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## Repression and Resistance: Negotiation between Motherhood and Labour Force Participation by Igbo Women

Vishwakarma, Alka<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Focusing on the maternal and trading roles as conflicting and complementing, this article explores the female labour force of Igbo women in rural and urban Nigeria. The majority of Igbo women contribute to local trade by carrying on various types of activities, studies have shown that approximate 45.5 % (World Bank 2019) of the Nigerian labour force is women; they either participate in farm activities or carry petty business. 73.15% of women are engaged in farm activities while 26.85 % are in the non-farm activities. Labour force participation in trade activities is challenging; women are marginalized and limited in their opportunity. In spite of difficulties, women continue to persist. This discussion provides insight into the basis of resistance and challenges and offers an opportunity to evaluate the use of economic trade-based activities as an opportunity to challenge existing patriarchal boundaries and promote gender equity.

*Keywords:* Trade, labour market, resistance, gender.

### Introduction

Depending on their agricultural activities, the majority of Igbo people are agrarian and their economy is dependent on their crops. Due to their dependency on agricultural activities, men and women both contribute to various activities of farming. However, these circumstances not impart equal status to Igbo women with their men because gender affected their farming activities too; “both men and women took part in clearing the bush or forest for farming, but the activity was predominantly carried out by men” (Chuku 50). Gender constructs the basis of Igbo social structure and determines men as the heads of their family; patriarchy and matriarchy both are prevalent in their family, however, the former rules from the beginning because matriarchy functions only when a woman is mother of her husband’s male children<sup>2</sup>. The Igbo society is “a stateless society”<sup>3</sup> that does not have any democracy or government to establish rule. However, the Igbo describe themselves as “kingless people from their saying, *Igbo enwe eze* (Igbo has no king), they paradoxically demonstrate true democracy and organization, not represented by any exclusive authority but transcending geographical borders” (Chukwu 17); therefore, they rule (often individual man or the head of their family) through exercise of their “customs, taboos, conscience, and honour” (18).<sup>4</sup> Igbo people decide origin of their descent on the patrilineal basis<sup>5</sup> and their relationships are constructed through blood-relations determined through their father’s lineage; the Igbo *umunna*<sup>6</sup> or agnate system does not owe any place for

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<sup>2</sup> Nigerian Igbo society is traditional; Igbo people are defined by their socio-cultural customs and practices and they are often male-dominated. According to a report by Izugbara, “the social production of masculinity and femininity is often begun at home through socialization practices” (2004, 7).

<sup>3</sup> Eze *et al.*

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Chukwu, “The Kingless People: The Speech-Act as Shield and Sword”, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The Igbo first belongs to father’s house, ‘consisting of a man, his wife or wives and their children’, then to the “*umunna*” (lineage) or composed of related houses, and then to “*obodo*”, group of lineages as compact village (Ohadike xxiii). Their lineage concerns origin of person through their father’s blood relation.

<sup>6</sup> The *umunna* patrilineal organization of village held on three levels – family, centred on the *Obi* of the *pater-familias*, in his absence eldest son, *okpala*; the *Ebo*, village lineage group, with the *okpala* as leader; and the ‘town’, i.e. aggregate of all the *Ebo* or village lineage (Nwoye 305-6). Local patrilineal or *umuana* kinship is

women that might demonstrate their position as originating factor, therefore, a woman's place is determined only on the basis of relation to their father, brother, husband, or son. However, the female labour force has improvised their subordination by aggrandizing their economic condition; local trade has helped them to have their say in their society and exercise their power over a specific section of agricultural activities.

Overall, the discussion addresses four aspects of Igbo society – gender-relations in Igbo local trade, womanhood and motherhood constraining to practice female labour force, and literary interpretation of narratives. With respect to local trade and marketing, this paper assesses the position of Igbo women in Nigerian society. Further the discussion also highlights the potential constraint of motherhood stands to independence. Finally, included is the impact of contemporary writing, specifically the strong women characters portrayed in select narratives by Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta; the discussion shows how they combat their situation in patriarchal structure by locating their roles in labour market in “rural” and “urban”<sup>7</sup> areas of Nigeria.

### ***Local Trade and Market – Contesting Sites for ‘Liberty’***

The labour force is one of the prominent resources of the Nigerian economy along with agriculture; agricultural labour has been supported by such works as “blacksmithing, leather-working, construction, textile manufacturing, beer brewing, building, boat making and so forth”<sup>8</sup> (Falola and Heaton 3-4). Igbo men and women both contribute to their economy through their various roles in different works of trade and marketing; researchers and anthropologists have enunciated their contribution in the Igbo economy through agricultural labour force primarily. Gender discrimination is instrumental to influence their roles in the Igbo society; however, labour division is often allotted based on the work needed on the land – “in general men clean and prepare the land, plant their own yams, cut stakes and train the yam vines, build [the] yam barns and tie the harvest. Women plant their own varieties of yam, weed and carry in yams from the farms” (Forde and Jones 13). Basden's work is on the Igbo people residing in Onitsha; his research reflects upon different aspects of Igbo life. Commenting on the Igbo trade, he writes that “the whole of the native trade is in the hands of the women and by them largely the markets are controlled. In former times, women had direct transactions with trading factories, and hosts of them still pursue this course. . .” (Basden 194). His research also justifies that market is often handled by group of women or women's council members: “The markets are controlled by the influential old women and they frame and administer the rules and regulations and settle all questions as they arise. Each market is presided over by “queen” (Amwu), assisted by women's council, of which she is the head” (195).

Women's association and women's council are prominent organizations that help women construct rules and regulation for their local trade and market; they predominantly monopolize marketplace that strengthen their social status in their family and Igbo village. The Omu society – *out omu* – is one of these prominent women's associations whose head is called Omu; its members “acted as a pressure group in political matters and imposed fines on men and women who disturbed the peace of the marketplace” (Ohadike 28 [xxviii]). Their power over local trade and marketplace is derived from a huge number of women working in the field – especially agricultural activities and little local trade drawn from such crops as yam, palm, and cassava.<sup>9</sup> Igbo men “cut palm fruit, tap and sell palm wine and also palm wine which the

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the basic social unit while minor lineages (*oha*) are sub-divisions of major lineages (Forde 15). Matrilineal and patrilineal kinships are prevalent, usually the latter dominated; descent is patrilineal, sons settle in their fathers' farms and women join their husbands' family after marriage (Berselaar 45).

<sup>7</sup> The town, Ibeju and the city, Lagos present rural and urban areas of Nigeria respectively.

<sup>8</sup> *A History of Nigeria*, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Yam is their staple food and its cultivation is necessary to each man of the Ibo country (Basden 138).

women prepare. . . . women reserve and sell kernels”<sup>10</sup> (Forde and Jones 14). Basden also refers to gender role that allocate specific work for men and women; therefore, it is “the men’s business to cut the nuts and the women’s duty to extract the oil” (Basden 160). It is evident from the allotment of work that men are given duty of initiating the work while women are meant to prepare it as reproduction; thus, men begin seedling process while women give the real product using seeds and fruits of the palm tree. Extending their role in agricultural activity or farming, it is also confirmed that “men engaged in tilling the ground, planting, and stemming yam (an Igbo king crop), and climbing trees, women were preoccupied with a wide range of tasks including weeding and planting vegetables and crops such as three-leaved yams (ona), cocoyam (Colocassia), pumpkins, beans, maize, okra, melons, and peppers” (Chuku 50). However, though agricultural work is gendered in the Igbo farming, it does enable their women to exercise their power over economy through which they could demand their rights. They negotiate prevalent taboos and customs to stand independently and to sustain their place in the social hierarchy of marketplace.

Igbo trade is, thus, immensely supported by their women because the majority of them contribute to this field from one or the other way. According to a survey, 45.5%<sup>11</sup> (World Bank 2019) of labour force in Nigeria is women; women’s contribution to agricultural activities is estimated approximately 60-80%<sup>12</sup> (Enfield 2) of the whole labour force. The progress of farming and trading in Nigerian is supposed to be the result of poverty in Nigeria; research has been conducted on “contemporary poverty” in Nigeria sponsored by “the International Labour Office and the World Bank”<sup>13</sup> (Ilfie 1). Census 2006 has reckoned the Nigerian population over 140 million<sup>14</sup>; however, the “Igbo concealed their poverty” (88). It can be said that poverty is one of the reasons to have the hands of women and children in marketing and agricultural labour so that their economic condition could be improved. Their power over marketplace enables them to stand with their men who are called the bread-winner of their family; however, gender discriminations persist in their working areas. The growth of women traders in the local area has enhanced their contribution in the field – “The power women exercised over the organization of local trade derived from the fact that most local traders were women. They alone could best serve the needs of those who converged in the marketplace for commercial and other purposes. . . . ;” nevertheless, “Igbo women’s associations upheld gender balance and equality. Their political and social activities were very useful, though men occasionally felt they were contentious” (Ohadike 30 [xxx]). Women’s role in local trade, therefore, helps them to combat gender-based subordination in market; their contribution to family-economy enhances their worth in their family but it could not protect them from victimization to male chauvinism and patriarchy that function to frame traditional Igbo society. The labour force was not an invention of colonialism because the colonizers utilized the African labour more than their native could do but their labour force was indigenous and was always available.

Household heads often tried to ensure that young men would leave and also return, bringing back fruits of their labour. Young men, at times women, often used wage labour to obtain a measure of independence from patriarchal authority or to set up their own households or invest in new, more marketable, crops. (Cooper 28)

<sup>10</sup> Nuts are “(commonly termed kernels) are dried and sold separately, a few only retained by the women” (Basden 161).

<sup>11</sup> Data is quoted by Enfield whose work is on gender-relations and role of women in the Nigerian trade and marketing.

<sup>12</sup> Source is added in references.

<sup>13</sup> *The African Poor: A History*, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 2008, 3.

Due to the practice of matriarchy and patriarchy, the household heads could be anyone – man or woman. Labour force helps Igbo women negotiate their independence not in the periphery of household or domestic world but also in the public world with an independent local trade of their own where they are the investors and benefitters. Their efforts in trading and marketing establish them an equal counterpart with their partners but their struggle for liberty still persists. The Igbo women freely utilize their right over agricultural activities and farming. In earlier time, “the woman was usually, after marriage, given land on which to farm and produce food (cassava, cocoyam, vegetables) to feed her family. The man provided no food except occasionally when he gave yams to his wife. It was the woman who fed her children and husband” (Ezeigbo 154). Studies have confirmed that Igbo women could utilize their economic liberty in marketing for independent life; “women were also traders, trading at home and sometimes extending their activities to neighbouring or distant villages. . . . women had a high economic status, especially the very industrious and intelligent ones who became wealth”<sup>15</sup> (154).

### ***Gender-Relations in the Igbo Local Trade***

Igbo women uphold stronger position in their family because of their ability to contribute to farming and agriculture along with their male partners – husband, son, brother, or father. Nevertheless, role of men and women in farming is gendered and this does not preclude women from gender-based discrimination and subordination. There are discrepancies among female labour in Nigeria because their chief role is still determined around household and motherhood. Gender-segregation is prominent aspect of labour force and sexual division of labour has been “universal throughout human history” (Hartmann 137); Nigerian labour has also been affected by this attribute; however, the discrepancies are “flexible in practice”<sup>16</sup> (Chuku 39) that provide men-women somewhat equal works in agricultural farming. Commenting on women’s entrance into men’s jobs, Meadow opines that “women’s entrance into previously male-dominated domains is not simply the numbers question, but curiosity about how having two genders (and countless ethnic and racial variations) in an institution formerly all-male might alter the structures and practices”<sup>17</sup> (Menkel-Meadow 314); this is quite true regarding the Nigerian female labour force that allows their women to explore their independence in male-dominated periphery. Studies have shown that before colonialism women could enjoy some traditional Igbo privileges; however, in “precolonial period, women have made remarkable contributions to trade and commerce in Igboland of Nigeria”<sup>18</sup> (Chuku 1) and “precolonial Igbo society” never subordinated women to men “but rather complimentary to them” (Allan qtd. in Korieh 120)<sup>19</sup>. The colonial period brought drastic changes not only in the Igbo social life but also in their economy and politics; “the structural arrangements introduced by the colonial administration . . . denied women access to capital credit but offered men opportunities for capital accumulation”<sup>20</sup> (123-4). Referring to S. M. Martin’s study on oil palm-industry, Chuku suggests – “Traditionally, women in Igboland were denied the right to owe land. However, in the colonial period, those who began to acquire wealth through trade and commerce started investigating in landed property, . . .” (Chuku 39). Studies on role of women in trade and marketing in Igboland speculate over their status and contribution to Igbo

<sup>15</sup> Nnu Ego (*Joys*) exemplifies such industrious and wealthy woman.

<sup>16</sup> “Women in the Economy of Igboland 1900-1970”.

<sup>17</sup> Menkel-Meadow’s study reflects upon intrusion of women’s interest into men’s world through profession; the analysis contextualizes “feminization of the legal profession” to show gender discrepancies (see references).

<sup>18</sup> Chuku, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> See references (Korieh 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Korieh suggests reading of Waitinte E Wariboko’s “The Status, Role and Influence of Women in the Eastern Delta States of Nigeria” to comprehend analysis of changes “that accompanied commercialization and women’s participation in trade” (124).

labour force but there are ambivalent arguments and conclusions that reflect upon different shades of gender-relations in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods of Nigeria. Nevertheless, those studies solemnize dominance of gender-discrepancies in the Nigerian labour market.

It is evident from the previous studies that the Igbo labour force has been gendered – especially agricultural farming and marketing – that discriminate women’s work from that of men in various activities of agriculture. Focusing on Igbo trade in different periods, works of Northrup (19172), Ezeigbo (1990), Oriji (1981), Basden (1921), and Chuku (1995, 1999, 1999, 2016) present gender-relations in terms of labour-division in the Igbo society; they speculate over growth of Igbo labour in nineteenth and twentieth century simultaneously presenting gender-ambiguities in the Igbo society. Chuku refers to Leith-Ross’s study presenting women’s assertion in the Igbo labour force – “(Igbo) women, because of their economic importance both as mothers, farm cultivators and traders have power more than is generally thought” (Ross qtd. in Chuku 38). Women did have and continue to have independence to practice trade that not only enable them stand with their male counterparts but also to get their own independent nature. However, the Igbo society expects its women to be natural traders or efficient enough to work in farming with their partners; their expectation emphasizes only their women’s visibility not voices. Like in any essentially patrilineal society, in the Igbo society too, “women are expected to be seen not heard, even when issues concerning them are being discussed”<sup>21</sup> (Olusi12). During colonialism, gender discrimination became more active than in the precolonial period that promoted egalitarian society due to retention of various women’s association – the Omu – and organization. Education is considered one of the major reasons that debar Igbo women from the access to economic field – “Women’s access to western education – the gateway to modern employment – was limited by dual-gender structure that emphasized domestic science training for girls and leadership and technical instructions for boys” (Chuku 2009, 89). Nevertheless, Igbo women gradually began protesting such discrimination and at that time “women’s anger was focused against the colonial government, missionaries, foreign trading companies and their Igbo agents” (89).

Igbo women had to confront similar gender-discrimination from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial periods; during pre-colonial the patrilineal Igbo society targeted women while colonialism brought duality of gender by allotting specific slots for girls and boys. The post-colonial period reflects upon various shades of repression of Igbo women that disallow them contributing to labour force; among these forces marriage, consequent motherhood, and lack of education are to draw our greater attention. Therefore, gender-based repression is primary generator of Igbo women’s subordinated position in patrilineal Igbo family. Womanhood is linked to motherhood in Igbo patriarchy that maintains its male authority at cost of women’s relegation; Igbo women, however, maintain motherhood and the Igbo proverbs illustrate their eminence in the Igbo family-structure.

*Nne nwa lo ahita o dika nke ibe ya agaghi alo.* (When a child’s mother returns from the market, it looks as if another child’s mother will not). (qtd. in OHA 90)

Igbo family structure is grounded through motherhood and its people prioritize male children to further their father’s descent. Womanhood constraints woman’s world to reproduction only – male-children specifically – because production of girl-child hardly brings them any respect. Emphasizing lack of education in the rural Igboland, the study of Olowa and Adeoti (2014) presents education as one of the prominent aspects that relegates women and does not give them proper and suitable place in the Igbo labour market. According to them,

<sup>21</sup> “Enhancing Female Participation in African Agricultural Transformation”, 1997.

“many Nigerian women largely live-in poverty, lacking access to basic education, decent nutrition, adequate health and social services which education and participating in labour activities will alleviate” (73). Womanhood and education, therefore, are considered pre-eminent sources that blockage their path to practice their free labour-force; Igbo women constantly are engaged to interrogate these aspects to exercise their rights on labour-force.

### ***Womanhood and Motherhood – Sites of Repression***

Black women have been relegated western feminist scholarship because of their “stereotypical images of womanhood” (Collins 69) that relegate their status as “mammy” (75), “matriarch”, “welfare mother” (79), “the jezebel, whore, or “hoochie”” (81), “freak” (83), and “sapphire” (156). However, “black feminist criticism” (Smith 157) promotes black female experiences to focus on black women’s issues specifically and to improvise stereotypical images of “hot mommas of Black womanhood” (Collins 83); Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems 26) is designed to promote “all women of African descent . . . grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of African women” (26). African perspectives centralize motherhood “in religion, philosophies, and social institutions . . . emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival interwoven as interdependent, complimentary dimensions to motherhood” (Collins 287). Motherhood is directly connected to womanhood and this is what debars them to practice their independence to create their own identity.

Igbo society is patriarchal, but it also emphasizes women’s role as mother which brings them respect in the existing Igbo social structure; the Igbo proverbs exemplify their roles in labor market and how motherhood is preferred in the labour world. They present prominence of motherhood and its constraining connection with women’s exercise of labour force.

*Nwanyi jere Nkwo Ogbe luo ogu, jee Afo Egbu luo ogu, jee Eke Mgbidi luo ogu, o bu ndi ahia na-acho ya, ka o bu ya na-acho ndi ahia? (A woman who goes to Nkwo Ogbe Market and fights, goes to Afo Egbu Market and fights, goes to Eke Mgbidi Market and fights, is it the market people that are looking for trouble (from her), or is she the one that is looking for trouble (from market people)?* (qtd. in OHA 100)

Igbo women primarily are expected to shoulder responsibility of being mother – taking care of their children – before they take step to labour world; it is their prior duty that almost closes the door to access free labour-force. Their working duties in labour market often clashes with motherhood that becomes a constraining attribute associated to womanhood. Preference of girl-child often relegates women’s position before she arrives in the living world of her people: “the importance of male children in Igboland defies gender boundaries – both husbands and wives desire male children for their culturally perceived significance” (Nwokocha 220). Women are also made to believe that motherhood<sup>22</sup> – particularly male children – bring them a higher status in the Igbo social structure and they continue to aspire for it doing everything to attain motherhood; however, the construction of motherhood remains patriarchal created to place their women under male authority. The most prominent African critic, Chinweizu has presented power of matriarchy enunciating how women control male authority – for instance their sons – through motherhood. According to him, “primary objectives of motherpower are to prepare boys so they *can* be ruled by their future wives, and to train girls to rule their future husbands” (29); it intends to create “narcissism in girls and heroism in boys”, to secure “kitchen power and to cradle power for girls”, and to magnify “wombpower” (29). Thus, motherhood

<sup>22</sup> It can be compared to Nnu Ego’s desire become mother and she is made to believe in motherhood by her family; finally she becomes victim to her own “blood and flesh”.

allows women practice matriarchy in the male-dominated family having her says and demands. However, it chains women to family and care for their children; it consequently results in her imprisonment to her own body to reproduce to earn higher respect and blocks her ways to outer world – market and trade. Motherhood, therefore, is considered primary source of “gender gap in the labour market as the greatest burden of childcare still falls on mothers” (Blau and Kahn in Berniell et al. 2).

Igbo women are respected if they give priority to motherhood over their rights of free labour-force in marketing; their economic preference subordinates their position as woman in patriarchal society. Due to their preference to motherhood and marriage, women are subordinated to patriarchy and consequently they lose their grip over market and local trade through which they could establish their independent identity away from any male authority – father, brother, husband, or son. Nevertheless, motherhood becomes an essential source of women’s subordination on their own hands: “women remain discriminated against in the labour force and unequal in the family, physical violence against women is not decreasing” (Chodorow 6). Therefore, repression of Igbo women is largely drawn from their own hands because despite knowing their own slavery to their own “blood and flesh” they give in to patriarchy; nevertheless, motherhood remains intertwined with their desire to independence and constraints them to “male-dominated society” (6). Igbo women, however, often take steps against their repression; matriarchy is found in contest with them because they often negotiate with it to obtain independency. Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta’s selected narratives, highlighted in the next section, are replete with such women who continue to negotiate their recent constructed identity under patriarchal Igbo society.

### ***Ma Blackie’s Resistance in the Patrilineal Igbo Society***

Buchi Emecheta is a prominent Igbo woman writer who focuses on women’s issues; her narratives castigate prevalent socio-cultural customs and practices – bride-price, polygamy, slavery, and early marriage – to draw her readers’ attention to dominating foregrounding of these practices that basically sustain male-authority protecting patriarchy in the Igbo family. Each of these novels focuses on “the life of an Igbo woman, documenting problems unique to women at this time of cultural intercourse and confrontation and exploring the complexities of female lives in a culture guarded by champions without sufficient powers to save it and challenged by powers bent on its destruction” (Barthelemy 559). The narratives present socio-cultural upheavals of pre-colonial Nigeria that leave its people entangled in between traditional Igbo customary practices and colonial civilization.

Set in the early twentieth century, *The Bride Price* delineates cultural clashes that take place between two worlds – European and African. Emecheta primarily targets traditional custom of “bride price” that objectifies women’s body through financial transaction; however, the novel also presents women’s subordination under traditional patriarchy of Igbo family. Aku-nna, Ma Blackie’s daughter, is the chief protagonist who challenges traditional marriage decided by her people; she falls in love with Chike, an *osu*<sup>23</sup> slave, and steps forward to marry him in Lagos. Against the backdrop of Aku-nna’s story, Ma Blackie’s story also advances to present miserable condition of women under the name of retention of traditional customs of Ibuza. After her husband, Ezekiel’s demise she is forced to move to Ibuza where she encounters traditional Igbo family, and her life turns topsy-turvy. She is socially inherited by her husband’s brother Okonkwo and is forced to shoulder various responsibilities of his family. However, her priorities remain her daughter and she does not comprise her duty with that of the one in Okonkwo’s family. The conflict between cultural exchange of Lagos and Ibuza elucidates human dilemma of accepting either of cultural values – European or African. Lagos presents a

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<sup>23</sup> *Osus* are “cult-slaves”.

strong European influence while Ibuza presents stereotype of Igbo family where women are bound to work in farm for their family; Aku-nna is determined to challenge it.

She would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman. She had heard that farmer husband did not give housekeeping money, as her father had given her mother. (*Bride* 53)

Traditional Igbo society expects its women expert in farming because that would not only establish her position strongly in Igbo family, but it is also a need to do so because husband's economy is not always sufficient to run the Igbo family which is often polygamic with children and their responsibilities. Therefore, "the whole of the trade in the Ibo country is in the hands of the women, and they are extremely capable. The more expert a woman proves herself to be, the more she is appreciated by her husband"<sup>24</sup> (Basden 90). Aku-nna is against traditional Igbo family because her interest is not to shoulder responsibility given by her parents and people but to have an identity of her own. However, her mother adheres to be a good Igbo woman who supports her husband in earning through her little trades that she is capable of. The subordinating position of Blackie is the result of her acceptance to her domination under the practice of Igbo polygamy; the sort of relation between her and her people is that of "a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus"<sup>25</sup> (Foucault 788). Her consent to domination is not permanent because living with that family – that consents male-authority of Okonkwo – she exercises her power to economic independence through local trade; her repression, therefore, is partial because she sustains her rights over her children. For her, economic independence is the only way to educate her daughter in a sincere way; Ezekeil's saved money helps her establish a new trade: "The little capital Ma had managed to save from her husband's gratuity she invested in palm kernels and, for she did not wish to have to carry baskets of akpu market on her head" (*Bride* 73).

Igbo women's struggle to exercise their labour force in rural area is exemplified in Blackie's struggle to carry on her trade for the care of her children in the rural Ibuza town. Going against traditional custom of the Igbo family, she attempts to educate her daughter; money drawn from her newly established local trade helps her to support her daughter's education. Her ways of carrying trade is different from traditional Igbo society that expects women to carry kernels to market for its sale on high scale.

Her type of trading was different and less strenuous: she would go to the town of Ogwashi to buy the kernel, have them bagged and sent it to Ibuza . . . . On Nkwo market days the bags were transported to Asaba, and Ma would follow on foot; she sold the kernels to eastern Ibo traders, who would have them reprocessed and exported to England to be used in manufacture of famous brand-name soaps. (*Bride* 73-4)

Ma Blackie endeavours to carry a new mode of trade through which she was selling raw materials to Europeans indirectly through the channels of eastern Ibo traders who were directly linked to the Europeans. She wishes to waste less energy in farming and earn more so that she could provide her children – Nna-nndo and Aku-nna.

Emecheta speculates over cultural conflict due to colonization and she does not miss any opportunity to highlight its effects in the ways of local trading that Igbo people – especially

<sup>24</sup> *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 1921.

<sup>25</sup> "The Subject and Power", 1982.

women – could take advantages to earn more in an easier way. Throwing light over typical Igbo trading system, she delineates through her narrator's description.

They would buy cloth, stock-fish and cartons of imported foodstuffs in Lagos, and most of the traders would take these buys to Asaba and across the river Niger to the big market in Onitsha where they could sell their wares. The more ambitious of traders would travel further inland to places like Aba and thereby make more profits. (*Bride* 59)

The graphic presentation of the Igbo traders shows the capabilities of Igbo people over local trade and their efficiency to run it for more benefits. The Ibo traders are considered ambitious and money-minded: “The money they received from selling there was used to buy yams, bags of *garri* and other produce from the local farmers was then taken back for sale in Lagos. The Ibo traders along this route were well known for their fast developing little empires” (59). Local trade strengthens possibilities of Igbo women's liberty; they take enough advantages through it because as a woman.

. . . she was able to overcome the limitation of her position through the strength she derived from her intelligence, resourcefulness and power of organization . . . . the socio-cultural and economic structures of traditional Igbo society gave her room to manoeuvre and strengthen her position as well as improve her situation. (Ezeigbo 154)

Blackie utilizes available resources to implement modern method which requires less physical effort with profound advantages in her economy. Supporting her daughter's education, she discards the compulsion that requires their women workers in farming; she desires her daughter to excel in studies and practice her skills in teaching by shifting her profession from a typical trader to jobholder in different academic and official services. She also exercises her rights over her children, and she does not allow them to be entirely inherited by their uncle as she was forced to. Therefore, trade becomes an instrument to create her identity as “the elite, for her children attended school, and this was a bone of contention Okonkwo and his other wives and children” (*Bride* 74).

### ***Nnu Ego's Resistance to 'Discard' Traditional Custom***

Emecheta's classic narrative fiction, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) presents a critique of motherhood that baffles Igbo women to exercise their power to construct their new identity against the imposed one in the patriarchal Igbo family. Her narratives are replete with women's issues – specifically predicament of Igbo women around Nigeria – deeply imbued with female psyche; they contour women's effort and resistance to traditional and customary practices. Motherhood is presented as male-construction that chains women's true self – her womanhood. Her major narratives, therefore, present dual issue.

(i) biological control of woman whereby sexuality and the ability to bear children are the sole criteria which define womanhood; and (ii) the economic control of women within the colonially imposed Capitalist system whereby women are placed at a disadvantage graver than they had faced in pre-colonial economic structure. (Katrak 159)

Indeed, the novel presents women's subordination to motherhood because her womanhood is believed to be dependent on her ability to conceive and become mother; but it also focuses women's struggle to maintain her independent identity with the help of her economic rights that she was able to practice in pre-colonial time more freely than during

colonialism. Emphasizing gender-gaps during colonialism, Chuku opines, “The colonial administrators and other Europeans in the Igbo region imposed their Western conceptions of state, family, and gender roles on the Igbo – notions that were prejudiced against women”<sup>26</sup> (88). Male-authority was privileged that created male institutions subordinating and ignoring female contribution and annihilating their rights. The novel presents the protagonist’s entrapment under western motherhood over black womanhood; it also castigates woman’s undermined role that disallows her to exercise her economic rights through trade. NnuEgo, the protagonist, comes to reside in Lagos after getting married to her second husband, Nnaife; in Lagos, her traditional values – grounded in the traditional Ibuza – come in conflict with recent socio-cultural upheavals of Lagos under European influences. She becomes victim to her own desire to become mother because becoming mother is directly linked to her womanhood that brings greater respect; however, she soon realizes her entrapment to be patriarchal, she broods over,

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? 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 male in my life, my father and my husband – and now I have to include my sons. (*Joys* 187)

She not only realizes her undermining position through motherhood but also accepts it; her opinion about motherhood is constructed through her daily experiences in her family and male members – her father – direct her path to motherhood as ‘true womanhood’ for her daughter. Therefore, “cultural dictates shape behaviours; the social environment in which an individual grew up affects her reproductive attitudes, perceptions, and motivations” (Isiugo-Abanihe 238). Nnu Ego’s motherhood is also constructed under the guidance of her father; it is he and his male friends who inculcate the desire of getting married and having a family – children – of her own in her mind. Motherhood becomes a “sexist ideology” under patriarchy that intends to create women’s bondage to her own “becoming” – to her womanhood – from which it becomes hard to escape because she believes in the “joys” of becoming mother; in this way a woman’s body becomes “subject to ‘social conditioning’, and later move to ‘normalization’”<sup>27</sup> (Bordo 193). Her normalized body, however, resists her subordination utilizing Igbo traditional economic rights that justify and sustain women’s role in the market and local trade; her resistance ignites “the creative agency of individuals, and the instabilities of systems” (194) which help to practice her power to educate her daughter for better prospects.

Nnu Ego’s struggle to uphold her local trade in the urban Lagos under European influence represents Igbo women’s struggle to practice her labour rights. She takes on a bold step in the surroundings of Lagos that was changing under the European influences promoting gender-gaps and curtailing women’s majority of rights – economic rights especially in this novel – to sustain patriarchal society and to maintain male-institutions. However, Nnu Ego is able to establish her little trade in Lagos where her traditional ways of economic independence comes in conflict with European influences: “She learned early in their married life to economise, since Nnaife earned little” (*Joys* 48). She tries to manage little trade after the birth of her first child, Ngochi.

When Nnu Ego felt stronger, she went back to her petty trading. . . . she would wash her baby, put him on her back and rush to catch the early workers on their way to work. They bought many matches and cigarettes from her. Then

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<sup>26</sup> 2009.

<sup>27</sup> “Feminism, Foucault, and the politics of the body”.

she would come home to feed her child and lay him down to sleep while she hurried through her housework. (*Joys* 54)

Her decision to continue trade along with her motherhood represents her resistance to discard traditional mode of leading life in the Igbo family where woman often carries her child at her back to work in the farm and local market. The Igbo society, thus, carries motherhood and female labour force together. Her resistance to disown her traditional ways of life exemplifies her understanding of the Igbo rights that do have some privileges for women to practice her power to create an independent identity.

Urban women often become more traditional than rural women because they realize the strength of practicing local trade; they realize the privileges of traditional values – right to work and earn through female labour force. Therefore, “many urban women are more traditional than some rural dwellers” (Isiugo-Abanihe 238). She practices her Igbo rights of local trade as any woman could uphold in local market.

In Ibuza, women make contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed women of her useful role. Nnu-Ego told herself that the life she had indulged in with the baby Ngozi had been very risky: she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. (*Joys* 81)

After losing her first child, she is baffled to believe whether she should work or not after becoming mother because due to her work she could not give her child enough time for his upbringing. She is made to believe by her husband that “woman, you have to look after your child [t]hat at least is a woman’s job” (86). She begins to believe that both cannot go at once: “money and children don’t go together: if you spend all your time making money and getting rich, the gods wouldn’t give you any children; if you wanted children, you had to forget money, and be content to be poor” (80). What she was doing is practicing her economic rights through local trade that each Igbo woman would exercise after the birth of her children; the Igbo women begin earning through their female labour force because men’s money is not often enough.

In Ibuza, after the child was weaned, one could leave him with an elderly member of the family and go in search of trade. But in Lagos, there were no elderly grandparents. Then she scold herself: “Nnu Ego, . . . Be satisfied with his earnings. Let him do his duty. (*Joys* 81)

She gets imprisoned in Lagos under European influences that implemented western patriarchy, leaving no room out of their home, because women are to be limited to their husband’s home without stepping to the public and doing so would be an insult to him. The Igbo society gives them economic freedom so that they could not only support their family – husband and children – but also could create their own identity; they could utilize prevalent resources to create efficient associations and organizations. The Omu women are fine example of such women’s association who monopolize local Igbo market; however, Lagos does not provide such privileges under the influence of European norms and regulations. Therefore, Igbo women have to encounter hindrances that stand in the garb of motherhood and womanhood; Nnu Ego is victimized under this condition and her inability to carry on Igbo values in Lagos subordinates her position to her man, Nnaife. Nevertheless, she does not discard practicing her traditional role and continues to work in local market to support her family when Nnaife joins European army to get handsome amount.

## Conclusion

The article has argued that women's subordination in labour force is greatly affected by motherhood, care for children, and prevalent customs and practices constructed under the supposed male authority. Igbo women are, indeed, very strong personalities in terms of a few rights that the traditional Igbo society provides them; however, colonization robs them of their natural rights over local trade and European influences become one of the prominent reasons for their subordination. Female labour force in Nigeria is on its high peak in the rural areas – like Ibuza – which would help women to exercise their rights through sale in such markets as Onitsha and Aba while Lagos does not allow them to practice their economic rights given in traditional Igbo society to earn through little petty marketing and trading.

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