

## Language and Gender-based Violence: A study of Buchi Emecheta's the Joys of Motherhood

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### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between language and gender-based violence with aim of establishing the crucial role language plays in the initiation, execution, perpetuation and resistance of gender-based violence (GBV hereafter), using Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, as a case study. GBV is no doubt a double faceted phenomenon as it affects both genders, but the female gender is the most vulnerable. The paper adopted Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a framework, and equally used qualitative research method to interrogate instances of GBV with special focus on the linguistic strategies employed by the male characters in the novel to exert power and dominance over women resulting in severe gender abuse. The analysis focused on how characters adjust their use of language at different points in time to align with or challenge the societal norms and cultural expectations of gender roles in a highly patriarchal setting. The result of the analysis indicates that communication accommodation with regard to GBV in the novel manifests at two levels: the convergence and the divergence levels, the former is used to perpetuate GBV while the later serves as a tool for its resistance. The study therefore, underscores the need to understand the role of language in perpetuating gender-based violence and calls for the development of communication strategies that can facilitate gender equality and promote non-violent communication.

**Keywords:** CAT, dominance, GBV, gender, Language, violence

### 1.1 Introduction

This work examines language as a willing tool for the perpetration of gender-based violence (GBV) through the instrumentality of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*. The novel was published in late 70s and set in the colonial Nigerian era. It chronicles the life of the protagonist, Nnu Ego, a village brought who marriage brought to the city of Lagos. Nnu Ego faced a lot of challenges as a woman ranging from the difficulties involved in growing up as a girl in a 'man's world' through the struggles of child bearing to the pressures of motherhood. She grows up with the notion that a woman's fulfilment in life stems from her ability to bear children not just children, but a number of male children who grow up to provide for her especially at old age. She had seven children that she virtually poured out her life for; she was enslaved by the desire to provide for them as her husband couldn't do that for a number of reasons. She was assaulted whenever anything goes wrong in the family: the loss of her first baby was attributed to her carelessness, the daughter who rejected an Igbo suitor arranged for her by her father and ran to a Yoruba man was because Nnu Ego failed to train her well, the son, Oshia equally blamed her for his inability to gain scholarship into secondary school as he lamented thus, "Maybe if I had a peaceful childhood, and not had to spend my young days selling paraffin and carrying firewood..." (p.186). But before he could finish the statement, Nnu Ego who couldn't bear it any longer had to shut him up. Her children grew into successful adults (two of the sons had the opportunity to travel abroad for further studies) in a changing world where Nnu Ego's perceptions no longer held sway as the younger generation were fast becoming self-centered. After spending her youthful years bearing and taking care of the children with the consolation that when they come of age, they will take adequate care of her, Nnu Ego died a lonely and unhappy woman. Where then lies the joys of motherhood?

The study focuses on how Language is used in the novel to bring about gender-based violence. Generally, GBV is the kind of violence meant to propagate "unequal gender-power relations" (Fulu, Warner, Miedema, Jewekes, Roseli & Lang, 2013).

GBV is a universal phenomenon, which negates the fundamental human rights and the equality of the human race irrespective of gender, race, colour and age. It is any unwelcome act carried out against a person's will, which is occasioned by the socially defined differences between males and females and the roles assigned to them. The gender roles are the collective social values that are widely shared concerning men and women about typical male and female features, abilities and codes of conduct in any given society. Based on these stereotyped perceptions, the masculine gender was perceived as being brave, strong, and superior to the feminine gender. This created inequality and leaves women powerless and vulnerable and it has been reported that

violence against women within the family setting is the most prevalent as one in every four women experience domestic violence (Warui 2013; Ahmadi, Roshan, Ghiyas & Hajian 2019). GBV is enabled mostly by prejudiced cultural practices and to a lesser extent impunity on the part of the male folk among other factors. It manifests in different forms depending on the context of occurrence and the magnitude; hence gender-based violence occurs: sexually, physically, emotionally/psychologically, socio-economically to mention but these. Out of these, the emotional aspect of violence is often neglected probably because its consequences are not easily discernible and, in most cases, manifest in long term unlike physical violence. Even at that, its consequences include: anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sharbatian, Danish, & Tavafi, 2017).

The research objective is to explore the role of language in perpetuating and challenging GBV in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The data used for the study is drawn from the interactions between characters in the novel specifically with regard to incidents that revolve around the life of the protagonist, Nnu Ego and her family. The major focus is on verbal violence and the effect on the victims. Qualitative analysis is carried out using CAT as a framework to draw the conclusion reached at the end of the study.

This work is one of the numerous studies of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and as such it is necessary to present an overview of literature in the field in order to situate the present study properly. More than forty years after the publication of the novel, it has continued to spur conversations from diverse perspectives and different theoretical points of view globally. Some literary analysts approached the study of the text from the angle of clash of culture. This is evident in the dilemma Nnu Ego the protagonist faced; she was torn between the dictates of her Igbo culture, which prioritises child bearing as the ultimate goal of motherhood and the harsh realities of urban setting and western civilization, which denied her the opportunity to enjoy motherhood when she eventually had children (Helay, 2016). Waheed, Khan & Bahatt (2021) view the work as an elucidation of the strength of character bestowed on women as typified in the protagonist. Even in the face of daunting challenges posed by male dominance, Nnu Ego is able to pull through most of her travails but to the detriment of her sanity at the very last moment of her life.

The novel has also been studied from the feminist point of view bringing to light gender inequality inherent in the work. This view opines for a level playground for both genders in order to cultivate peaceful co-existence in society. Ezenwamadu (2020) x-rays the ill treatment meted out to women in the novel using Feminist critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). In a similar vein, Akujobi (2021) sees the title of the novel as an irony

as the study brings to the fore the fact that motherhood as contained in novel is all shades of suffering and oppression with no strain of joy.

Among the numerous works on *The Joys of Motherhood*, an outstanding study that shares some degree of similarity with the present study is that of Craft (2013), which explores the theme of violence in the novel but from the stand point of physical violence. For him violence against women manifests significantly during the burial of Agbadi's wife where the slave girl was forced into the grave to accompany her mistress as the tradition demands. Aside that, there are other degrees of physical violence meted out to the female characters but the major interest in the present study is psychological aspect of violence as orchestrated by language use. This form of GBV is often taken for granted and given less attention both in literary work and in reality. It is on that note that this study examines gender-based violence in relation to communication accommodation theory in order to lay bare the fact that language is a tool that can be used to perpetuate and resist such violence.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a framework for the analysis of instances of GBV in the novel under study. CAT provides a useful insight for analysing the role language plays in perpetrating/challenging GBV in literary works. CAT was originally developed as a theory of linguistic variation that accounts for accentuation in intercultural communication under the name Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles 1973). Some years later, it was modified to encompass interlocutor's use of vocabulary and pronunciation patterns, length of utterance and other paralinguistic features like pauses and the speech rate in addition to non-verbal cues as represented by the body language (Giles & Smith 1979). Giles and Johnson (1987) together with Gallois et al (2016) present a more encompassing version of CAT, which extends the goal of accommodation from inter-personal and inter-group considerations with the reason that communication is equally affected by identity of a shared group. CAT equally cuts across the thresholds of "linguistics, communication and social psychology" with special interest on the rationality that underlie interlocutors' accentuation of messages to either align or diverge with the views of their communication partners (Farzadnia & Giles 2015). Consequently, the shared ideological underpinning of a social group influence the communicative behaviour of the members. An instance can be drawn from the novel under study. *The Joys of motherhood*, where the socio-cultural norm is highly patriarchal and has great influence on the communication style of the characters. A male character for example feels that he represents men generally and the masculine qualities they stand for especially when dealing with women. The choice of words tends to depict the stereotypical roles of supremacy assigned to men in such society but when in communication with fellow men the reverse becomes the case.

The tenets of CAT outline the tendency of interlocutors to adjust their communication styles to align with that of their partners for the purpose of effective communication. This adjustment can be prompted by different factors such as: power dynamics, cultural norms, social identity and the context. Communication accommodation can occur at different level: convergence, divergence, and maintenance but the focus here is on two aspects, convergence and divergence. Convergence is the aspect of CAT that captures the ability of an individual to adjust his/her language to align with that of the communication partner. In the context of this work, this has two implications; the victim of GBV accommodating the language and communication styles of the oppressor in order to lessen the degree of the violence or the perpetrators aligning and re-aligning their language to showcase the unequal power relationship that exist between them. The asymmetrical power relationship between the genders in a typical traditional Igbo society tends to legitimize Maledominance and equip them with all the cultural backing needed to lord it over their female counterparts at all levels.

The second aspect of CAT used for the analysis is divergence, which refers to the use of language or communication styles in strict dissonance with that of the addressee intentionally. In this work, divergence includes: the victim's use of language basically to challenge the status quo, a revolutionary language use that questions the societal norms that brings about GBV. It also occurs when the oppressor deliberately uses language that emphasizes his dominant status in the relationship irrespective of the partner's stance or to amplify the marginalization thereof. Using the convergence and divergence arms of the CAT, the study specifically investigates the linguistic strategies used by the characters in the novel to either accommodate or resist GBV, its impact on power dynamics in relationships where GBV occurs, and the influence of cultural and social factors in the perpetuation of GBV.

### 3. Data (excerpts from the novel)

Below are the set of data with which the study was conducted as drawn from Buchi Emecheta's *The joys of Motherhood*.

- (i) "If you can't produce sons at least you can help harvest yam" (p.33).
- (ii) "What type of chi have you got, eeh? When you were desperate for children, she would not give any, now that we cannot afford them, she gives them to you" he exclaimed (p.92)
- (iii) "You are a lazy insensitive man. You have no shame. If you hit me again, I shall call the soldiers in the street. Haven't you any shame" (p.92) (And he made to hit her the more).
- (iv) "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? Where will we all sleep, eeh? What will they eat?" (p.128)
- (v) "You are worth more than ten Dumbis" Adaku snapped at the boy.
- (vi) "Iam not adding a penny to that money...you can starve for all I care" (p. 137) (No money for food but for palm wine on daily basis)

- (vii) It's your responsibility to feed your children as best you can. Don't worry about me. I shall take care of myself" (p137).
- (viii) "The case was stated to them, but instead of laying the whole blame on Nnu Ego, they made Adaku feel that since she had no son for the family, she had no right to complain her senior's conduct" (p. 167)
- (ix) "I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman just because I have no sons. The way they go about it one would think that I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband" (p.170).
- (x) "But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you" (p.177).
- (xi) "A girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life. The boys, on the other hand were encouraged to put more time into their school work" (p.181)
- (xii) "Have you gone mad or something...We only have one room to share with my five children, and I'm expecting another two, yet you have brought another person. Have you been commissioned by the white people you fought to replace all those that died during the war? I don't want that girl sleeping on my bed. I am not giving it up this time, and I don't care what your friend say" (185).
- (xiii) "Maybe if I had a peaceful childhood, and not had to spend my young days selling paraffin and carrying firewood" (p.186)
- (xiv) "You answer your father back, eh, son? Well maybe if your mother was not so keen on getting money, maybe you would win a scholarship. I had to go and fight. I didn't choose to go. And whenever I could get a job, I always did, so don't blame me" (p.186).
- (xv) 'Nnaife was not pleased with the outcome; all these ballyhoo for two more girls! If one had to have twins, why girls for Olisa's sake" (187).
- (xvi) "She noticed that Nnaife was beginning to refer to them as her children, whom she had borne to kill him before his time" (203).
- (xvii) "One planned for and had sleepless nights over boys: girls, on the other hand, were to help in running the house and be disposed as soon as possible unless he was asking for trouble" (205). Nnaife
- (xviii) "You don't have to like your husband ... You don't even have to know him in advance. You just marry him." (205).
- (xix) "I didn't bring the children from my father's house. You gave them to me. Leave your house? What house have you got? How many people live in mud- covered houses in Lagos? I am only waiting for my share of your pension money. I worked for it as well. After that if you don't want me, I can go to my people" (207).
- (xx) "You, see, you see, Nnu Ego, you see what you have done to me! One of your daughters is responsible for their me to jail" (211).



#### 4. Analysis

The Communication Accommodation Theory as put forward by Giles accounts for the adjustments interlocutors make to accommodate one another in the course of interaction for the purpose of effective communication. “This constant movement toward or away from others by changing one’s communicative behaviour is called accommodation” (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 295). It is a viable framework that deconstructs the negotiation of gender identities and their influence on communicative behaviours of interlocutors and particularly account for how people express identities in literary texts. Accommodation can take place at the level of convergence, or divergence depending on the stance taken by an interlocutor in relation to the counterpart in an interaction. The subject of enquiry here is the relationship between language and gender-based in *The Joys of Motherhood* and how communication accommodation can account for that. GBV, as earlier said, can manifest at different levels and because other studies on the novel have explored the theme of violence from the perspective of physical assaults, this work delved into the psychological abuse meted out to the female folk through the instrumentality of language use and the argument here is that psychological violence is more devastating than physical violence because it leaves a permanent scare on its victim. If left unchecked leads to mental instability and premature death (as the case with Nnu Ego).

From the excerpts presented in Section three, it can be seen that the prevalent level of speech accommodation used for the purpose of perpetration and to a little extent resistant of GBV in the novel under study are convergence and divergence while the major instrument through which they are achieved is ‘blaming the victim’. Within the context of this study, the characters involved are from the same socio-cultural area and are quite conversant with the prevalent values upheld by the people, which include the supremacy of men and their ownership of women and their children. Hence in chapter two we were told that Agbadi had seven wives and two mistresses and that ‘he ruled his family and children as if he were a god’ (p.15). It is against this background that the study analyses the data in terms of how they accommodate the prevailing cultural practices in the course of interaction to perpetrate or resist GBV. From the data presented above, the male characters inflict mental pains on women who are unable to bear children and most importantly male children.

Based on this, the data can be categorized into two: those that uphold the lordship of men over women and children and treat women as subordinates who have much less value than men thereby perpetrating GBV and secondly, those that oppose the system by resisting GBV through divergence. In excerpt 4 (i and ix), Nnu Ego and Adaku were abused verbally because they were unable to get a child and male children respectively. While (in ii and iv) the same Nnu Ego is being berated by her second husband Nnaife for giving birth to children when they can scarcely feed and house

themselves decently. Excerpts(xiv) and (xx) x-ray another dimension of the violence where Nnu Ego was blamed by her husband for not inculcating sound moral values in her children. The man exonerated himself in convergence with the unwritten law that when a child excels, he is his father's but when he misbehaves the mother is held responsible. There are instances where it was affirmed that male children are preferable to female ones thereby causing mental torture to girl children (see excerptsv, x, xi, xv, and xvii). In except x, are portrayed as purely male subordinate, their existence derives meaning in providing support and succor to the males around them. Girl children forfeit education, hawk goods around to support the education of the boys and that they are meant to do without grumbling. "A girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life. The boys, on the other hand were encouraged to put more time into their school work" (p.181). The level of maledominance is so high and deeply engrained in the psyche of both genders that mothers also tend to attach less value to their girls hence Adaku sees a son's worth as being more than that of ten daughters as she says "You are worth more than ten Dumbis". In a similar vein, when Nnu Ego gave birth to twin girls, 'Nnaife was not pleased with the outcome; all these ballyhoo for two more girls! If one had to have twins, why girls for Olisa's sake" (187). For him, the value of twin girls is much less than the trouble and inconveniences associated with their upbringing. The likes of the above comments and even worse are the verbal abuse with the attendant emotional stress faced by women on regular basis. Women's worth only measured in terms of their ability to provide relief to the men folk; the names given to female children mostly reflect this view. For instance, Adaku and Nnu Ego, which can be loosely translated into 'daughter of wealth and lots of money'. Wealth and money meant for who? Those names perfectly foreshadow their destinies as females in line with dictates of the tradition.

At no point are females considered mature enough to take major decisions for themselves even in the choice of life partners. Men arrange for their husbands and they are literally packaged to them. To this effect Nnaife said to his daughter, 'You don't have to like your husband .... You don't even have to know him in advance. Just marry him' (P.205).

On the other hand, divergence from the norm is used by some of the characters to resist GBV. Kehinde refused to accept the husband arranged by her father. Nnu Ego on her part dammed the consequences on some occasions and registered her displeasure with the mental abuse as exemplifies in excerpts 4(iii and xix). "You are a lazy insensitive man. You have no shame. If you hit me again, I shall call the soldiers in the street. Haven't you any shame". Here, she is already getting chocked up with the burden of accommodating her husband's excesses and is making effort to assert her self-worth. In excerpt xix, she made it clear to her husband Nnaife that she didn't bring those children from her father's house rather the husband was responsible for their conception and



that she would only leave the house she must have received her own share of the husband's pension. She has to say so because the husband is in the habit of blaming her for whatever mistake the children make at any point in time and has a penchant for accusing her for not raising them right. This is her own little way of verbally resisting GBV. Adaku on her own part left the marriage entirely to become a single parent when it became obvious to her that she couldn't copewith the psychological violence associated with not being able to bear male children. Nnu Ego who stayed back was the worse for it because she died not just prematurely but miserably.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between language and gender- based violence in Buchi Emechata's *The Joys of Motherhood* using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a framework. GBV is a recurrent theme in the novel brought about by the cultural practices enthroned by patriarchy. Within the novel women abuse is measured by the degree of physical assault meted out to them by their husbands. Hence, a woman's family will only begin to raise eyebrow when they get information that her husband beats her. But this work has been able to establish that psychological violence cuts deeper than physical violence and that GBV carried out linguistically can be deadly as well as exemplified in the life of Nnu Ego, the protagonist. She suffered more of psychological violence brought about by verbal abuse, which later resulted in mental derangement and miserable death. The study therefore, underscores the need to understand the role of language in perpetuating gender-based violence and calls for the development of communication strategies that can facilitate gender equality and promote non-violent communication.

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