu Ego rather disappointingly: “Her hands were work-worn, dry and scaly. She was barely in her forties,
yet she looked like a woman of about seventy years old. The pains of Motherhood have aged her so. She remains a slave till her death, providing for her family yet having no one to provide for her. Realising her mistakes later in life, Nnu Ego cries” (Obiorah, 2014, p. 9)

“God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage? After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? In my life, I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, and I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul.” (Emecheta, 1979 as cited in Obiorah, 2014, p. 9).

From the above passage, one can see that Nnu Ego has understood by herself that all the things she has spent her life dreaming about are utopic and merely dreams. She gains nothing from all she has sacrificed. Motherhood is the cause of her slavery under men’s dominance. Obiorah and I are in agreement. She concludes that Nnu Ego can have a better life if she isn’t a mother: “Perhaps, she would have been better off if she were not a mother. At least she would have made friends who will hold her hands in death” (Obiorah, 2014, p. 9).

But another fact related to motherhood is the syndrome of the male child. Adaku, Nnaife’s second wife, is usually ill-treated because she is the mother of a girl child. Although Adaku is a mother, it is not sufficient. The female child she has is the source of her marital problems. A woman without a male child cannot complain about anything. She should bear every type of suffering (Emecheta, 1979, p. 183). Being the mother of a girl child is also a source of serious trouble for mothers in patriarchal societies. From all the above-mentioned arguments, it is meaningful to conclude that motherhood is also a source of women’s plague in society because if a child whose sex a woman is not responsible should be the cause of her life-lasting suffering, they had better resign. This aspect is also tackled in Efuru.

Indeed, Ossai refuses to leave her dead husband’s house because of her son Adizua. If she had accepted to leave, she would have had to think about how to take care of herself. A mother’s love for her child may be, in large part, responsible for the deterioration of the mother’s health when a child behaves in a strange way. Since Adizua, Ossai’s hope has vanished, and the old woman’s worry and despair have devastated her health. Ossai’s motherhood has brought her sorrow and pain instead of joy. Her son’s behaviour toward the bride’s parents has even shattered the mother’s dignity. In patriarchal societies, mothers are the only ones blamed if children misbehave. Children are the barometer by which society rates mothers in the traditional African context.

As for Efuru, despite her strong character and doggedness, she suffered not only the death of her little girl but also from Adizua’s abandonment of the household for another woman. As he has been misbehaving, Efuru is feeling the pain but does not want to leave him because she is in need of a child. For that, Efuru finds Adizua’s wrongdoings less painful because she has the hope that one day, she will be a mother if she is there with her husband. In fact, as the woman is described throughout the novel, she would not suffer if she were not in search of a baby. Even in her second marriage with Eneberi, a friend of hers she gets married with seeking to be mother, turns out to be another hell to the extent that she is held guilty of adultery. In various cases, women’s sufferings result from their ties to motherhood. Efuru is destined to be a wealthy but childless woman. As such, it contended that motherhood or the attempt to be a mother in men-dominated societies brings more suffering than joy.

1.4. Poverty and Women’s Predicaments

Poverty, according to simple English Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, is the “state of one who lacks a certain amount of material possessions or money”. It is a state of total need. Building upon our corpus novels, poverty is a front factor which bogs down our females in constant difficulties.

Through Emecheta’s Work under scrutiny, poverty is seen specifically in Nnaife’s household. It is a phenomenon that is characterised by the inability of parents to do fully their duties. Nnaife’s state of need is perceptible in many spheres of his social life. If we consider only the five fundamental rights of a child, such as the right to education, good health care, clothing, housing and the right to food, Nnaife’s family fails to provide them for their children.

When we take each case separately, it is clear that poverty does not allow Nnaife to fully satisfy any of them. As far as education is concerned, there is gender discrimination in the treatment of children. Boys are given more chances than girls to go to school. We only base our argument on the tradition that, at the beginning, segregates children and gives boys more value than girls. Kehinde and Taiwo must never see the gate of a school. Nevertheless, when Nnu Ego, the twins’ mother, has a small opportunity, she sends her two daughters to school. She is sorry for their financial situation: “My only regret is that I did not have enough money to let the girls stay at school” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 241). So, if Nnu Ego had sufficient money in the beginning, she could send her female children to school. This means that
the fact that young people are not schooled is ascribed to poverty. Nnu Ego explains things to her son Adim: “... but look son, ... I have to look for money to pay for your last year at school, and with my chi helping me, I shall get it for you” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 240). This means that there is no economy dedicated to children's education, and Nnu Ego has to work very hard to find money to pay Adim's school fees.

Moreover, poverty leads parents to negotiate their daughter's bride price in the view of affording boys' school fees. In this objective, when Nnu Ego is complaining about giving birth to a set of two girl baby children, Adaku comforts her that the girls will be very useful when they grow up: ... still, senior wife, these girls when they grow up will be great helpers to you in looking after the boys. Their bride prices will be used to pay their school fees as well (Emecheta, 1979, p. 141). So, the little girls who have just seen the day are calculated as commodities to provide parents with resources to solve future problems. The state of great lack, in fact, is also a source of hunger. It comes days when a woman has nothing to feed her family with. Enu Ego, in her marital life, has experienced all those hardships. The daughter of the wealthy Nwokocha Agbadi says to herself in a pitiful and desperate voice: “I may not be snubbed, but can I keep it up? I have no money to buy food, let alone abadas in which to attend meetings and church” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 191). Considering this, we can see that poverty keeps the great Nnu Ego in miserable and pitiful living conditions.

The kind of clothing Oshia, the favourite child, wears for feasts shows that he is from a family where they need everything. The narrator says that “for a naming ceremony, Oshia has put on the khaki uniform and one of his brother’s lappa cloth” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 146). This means that children are cared for. The reason is simple: money that is not for food cannot be used for clothes. Even the common room in which all the family, Nnaife, his wives and children, live is a one-piece room. The paradox is that Nnu Ego cannot ask her father or relatives for help because it will weaken her husband's social level and illustrate his inability to cope with his family's needs. The point is that poverty has severely hit Nnu Ego and his family and caused them much suffering.

Nwosu's family is another one that is seriously ridden by financial lack. Their state of need leads them to contract a lot of loans from Efuru that they have not succeeded in paying. Nevertheless, they do foolish things. For example, Nwosu, the head of the family, poorly invested the little money he received after the harvest to have a title because [ethnicity here] society dictates that men should always care for their image. In a short conversation, Ajanupu, Ossai's sister, asks Efuru if she has been paid, and the latter gives a negative, surprising answer:

“‘Efuru,’ Ajanupu began, ‘Debtors don’t pay their debts these days. I am knee-deep in debt myself. But my debtors won’t pay me. How is one going to survive the famine this year? By the way, have Ogea’s parents paid you yet?’ Ajanupu asks.

‘They have not paid me. I have not gone to ask them either. I thought they would use their discretion.’ answers Efuru.

‘Discretion indeed. Whoever uses his discretion when it comes to debts, if you don’t go often to remind them, your money is lost. Didn’t I hear that Ogea’s father took a title about a month ago?’ Ajanupu asks again.

Efuru answers in a surprising way, ‘A title? But he has no money, and he owes me so much.’” (Nwapa, 1966, p. 121).

From the above discussion, there is no doubt about Nwosu's family poverty. They owe Efuru over the years, and they are not able to pay back their debts, but they still find means and ways to have titles. Because of poverty, they are obliged to give their daughter's hand as a servant to Efuru. In this, the little girl Ogea is given to undergo all the sufferings inherent to her parents' debts in arrangement with Efuru.

Some other people are not able to cope with their health situation themselves unless they are helped. The disastrous health situation that Ossai, Adizua's mother, is living in is totally due to the fact that she is poor and there is nobody to look after her. If she is as rich as Efuru, she can provide herself with the necessary medical treatment. Her life has become a miserable one when Efuru has left her son, and there is nobody neither to feed nor to heal her.

In addition to Ossai's case, another woman had been enduring a terrible foot disease until Efuru carried her to the doctor for adequate health care. Efuru and Adishiemea, the doctor, have a friendly discussion when she talks about Nnona's health situation. Because she is used to helping poor people overcome their situations, she begins with: “I have not seen him for some time now though. But there is nothing wrong. If there was anything wrong, he would have come to me. I have another case now. It is an old woman this time. She has a bad leg. Since I was a child, she has always had a dirty bandage on that leg.” (Nwapa, 1966, p. 128) Promptly, the doctor says: “I won’t be staying long this time, so bring her to me tomorrow” (Nwapa, 1966, p. 128). Then, Efuru brings the poor, old woman to the doctor. She pays the fares for the treatment and gives the woman money for food. “The next day, Efuru
brought Nnona to the doctor. Her leg was examined. ‘It will take a long time to heal’, the doctor said to Efuru after the examination. ‘She had a bad sore, and she allowed it to eat into the bones. I shall send her to the hospital where she will have an operation. So bring her any time next, and we shall see what we can do for her’ (Nwapa, 1966, p. 129). This is, for the old woman, a source of great joy because she knows that she cannot offer herself suitable treatment and her daughter cannot either due to their poverty. The heterodiegetic narrator says:

“Nnona was overjoyed. She had a daughter who was married and had children. One of the children could go with her to the hospital because she would need someone to cook for her since the hospital did not provide food for its patients. It was arranged, and Efuru had to buy them a few things they needed, like yams, fish, pepper and salt. She paid the fare to Onicha and gave Nnona a few shillings as pocket money. The leg took time to heal, and they were in the hospital for over a month.” (Nwapa, 1966, p. 129).

This is to show that, without Efuru’s generous and charitable actions, Nnona would die in pain. For long, she has been suffering, and though she knows the way to the hospital, she has never dared to go there because she has no money to offer herself appropriate treatment. As a result, poverty is another enemy of our mothers in men-centered communities, especially when they are widows.

2. Conclusion

This article is about the roots of women’s predicaments in African fiction. The troubles of female folk in those two books are related to the patriarchal system that organises their societies. Both novelists have shown that patriarchy, barrenness, motherhood and poverty are the major factors that cause women’s suffering. Through the female characters like Nnu Ego, Adaku, Kehinde, Taiwo, Efuru, Ossai, Nnona, and Ogea, the Nigerian novelists draw the readers’ attention to girls and women’s predicaments. In highlighting the patriarchy of Nigerian/Ibo/etc. society, the writers want society to adopt fair social rules that can improve women’s and men’s co-existence. However, as Nnu Ego and Adaku think, suffering will not stop if nothing is done if women do not fight patriarchy. Insofar as women will not take action against this system that maintains them in an inferior position, this world will remain men’s. “Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 210).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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