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Breaking Cultural Chains

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Holden Hartle

Breaking Cultural Chains

In a society in which everyone, one's family, friends, community, expects them to act a certain way, how much courage does it take to be your own person? A lot. In Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, the idea of a cultural norm is prevalent. Within the setting of the book, men and women have certain duties. For example, women are expected to marry a husband that is chosen by the father. Once married, the woman is expected to bear children and do housework, while the man is expected to make an income to support the family. This is the structure that has been taking place in Lagos, Nigeria, for generations. After someone dies, as long as they performed their duties during their lifetime, it is said that they lived a happy life. But, when a character deviates from these norms, could one say that that character lived a happy life?

Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the story, compares her unhappy and abusive relationship to slavery throughout the novel. She explains "I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood... We women subscribe to [these] law[s] more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (Emecheta 187). The laws she is referring to are the ones enforced by their culture that say men have certain roles that are more important than those of the women. Someone can look at Nnu Ego's situation and ask, "why doesn't she just leave?" Well, the situation is not that simple.

It has been instilled within Nnu Ego that there is a certain standard of how people are meant to act and behave. A woman is meant to find a husband, bear children, and raise them. These standards do not disappear if the husband is abusive and withholds money for his

alcoholism (Emecheta 134). As the novel progresses, Nnaife becomes more and more abusive, but the culture accepts this based on the “laws” that are set in place. What would happen if someone went against these values?

After Nnaife’s brother dies, Nnaife inherits his brother’s wife, Adaku (Emecheta 115). When she enters the story, she is immediately described by Nnu Ego as “enviously attractive, young-looking, and comfortably plump with the kind of roundness that really suited a woman” (Emecheta 118). After this description, the narrator says Nnu Ego “hated this woman” (Emecheta 118) and that she is a “new threat” (Emecheta 118). All of this hatred that Nnu Ego has for Adaku would eventually subside, as they come to this realization that they are in this abusive marriage together and should treat each other with respect.

As the novel progresses, the relationship between Nnu Ego and Adaku becomes complicated. Nnu Ego is considered superior because she has had more sons, which are the defining factor of status in this culture. Adaku is shamed since she only has two daughters. This is primarily done by Nnu Ego since she is feeling inferior herself as she struggles with her role within the community. The narrator explains that Nnu Ego “looked for every opportunity to call the names of her children in full” (Emecheta 162). This degradation, in conjunction with the cheapness of Nnaife, leads to an outburst by Adaku. She says she’s going to “leave this stinking [house]” (Emecheta 168). Adaku does not stop there, however. She exclaims “I am going to become a prostitute” (Emecheta 168). This is powerful for several reasons. To start, she claims that she wants to leave the house. This is something that by itself is breaking a “law”. Women are supposed to stay with their husbands until death. Her willingness to leave symbolizes independence, a privilege that women are not allowed to have within Lagos, Nigeria.

Then there is the idea of her becoming a prostitute. This is also breaking a cultural standard, and the reasoning behind it reveals interesting aspects concerning the ‘laws’ set in place. In this society, men can have multiple wives, but this is not the case the other way around, furthering the idea that men hold more importance to the people of Lagos. The fact that Adaku is willing to become a prostitute— in other words, have multiple male sexual partners, —shifts the scales. This boldness causes the conflict. Adaku’s action is symbolic of not only independence, but of equality between genders.

However, perhaps most relevant to the theme of the story is the idea of being a “prisoner.” With this power move, Adaku breaks not only the chains of her marriage, but of society as a whole. The pressure set by her family and peers, and the precedent set by the generations before her, led her to the moment just before she leaves Nnaife and Nnu Ego to live her own life. With all of these conflicts degrading her livelihood and that of her children, not only does she have the strength to recognize that what is going on does not make sense, but she also has the strength to break the socially established “law.”

When Adaku dies, would she have lived a happy life? To someone in Lagos, probably not. Her actions outcasted herself from her community, despite the fact that it was what was best for her. To the reader, however, Adaku undoubtedly made the right decision. Adaku’s attitude changes when she leaves Nnaife. Nnu Ego has a conversation with Adaku after she has established her new life and asks, “You mean you won’t have to depend on men friends to do anything for you?” (Emecheta 170). Adaku responds with, “No...I want to be a dignified single woman” (Emecheta 170). Adaku becomes a symbol of breaking norms, something that even the protagonist of the novel cannot do. She breaks the chains of her own prison; the prison created

by Nnaife, her family, and subsequently, her whole community. She becomes her own person and makes her own decisions, free from the thoughts or beliefs of anyone else.

Works Cited

Emecheta, Buchi, and Robilin Stephanie Pierre Raymond. *The Joys of Motherhood: a Novel*.
George Braziller, 2013.