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## ***The Joys of Motherhood* and *Ny Zanako* [My Child]: Changing Images of the Mother in African Literature**

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**Abstract:** Traditionally associated to the earth, to water or to goddesses, the mother figure is sacred in African societies. Indeed, the centrality of procreation and mothering as the guarantees of lineage continuation has led to the institutionalization of motherhood. Changes brought by modernity, however, have also altered the way in which motherhood is viewed and experienced by African women. It is more and more present in public discourse not only as an institution but also as an experience. This article presents a comparative analysis of two African novels, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta and *Ny Zanako* (1966) by Clarisse Ratsifandrihamanana and aims at providing a more systematic understanding of the past and present dimensions of motherhood in the African context.

In fact, despite the writers' different backgrounds and nationalities, a close examination of the two texts reveals a stunning array of thematic and stylistic parallels revolving around motherhood. *The Joys of Motherhood* relates the trials of a traditional, victimized mother during pre-colonial and colonial Nigerian society. *Ny Zanako* [My Child] presents the story of a rebellious young woman who becomes a mother against her will in colonial Madagascar. Through a gynocentric point of view, the paper will shed light on the evolution of the representation of motherhood in African culture, with an emphasis on the common grounds as well as the specificities of each writer. The two texts intersect on the traditional theme that being a mother is a cultural mandate and a privilege. The readers are given to understand that in our changing world, motherhood cannot only be the idyllic act of creation which is the basis of feminine subjectivity and which

implies love, generosity, empathy and bliss. It is also a factor of oppression and exclusion linked to suffering, solitude and poverty. The paper intends to analyse how the two novels' depiction of motherhood reflects the stability and changes inherent to African societies.

**Keywords:** *motherhood, representation, culture, society, institution, experience*

As issues of demographic boom, development and sustainability are among Africa's 21<sup>st</sup> century agenda, the family and obviously motherhood remain central in current debates in and outside the continent. Indeed, motherhood, which is still the most important institution in African society, plays a key role in producing the continent's largest resource: its people. Myriads of scholarly studies have been published on the topic, especially within the last three decades. The majority of the research points out the stability and changes related to motherhood, in an attempt to throw into relief a variety of different or hitherto unexplored ideas that could improve our understanding of the issue and bring positive impact on mothers, children and society in general.

Literature, due to its transgressive and transformative modality, offers a rich and subtle representation of motherhood which is first and foremost a personal experience. *NZ*<sup>1</sup> and *TJOM*<sup>2</sup> are cases in point. *NZ*, as its title indicates, is the story of a mother and her child. It describes how Sahondra, the central character who comes from a respectable Protestant family experiences pregnancy out of wedlock and single parenthood. As for *TJOM*, it relates the journey of Nnu Ego as a wife and a mother from girlhood to old age. Through the depiction of atypical mother figures, the two novels give us an insight into the two faces of motherhood in the African context: the institution and the experience. But before exploring the literary representation of the subject, it might be more helpful to provide a brief overview of the concept of motherhood in African culture and society.

### **Motherhood in African Culture and Society**

Literature on motherhood in the African context is extremely rich and multi-faceted but one can single out two distinctive features. On the one hand, there is the study of motherhood as a social construction, which

focuses on revealing how “current definitions and practices of mothering – such as those emerging from dominant ideology are not inherently more valuable, natural or inevitable than an array of other possibilities” (O’Reilly 415) . On the other hand, motherhood is approached .as a personal experience. Such an approach promotes a reading of motherhood through a woman-centered lens and grounded on the realities confronting women.

The institution of motherhood is a constellation of ideas, beliefs, rules and expectations which directly and indirectly dictate how a woman should mother. The main feature of those beliefs and ideas institutionalizing motherhood is that they are oppressive to women. Writings about the issue in African culture emphasize the fact that the institutionalizing of motherhood is based on the idea that “maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies. And in all of them, the earth’s fertility is traditionally linked to women’s maternal powers. Hence the centrality of women as producers and providers and the reverence in which they are held” ( Hays 191). This sacredness of motherhood can account for the premium attributed to other institutions including marriage, the family and other patriarchal structures such as polygamy and the general social and sexual subordination of women.

As pointed out before, the visible oppression exerted by the institution of motherhood in the African context has generated a general attempt to find a different way of living and thinking of motherhood, as Obioma Nnameka says:

Theorizing of motherhood has shifted in the past decade in terms of articulating the affirming aspect of motherhood, the earlier stridency against motherhood has not quite subsided [... ] The arguments that are made for motherhood in the African texts are based not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but motherhood as an experience (“mothering”) with its pains and rewards. (Nnaemeka 5)

Feminist thinkers in particular have tried to question and challenge the normative beliefs and practices about women and motherhood and put more emphasis on motherhood as experience. Still, it is clear that “mothering cannot take place outside the institution and so is always influenced or shaped by it in some way” (O’Reilly 415). In the African

context, the reality of the motherhood experience which is supposed to take place in the private sphere is directly and indirectly shaped by the public domain. The experience of motherhood is grounded on the idea that it is different from what is socially defined, that it is delineated by the circumstances in which motherhood occurs for a given woman. Lauretta Ngocho gives us a very enlightening account of possible factors that might shape the African woman's experience of motherhood. She asserts that the first of them is the concept of marriage and children. The continuity of lineage which guarantees "human capital" and "social security" (Ngocho 141) is essential to the African world where children are the first wealth. Marriage, especially an arranged one, is the legitimation of the union and functions as guarantee of lineage. Another element that influences the way a woman experiences motherhood is her role and status in society. A noteworthy aspect of such a role is the predominant sexual and social subordination of women and the traditional definition of masculinity. The most visible example which combines these two is polygamy. Finally, another salient factor identified by Ngocho that shapes the experience of motherhood in Africa is poverty. It leads the woman for example to play the role of a father and mother at the same time.

### **Representation of Motherhood as an Institution in *NZ* and *TJOM***

In the opening pages of *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich asserts that "no woman comes to motherhood in a vacuum. From her earliest years, she has been the recipient of a continuous stream of dictates, determinations, representations, and symbols emanating from her culture, and instructing her in the norms of femininity (2). Such a situation is vividly represented in *NZ* and *TJOM* in which the social and cultural construction of motherhood is deeply essentialist and oppressive. The novels seem to reflect and critique the normative belief that a woman's and more particularly a wife's personhood lies in motherhood.

Indeed, the two novels intersect on the motif of the barren woman who foregrounds the idea that being a mother is the essence of a woman and a wife. On several occasions in *TJOM*, Nnu Ego, the central character, is reminded by her first husband and family how much she has failed her mission. A few months after her wedding, when she is still not pregnant, her husband stops having sex with Nnu Ego, telling bluntly to her that he has "no time to waste [his] precious male seed on a woman

who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line” (NZ 32). The husband, Amatokwu does not take her as his wife any longer because she cannot accomplish her main function, to bear a child. The incident drives home the idea that the foundation of a marriage in African culture is not love, companionship or sex, but “the children of the marriage” (Ngcobo 142). Razay, the childless woman in NZ gets a similarly caustic remark from her husband. There is not a day in the story when Razay does not feel sad about not having a child, and when she asks herself aloud when happiness will come to their household, the latter says “when your belly can bear a child” (46). Here, the husband voices the general premium placed on the maternal body on which the normalcy and felicity of their marriage depends.

Indeed, the representation of the childless woman’s desire for a progeny highlights the essentialist conceptualization of motherhood which is based on the importance of having one’s biological child. When thinking of the baby that she is going to adopt, Razay is still haunted by the idea that “*ny zanaka haterany no tena notadiaviny, zaza hiretsidretsika ao amin’ny votoatin’ainy ary hamparary ny andilany*” [it is a biological child that she wants, a child that will grow inside her, that will make her hip ache] (11). Nnu Ego likewise uses the physical dimension of her relationship with the junior wife’s baby to find relief and fulfillment over her frustration for not having children: “allowing this child to suckle as much as it wanted relieved her agony, and when they were both satisfied, he nestles against her and rests” (34). Such a symbiotic and intensely physical relationship is cherished by Nnu Ego because it implies the body and thus gives her a taste of the much longed for experience of having a biological child.

It is worth noting here how the two writers take recourse to the same rhetorical figure, the desert trope to refer to the childless woman, reiterating the association of the mother to the land in African culture. When Nnu Ego’s first husband comes to know that she has left for Lagos to be married to another man, his pride is somehow hurt because he has not thought that Nnu Ego would not come back to him. To console himself, he says that it is not a real loss because Nnu Ego is “as barren as the desert” (39). Sahondra uses the same reference to one characteristic of the desert to describe her life as a mother, she says: “*tsy karankaina ny fiainako*” [my life is not arid] because she has her daughter.(NZ 57)

The biological child is in fact the first component of the standards of ideal motherhood imposed by society in the two novels, which are referred to as the “mothering mystique” by Sharon Hays (qtd. In O’Reilly 361). The other components include mothering practices, more particularly the primordial and mythical place attributed to breastfeeding. The two novels show how failure to honor an act imbued with extraordinary ideological and cultural significance like breastfeeding is condemned by society. A few days after the birth of her baby, Sahondra is preparing herself to leave her baby to her surrogate parents. In doing so, she does not breastfeed as she thinks it is better not to have any contact with the child to facilitate the separation. The midwife’s reaction to that decision is noteworthy:

“*Te hiteraka ka no hiala adidy? [...] Ampinonoy io zazakely io sa tadiavinao ho faty? Adidin’ny reny no mamelona ny zanany, ny biby aza mahalala izany*” (NZI 46) [You wanted to have a baby so why do you run away from your responsibilities? [...] Breastfeed your baby or do you want it to die? It’s a mother’s duty to take care of her baby, even animals know that.]”

The midwife here articulates the central point concerning the meaning of breastfeeding in the social definition of motherhood: she makes an exaggerated and erroneous assertion that not breastfeeding the baby would kill. This scene reveals how such social construct is oppressive and unfounded. The fact that Sahondra is considered as inferior to animals implies that breastfeeding is such a basic instinct that it is inconceivable not to have it, a point that will be explored in more depth later on.

The same importance to breastfeeding for the biological mother is depicted in *TJOM*. When Nnu Ego becomes the childless senior wife, she finds comfort in taking care of the junior wife’s baby. She vents her frustration in talking to the child, in breastfeeding it and in secretly hoping that such an act will make her have her own children. When her husband catches her breastfeeding a baby that is not her own, she gets “a double blow from behind” (35), and was no longer allowed to take care of the baby, a situation which puts an end to their marriage. In Nigerian society, breastfeeding is a sacrosanct act that is exclusively the duty of the birth mother.

As a matter-of-fact, the general pressure put on the protagonists to breastfeed is linked to another popular lore asserting that maternal bond is reinforced by breastfeeding. Maternal bond, as defined by Blakely, is “alleged to happen instantly, almost chemically, within the first few minutes after the elements of A made contact with the stuff of B. If this powerful adhesive was timed and mixed properly, the mysterious properties of B caused A, the progenitor, to secrete infinite quantities of milk, patience, forgiveness, and compassion” (27). Most mother-child relationships in the novels are characterized by such unexplainable, almost magical mechanisms resulting in blissful, unconditional and reciprocal love, as Clarisse Ratsifandrihamanana summarizes it: “*hehy mivaly hehy, fitiavana mivaly fitiavana, zanaka sy reny!*” [laughter responded with laughter, love responded with love, mother and child!] (NZ 116)

This makes us understand that every element related to motherhood (the desire to become a mother, gestating, delivering, lactating and other motherworks) is natural and governed by the innate qualities popularly referred to as “maternal instinct: the effortless knowledge women allegedly acquired with birth” (Blakely 26). Among the list of “natural” feelings, behaviors and capability expected effortlessly from women during and after childbirth are pain and self-sacrifice. Both Sahondra and Nnu Ego are told to endure labor pain in silence because it is normal and bearable. When Sahondra complains about her pre-labor pain, her aunt answers: “*Aretina nilaina io, ka tsy misy hotarainana izany ... ny Soratra Masina manambara fa “fahoriana no hananana anaka”*. (NZ 15) [You asked for it, so do not complain ... The Scriptures say that it is in pain that you shall birth your children]. The fact that the writer borrows terms from the Bible is significant as it alludes to the dogmatic dimension of this belief. Similarly, on the night Nnu Ego gives birth to her first child, her friends inform her about the tradition among the wives in the compound: she has to “stifle her labour cries [...] and agonises for hours there in the back of their shared kitchen so as not to wake their sleeping husbands” (TJOM 53).

Such capacity to endure pain is the basis of self-sacrifice that women must show as they become mothers. This idea is implicit in the reproaches made by the midwife to Sahondra earlier, when she learns that the latter is going to give the baby for adoption. The midwife does

not understand the fact that Sahondra can still put her priority, namely her studies, before the baby. For Nnu Ego, it is much later in life, when her kids are grown-ups and have left her that she realizes how much she has sacrificed herself for the sake of her progenies. When all her children are married and she is separated from her husband, Nnu Ego decides to settle in her hometown. There, alone, she grows conscious of the fact that she never had the time for anything else, not even for friends, and that the only thing on which she has devoted her entire life is motherhood: “I don’t know how to be anything else but a mother” (*TJOM* 222).

Another socially imposed law related to motherhood is the context in which it should occur. In Malagasy culture, a child should be conceived in a morally acceptable structure, with the father and mother at least living together and preferably legally married. We have an insight into the degree of importance placed on this condition in *NZ* as the plot is based on it: Sahondra’s tragedy originates from the condition in which she gets pregnant. As already said, the parents banish her because they are unable to bear the Church’s judgment over the fact that their daughter gets pregnant out of wedlock. Thus she loses the support of her family, her chance to have education because her parents and her society do not tolerate such transgression. The solution they find to repair the damage is to give the baby for adoption, and thus the child would grow within the right structure and Sahondra would somehow escape society’s stigmatization.

The importance of the structure within which motherhood occurs is equally depicted in *TJOM*. Nnu Ego’s mother, Ona, has never been married to Agbadi, she is simply acknowledged as his mistress. Agbadi has proposed to her but she always refused. It is only her unplanned pregnancy that changes the situation. For the baby to grow in a family, with both parents present, she agrees to join his harem and in this way, becomes one of his wives.

Thus the social construction of motherhood enacted in the two novels seems to be oppressive to women, especially when rewards and punishments are dispensed according to how the female characters meet normative expectations. The modern and subversive aspect of the two texts lies in the fact that alongside this presentation of the traditional conceptualization of motherhood, they also depict a different alternative. The female characters show how their own modes of mothering are more natural, more valuable and empowering.

## **Motherhood as Experience in *NZ* and *TJOM***

The first remarkable point in the portrayal of motherhood as experience in the two novels is that what the characters actually live and feel in private proves that the socially defined dimensions of motherhood are wrong. The common point between the experience of motherhood in *NZ* and *TJOM* is first of all the fact that it is determined by each character's reality. Both characters experience motherhood under oppressive circumstances characterized by poverty and social subordination.

Right from the beginning of the mothering experience, the desire for a child is totally absent in Sahondra, a fact that debunks the myth of the woman's innate desire for a child. As a young adult, Sahondra enters into the world of sexuality in a very romantic and naïve way, unable to associate sex with procreation. Thus, her first reaction when discovering that she is pregnant is one of dread and hate, feelings that push her to think of and attempt abortion. Similarly, Nnu Ego is utterly appalled when finding out that she is pregnant of her ninth child. Already tired of taking care of her older children and leading a very precarious life based on small trade activities, she is not very physically and psychologically fit for a seventh pregnancy. When seeing her lack of enthusiasm and joy over the fact she is expecting again, her husband asks with big surprise: "Since when has pregnancy been a disease to you? And a seventh pregnancy at that?" taking for granted the fact that a woman would always positively live pregnancy (194). It is important to notice here the discrepancy between what the mother actually feels and what others think how she should feel. Such a situation highlights the gap between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience.

Such total lack of desire for a child is poignantly depicted through the child's death scene in *TJOM*. As a matter-of-fact, Nnu Ego's last child lives only for a few minutes and dies. Ngu Ego does not shed a tear, feels no sadness, and is even happy to lose it: "I am also glad that God has seen fit to take you back" (194). Later on, the only feeling she has is one of guilt over the fact that she does not feel sorry over the loss of the child.

However, the lack for desire for a child does not prevent pregnancy and childbirth from occurring. Once the child is conceived, the mother tries to cope with the changing maternal body as best as she can. Sahondra's reaction at the sight of her changing body is a telling detail.

She is horrified because she is losing her lean, discreet body and now has what she sees as a sick body marked by excess and protuberances:

*Nihorohoro i Sahondra, satria nanomboka tsy omby azy ny akanjony, mizijihitra ny tepany ary ny fiheverany ny mason'ny olona dia manombana avokoa ny bikany tsy metimety. Misalotra kapaoty andro mafana izy, tsy mametaka ny fehin-kibo mpamaritra ny hakelin'ny andilany fihamboamboany ary tsy andriny ny hiavian'ny alina hiafenany ao anaty lambam-pandriany. (31)* [Sahondra was horrified because her body no longer fit in her clothes, the waist was bulging and she thought that people's eyes were always judging her allure which was going awry. She wore her raincoat when the weather was hot, and she stopped wearing the belt which used to indicate how tight her waist was, something that she used to be so proud of, and she couldn't wait for the night to hide inside her bedclothes.]

Indeed, the pregnant body now stops being discreet and manifests its state. Sahondra is utterly terrified of her body because it is no longer docile and the only kind of control she can exert is to mask its manifestations. Nnu Ego's similar effort to go on with her life and not let the child be an obstacle is visible in the fact that she had carried her baby "while climbing up to Zabo market, this thing she knew was probably being hurt as she had bent defiantly down to wash clothes for her son" (*TJOM* 195). Such rejection of the baby continues until childbirth. After Sahondra has given birth to the baby girl, her reaction is one of total aversion:

*Sahondra kosa tsy nanopy maso ny zazakely akory, nihodina tany amin'ny rindrina izy. Ny fieritreretana ny fisiany fotsiny dia ampy sahady nampifaremotra azy. Na izany aza, tsaroany kosa fa maivamaivana kokoa ny eritreriny. Tafasaraka amin'ny tenany ilay fitomboky ny heloka nataony. (NZ 42)* [As for Sahondra, she did not even set her eyes on the baby, she turned away to face the walls. The idea that it exists is enough to upset her. Yet, she felt relieved. The stigma of her sin is now outside her body, separated from her]

This passage is the expression par excellence of the inexistence of maternal instinct or the automatic bond between mother and child. The mother/ child relationship is here completely thwarted by a different reality, that of religion. Similarly, in *TJOM*, the rejection of the child is symbolized by the fact that Nnu Ego, gives birth to it alone, without anybody's help, because she thinks it will not be necessary for a ninth baby. The delivery is described as follows: "Nnu Ego knelt in the middle of her room, holding on to the bed post, and with her teeth dug right into her lower lip ... she gave birth to a baby not bigger than a kitten... she saw the baby and herself in the pool of blood. The child, a girl, was lifeless" (*TJOM*194). This careless and unconscious act reveals her rejection of the baby

Another reality determining Sahondra and Nnu Ego's experience of motherhood is poverty. Such a situation, as alluded to earlier, demystifies the idyllic and sentimental image of the child that society promotes. The description of the child in both novels is associated to its economic value. Many times in the novel, Sahondra notices how her child grows and how much its needs also increase. Her slender means however obviously cannot meet those needs. This engenders a lot of anxiety in the mother. Raising children under precarious circumstances is likewise the main characteristic of the Nnu Ego's experience of motherhood. The degree of poverty in which those two characters live is probably the same, yet its impact on the child is greater in *TJOM*. Children's rights such as going to school or to play are denied, the kids have to take part in the trade of the mother. More significantly, the mother cherishes the children for the economic reward that they will give her later: "he will grow soon and clothe you and farm for you, so that your old age will be sweet" (*TJOM* 80).

One more striking similarity between the two novels related to the demystification of motherhood is the two characters the assumption that the unwanted child ends up dying in its childhood. When Sahondra's daughter dies at the age of 4, Sahondra's parents come to Marovoay to take her home and the first reproach she makes as she sees them is that her baby is dead because she was excluded by the society. Similarly, Nnu Ego's ninth baby is "taken back by God" because she has "deteriorated into the kind of woman who would not want her own child because she could not afford to feed or clothe her" (*TJOM* 195).

The modernity of these two novels lies in the fact that they “give a human face to motherhood” (Nnaemeka 5) In fact, alongside the presentation of motherhood through the biological mother, they also present mothering as a more metaphorical act which is available to those who want to do it, even the barren woman. In so doing, they put emphasis on the inner well-being of the surrogate mother who can find fulfillment through adoption. The discrepancy between Sahondra’s lack of joy as a biological mother and the surrogate mother’s bliss when holding the baby for the first time is a telling detail. Similarly, Nnu Ego finds more pleasure and fulfillment in nursing the junior wife’s baby than the latter.

Indeed, one significant contribution of these two novels in the treatment of motherhood as experience is their representation of surrogacy. The figure of the surrogate mother, in Malagasy culture in particular is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, she is ennobled and praised for the act of adopting another woman’s child; yet she is also an object of pity because she is either unable to have biological children or because she is doing the unnatural act of proffering care and affection to a child that is not her own. She exemplifies Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of “othermothering: those who help to pick up the pieces and maintain some sense of normalcy” (qtd in Weaver 17) for the children. In the two novels however, she is presented as a normal woman, able to feel and to act like a biological mother in the two novels. The surrogate mother is more relaxed, more detached from the pressure related to childbirth, breastfeeding, other responsibilities and constraints inherent to her fertility and wifeness. When Sahondra has given birth to the baby girl, she is tormented by worries concerning her future as she is still a student. This leads to different forms of rejection of the baby as seen earlier. It is the surrogate mother who feels the happiness associated to motherhood. Significantly, the name she has chosen for the baby that she is going to adopt reflects that state of mind: “*Maminirina*”, meaning sweet and desired testifies to the importance, the degree of love and affection devoted to the child. Similarly, Nnu Ego spends a lot of nights taking care of the child, giving it undivided attention, more than the biological mother who is already busy with her duties as a junior wife. In fact, the ironical title “the joys of motherhood” refers more to the surrogate mother than to the biological mother in that novel.

The description of the mother and her world in *TJOM* and *NZ* confirms Elaine Hansen's point of view that motherhood "offers women a site of both power and oppression, self-esteem and self-sacrifice, reverence and debasement" (3). It also reflects the tension between motherhood as institution and as experience in the African context. The two writers' obvious indictment of the socially constructed oppression of women means that motherhood, the largest institution in human society has not reached an impasse. It suggests that in the current context, a change in attitude and mentality is needed for Africa to be able to face its challenges.

### END NOTES

1. *NZ* stands for *Ny Zanako*, a Malagasy novel published in 1966 by Clarisse Andriamampandry Ratsifandrihamanana (1926 – 1988). Having won many literary prizes, including the prestigious one awarded by the Malagasy Teacher Trainers' Syndicate for *Ny Zanako*, she is an important figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Malagasy literature. The abbreviation *NZ* will be used to refer to *Ny Zanako* in this paper.
2. *TJOM* stands for *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and will be used throughout this paper to refer to that novel. Written by Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, the novel was critically acclaimed and has placed its writer among the canon of African literature in English.

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