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## Gender Inequality and Challenges of Motherhood in the Developing Society: Lessons from Head above Waters

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**Abstract:** We cannot dispute the fact that both challenges of motherhood and inequality in gender go together. Buchi Emecheta in her novel pointed out the challenges faced by women in the developing world. Although the story line may look fictitious but the novel really depicts what is going on in our environment. When we talk about challenges mothers faced in their matrimonial homes we talk about maltreatment, inequality, betrayal, infidelity, deprivation of rights of their female children coupled with the trauma they have to go through during pregnancy, labour, and child upbringing. However, many of them die in this situation leaving their children to suffer in the hands of their impious fathers especially the female ones since they are not regarded as the male ones. They are deprived of education, they are not well catered for and this is how it happens till they grow up, forced into marriages and the trend goes on even to their grandchildren. This is the type of hostile society women find themselves in the developing world. This paper aims to study the challenges faced by the women folks in the developing society and to point out the lessons learnt from understudying the novel “Head above Waters”

**Keywords:** Inequality, developing society, Gender, social deprivation, women, challenges of Motherhood

### Introduction

Motherhood is defined as the condition of a female parent or one who shows “motherly qualities (Oxford, 1997). A mother is a woman as she is related to her child (Webster, 1988). Motherhood is also defined by its attributes “the capacity to love, to create, produce, to watch over, nourish and protect (Webster, 1988). Over the ages, motherhood has been positioned within supportive social frameworks which allow the mothers to develop the essential primary bonds with their infants and children, but also allow them to be additionally productive members of the groups in which they lived (SIRC, 2011). Schaffer, (1977) contends that motherhood is a complex pattern involving both interactive qualities with another and tasks associated with the role. John Bowlby emphasizes the attachment of motherhood that begins in pregnancy (Schaffer, 1977). It is acknowledge that even temporary separation between mother and child can produce distressing for both.

According to Bowlby who emphasizes that motherhood begins in pregnancy, being pregnant is a gift from God bestowed on women but how can she know that she is pregnant. For most women, the absence of the monthly menstrual flow is generally the first notable signs, although some women pass through some other initial experiences signaling that a little addition is on the way. Such signs include dizziness, morning sickness, fainting, vomiting, cramping etc. These signs tell her that she has become a woman and

waiting patiently to become a mother of a son or a daughter.

### Yoruba Perception of Motherhood

Yoruba, *Ìran Yorùbá* (literally: Yoruba lineage), also known as *Àwon omo Yorùbá* (literally: Children of Yoruba), or simply as Yoruba, are an ethnic group of Southwestern and North Central Nigeria as well as Southern and Central Benin, together known as Yorubaland (Wikipedia, 2017). The Yoruba constitute over 40 million people in total. The majority of this population is from Nigeria and make up 21% of its population, making them one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa (CIA World Factbook, 2013). The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language, which is tonal, and is the Niger-Congo language with the largest number of native speakers (Samuel, 2000). The concept of Motherhood in Yorubaland seems as an opportunity to empower women. Although, the perception differs across the region, Yoruba perception of women can contribute to the improvement of life for women generally. Most important is that the Yoruba culture, with emphasis on motherhood, and the possibility of giving consideration to the Yoruba concept of motherhood in the process of formulation and implementation of policies especially with regard to women. A woman in Yoruba culture occupies various position a mother, a wife, a daughter, or even a priestess. The way a she is perceived depends on the position she occupies, and the different perceptions are reflected through songs, works of art, music, language and religion

(Makinde, 2004). The highest value is given to women as mother because Yoruba reverence motherhood. A popular proverb among the Yoruba presents motherhood as very precious:

*lya ni wura*

*Baba ni dingi*

Meaning: *Mother is gold*

*Father is a mirror*

Even in songs, mother is rated as precious as precious gold

*lya ni wura lyebiye*

*Ti a Kole fowora*

*Oloyun min fosu mesan*

*Opon min fo dun meta*

*lya ni wura lye biye*

*Ti a kole fowora*

Meaning: *Mother is a precious gold.*

*That cannot be purchased with money*

*She carried me in her womb*

*For nine months*

*She nursed me for three years*

*Mother is a precious gold*

*That cannot be purchased with money*  
(Washington, 2014)

The way mother is revered in the culture make most women look forward to being a mother she is even deified thus:

*Orisa bi iya kosi*

*lya laba ma bo*

Meaning: *There is no deity like mother*

*It is mother that is worthy of*

*being worshipped.*

Motherhood is considered to be very important in Yoruba culture because the preservation of humanity depends on the role of mothers in the society (Lawal, 1996). Motherhood and Womanhood are two words embedded in each other. The word womanhood is defined as “the state of being a woman and it can also mean women in general (Oxford, 1988). A woman is an adult female human being: women and children, a single (unmarried) woman, a woman of the world, one with experience of society, not young and innocent (attributed to be preferred to lady). A woman can also mean the female sex, feminine character, the state of being a woman. By becoming a mother, a woman is promoted to the esteemed position in which she can be referred to as a precious stone. Therefore, it is a tragedy for a

Yoruba woman not to have a child. This is reflected in songs:

*Omo l’okun, omo n i’de*

*Eniyan t’owa saye ti ko bimo*

*Aye asan lo wa*

Meaning: *A child is a coral bead; a child is silver*

*A person who has none has not*

*lived a fulfilled life.*

According to Makinde, (2004), in his paper on Motherhood as a source of empowerment of women in Yoruba culture, he described a child as okun (beads) according to Yoruba culture. These are a type of traditional necklace worn by obas (kings) and ljoye (chiefs); wearing of 'okun' is a symbol of royalty and authority using a royal symbol to describe a child. There may be interpreted to mean that a child confers on his or her mother the power to exercise authority in her husband's home. The importance attached to motherhood, thus reduced the negative effect of being referred to as an 'eru' (slave) on the psyche of women.

#### **Challenges of Motherhood in ‘Head Above Water’**

The novel *Head above Water* written by Buchi Emecheta Florence but her mother decided to call her in reminiscence of the story of the lady with lamp which the missionary had told her when she was in onisha. Among the most important female authors to emerge from post colonial African- born, Buchi is distinguished for her vivid descriptions of female subordination and conflicting cultural values in modern Africa (Ritombharali, 2000). In this book, Buchi exposes the injustice of traditional male-oriented African social customs that relegate women to a life of child bearing, servitude, and self-determination for aspiring young women who struggle against sexual discrimination, racism and unhappy marital arrangement to achieve individuality and independence while critical of patriarchal tribal culture. The fiction evinces an abiding reverence for African heritage and folklore that reflects the claims of tradition and modernization. The most challenges mothers face is child up-bringing. During this period, there are some tedious situations the mother will come by. Some of the clinical implications are outlined in Lan Brockington's paper where he argues against an over simplification of these disorders and suggests using commonly known terms to describe depression to new mothers and their relatives. This would help them to understand the disease, reduce the stigma of their illness and allow them to recognize their need for help.

In the book, the mother known as Buchi, the mother of five children passed through a lot of challenges. During this period, she endures torture while pregnant in prison for carrying on where her incarcerated freedom fighter husband left off. Buchi (1986). Giving birth to children survive this hell because inside this woman all along is a white light and an eternal flame that exist in her children, who carries on where her mother left off. She stands up occupier head on to defend herself, her family, her people and home and then turns her back to resume a daily life in the fields. Buchi continues to struggle to raise her family all alone. Buchi finds jobs to support her family amidst all these she still gains a degree in sociology and still manages to find time to write so as to survive in life. Though her marriage did not last long when they arrive at the time when it was classy to advertise for tenants and print in bold red fetters, "sorry no coloured" Sylvester could only get a small room from one Mr. Olufunwa, a man he met through another friend. It was a box-room with just enough space for a bed and a chair. Things were tough for Buchi and yet she conceived Jake and tries to hide it from the doctor because she is looking for a job and if the director gets to know, She is pregnant she will forfeit the job, so she has to keep it from the doctor and struggles continues.

To Buchi, that is not the end of her problem, the landlord and landlady try to send them, packing, complaining that Ikechukwu their son cries a lot that Chiedu wet the couch and it stinks and Ike Chukwu tore all the wallpaper and Buchi says, she never caught Ikechukwu who was then only nine months old doing the latte, all these claims were for them just to pack out. Only people who lived in London at the lime would know the power landlords used to have over their tenant. They could throw any tenant out at any time and few people would think of taking a black family in.

Buchi says, her husband always quoted this early shock they had at human nature as the strongest contributory factor to break up of our family. Maybe, so but she know that meeting the people they did at that time made her husband lower his standards considerably and like his new friends, he began to settle for second best. Buchi could have followed Sylvester but for the sake of the kids they were bringing into this world, she is prepared to hang on the edge of the cliff with her teeth, or to keep swimming with her head above water. There is racial discrimination in London then, that no respectable landlord wanted a black family, she says, she realized that however well educated they were, their colour which they had hit her to regarded as natural was repulsive to others and posed a great problem. Their host in their new country simply refused to see beyond the surface of their skin.

In London, Buchi and her children wandered from street to street looking for a place to

rest their heads. This show how critical a situation could be. The other challenge she faced was her children falling sick in the face of no job, no money to take care of the children. One of the children called Christiana is taken to the hospital, then she had to pay for the bill of the hospital, for things to be easier she told Sylvester that he should get a job as she was no longer prepared to go on working with four young children while he sits at home, she said:

*An eternal student who could*

*only*

*Afford to hop in and out of bed*

*With the women of the house*

These couple Mr. and Mrs, Ola supported her and she eventually gets job as a clerical officer at the newly but GPO Tower and she continues her reading since she wants to become an accountant.

### **Motherhood success mixed with disappointment**

At first, Buchi and her husband were delighted that they had gotten a new job but she never learnt with this new job of theirs. Another thing will come up when she tells herself that she is going to make their marriage work , this make her to make a statement that:

*"Once he went out to work*

*His confidence would soar*

*And he would learn to enjoy*

*The new power he had over*

*His family, the power to*

*Be the breadwinner"*

Sylvester in his life has never achieved anything good, Buchi herself make up her mind that she is going to practice all those things she learnt at the Methodist girl's high school. She was naive then, all she wanted was to be a full-time housewife and mother, she will be perfectly happy living Sylvester's reflected glory. She also have it in mind that she is going to teach her children to read and write before they go to school, and then take them to music and ballet classes where they would acquire confidence. She is going to take them to elocution classes and they will be beautiful table manners. She said:

*House work could be creative*

*If there is a breadwinner*

Another success that is mingled or mixed with disappoint is that she is so excited that she writes her first book *THE BRIDE PRICE*, this make her show it to her husband who throw .the manuscript into the fire and burn everything up. This' now make her to know that her dream of being an ideal wife and mother is buried. That is why she says:

*“Society never prepared us for lone  
Parenthood, as children they  
Were encouraged to play the ideal  
Mother or father, but as adults  
The fear of failing to achieve  
this ideal become a very stressful”*

In *Head above Waters*, another success mixed with disappointment is the situation in the life of Buchi that makes her sad is the thought that having a husband should make someone happy but reverse is the case for her. Buchi makes it known to readers that the happiest moment she has is when her husband is not around. All these are Buchi success mixed with disappointment.

### **Societal conspiracy against Motherhood**

This novel reflects the condition of women. They are saddled with the responsibility of taking care of their children even when their husbands are around. According to the recording consciousness Buchi says:

*“I remember my first day at school  
How I got fed up watching my mother  
Chatting with her friends and plaiting  
And replacing her hair and me  
Just standing there looking at them  
And missing my brother who was  
Already at school before I did”.*

Buchi says that she remember how her Chi whispers to her? Go on take a scarf and go to school, go on! Because ‘being a girl’, it was decided that she would not need much education. The society she finds herself does not encourage female children they looked down on. /in many African states, the above concept has assumed the status of a myth while the woman herself in order to maintain eligibility for marriage are to avoid being isolated and regarded as woman and man. Buchi either restrains herself from discussing the man and woman relationship, when and if she does rather than analyse the situation from an individual perspective giving her feeling and reaction to all the limitations imposed on her. She toes exactly those lines prescribed for her by the society.

*That is due to successful intimidation  
Of the African woman by the man  
Woman is shackles by their own  
Negative self-image by centuries of  
The exteriorization of the ideologies  
of patriarchy.*

The woman reactions to objectives problems therefore are often self-defeating and

self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitude to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. The African woman urgently needs to rid herself of all the complexes cited above, although today she is still very much involved in raising the family. She is equally actively participating in other spheres of nation building to gain recognition in the society. Therefore marriage procreation or selflessly and sheepishly pleasing the man should be neither a prerequisite nor an imperative. It is therefore very disappointing to note that some of our women feel uncomfortable to declare that they are feminist or to give the impression that they have any connections with feminist or feminist ideology. Assuming however, that the African woman sees marriage and house wifery as her only source of wish fulfilment and should she shy away from discussing her role as a wife and mother and the pleasure and tribulations involved? Should she not be interested in examining how her position has been affected by the changing processes in the socio-economic life of modern Africa? It is her duty to critically evaluate her position in her society and give her reaction to issues which concern her. Doing so does not make her anti-society, rather ignoring it portrays her as naive unintelligent and incapable of determining what is good for her.

One such condition is that which bases the woman’s value in her society only on her reproductive capability both the reproduction of actual human being and that of the labour force, thus recognizing this biological functions as the woman’s only contribution towards the development of her country such subjugation limits her self- actualization and stifles her talents, it is therefore amazing that our intellectuals, especially women writers among them seem apologetic to admit that they are feminists, even when their writing constitutes clear indication. Motherhood in the traditional society is associated with social acceptance: proof of one’s fecundity and ability to ensure the continuity of your husband lineage as well as assuming one’s place in her husband’s household while not negating that positive and necessary functions of motherhood, Emecheta shows that there is a schism between the projected and actual head above water.

### **The tyranny of patriarchy in the developing society**

This has to do with the idea of male dominance (patriarchy) in the traditional African society. This type of marriage system undermines the woman. She is to be seen and not heard. She is an appendage to the man. The man’s opinion on any issue is final and therefore cannot be challenged. In *head above water*, we have struggles with patriarchy and women’s status as second-class citizen. However, while I refer to African women writers, I do not suggest that they form a



homogeneous, unitary group with shared monolithic histories; indeed, shared commonalities often mask important differences. The different and individual cultures and histories define how African women relate to their struggles, and their cultural and historic locations are themselves defined by time, space and class. African patriarchy, too, is no more unitary or universal than are African women themselves. Emecheta thus express differing tensions and reactions to their particular confrontations with post colonialism and patriarchy.

Emecheta tend to confront the issue which relates most closely to themselves. Thus, marriage polygyny, childbearing and the woman's subservient status are recurrent themes in their works. While African male writers may well incorporate these same issues in to their texts, seldom are they the central themes. Furthermore, in writing by African men, such gender traditions generally remain unchallenged. Much of the early literature written by Africa men deals with social and political implications of colonialism and men's struggles within and away from its confines. Women are generally depicted as peripheral to the struggles they tend to function as symbols of traditions or instruments for the male working out of his problems.

When African men do depict a central woman protagonist. She is likely to be methodized or romanticized. The different sexes create or record the roles of their women protagonists through their own eyes and thus not surprising depict different perspectives, perspectives developed from their inherited and personally experience cultural and individual memories. Emecheta articulate women's struggle for equality in this work, I use the word "feminist" to denote women who strive for equality in political, economic and social arenas, although I am cognizant of the multiple definitions of the word, and in the understanding that women of varying cultures have different approaches towards liberation. Many African women consider the term "feminist" as applicable to the struggles of white, middle-class American women and in appropriate for depicting the broader liberation issues confronting African women. Many view the feminist movement as hegemonic, western or euro-American and Anti-male. African women have been challenged by more sexual inequality; many are disadvantaged by oppression of poverty and lack of education.

The novelist, Buchi Emecheta states there are some contradictory attitudes that are evident in the text for example, when she says, "in many cases, polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her especially if she is educated.

Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends.

Yet, Emecheta's the joys of motherhood clearly depicts the negative aspect of polygamy. In *head above water* she writes, "I was writing my books from experiences of my own life and from watching and studying the lives of those around me. I did not know that writing the way I was, was putting me into a special category. Despite her claims, her words may also reflect her subconscious internalizing of the current cultural trends of her British environment. In 1984, she claims my novels are not feminist, they are a part of the corpus of African literature' (Raveli-pinto 50). However in 1988, she states I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist, then I am a feminist with a small "f". The authors may wish to evade the feminist label to avoid accusations of serving neo-colonialism. On the other hand,

Ogundipe-Lesile, (1994) maintains that their denials may reflect patriarchal intimidation. The differing forms of feminism are always fluid and changing exacerbating the difficulty of generalizing. While some of the works examined voice desires for sexual equality, all confront the influence of western culture and all, with the possible exception of Rebecca Njuau's *Ripples in the pool*, advocate the need for women to be educated, an important aspect of the liberation of African women. Of course, male dominance and education of women are not unrelated issues.

Struggles for sexual equality as only part of a larger wider struggles for liberation of women and of their people as a whole, and do not necessarily see themselves in an oppositional stance to their inherited culture or the men in their ethnic groups. Nigeria feminists, Ogundipe-Lesile, (1994) advocate that there can be no liberation of African society without the liberation of women, arguing indeed that the two issues cannot be separated. However, she acknowledges women's different attributes to gender issues. Some women reject the bride price (dowry) which values women as commodities; others wish to retain it, valuing the respect it affords women. Some rejects the practice of polygamy; other colludes with or openly condones polygamy. This can be seen in the relationship between Buchi and her husband. She is not consulted when Sylvester had sexual intercourse with the landlord's wife and yet he pretends as if nothing has happened between them.

In *head above water*, Sylvester shows tyranny in the way he maltreats the children Buchi gives birth for him, according to Sylvester:

*he seized Jake's arm and said  
you do not like him that much  
because he looks like me.  
The boy said, leave me alone*

*you're bad, you beat me all.*

*the time, I'm going with my mummy.*

Sylvester also demand sexual right from Buchi even though he never take time to stay with the family, care for them, pay their school fee. Buchi is force to say thus:

*Sylvester found out where*

*We lived and came to demand*

*What he calls his*

*Sexual rights as a husband.*

*I was virtually raped for*

*Alice to be conceived*

*Looking at Alice now, I am glad it happened.*

The level of wickedness in Sylvester made Buchi to rain curses on him, when he denied his children and recommended that Buchi should have them all adopted, because being a student he did not wish to be saddled with five kids and he burnt Buchi's Nigerian passport, the children's certificates and the marriage certificate.

This made Buchi curse him, she said;

*From now on, Sylvester, you the son of Onwoidi*

*The day you come out to make fire*

*God will send rain, unless any of those*

*Five children belonged not to you but*

*To someone else.*

Due to the wickedness of her husband, she was forced to say these. And this shows the tyranny of patriarchy in head above water.

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## Conclusion

The challenges of motherhood have been one of the major concerns issue undermining the sustainable development effort in the developing society. Women are indispensable in any society. Yoruba perception of women was based on the indispensability of water because water is the source of life and therefore a necessity. Looking it from another angle, a woman is a necessity for procreation, that is, woman is a source of life just like water. However, just as water is useful and necessary, sometimes it can be dangerous; it can cause flooding, which can wash off properties and people. In the same way, women can be a blessing or a curse to their husbands or to her community. The struggle for equality, challenges mother face in their homes as well as tyranny of patriarchy depicts the negative aspect of developing society as regard gender inequality. Women are to be liberated and treated as equal because they are the pillars in this world. That is, through them, the world can stand. In conclusion, the works of Emecheta recalls dignified individual women characters, who suffer the fate of none compromising and non-conforming. Emecheta's fiction focuses on the plight of African women who struggle against patriarchal family structures, unfair gender stereotypes, and contradictory should values in contemporary Africa. All these challenges Buchi passed through in this novel head above water, she also serves as a female leading voice in contemporary African literature, Emecheta has attracted international attention for her compelling depiction of the female experience in African society and in particular her native Nigeria.