

Infertility and the Female Experience in Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg Without Yolk*

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Abstract

*This study examines the relationship between fecundity, motherhood, and the status of women in Nigeria. Infertility remains a deeply disturbing experience that affects many couples around the globe, often carrying profound emotional, social, and cultural implications. While biological, medical, and psychological factors contribute to infertility, cultural beliefs and societal expectations exacerbate the emotional burden, mostly for women. In many African societies, a woman's status is closely tied to her ability to bear children, especially male offspring, reinforcing gendered stereotypes and expectations. Infertile women frequently experience stigma, discrimination, and exclusion, as they are often perceived as being incapable of fulfilling their primary social roles. Using Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg Without Yolk*, this study explores the plight of the female protagonist grappling with infertility, and the social pressures that dictate her identity and self-worth. Additionally, this study considers how drama serves as a powerful channel for challenging these entrenched cultural misconceptions and advocating for a more empathetic approach to infertility. By interrogating the social constructs surrounding fertility, this study highlights the need for greater awareness, education, and policy interventions that foster a more supportive environment for women experiencing infertility.*

Keywords: Infertility, Fecundity, Motherhood, Culture and Gender Roles.

Introduction

Infertility is an emotionally disturbing experience that affects millions of couples irrespective of status and tribal affiliations. While Infertility can be caused by so many factors, ranging from biological, medical, and psychological causes, it is also shaped by cultural beliefs and practices that can create significant emotional burden and stigma for those affected, especially for women. Fatima Arbaoui (2018) says that:

Society excludes the barren woman who does not invest the seeds of her husband and reproduce his race because a woman should bear many male children to accomplish her stereotypical roles towards her husband and if, by misfortune or bad luck, she fails to be a mother, she experiences a painful life; no pity

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is shown to her even by her sweet husband; she can be insulted and disregarded, abused and even expelled from her house (Arbaoui, 2018, p.66)

In a similar vein, Mbiti (1991) says in the African view of infertility: "If there is not yet a child in the marriage there is no guarantee that the marriage will endure" (Mbiti, 1991, p.41). Cultural misconceptions surrounding infertility can arise from a variety of sources, including religious beliefs, social norms, and historical attitudes towards fertility and reproduction. These beliefs can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation for individuals experiencing infertility, as well as stigmatization and discrimination from others. In many African cultures, the most revered and esteemed position for a woman is her capability and right to give birth and raise children, particularly male offspring. The role of motherhood brings personal fulfillment and recognition from society. Girls are typically trained from an early age to prepare for marriage. Florence Orabueze, (2004) says that a man may:

marry because he wants somebody to cook his meals; help him in his farm, clean his house, wash his clothes, keep him company, but most importantly, he wants somebody to bear him children especially sons that will replace him when he dies. To achieve this last purpose, the bride is expected to start having children within one year of coming into the house (Orabueze, 2004, p.141)

Motherhood is considered the greatest accomplishment for women, and in African culture, the importance placed on children is incredibly high. Women who are unable to have children experience immense emotional pain. This belief is reflected in the names given to children in Igbo cultural society, such as Nwabueze (meaning "a child is a king"), Nwabundo (meaning "a child is a shelter"), Nwakego (meaning "a child is more valuable than money"), Ifeyinwa (meaning "there is nothing like a child"), Nwabuona (meaning "a child is gold"), Nwadiuto (meaning "a child is sweet"), Nwamaka (meaning "a child is good"), Nwabugwu (meaning "a child is an honor"), Nwabunwanne (meaning "a child is a relation"), Ifeadike (meaning "nothing can be compared to a child") and so on. Traditionally, it is expected for a woman to bear many children, particularly sons, as they are seen as valuable assets. The number of children a woman has determines her status and inheritance in her marital home. In Igbo society, giving birth to several sons in a row is considered a great accomplishment, and is celebrated with a ceremony called ewu ukwu, which involves slaughtering a goat. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recounts how Okonkwo marked the birth of his first wife's third consecutive son by following this custom and slaughtering a goat for her.

In Africa, being unable to have children is considered a curse and women who are infertile are treated with disrespect and considered to be of low status. In contrast, motherhood is highly valued and considered to be the ultimate sign of a woman's fecundity. Women are watched by

their community for signs of pregnancy, and when they do become pregnant, they are celebrated and compensated for their virility. Similar customs exist in other parts of the world, such as Scotland, where a trial marriage was used to test fertility, and among the Bali in Indonesia, where premarital sex is seen as a way to test fecundity. However, infertility can also be a deeply personal and emotional struggle for women, with implications for their identity, relationships, and life goals, causing feelings of grief, loss, anger, and anxiety.

In this context, it is important to understand the ways in which cultural beliefs and practices intersect with biological and psychological factors to shape the experiences of infertility. By recognizing and addressing cultural misconceptions and emotional burdens associated with infertility, we can help to create more supportive and inclusive communities for those affected. This study investigates fecundity, motherhood and the status of women in Nigeria. The plight of Udemma in Osita Ezenwanebe 's *Egg Without Yolk* will be used to foreground this phenomenon.

Infertility and Women's Oppression in Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg Without Yolk*

Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg Without Yolk* is set in a post-colonial region of southeastern Nigeria, where the fictional community of Umuachi symbolizes a patriarchal society gradually experiencing the impact of Christianity and Western education as it transitions into the modern era. The play captures the marital relationship between Udemma and Dozie, a successful businessman. Udemma's inability to conceive and bear children for her husband, according to Dr. Ray, is medically explained thus:

DR. RAY: I think the problem is in the blood group.

DOZIE AND MMA: Blood group?

DR.RAY: Yes. Mma has blood group O with Rhesus negative. Women with RhD negative are handled with extra care in their reproductive years. After birth, certain medical care may need to be given in preparation for the next pregnancy. From medical examination, it is clear that Mma has had a pregnancy but I don't think she received the medical care (MMA gives a quick yell and holds herself)

DOZIE: What happens if the medication is not given?

DR.RAY: It creates an en passé in the reproductive process

MMA: En pa gini? What en passé? Please doctor, I don't understand.

DR. RAY: Yes. It may make further pregnancy very problematic. The blood group becomes hostile to the development of the foetus (Pp.44-45).

From the foregoing, Udemma does not have Rhesus factor, coupled with the fact that she has not received adequate medical care which ought to have been given to her after last pregnancy,

in preparation for the next pregnancy. It is reported in the play that Mma aborted her first pregnancy, and the necessary medication that ought to be given was not administered immediately, thereby creating an en passe in the reproductive system. Therefore, her blood group becomes hostile to the development of the foetus.

In the setting of the play, *Egg Without Yolk* where marriage and childbirth are closely linked to each other, infertility becomes a significant issue causing severe emotional distress and strain in the relationship between Mma, Dozie, and his mother. In Africa, there is no room for a childless woman, especially a married woman. This makes everyone see Udemma as a failure. Worse still, as a woman, her life is full of misery as a result of the humiliation and oppression she is subjected to. Ngcobo (2007) says that: "Marriage among Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full" (Ngcobo, 2007, p.533). Basden (1966) says that: "A childless marriage is a source of serious disappointment and sooner or later leads to serious trouble between man and wife" (Basden, 1966, p.1). Mma's childlessness has caused her a lot of physical and psychological sufferings. This psychological reflection affects Mma deeply and prompts in her dreadful feelings of bleakness and gloominess. According to Donkor (2008) "Childless women usually encounter unfavourable treatment from their society. A woman might be expelled from her husband's house either by the husband himself or by his family. A husband could be encouraged to take other wives if a wife is suspected of barrenness" (Donkor, 2008, p.22).

The female protagonist, Udemma is therefore being stigmatized by her fellow women and also by Dozie's family. Udenma decides to leave her husband's house as a result of the conflict that ensues following her bareness. Her mother-in-law convinced that she is a witch tried all that she could to make Dozie, her son send her away and marry a new wife, but she did not succeed. Udemma eventually becomes frustrated and leaves her matrimonial home on her own. Immediately, after her departure, her mother-in-law brings a girl from the village to take over Udenma's position in the house. She made frantic efforts to make sure that Dozie, her son and the new girl would have sexual intercourse, but she failed. Dozie, goes in search of Udenma, his lovely wife and they reconcile together again as man and wife. In this play, Ezenwanebe shows that as far as culture is concerned, infertile women are incomplete beings who are expected to meet a particular requirement before they can be seen as fulfilled women. Irene Salami (2008) says that:

a woman's importance revolves around her childbearing role. In African tradition, only motherhood confirms the gender identity of a woman, granting her cultural legitimacy. These are parameters defined

by patriarchal ideology, which women have learnt to live with for their personal survival (Salami, 2008, p.97)

In *Egg Without Yolk*, Udenma, even though she is married, is seen to be incomplete because she has no child. Shattered by her predicament, Udenma begins to question her own womanhood as she cries to Nedo, her friend:

MMA: Wife, yes! But a different kind of wife! Look at me, Nedo; what type of wife am I, Nedolisa?

NEDO: I don't understand what's going on here.

MMA: You are not only a wife but a mother! Not just a mother of one child but of four, four children! What is wrong with me, Nedo? (p.5).

The above passage shows the level of emotional or psychological trauma Udenma is going through because of her inability to conceive in a society which places motherhood as one of the primary responsibilities of a woman. The members of the Umuachi Women Association, a women's group which Udenma is part of, mock her as no day passes by without them talking of their husbands and children. According to Nnebuihe, one of the members of this women association:

NNEBUIHE: (Angry) Look at this woman; of what use is a woman who cannot marry and give children to her husband and his people? What if there are no human beings for her to serve with the so-called knowledge and skill? (p.12).

Nnebuihe is convinced that what matters in a woman's life is her ability to conceive and bear children. Nnebuihe does not waste time to make it clear to Udenma that a woman must be addressed as someone's mother, otherwise she is not qualified to be associated with women folk. Nnebuihe, through her mockery of Nma for being barren has given voice to the male's maltreatment of childless women. This level of oppression against a fellow woman is a serious challenge to the emancipation of the African women and has other serious psychological and physical impact on the victim. Nkiruka Akaenyi (2024) says that "the effects of Intragender subjugation can be profound resulting in psychological and physical harm. Individuals who experience Intragender subjugation may suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues (Akaenyi, 2024, p.152). The playwright condemns this violence against women, stressing that some of these cultural practices and gender role differentiation are harmful to women.

So many African women and scholars like Ezeigbo and Ezenwanebe lament the number of contemporary Nigerian women who willfully lose their names upon marriage. According to Osita Ezenwanebe (2011) "Gender relations between husband and wife are unequal. Women

as wives lose their personal identity and assume the names associated with their social roles as wives and mothers; for example, “Nwunye John”, that is, “John’s wife” or “Mama Ada”, that is, “Ada’s mother”, and that opens the door to further powerlessness and oppression”. (Ezenwanebe, 2011, p.268).

Infertility is being employed in a male-dominated society to limit and restrain women from making progress. In African societies, women are typically the ones who suffer the consequences of being unable to conceive or bear children. Even in cases where men are responsible for infertility, women are still unfairly held accountable. However, numerous studies have discredited this belief and have concluded that it is unjust to solely blame women for infertility and subject them to emotional or psychological mistreatment without first testing the man to determine his potency. According to Naina Kumar and Amit Kant Singh (1989): male infertility is an important cause of infertility with a strong impact on the psychology and physiology of couple. It can be due to several reasons. Also, the present literature reveals that its trend is increasing in India. Therefore, it's the need of the hour to look into the factors which are causing such a rise in male infertility and attempts should be made to control such factors in near future Naina Kumar & Amit Kant Singh, 1989, p. 191).

In the play, Nnebuihe’s tantrums throw Udenma into a state of confusion and frustration. Her feeling of incompleteness makes her to become emotionally distressed. While Udenma bears the emotional burden of infertility, her husband gets pity and sympathy. According to Agozie Ugwu (2014) “This ideology of gender profiling in relation to the ability of a woman to bear children is a popular believe amongst the community of women represented in the theatre of *Egg Without Yolk* ” (Ugwu, 2014, p.383). The society believe that a woman who is unable to bear a child for her husband is of no use, and therefore, these women in the Ezenwanbe’s *Egg Without Yolk* , through the use of discriminatory language registers attack, stigmatizes and oppress Udenma. During the women’s meeting, Udenma is being ridiculed by her fellow women for attempting to add a title to her name just like others, simply because she does not have a child. When Udenma says that she should be addressed as Ugwu Nwanyi (meaning the dignity of a woman), these women refused blatantly. One of the women ridiculed her, by asking her: What do you mean by the dignity of a woman? What type of name is that? What in particular is the dignity in womanhood? Is it husband, or child, or money? (p.383).

Udenma is made to undergo severe emotional trauma in the hands of her fellow women, especially her mother-in-law. She could not endure her pariah status occasioned by the stigma of childlessness that she suffered on a daily basis. She is willing to do anything to cover her

shame. In the case of the traditional doctor, Omenka, he captures aptly the predicament of the couple. He says “Now, listen, the egg is yolkless and the testes juiceless because they are tied together. It is the tying of the egg to the testes that makes the egg yolkless and the testes juiceless” (p.38).

Osita Ezenwanebe’s play is not peculiar in this representation. The importance or value placed on children in the family is a prominent theme in Nigerian drama, especially in creative works by women. This dominant theme is explored on two levels. The first level primarily deals with women who are fertile, having conceived and given birth to only female children. Despite this, they still suffer societal pressure and stigmatization due to the strong preference for male children. This subject matter is opulently dramatized in Tracie Utoh Ezeajugh’s *Nneora: An African Doll’s House*. In the play, Ezeajugh draws our attention to a world where high importance is placed on the male child. *Nneora*’s husband Ikenna blames his wife for her inability to give him a son after having four “noisy girls”. Despite the fact that Ikenna is educated, he rejects the genetic science demonstrating that men determine a baby’s sex due to their possession of the ‘Y’ chromosome. This modern scientific understanding is absent in the conversation between him and his wife, as illustrated below:

Ikenna: I set up this home with your help, and I believe that you will “give” me a son in due course to perpetuate my name.

Nneora: It is my heart desire “to give you” a son. I only wish God will grant my desire. (p.38)

Most gender activists have condemned this level of discrimination against the girl child, Osita Ezenwanebe (2011) says that:

The presence or absence of children especially a son in a home creates much tension in patriarchal societies where descendant is raced through the male line. In fact it determines the level of love, affection, care and harmony in such homes. Male ego is rooted in traditional culture, which it continues to parade even in the face of changes in modern society, thereby fueling gender crisis (Ezenwanebe, 2011, p.267).

Ikenna expresses his impatience to know the sex of the baby in *Nneora*’s womb. He says that “If the baby is a boy” I will throw an extravagant Christmas party ... our love life will revert to its former glory ...” (Pp.38-39). This simply implies that in the traditional African society, the degree of respect or love that a woman earns from her husband is dependent on her ability to bear him children, especially if they are sons. Arbaoui (2018) says that:

It is so aching for a woman to be rejected by her own society, mother and mother in law, but it is even worse if the rejection is also being made by her husband; the one who is supposed to be her protector and

supporter. Both the immediate family and entire society contribute to the torment suffered by childless women in African traditional culture (Arbaoui, 2018, p. 73).

In Nigeria, as in many parts of Africa, giving birth to daughters does not bring comfort or relief to women, as there is a pervasive cultural preference for sons. Linda Osarenren (2008) says that:

For a young couple in some African communities, prayers for fecundity would either wish for sons only or for “sons and daughters” with sons taking precedence over daughters. It is always “sons and daughters”, never “daughters and sons”. At the first sign of pregnancy, a woman receives unsolicited prayers from her family-in-law for the safe delivery of a baby boy. Many husbands on their part secretly or overtly express to have a male child as the first-born. Inadvertently the expectant woman would also wish for a male child as her first born in response to attitudes and behaviors that reinforce women’s subordination (Osarenren, 2008, p.33).

On the second level, there is the theme of cultural misconception and emotional trauma associated with infertility. Here, there is a general belief that in a marriage that has not been blessed with children, the fault is always assumed to be the woman's. Ezenwanebe (2011) says that “It is widely believed that African men are potent and cannot fail to impregnate a woman (their wives in particular). This belief is so strong that even today, a lot of men and even women still believe that men cannot have problem with fertility and reproduction” (Ezenwanebe (2011, p.267). However, with the advances in reproductive health, science and technology, such beliefs are gradually on the wane.

Closely related to the issue of marriage in this play is motherhood and its capacity to influence respect and recognition for women. Ezenwanebe’s play reflects the cultural belief in Igbo society, that the ‘successful’ woman is one whose home is filled with children. The negative fall-out of this is portrayed in the dilemma of Udemma who, being infertile, is either scorned or pitied. The issue of childbearing and infertility, among Africans is a serious issue and it is not being compromised. Ugwu (2014) says:

No wonder Ama Ata Aidoo in *Dilemma of a Ghost* highlighted the issue of marriage and child-bearing and the opposition both Ato and his African-American wife faced in their attempt to raise a family without childbearing. This shows to the extent the identity and personality of a woman is conceived based on her ability and willingness to bear children. More so, another representation of the image of a woman through childbearing in African drama and theatre is evident in *Anowa*. The magnificent lens of child bearing gleams evidently is the dramaturgy of *Anowa* (Ugwu, 2014, Pp. 383-384).

In the play, Dozie’s mother, Nwakaego, worried and distressed over her daughter-in-law’s state of childlessness says:

NWAKAEGO: (Pushes her aside) where is that egg white; shining out with no seed inside? You think you can just enter my house and ruin my family? To deprive me the pride of grand children? You are joking (p.48).

Therefore, Udemma's decision to adopt her late friend's children is driven by the pressure to remove the shame and disapproval from her community. Unable to bear the social isolation and daily stigma of being childless, she is prepared to do whatever it takes to cover her shame and disgrace.

The representation of psychological trauma suffered by women occasioned by the obvious inability to have children and preference for a male child is not peculiar to Osita Ezenwanebe. The words spoken by the masseur in J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* are rich in poetic language and symbolism, and they serve to illustrate Ebieri's inability to become pregnant. She had always kept her "house" open. She has consistently engaged in sexual activity with her spouse. The Masseur had pronounced that her womb is "warm" or fertile to "accommodate many" or conceive many children. Although she was capable of conceiving, her interactions with the Masseur revealed that her husband had been consistently unable to impregnate her after the birth of their first child, Dode. In rural areas, particularly among farmers and fishermen like Ebieri, the number of children one has is essential for their livelihood as they form the bulk of the workforce. Therefore, even though Ebieri has one child, it does not bring her any comfort. She wants to showcase her fertility by giving birth to more children, which would not only help in the farm work but also elevate her status in society. Having just one child is not enough for her, making her feel desperate. It is important to note that the theme of children is a prominent one in Nigerian drama, particularly from the perspective of women. Jeremiah Methuselah (2014) says that:

the anxiety of Ebieri to prove her fecundity forced her to throw caution, decency and morality to the wind as she blatantly went after her husband's brother to impregnate her so she can take away her shame and reproach from society. The Woman Penitent, on the other hand craved to satisfy the social expectation of a woman. She became a 'customer' to many spiritualists and prayer houses around. We further suggest that Ebieri and the Woman Penitent, who of course, are typologies of women who have found themselves in this grueling and depressing situation are victims of an unbending culture; a culture that has put so much strain on the woman. Invariably, it has heaped so many expectations on her to perform so much in the art of procreation. There are many families in which women are suffering being blamed for the problem of child birth when it is not their fault as exemplified by Ebieri. There are many others, too, where there might be genuine barrenness like in the case of the Woman Penitent, but where proper guidance and referral might not have been given (Methuselah, 2014, pp. 220).

Numerous instances readily come to mind, such as those portrayed in Julie Okoh's *The Mannequins*, where Etimini faces neglect from her husband due to their having only female children, causing him to accuse her of failing to provide him with a male heir. Similarly, in Stella Oyedepo's *On His Demise*, Fola endures mistreatment from her husband's relatives following his presumed death in a horrific car accident. When she refuses to be inherited by one of her 'deceased' spouse's brothers, she and her daughters are evicted from their home. In *Anowa*, Ama Ata Aidoo depicts the harrowing experiences of the title character, who undergoes extreme trauma.

Conclusion

This study explored the cultural misconceptions, emotional burdens and social stigma linked with infertility in most African societies. The play buttresses the belief that infertility is a woman's problem. The pressure to have a child, which is a significant part of their cultural and social identity, makes Udenma to become emotionally traumatized. She feels like she is the one responsible for the couple's inability to conceive. The play underscores the need for increased awareness and education on infertility issues in a modern African society. In the case of Udenma, her inability to have a child is linked to a medical condition which should have been avoided. Nma does not have the Rhesus factor and has not received the necessary medical care following her previous pregnancy to prepare for the next one. Additionally, the play reveals that Mma had an abortion during her first pregnancy, but the essential post-abortion treatment was not administered promptly. As a result, complications arose in her reproductive system, making her blood group incompatible with the healthy development of a fetus.

In the play, Osita Ezenwanebe also stresses the need for social support systems that can help couples dealing with infertility. Overall, the play serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and stimulating discussions about infertility issues in traditional societies. The play also deals with the achievements of the character Udemma, who manages to find joy in motherhood despite her infertility through adopting and caring for the children of her deceased friend. This study recommends that couples facing similar challenges should consider adoption as a means of overcoming the anxiety of childlessness and reducing the demeaning acts and stigma associated with it. Additionally, this study advocates for more positive bonding and love amongst women to minimize the suffering and limitations imposed by female characters on their own gender.

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