

Big Brother is Watching You: Interrogating Feminine Subjectivity in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

This paper explores the construction of feminine subjectivity in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. Against the background of studies of the novel as a feminist narrative which exposes women's subjugation and patriarchal hegemony, we consider the emergence of the female subject under the surveillance of the symbolic authority operative in the text. In other words, our study examines the symbolic determination of femininity by the symbolic order whose constitution in the text is inherently patriarchal. Hence, we understand patriarchy in psychoanalytic terms as a symbolic authority, the Big Brother, whose watchful eye plays a major role in the formation of the female subject. By borrowing insights from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyse the novel, we argue that Nnu Ego and Ona are characters whose subjectivities are determined by the patriarchal order, for which their desires as subjects revolve around the provision of this order. The attainment of consciousness towards the end of their lives is, therefore, read here as a return of the repressed desire which tends to surmount the borders of patriarchy. Our analysis focuses mainly on Nnu Ego, the protagonist, and Ona, her mother, with the introduction of Adaku serving to highlight the difference between her subjective constitution and that of the novel's protagonist. This way, the paper concludes that Nnu Ego is an ideological habitus whose death symbolises the death of patriarchal ideology in the text.

Keywords: *Symbolic Castration, Desire, Other, Symbolic Order, and Return of the Repressed.*

INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* was published when there was a raging thirst for women's voices in the African literary tradition, which male writers largely dominated. Although it is the author's fifth novel, it has emerged as her most famous work and one of the most widely read female-authored narratives in Africa, with an established canonical significance. Thus, the novel has received considerable criticism both for its seminal position in the African feminist literary archive and for the polemical structure of the narrative sequence. Scholars are almost unanimous that the novel presents the plights of motherhood, feminist struggles, women's subjugation, quest for selfhood, patriarchal dominance, and so on (Barfi and Alaei 12; Barman 29; Bedana et al. 1; Diakhate 278; Eke and Abana 96; Himakshi 342; Kanorio and Nwangi 108; Muhammad 102; Nnoromele 178; Serafin 1; Sindhu and Frederick 2308).

Aliyu Muhammad, in a comparative study of the text with Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, considers the authors' contrastive representation of main and minor female characters; for him, the main characters are portrayed as 'docile and dogmatic' and the minor ones as

‘radical and rebellious’ (107). Although he has set out to examine the minor characters particularly, his analysis focuses mainly on the main characters – Nnu Ego and Ramatoulaye – while failing to highlight how the actions of the three minor characters he references (Ona, Adaku, and Aissatou) are anti-feminist, given his jumping-off remark that the novels are anything but feminist narratives (102). In a similar study, Anne Serafin explores the attributes of Nnu Ego and Ramatoulaye, highlighting their shared marital experience, how tradition/religion constitutes a shaping force in their lives, and how the two novels have ‘contributed enormously to stripping away the[] coverings and misconceptions [about African women]’ (7). However, Salome Nnoromele is rather sceptical of universalising the experience of African women based on the experience of characters, especially the case of Nnu Ego, who is seen as ‘the quintessential African woman’ (178). According to her, ‘we must develop new paradigms for reading and interpreting works by African women that take into account both sociological and historical evidence available about the lives of African women’ (182). This new paradigm considers the individuality of the female characters and the choices they make, which have long-term consequences of shaping their destiny. This way, *The Joys of Motherhood* is not a construction of the universal African woman but ‘is simply the story of a woman who makes devastating choices and sacrifices her health and selfhood in the pursuit of failed traditions, capsulated in the idea of motherhood’ (182).

There is no doubt that the question of choice plays out significantly in Nnu Ego’s experience; however, what informs the choices she makes and whether they are choices after all seem to slip under the radar of most studies of the narrative. To what extent is Nnu Ego’s choice really hers, being a character whose subjectivity has been constructed by the patriarchal authority, the Big Brother in her life, whose piercing gaze shapes both her personality and her desire? Our study, therefore, focuses on the making of the subjects, Nnu Ego and Ona, her mother, under the regulatory gaze of the dominant patriarchal system in the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In his theory of psychosexual development, Freud provides an account of male and female sexuality and how this plays a role in the psychological formation of the individual subject. He postulates that although both sexes experience the Oedipal situation, the ‘little girl’s Oedipal complex runs a different course than the little boy’s and holds a different relation to castration anxiety’ (qtd. in Zakin 5). For the little girl, the Oedipal complex is a secondary formation which results from the castration complex. The girl child enters an Oedipal situation when she discovers that her mother is castrated, having no phallus. This prompts the girl child’s gradual shifting of attachment from the mother to the father, whose presence does not constitute a threat to her sexuality since she already feels castrated. Thus, in place of the castration anxiety experienced by a male child before the father is the penis envy which trails a female child’s Oedipal complex.

Castration and the resolution of the Oedipal complex introduce the child to the law, which the father represents and is referred to as ‘the name of the father’ (Lacan, *Écrits* 230). This law, also conceived as the big Other, is the law of social relations built primarily on prohibition. It is the law that forbids excessive desire and structures social interaction. In fact, the law, which is here seen as Big Brother, is the third figure in every intersubjective relation as well as the field of intelligibility and meaning. The law is an agency for determining normalcy, a common reference point, the ultimate signifier. The accession to this law through castration is conceived by Freud as a ‘shared sacrifice’; that is, something that must be given up by those who enter a

society, a kind of societal entry fee (*Totem and Taboo* 12). It is the sacrifice of desire that admits the subject into society. This way, castration becomes an effort to normalise the subject, to bring their desire in tandem with the desire of the Other. The Other is the Big Brother which controls and determines the subject at every point in their life.

The concept of Big Brother was popularised by George Orwell in his classic novel, *1984*, where it is presented as the figure of authority whose power is as limitless as it is totalitarian. We read:

On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran. . . . The blackmoustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. (Orwell 1)

The immensity of this symbolic figure draws from the profound sense of presence his very absence commands in the individual subject; for although Big Brother does not have a material body, his all-seeing eyes, like the god's, are everywhere the subjects realise their existence and control every aspect of their lives. Thus, the subjects are perpetually under surveillance and presented as objects overseen by the dark, roving eyes that upset their privacy. In *1984*, even the characters' inchoate thoughts are monitored by Big Brother's agent known as the 'Thought Police' (9). This is to say that the characters only think, and perhaps desire, what is permissible by Big Brother. Big Brother is here grasped in the Lacanian sense as the 'Law,' the symbolic authority whose castrating gaze on the subjects ascribes to them a certain identity and regulates their desires.

Part of the castration effect on the subject is their emergence as a 'given-to-be-seen', the object of the gaze (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 74). The gaze is one of the objects, specifically the object of the scopic drive, prohibited to the subject. We will return to this in the penultimate section. Symbolic castration, therefore, tends to mean the fundamental separation of the individual from their desires in order to fashion them as subjects under the symbolic authority, understood as Big Brother. Although the subjects' desires are separated from them, these desires are only denied, not erased; as a result, there is always a recess of discontent which certain situations can rouse in them, thereby inducing the return of the repressed desires. Such a return amounts to an exposure of the hole in the Other, which often means a threat to the law and the social framework that structures the society.

In Freud's account, however, women 'appear not as subjects of the law but as objects of its exchange' (Zakin 7), for in his story of the ritual killing of the father and the claiming of his women by a horde of brothers, the action of which results in the creation of totems and taboos, it is the relationship between father and son that institutes the law (see *Totem and Taboo* 147). Freud's privileging of fraternal relations as constitutive of political order and Lacan's association of the phallus with masculinity provide the locus of attack by psychoanalytic feminism. Hence Simone de Beauvoir, in line with Karen Horney, characterised psychoanalysis as 'sexual monism', arguing that if women envy men, it is because of the social power and privilege they enjoy, and not because of anatomical superiority (qtd. In Zakin 8). Although Freud had warned that psychoanalysis 'does not try to describe what a woman is . . . but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition' ('Femininity' 116), his theorisation is 'sexually indifferent', as Luce

Irigaray and Julia Kristeva maintained, especially for the symmetry it assumes between masculine and feminine sexualities (qtd. in Zakin 17). By excluding mother-daughter relations in the symbolic order, Freud's and Lacan's accounts sustain the legitimacy of patriarchy while leaving the notion that the 'meaning of being a woman is fully exhausted in the meaning of being a mother' (18). In place of the homogenising essence psychoanalysis ascribes to a woman, psychoanalytic feminists embrace an ambiguous identity, denouncing womanhood as a 'metaphysical concept with substantive content' (18). However, the construction of feminine subjectivity in *The Joys of Motherhood* tends towards this homogenisation of women, where it is unanimously 'agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman' (62).

We shall, therefore, interrogate the novel based on this common conception of women, which is enabled by the prevailing patriarchal ideology. Our methodology follows textual analysis, aiming to account for 'the greatest number of facts furnished by the text . . . and offer[] a qualitatively better convergence between the features which it takes into account' (Ricoeur 137). This method of analysis allows us to situate events within the socio-cultural contexts of their occurrence in order to gain a deeper understanding of the novel.

Construction of Feminine Subjectivity

The female subject in *The Joys of Motherhood* is determined by Big Brother, which assigns her identity and position in society. This determination is so holistic that it comprehends a woman's sense of self and is so normative that it is definitive of who women are by tradition. Women invariably understand themselves in this normative sense, positing their self-image in the very register established by the patriarchal order. This way, their subjectivity takes on a patriarchal construct, which, in the narrative, revolves around the common conception of women as mothers. For instance, Nwokocha Agbadi, referring to Ona, remarks, 'You see, you won't even allow yourself to be a woman. You are in the first weeks of motherhood, and all you can do is to think like a man . . .' (Emecheta 24). Similarly, noticing Nnu Ego's pregnancy, Nnaife wonders, 'Look at yourself – you look pregnant to me, and you were not like that when you came here. What else does a woman want?' (49). Perhaps Nnu Ego already has an answer to the question, as we read from her, referring to the husband, 'He has made me into a real woman – all I want to be, a woman and a mother' (53). Thus, a woman can be successful, but she is incomplete without a husband; besides, her life is 'nothing if she left no male children behind when she had gone to inherit the wealth, children who were her own flesh and blood' (166). This is the logic of meaning legitimised by patriarchy, the Big Brother, which works by concealing the power relation that is the basis of its force (see Bourdieu and Passeron 4). By appropriating this meaning, which hence begins to steer the course of their existence, the female characters perpetuate the ideology of the authority through which they have been constructed.

Although the character of Ona poses as a woman of self-will who defies the patriarchal order by refusing to marry, she is under the sway of the patriarchal authority, which constitutes the deciding agency not only in her life but also in the lives of other women. In her case, Chief Obi Umunna, her father, 'had maintained that she must never marry; his daughter was never going to stoop to any man' (12). Striking in this quotation are the verbal groups and the semantic imperatives they evoke: 'had maintained', 'must never marry', and 'was never going to stoop'. In the brevity of this statement, 'all has already been said in enigma', according to Paul Ricoeur (288); for seen here is the authority of the father whose utterance alone constitutes the law for the subject; by contrast is the figure of the subject before the law, who having been

spared from stooping before the law of another man is nonetheless bound to stoop before her father's law, the decision made being nothing of her own, but which she must uphold, living it out as if it is her natural destiny, while ultimately succumbing to authority not even her stubbornness and arrogance can equal in resistance. In Nnu Ego's case, the decision of her two marriages is taken by her father, whose acceptance of a suitor translates to her daughter's acceptance. While being sent to Nnaife, her second husband, Nnu Ego appears as a subject without desire, or rather, as a subject who has properly internalised the desire of the Other, saying to the father, '. . . but if you wish it so, so it will be' (38). According to Lacan, the castrated subject's desire is the desire of the Other (*Fundamental Concepts* 115). Because their own desire is prohibited, they appropriate the desire of the Other. Nnu Ego's father, just like Ona's, is, therefore, an over-determining force, the law, so to speak, who has assumed a symbolic function in his daughter's life.

But despite being subdued by the patriarchal order, curling 'her long legs in feminine modesty' when she sits (Emecheta 12), Ona first hints at the notion of woman which transcends the dominant patriarchal conception of womanhood in their society. According to her, "Please don't mourn for me long," she tells Agbadi, "and see that however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego, you must allow her to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman'" (28). The woman Ona means for her daughter here flies in the face of the woman Nnu Ego wishes for herself, as seen in her declaration above, '. . . all I want to be, a woman and a mother' (53). For Ona had meant a woman with agency, having independent thought over what to become, and not the kind that panders to men's fantasies. Contrary to this, Nnu Ego 'was taking the trouble to look more feminine than usual. . . . That was a quality many Ibuza men appreciated; they wanted women who could claim to be helpless without them' (36). The full accession of the subject Nnu Ego to the castrating function of the symbolic authority represents a successful construction of her subjectivity within this patriarchal society. As a subject, she reflects the patriarchal temper of society, disappearing into signification while she lives separated from her own desires. However, due to her happy blend with the symbolic authority that legitimises meaning, Nnu Ego is temporarily distanced from the separation anxiety that attends the denial of individual desires. She is, instead, the signifier of the Other for others, the mirror through which patriarchy casts its ideological shadows on other women in the text. We shall return to this in the last section.

The patriarchal authority which castrates the subjects ascribes to them an identity from which they can hardly be divorced, just like biological traits inherited genetically stick to the individual. This explains Nnu Ego's inability to adjust when she relocates to Lagos, having fully internalised the patriarchal ideal from Ibuza, which is unchallenged by the colonial enterprise of the city of Lagos. Unlike Nnu Ego in her fixity and 'singleness of purpose' (36), Adaku is flexible and responsive to her environment, breaking loose from the clutches of patriarchy when it cannot offer her a survival option in Lagos. This is to say that contrary to Salome Nnoromele who sees Nnu Ego 'not as an object on which society heaps its "unfair" practices and demands, but as a subject of her own actions, as an active determinant of her own destiny' (182), Nnu Ego is here seen as an embodiment of patriarchal tradition, of whom Adaku exclaims, 'You believe in tradition. You have changed little, but stood firm by your beliefs' (218). Her father has also raised her to believe that being a mother is everything to a woman and fathering male children establishes a woman's worth (119). Therefore, to agree with Nnoromele that Nnu Ego is 'a subject of her action' is to downplay these ideological factors that have both shaped her personality and continue to influence her actions. As a product of this traditional authority, Nnu Ego makes sense of herself and life through the system of

meaning it provides her, but this meaning is limited in vision and thrives only within the system of authority that powers it.

In this regard, Nnu Ego is rather an ideological habitus that ‘follows the schemes of cultural arbitrary by heart’ (Corsten 4). Speaking of cultural habitus, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron see it as ‘the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after symbolic action has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practices the principles of the internalized arbitrary’ (31). Hence, despite not enjoying her first night of sexual encounter with Nnaife, Nnu Ego ‘bore it, relaxed *as she had been told*. . .’ (Emecheta 44; emphasis added) because the act has the prospects of making her a woman in the patriarchal sense of the word. To return to the phrase, ‘. . . *as she had been told*’, one may wish to ask who told her. But this is an utterance already deprived of a grammatical subject, which, though reproduced by the speaking subject, nonetheless objectifies her, rendering her passive in her own speech action. The utterance in this case has the force of tradition, which, as we shall see in the next section, is the master signifier, giving meaning and representation to the subject. However, by interrogating the basis of patriarchal hegemony in her life, as we shall see in the last section, Nnu Ego displays ‘the possibility of trying to get on the bottom of a habituated symbolic practice’ (Corsten 4), the outcome of which signals a revolution.

The Patriarchal Gaze

Gaze in Lacan is not just the act of looking but also the object of the act of looking. It positions the subject within the symbolic order and introduces the awareness of being the object of another’s look; thus, the Other has the privilege of gaze: ‘we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world’ (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 75). The gaze is not merely about a physical sight but a symbolic function that situates the subject in relation to the field of vision and desire; hence, the concept of gaze formulates how the subject is caught, manipulated, and captured in the scopic field. Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon comes in handy in the understanding of the Lacanian gaze, as it explains how norms, laws, and policies are deployed to organise the subjects into ‘docile bodies’ which can be worked on to achieve maximum compliance (Foucault 135). In Michel Foucault’s elaboration of this concept, the panopticon works in the formation of subjectivity by highlighting ‘the psychological control of society through the altering of social behaviors of the watched by those who watch’ (Isike 19). The panopticon, because, like the gaze, it situates the subject at the position where ‘he is seen, but he does not see[, where] he is an object of information . . .’ (Foucault 200), demonstrates the asymmetrical nature of surveillance. This way, the panopticon, as much as the gaze, is so significant in the relation of domination because it represents the force of authority, the Big Brother, which raises in the subject the consciousness of being watched. So by the same token the symbolic function subjectivises women in *The Joys of Motherhood*, it makes them the ones who are looked at. Nnu Ego is perpetually caught under the gaze of the symbolic authority which defines and regulates the terms of her life. Although details regarding her childhood development are missing in the novel, she is a genuine object of men’s attraction, being such a beautiful girl. But besides being the object of men’s gaze, serving as an ‘appealing visual object[, the mirror of men’s desires . . .’ (Irigaray qtd. in Zakin 18), Nnu Ego as a young girl is constantly monitored by men around her, especially her father Nwokocha Agbadi and his friend Obi Idayi, the Big Brothers in her life, whose watchful eyes determine when she is ripe for marriage.

As observed by Idayi, ‘Your daughter's mind is not here. She dreams of her man and her own home. Don't let her dream in vain. After all, her age-mates are already having their first

and second babies' (30). This all-seeing patriarchal eye penetrates the interior of the subject, and like the Thought Police in *1984*, is aware of what is going on in the subject's mind. Thus, the gaze is violating: it upsets privacy, rendering the subject as a script read and interpreted. In Christopher Isike's study of Big Brother Naija, a television reality show, he notes that the 'constant and sometimes penetrative gaze of the Big Brother conditions and moderate the thought patterns and behaviors of the housemates in ways that ensure compliance with the norms, rules, and regulation of the Big Brother . . .' (26). Apparently, the one with the gaze has dominance over others while also exercising the power of constructing meaning, meaning which tends to alienate the subject in that it does not identify the subject's truth of being. In Nnu Ego's case, it matters less whether she wishes to marry at this point; what is more important is what the gaze sees, which is her desire for her own man and home. Both Idayi and Agbadi seem to know what is good for her without as much striving to understand her peculiar needs. However, the representation by the gaze of the Other is often distorted because what the eye sees is limited and comes already warped. Lacan teaches that 'there is, beyond the thing, the thing itself' (106), which often eludes the eyes. In other words, there is a truth of being unrepresented in the gaze, beyond the gaze's eye. Hence, the Other's claim of the 'quality of being all-seeing' (75) is disproved by the very condition of the subject, which lets loose their suppressed desire. This situation usually occasions the return of the repressed, which, as seen in Nnu Ego's life, shall be taken up in the next section.

This is not, however, to suggest that Nnu Ego's first marriage fails because the choice, which is made by her father with the support of his friend Idayi, does not reflect the subject's actual desire. As we noted above, her two marriages are both her father's decisions, but while the second marriage to Nnaife is considered a success due to the number of children she has, male children especially, the first marriage to Amatokwu ends in childlessness. When her first marriage collapses, she laments that she has disappointed the expectation of the patriarchal figure in her life, 'How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed?' (Emecheta 31). It is not so much the failed marriage that is of concern to her as the shame of returning to her father with the news of her failure to give birth. No doubt she is always under her father's gaze, under whose watch she realises her existence, and it does not matter if she is close or far from her father, for the patriarchal gaze transcends the barrier of distance, always already there with the subject, in their very interiority, structuring their thought and setting the stage for their expression of desires. But, according to Beth Newman, 'to be the object of the gaze, to be the spectacle instead of the spectator, is to lose one's position of mastery and control, in short, to be emasculated' (1035). So, to be deprived of the position of the spectator is to lack self-mastery, to be thrown down, so to speak. This explains Nnu Ego's total dependence on the male figures in her life without qualms and her inability to make decisions or fend for herself. To her father, her husband Nnaife, and her sons, she is cast in their field of vision, satisfying their scopical drive.

However, she is consciously aware and unaware of the operation of this patriarchal control: she is aware to the extent that the gaze, like Big Brother's photograph, is always looking back at her as much as she is looking at it, disrupting her comfort as a detached observer, revealing her vulnerability and entanglement in the field of vision; hence, she declares, '[i]t was one thing to be poor, it was another to be *seen* to be poor' (Emecheta 161; emphasis added). But she is unaware in the sense that the gaze underlines her fundamental lack, that which, like the phallus, is denied the castrated subject, but which produces in her the double effect of fascination and alienation that structures desires. Thus, in the dramatic encounter between her and Igbonoba's wife, a woman who 'had many children, boys as well as girls – in

short she had everything any woman could want' (163), Nnu Ego comes into full confrontation with her desires and fantasies which have been overlaid, as she becomes aware of a life outside her normal longing for children, an awareness of which gives rise to the interplay of envy and anxiety in her. For this, we read:

And look at her, Nnu Ego thought angrily, look at the expensive shoes she is wearing, look at that headtie, and even a gold chain – all this just to come and see her relative Adaku, and in this rain! God, the cost of that headtie! Whatever she paid for it would feed me and the children for a whole month. And she is the daughter of a nobody! Yet look at me, the daughter of a wellknown chief, reduced to this. . . . (163)

Nnu Ego's anger stems from her being exposed to the lack trailing her desire, which she has not prepared herself to embrace, as would a subject in the throes of subjective destitution, where reconciliation to their inherent lack becomes a new mode of living. In her case, she 'could not stand it, no, she could not! She felt like screaming, but she covered her mouth tightly with her hand' (164). And there is her frustration; there is also her angst, for it dawns on her that the gaze which regulates her desires also denies their full attainment, leaving her split in the tension between reality and wish fulfilment. That notwithstanding, this experience, coupled with Adaku's dissolution of her marriage with Nnaife, as seen below, has allowed Nnu Ego to glimpse the hole in the gaze of the Other. Consequently, her violation by the gaze is momentarily entrapped, with the result that the Other may cease to maintain its hold on her. This situation is considered the return of the repressed in psychoanalysis.

Desire and Its Resurgence

The patriarchal tradition in *The Joys of Motherhood* applauds a woman's capacity to have multiple children, preferably male children who are to continue the family lineage. However, this patrilineality is only in the service of patriarchal ideology, which the likes of Adaku oppose. Adaku embarks on a course of action that contests the definitions of the female subject, plucking up the courage to defy the traditional expectations that marginalise women. Thus, she is a woman whose agency is manifestly demonstrated, though her experience complicates the question of discontent in relation to desire. Because she is introduced halfway through the narrative, not much is known about her childhood in terms of her upbringing and early childhood experiences. However, she is said to have grown up in 'a low family where people were not tied to pleasing the rest of their members . . .' (Emecheta 127), a background which has imparted to her some boldness of character and independence of thinking. Adaku exudes a strong personality that is lacking in Nnu Ego, which makes her both a thing of envy and admiration for Nnu Ego. Her self-assured personality, combined with her inability to settle for less, distances her from the control of the patriarchal ideology. Hence, following the unjust resolution of the quarrel between her and Nnu Ego by Ibuza men, she resolves to break away from her marriage and enter prostitution. According to her, 'Maybe you're right again, my senior. Yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own' (169).

These standards are set and sustained by the patriarchal order, which Nnu Ego has become its signifier, as we noted above; hence, by dissociating herself from Nnu Ego's standards, Adaku is at the same time freeing herself from the constraints of patriarchy which fellow women have become their true reflection. Lacan observes that 'when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as "fading," as disappearance' (218). That

is to say that the subject, having internalised the desire of the Other while being alienated from their own desire, ceases to be for themselves, but for the Other, serving as the means through which the Other perpetuates its ideology. This further reinforces Nnu Ego as an ideological habitus. By choosing to live on her own terms henceforth, Adaku is also spared from the moral question raised by her decision to go into prostitution, as the system of this morality is ultimately bound up with the entrenched gender definition in a patriarchal tradition which assigns value to a woman's body and how it is to be used. Adaku is reacting against this tradition by striving to regain her body's autonomy, even if it means redefining what is normatively suitable for women. However, the heroic stature of her action is undermined by its immediate motivation, seeing that her reason to start prostitution is prompted by her failure to have a male child that will accord her a privileged position like Nnu Ego in Nnaife's family. In this case, her awareness of this patriarchal tradition is strong enough to assume a defining force of her lifestyle and career choices, in a way that cannot be said of Nnu Ego, who lacks both awareness and the self-will to challenge the rule of patriarchy in her life.

As a product of this ideology, Nnu Ego's desire is so caught up with its ideal that it is almost difficult to draw a line between her personal yearning and ideological expectations. But this is not to neglect the place of Chi as a third force in Nnu Ego's life, especially in her experience of childbirth. In fact, the involvement of Chi, a supernatural element, in her destiny problematises her case as a desiring subject. To what extent, therefore, is Nnu Ego determined by Big Brother, given that she is equally under the control of a Chi whose good offices or otherwise fashions her desire and its actualisation? If we recall, Nnu Ego is a reincarnation of her father's slave girl who vowed to come back as a legitimate daughter after her brutal killing in the burial of her mistress. With her life cut short, she has returned as a true daughter of Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father, to complete her life cycle in Nnu Ego's body. This is to suggest that the life Nnu Ego lives is not hers but the slave woman living in her. However, the tension between Nnu Ego and her Chi, which in this case translates to the internal conflict between her self and the embodied self of the slave girl, makes Nnu Ego a plural being. At the physical level is the character Nnu Ego, a girl child born like every other girl and brought up in the same patriarchal tradition as her mother; but at the spiritual level is the slave girl, her Chi, who exercises control over Nnu Ego's desires and their attainment. This semantic surplus, which Nnu Ego resonates with, calls into question the place of psychoanalysis in the explication of a character whose motivation for action reverberates beyond psychical and social considerations. Part of the constitution of consciousness in the text is the supernatural entities, which occupy an essential position in the characters' lives, forming also a component of their symbolic order. As such, Nnu Ego is not just being determined by the symbolic authority but is also under the control of the elemental force of Chi and the gods of the clan to whom prayers are offered for her freedom. A psychoanalytic intervention may locate the Chi and the gods as father figures who prohibit desire, standing in the way of the subject's desire and its actualisation. This way, Nnu Ego can be said to desire only what is permitted by the law, identified here in such terms as Big Brother, (patriarchal) tradition, father figure, and symbolic authority (order).

However, towards the end of the narrative, we see an attempt by the subject Nnu Ego to reclaim her desire, to subvert the symbolic authority operative in her psyche. By questioning the logic of meaning in her life, as well as the patriarchal system which has hitherto constituted her ideal of motherhood, Nnu Ego experiences a recess of discontent that anticipates the return of the repressed. Since the fundamental cause of repression is cultural and ethical representations (Eidelsztein 110), which translate to the symbolic organisation of society, the return of desire is bound to be a revolt against this cultural order. Although we see a resurgence

of desire in Nnu Ego, that is, an attempt to be a desiring subject in a system that has alienated her from her desire, she does not go forth in pursuit of the desire. But her moment of self-awakening confers an insight into the constitution of her subjectivity and that of fellow women in her society. Hence, we read:

The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (Emecheta 187)

Nnu Ego's reflection here is, by its very motive, revolutionary. It is for A. N. Akwanya some kind of dialectical questioning that usually threatens ideological coding (48–9), because it undoes the system constructed and sustained by symbolic authority. This reflection and the eventual expression of it, which signals a revolt, is, on its own, difficult to exercise. Thus, if 'Emecheta's work is not just an individual woman's story, but that of a woman writing her body into the social and cultural spaces defined by patriarchy' (Okome 403), it can be argued that the author is struggling with the figures of patriarchal authority in the life of her character, Nnu Ego. But given that the father figures in Nnu Ego's life are no more (Nwokocha Agbadi is late; Nnaife is incarcerated, marking the end of his reign in Nnu Ego's life; and her sons are overseas), the narrative sequence tends towards a revolutionary end. Their death, either physically or symbolically, and the subsequent death of Nnu Ego, the ideological habitus, symbolises the end of Big Brother, the patriarchal hegemony in the text. More significantly, the cosmic interaction in the text enables the transfer of the revolutionary action to the world of the dead, where it is ultimately realised. Hence, Nnu Ego's refusal to answer prayers requesting children from her illustrates that her freedom of choice, which the tradition denied, is gained by her at last in death.

CONCLUSION

The application of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in its pure formulation to an African novel may pose some difficulty because of the universalising principles of the theory, which takes for granted the range of factors that constitute a psychological subject. Although this deficiency is later addressed by Carl Jung's psychoanalysis, the legitimate belief of Africans in the supernatural beings who exercise a considerable influence on the lives of the characters in this novel points to a blind spot in Freudian and Lacanian accounts of human subjectivity. The presence of supernatural forces in the novel tends to introduce cultural specificity as a condition for appreciating the nuances of individual characters while stretching their psychoanalytic formulation to account for their spiritual accoutrements. However, in this analysis, an attempt is made to consider the spiritual component of characters as part of the range of influences on their lives. For Nnu Ego, as for her mother Ona, this influence is seen in the involvement of Chi and gods in their destinies, which psychoanalysis understands here as an obstruction to desire, entirely complicit with patriarchy. These two characters are read as revolutionary because of the consciousness they attain towards the tail-end of their life. Nnu Ego is an ideological habitus, desiring only what is permissible by patriarchy, but discovers to her dismay the constructed myth of motherhood, an insight that comes to the mother on her dying bed. By questioning the basis of patriarchal authority in her life and ultimately kicking against its ideal in death, Nnu Ego achieves a total subversion of Big Brother's watchful eye.

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