

2013

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Recommended Citation

Craft, Matthew (2013) "The Colonized Gelding: Marital Violence in The Joys of Motherhood," *The Catalyst*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.18785/cat.0301.05

Available at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/southernmisscatalyst/vol3/iss1/5>

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Matthew Craft

The Colonized Gelding: Marital Violence in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

While Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), mostly concerns itself with depicting the struggle of an African mother to provide for herself and her children in an alien, colonial society, readers cannot ignore the plight of the African male in the novel. The situation and ultimate fate of Nnu Ego's husband Nnaife coincides with Nnu Ego's own turbulent journey. In many ways Nnaife could almost be considered the secondary protagonist of the novel, as the reader follows his story all the way to its tragic conclusion. Emecheta uses Nnaife to detail what colonialism has done to the African male, all while from the perspective of a woman. Readers see his pride, already in ruins due to his humiliating job as a laundryman crumble as the redefinition of his culture's gender roles allows his wives to surpass him as the providers of his family. In his struggle to make sense of this new world that is rapidly changing around him, Nnaife chooses violence to reestablish himself as the dominant head of the household, his treatment of his wives representing a redefinition of the masculine role in the colonial society for the colonized Africans. The abuse that he inflicts upon his wives is indicative of the migration from the rural, tribal environment to the urban, colonial environment and represents a symbolic castration of the colonized male as they try to fulfill the new patriarchal standard under emasculating subjugation.

While a significant aspect of Nnu Ego's story in *The Joys of Motherhood* is concerned with her children, her relationships with her two husbands are what drive the story forward. After Nnu Ego's failed marriage to her first husband Amatokwo she moves to the colonized city of Lagos to be with her new husband. This husband, Nnaife, breaks all of Nnu Ego's preconceptions

of what the African male is supposed to be. While the tribal Africans have more fit and athletic physiques from toiling in the fields or hunting, her husband Nnaife's body is soft and sweet smelling. To Nnu Ego, Nnaife appears to have more feminine qualities than herself, she mocks his overweight physique and his "breasts," and she considers his line of work to be feminine and emasculating, even going so far as to claim that living with Nnaife "would be like living with a middle aged woman" (Emecheta 42). To Nnu Ego, Nnaife is no longer a man both due to his physical appearance and also his willingness to serve under the white Europeans. Despite all his physical shortcomings, she begrudgingly chooses to accept him as a husband when he manages to give her children. From there *The Joys of Motherhood* explores what it means to be a mother while also never truly abandoning the plight of the colonized male. Lillian Temu Osaki explains that Nnu Ego's "determination to fulfill the roles of an African woman while still respecting the traditional concept of manliness drives her to madness" (Osaki 10). If Nnu Ego must adapt and provide for her family, then Nnaife must adapt as well. Like Nnu Ego, Nnaife is also determined to fulfill the role of the man in the relationship. His desire to prove his dominance clashes with his desire to fit in with the colonized society. Nnaife enjoys the easier work and modernism of the colonized world but unlike Nnu Ego, he is unwilling to sacrifice and strive to attain the position he so desires, and this is what stresses him to his breaking point.

For the African male, to live within the colonized culture means to live in submission and engage in work that his traditional culture would consider humiliating. This switch from the rural, agrarian society to the more industrialized colonial society forces adaptation for survival. To adapt he must integrate himself with the colonials and become more European and thus less "African." Essentially, he must kill his own culture to join a new culture that neither respects nor values him. For the African man this is an act of symbolic castration: he must remove all that his

culture considers to be masculine and desirable to fit with the softer, less physical Europeans. He abandons a culture where a man can tend his own farm and provide for both himself and his family, and he moves to one in which he must do tasks traditionally stigmatized as shameful or gendered feminine in his culture just to eat table scraps and earn a meager sum to purchase food for himself and his family. Only when he destroys his own masculinity is he allowed to integrate, as much as he can, into the colonial world but this integration does not restore what he has lost. He is now looked down upon by his native culture, a pariah who chose to sell his manhood to placate the white man; yet the cost of this sale does not yield a commensurate benefit because to said white man he will always be just a servant, never anything more. The challenge to come to terms with this dichotomy is staggering, but the greatest of the challenges for the “castrated” colonized is dealing with the effects of the redefinition of masculine and feminine gender roles.

The struggle for the colonized African male to retain his sense of masculinity is exacerbated because the colonial society has redefined the idea of male gender roles. The idea of manhood in the rural, tribal world is not the same as what the colonials consider manhood, because the tribal system is associated with personal power. The people of Nnu Ego's village associate physical prowess with one's role in life; thus, her father, a tall and successful wrestler and hunter, becomes a powerful chief in their society. His deeds alone did not earn him this position, but the fact that he was born both male and physically gifted assures his right to power within the tribal society. Tribal masculinity is established via a strict system, wherein personal power is trusted to those who *appear* to be worthy, like the physically powerful Agbadi, instead of to those later who prove they are worthy through economic acumen or academia. Thus, masculinity within the tribal culture seems to take on a competitive quality, as seen with the focus on physically aggressive sports such as wrestling. The colonized, however, exist in the

colonial system of masculinity. While the display of masculine, physical prowess does exist, the colonial means of expressing their masculinity is economic in nature. Prestige is determined by wealth; therefore the method of gaining said wealth and the recognition that accompanies it underlies the colonial masculine system. It is this system into which the colonized African man attempts to integrate himself while nonetheless failing.

The roles of the tribal male and the colonized male differs in that the role of the tribal is defined by his culture and his people, while the role of the colonized is defined by outsiders. For the tribal man, his role is clearly defined as that of the patriarch. The tribal man seeks to enforce the tradition of the Ibuza people that Nnu Ego claims has existed for "five, six, seven generations with no change at all" (Emecheta 46). The tribal male instills that sense of patriarchy in his sons and thus helps spread it throughout their society. The tribal male also serves as the primary provider for his family. The Ibuza people are mostly a hunter-gatherer society and thus the means of food production is left to the male, a farmer and hunter by Ibuza standards. By contrast, the role of the colonized male remains nearly completely undefined. The rules that apply to the tribal male do not transfer into the colonial system. There is no hunter-gatherer system for the males to use to be the sole providers; in fact, even the women are allowed to have jobs of their own and earn money. Salome C. Nnoromele states that, "failure to change with the times, to adapt psychologically, and to make tangible plans for the future is a form of madness" (Nnoromele 13). Nnoromele points out the struggle for the African woman to adapt to the changing culture, a struggle that the colonized men also face. They are forced to abandon their own traditions and adapt, yet are unable to do so because, like their wives, they are torn between the two cultures. Unlike their wives, however, their struggle to accept their new submissive position only seems to split them further. The colonized male cannot truly enforce a familial or

cultural system of patriarchy when the father himself lives under submission. The father's authority is constantly undermined because he, like the other colonized men in the city, is a servant. Thus, he faces the continuing struggle of maintaining his own personal authority over his wife and children, all the while not only having to share authority with his working wife but also accepting that he is no longer in control of his own life. He now believes that the only way for him to demonstrate his own authority is to enforce it physically.

The colonized must now depend on the colonizer to define his sense of masculinity. All of the African males within the colonial society serve in the houses of the wealthy, white Europeans. The way that these men gauge their gendered status between them is based on how well treated they are by their master, which displays their own significance. The idea of simply being born with status or earning it through competitive sport is alien to the colonized males: to them the only way for African males to obtain status is to impress upon their master their own importance. To prove their importance to the colonial masters, the colonized must do what Nnu Ego and the Ibo people consider degrading, humiliating tasks. The new domestic work of the castrated colonized male, less physically demanding than that in the traditional, rural setting, now begins to change his physical appearance, making him more round and feminine. When Nnu Ego first arrives in Lagos to meet with her new husband, she describes him as "a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel" (Emecheta 42). Nnu Ego goes on to lambast his longer hair and choice of dress, khakis with a white shirt: it is not the servitude that initially upsets her, but that a man would allow himself to look like this. That is not to say that his job is not troubling to Nnu Ego as well; on the contrary, she chooses early in their marriage to ask him why he cannot have a more respectable job, and Nnaife scoffs at her. Nnaife considers a job like

farming too laborious and unpredictable for his source of living. Nnu Ego continues to despise his line of work, and she would even "wince like someone in pain" when she witnessed him at work (Emecheta 47). It is the pride that he takes in his work, however, that seems to offend her most of all. Nnu Ego sees no pride in servitude, but Nnaife no longer sees a need for "pride" so long as he can appear useful to his master and maintain his primary source of income. Even if Nnaife wished to have a more "prideful" occupation he could not because in the colonized world, there are no 'traditional' masculine jobs for Nnaife to possess.

In the colonial setting, the African male now believes that to display his power, he must show his dominance through his control of his wife. To show his control the husband must crush his wife's newfound independence, most likely through violence. As Stéphane Robolin states, "If Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrates anything, it is the extent to which the deeply rooted power hierarchy between men and women plays out in society and, in particular, how the privileges conferred upon men are founded upon the limitation or privation of women's power" (Robolin 84). The power of African patriarchal masculinity, colonized or not, is dependent on the complete control of the wife, but this control is more crucial to the colonized because of their gradual loss of masculine identity. The domination of women is a cultural trait that the colonized and colonial seem to have in common, but the colonial is not defined by his control of his wife. Western patriarchy is strictly defined in Biblical terms. Thus, there is a religious expectation for the wife to submit to her husband, which places the burden on the wife to fulfill her own cultural duty rather than the husband. For the colonized, though, the wife has supplanted what the husband believes to be her place in his culture, and without a real way to express himself in the colonial culture he will inevitably turn to violence. The "castration" has left him frustrated and without an outlet for this frustration, the colonized must continuously serve the colonizers and

frequently betray his original culture. For Nnaife especially, the greater shame comes from knowing that his wife is outclassing him. He cannot hoard his position as the 'bread-winner' when his wife is bringing in as much or even more money than himself. The colonial culture allows for little if any upward mobility for the colonized and so to help keep his now fragile ego intact, the colonized will choose to attack the only source of emasculation that he can truly harm: his wife. The willingness to beat their wives almost seems to be a mark of respect among the colonized. When Nnaife manages to find a new job as a grass cutter the reader is told, "he gained the respect and even fear of his wife Nnu Ego. He could now even afford to beat her up, if she went beyond the limits he could stand" (Emecheta 117). For Nnaife to claim that he now can "afford" to assault Nnu Ego signifies his growing sense of colonization. He is now associating his personal wealth with personal power. His physical traits do not matter because he now has money, making him the important 'head' of the family that he could not be on his physicality alone. Nnu Ego does not fear Nnaife because he is strong; he believes she will fear him because he now has money. Nnaife seems to equate Nnu Ego's fear with the respect he so desperately seeks. To go from a culture where physicality is directly associated with masculinity to a culture where his only choice is emasculating servitude, Nnaife now finds that expressing his masculinity is directly proportional to how much his wife fears him. He begins to associate this fear with a new sense of masculine pride, even though this seems to break with his traditional culture.

Though violence against women exists in both cultures, there are some key differences between the tribal violence and the colonized violence. The violence that the tribal culture seems to inflict upon women appears to be more based in ritual and tradition. The only time the reader actually sees violence against women in the novel is during the funeral of one of Agbadi's wives.

During the funeral when the wife, Agunwa, is being placed into the grave, her own personal slave is brought to be sacrificed with her. When the woman resists, Agbadi's eldest son angrily strikes her in the back of the head with a cutlass. After the woman lies dying Agbadi walks forward and exclaims "Stop that at once!" Agbadi roared, limping up to his son. "What do you call this bravery? You make my stomach turn" (Emecheta 23). There are interesting implications depending on how the reader interprets the context of Agbadi's outburst. If Agbadi is speaking to the woman then he is admonishing her unwillingness to continue the bloody ritual. He finds her resistance abhorrent and is offended by the woman's "bravery." The narrator says that a good slave "was supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress" so Agbadi sees her not only defying the ritual, but defying her place in life both as a slave and as a woman (Emecheta 23). Her resistance is met with lethal violence, but within the tribal society this is the only violence the reader witnesses. The violence against women associated with the tribal culture is shown strictly in these ritualized terms. If the reader were to assume, however, that Agbadi was not speaking to the woman, but to his own son, this complicates things. If Agbadi is admonishing his son for his "bravery" in striking a woman, then it means that such violence within the tribal culture is not commonplace, and perhaps even rare. This interpretation makes the contrast between the tribal violence and the colonized violence even more stark. The text, however, does seem to indicate that Agbadi was speaking to the woman. Immediately following Agbadi's outburst, another man in the crowd strikes the woman and kills her. If Agbadi was yelling at his son for striking the woman, then why doesn't he or the other men respond when the woman is killed? No matter how the reader chooses to comprehend this scene, the violence of the colonized world still differs from the tribal world in startling fashion.

The violence of the colonized men towards women is not ritualized at all: if anything it is a response to the reconstructions of gender in the colonial economic context. Nnaife notes with pride his ability to beat his wife if he so chooses and the sentiment does not seem to be alien to the other colonized men. In one of his rages, Nnaife goes so far as to attack his second wife, Adaku, while she is pregnant. Nnu Ego even shouts to Nnaife, “leave the poor woman alone. Do you want to kill the new child that she is expecting?” (Emecheta 135). The novel shows much earlier that women are expected to endure their husband’s sexual lusts with silence and stillness, yet when violence is administered both Nnu Ego and Adaku resist and scream for help. They are both willing to withstand sex in silence because it is the tradition of their people, but their heavy resistance to being assaulted indicates that this violence is not common among the Ibuza people. What is more shocking is that Nnaife actually attacks Adaku while she is pregnant, possibly with a son. In the Ibuza culture and in the colonized society, the men see children, most especially sons, as the most important aspect of their culture. The son is the means to pass on the ‘divinity’ that the Ibuza man believes he possesses, and more importantly create another piece of themselves within the world. Thus the Ibuza man sees the birth of a son as his own means of vicarious immortality. For Nnaife to attack Adaku while she is pregnant is truly shocking and goes against everything that the Ibuza believe and stand for in their culture. Nnaife’s own obsession to prove his dominance over his wives now borders on self-destructive if he would risk the lives of his children. Yet Nnaife still attempts to use tradition to justify his violence. When his daughter, Kehinde, chooses to marry a member of an enemy tribe Nnaife attempts to kill both his daughter and her husband to be, as he claims is customary in Ibuza. During his rampage the narrator says, “Nnaife in his mind thought that he was in the Ibuza of his childhood where arguments of this sort were to be settled by sheer force” (Emecheta 210). It is interesting that

when Nnaife makes the decision to murder the Yoruba boy and his daughter, he falls back to the tradition of his people, something that he had dismissed prior. Nnaife chooses to use his traditional justification for violence only when it suits him, and the new culture he lives in punishes him. The colonized African man cannot depend on his cultural traditions in the colonial world; he abandoned that when he moved from the tribal society and was forced to adopt a culture that was not his own.

The Joys of Motherhood is a novel concerned with the effects of colonization on the tribal people of Africa. To go from a rural, agrarian society to an industrialized society is a staggering change, but it is the change in culture that proves to be the most challenging. Through Nnu Ego, Emecheta details the struggle of the African woman as she attempts to withstand the overbearing and often dangerous patriarchy of both the tribal and colonial societies while also attempting to adapt and provide for her family. By contrast, Nnaife represents the tribal male's grisly leap into colonized life. With his power stripped away and his manhood taken, Nnaife is something less than a man to his wife and his people. He fights to maintain his grip over his own masculinity but fails to realize that he gave up his power when he willingly became colonized. His attempt to gain the perks of the society cost him his identity as a man. The abuse that he showers upon his wives is Nnaife's final attempt at holding on to what he considers the last vestiges of his masculine identity. If he cannot have respect then he will accept fear. By allowing his wives to take what he believes should be his role as provider, he tries to fall back on the physical aspect of his culture but only further separates himself from his African heritage and exacerbates his own metaphoric mutilation when he assaults his pregnant wife. In the end, both Nnu Ego and Nnaife meet pitiable fates, but Nnu Ego, who chose to adapt to her new role, was the one who struggled through her situation in an attempt to improve her status in life. Thus, it was Nnu Ego who

retains more of what her culture considers to be masculinity, not her husband. While Nnu Ego adapts, Nnaife stagnates in the colonial culture. The switching of the gender roles proves impossible for the African male to accept. The loss of masculine identity functions as a symbolic castration for African men like Nnaife who try to exist in the colonial culture. Unwilling or unable to return to his tribal culture, the African male is forced to grudgingly accept his emasculated status in the colonial life and live as an outsider to both cultures. The pressure of this change in gender roles is what pushes the colonized African male to inflict violence upon his wives. The colonial culture robs him of his identity both as a man and as a worker and his frustration with the colonials is left unresolved. This lack of resolution is what drives men like Nnaife to physically assault their wives in a misguided attempt to retain some sense of masculine authority.

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