



Dissertation examines the symbolic imposition of motherhood in the book “The Joys of Motherhood”, by Buchi Emecheta

Geovana Benites / 8 de agosto de 2024 / In English

Literature | By evaluating the trajectory of the protagonist Nnu Ego, study proposes a dialogue between law and literature and questions power dynamics and violence rooted in society

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*Photo: Rochele Zandavalli

A master’s thesis completed at the Graduate Program in Languages and Literature at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) analyzed the compulsory motherhood imposed on the main character of the book “The Joys of Motherhood”, by Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta. Guided by Professor Rita Terezinha Schmidt, Danielle Massulo Bordignon’s work proposes a dialogue between literary studies and the legal Sciences. The dissertation explores Nnu Ego’s life’s narrative and the protagonist’s pursuit of happiness, considering the symbolic imposition of motherhood the character experiences throughout her journey.

Published in 1979 and set in Ibuza and Lagos, Nigeria, “The Joys of Motherhood” narrates the life of Nnu Ego, the daughter of a tribal leader with one of his mistresses. The character’s decisions are guided by societal expectations for women in her context: to become a mother. The protagonist sees motherhood as a way of achieving fulfillment and happiness, as Danielle explains. “The issue of motherhood constantly surrounds her; her father tells her, ‘You will be a mother’, and so does everyone else. So, she really embraces that idea and lives with it.”

The story is told by an omniscient narrator, who, despite questioning the ideal model of wife or lover, shows a certain empathy with Nnu. According to Danielle, the narrator also ends up inserting herself into the African country’s environment, even if she does not place herself directly in the plot. “If the narrator has an intention, it is not to directly change the external conditions that produce violence but to provide elements for developing an awareness of the gendered oppression to which these women are subjected,” the researcher reports. Danielle also indicates that, when reporting the situations experienced by the book’s characters, the narrator highlights the system of oppression inscribed in patriarchal cultures.

The symbolic imposition of motherhood

Contrary to the idea of violence as a physical act of aggression, there are significant violent actions that transcend the material world and manifest themselves in symbolic forms. This is the case of forced motherhood, which results from the creation of codes of behavior and stereotypes of the ideal woman, mother, and wife.

The protagonist Nnu Ego does not seem to understand that she is subjected to this violence, nor does she realize that this imposition is directed at her and other women in the same context. “Sometimes she has moments of clarity, she has some insights, but she never takes them as a catalyst to do anything different. She does not consider leaving her husband, abandoning her children – something a man might have conceived. And she will not see the danger until it is too late, when she is on her deathbed,” says Danielle.

“She believed for a long time, practically until her death, that not only was she destined to be a mother, but also that motherhood was inherently painful, that the anguish of being a mother was something natural and that was their [the women’s] duty.”
— Danielle Massulo Bordignon

In the analysis, the researcher observed that Nnu sought motherhood not only to fulfill a personal desire, but because she considered it essential for her completeness as a woman. If at any point the character truly wanted to be a mother – without being influenced by social pressure –, the narrator did not make this explicit and indicated the contradictions involved in the act.

Law and literature together

A Law Graduate since 2017, Danielle combines her field of expertise with literature, exploring the dialogue between the two. In this case, the legal aspect of the researcher’s dissertation topic is rooted in the narrative choices of author Buchi Emecheta. “I believe it’s a mistake to strictly associate Law with just rules and codes. For me, Law has much more to do with relationships, with norms that are not necessarily laws,” reports Danielle.

The researcher points out that the intersection between Law and Literature is crucial because culture and social relations are integral components of Legal Sciences, not only as influencers of legal texts but also as regulators of human behavior in society. Codes of moral conduct and behavior reflect what may or may not later become law.

Thus, Danielle did not undertake an analysis guided by the written laws but sought to understand the context and reality not reflected in the statistics. Just like compulsory motherhood, these issues cannot be resolved with new legal norms, as they are consequences of hidden powers and violence considered “normal” in societies. “A novel like ‘The Joys of Motherhood’ impacts readers by challenging the patriarchal law that still prevails today in the ideology that permeates the cultural, social, and political field,” the researcher concluded.

Translated into English by **Lilianne Dias Souza**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course “Supervised Translation Training I (English)” of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Márcia Montenegro Velho (M.A.) IL/UFRGS.

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