

## INVESTIGATING CHARACTERS' INTENSE SUFFERING TO ORDINARY UNHAPPINESS IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S

### *THE BRIDE PRICE AND THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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#### **Abstract**

This article investigates to what extent the characters' intense suffering become ordinary unhappiness in Buchi Emecheta's selected novels. This paper examines how Anglophone African Literature characters' intense suffering is manifested. Also, the focus will be on how the Igbo community depicted by Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, contributes to transform the community members' intense suffering to ordinary unhappiness. The sociological, sociolinguistic and psychological approaches will be applied. The application of Freud's theory of 'hysterical misery into common unhappiness' will be mainly helpful in the analysis of the situation.

**Key words:** Characters, intense suffering, 'hysterical misery', community members, transform, 'ordinary or common unhappiness', contribution.

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#### **Résumé**

Cet article examine dans quelle mesure la souffrance intense des personnages devient un malheur ordinaire dans les romans sélectionnés. Cet article met en lumière, comment la souffrance se manifeste au travers des personnages de la littérature africaine anglophone. Aussi, il sera passé en revue, par quel moyen la communauté Igbo représentée dans *"The Bride Price"* et *"The Joys of Motherhood"*, contribue à transformer la douleur intense des personnages en malheur ordinaire. Les approches sociologique, sociolinguistique et psychologique seront utilisées. L'utilisation de la théorie de Freud de 'hysterical misery into common unhappiness' sera principalement utile dans l'analyse de cette situation.

**Mots-clés:** personnages, souffrance intense, 'hysterical misery', membres de la communauté, transformer, malheur ordinaire, contribution.

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores insofar as the characters' intense suffering become ordinary unhappiness in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Freud's concept of "hysterical misery into common unhappiness" will be critical in the analysis of this paper under

consideration. The following questions may be considered as the central questions of this article: What does Freud's theory of "hysterical misery into common unhappiness" stand for? To what extent characters' intense suffering is perceived through Anglophone African literature? What does ordinary unhappiness stand for? To what extent the intense psychological distress of characters in Anglophone African literature, is relieved by fellow community members?

This research paper intends to look over how Anglophone African literature characters' intense suffering is displayed, with a specific focus on the social environment contribution to turn characters' extreme distress into ordinary unhappiness. Also, this paper highlights through the application of Freud's above mentioned theory, the way in which characters in Igbo community depicted by Buchi Emecheta's selected novels, allow the fellow community members to relieve their intense psychological suffering.

David SMAIL in the chapter one 'Psychology and Distress- The Story so Far' of his book entitled *The Origin of Unhappiness A New Understanding of Personal Distress*, points out:

Psychiatry, to be sure, still holds sway in the field of emotional distress, and seeks with habitual arrogance to define what may and may not count as 'mental illness' and what are its appropriate treatments, but its grip is loosening. Apart from the 'psychodynamic' therapies which derive from the psychoanalytic school, there are many other kinds of therapy for the sufferer to choose from: 'behavioral approaches', 'cognitive' approaches, Client-Centred Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Gestalt Therapy, Rational-Emotive Therapy, and Hundreds of other varieties of therapy and counseling, which are flourishing in a rapidly deregulating market. (Smail, 1993:12)

In view of the foregoing, David Smail makes it clear, psychiatry still exercises power in the field of emotional distress and tries to find with usual approach to define what may and may not be considered as mental illness and what are its suitable treatments. He also shows that apart from the 'psychodynamic' therapies which are related to psychoanalytic school, there are other kinds of therapy that the sufferer may choose.

Jon Baskin in his article 'Habits of Mind' from *Ordinary Unhappiness, The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*, writes:

The Beginning with Aristotle's idea of catharsis - according to which citizens purged their unproductive emotions at the theater so that they could become more virtuous and rational citizens outside of it- many such apologies have been attempted over the years, by philosophers, by

literary critics, and sometimes by philosophically inclined artists like Tolstoy. (Baskin, 2019:2)

Having this in mind, Jon Baskin refers to Aristotle's theory of catharsis in which unhappiness also called unproductive emotions. This theory is based on the fact of getting rid of unwanted feelings or emotions through the attendance of dramatic performances and plays in the theater.

Frank C. Richardson in his book entitled *Suffering and Psychology*, points out as follows:

Cushman wonders how many of the emotional and interpersonal problems in today's world stem from our wider culture and politics' failure to address the difficult and dark side of things with something other than illusions, like the belief that "our babies will be safe... well adjusted ... happy...and successful- contingent only on mother's ability to perform properly"(p.5)

He suggests that much psychology only abets the problem by interpreting emotional pain as "solely intra-psychic, biochemical, or cognitive symptoms" rather than stemming from the societal and existential conditions and offering primarily technical or narrowly instrumental approaches to treating it, such as medicalizing a mother's suffering as peripartum depression or PPD in the DSM-V-and then perhaps devising a annualized treatment for the problem. (Richardson, 2023:12)

As stated above, Frank refers to Cushman who asserts that personal and emotional problems or pains result from our broader social and cultural context that moulds and affects a society or group of people, and politics' failure to solve the imperfections of things with something other than dreams. He also indicates that much psychology only rely on interpreting emotional pain as "solely intra-psychic' biochemical, or cognitive symptoms" rather than addressing the problem from the societal and existential conditions.

Ronald SCHLEIFER in his book entitled *The Routledge Series Integrating Science and Culture Pain and Suffering*, refers to Simone Weil and Dr. Eric Cassell's perception of cultural source of pain as follows:

The French philosopher, Christian mystic, and political activist, Simone Weil, articulates explicitly what was strongly implicit in Chapter 5 (and, in fact , implicit throughout this book), namely that pain is always woven up with social as well as personal meaning. This is perhaps most implicit in Dr. Eric Cassell's delineation of the nature of suffering described earlier, but it is also part of understandings of the phenomenon of pain as perception as well as sensation insofar -like experience-is tied up with

schemas of apprehension, which are often cultural at their source.  
(Schleifer, 2014:102-103)

In exercise of that, it is important to define what does culture stand for. According to an online definition, culture involves the ideas, customs and social behavior of a specific group of people or community. Having the above quote in mind, this entails that any kind of pain an individual may experience is caused by the elements which are culture related.

It is obvious that the themes related to the origins of unhappiness, ordinary unhappiness, suffering and psychology, and pain and suffering have been considered by authors and researchers such as David SMAIL, Jon BASKIN, Frank C. RICHARDSON, and Ronald SCHLEIFER. However, they did not highlight in their analysis to what extent characters' intense suffering may be transformed to ordinary unhappiness in Anglophone African literature. This fresh insight, is what this paper under consideration will approach.

### **Freud's Concept of "Hysterical Misery into Common Unhappiness"**

In any community, some community members may undergo pain, distress, and hardship. However, the psychological support of fellow community members can contribute to lessen the intense psychological pain to the ordinary pain. This is where Freud's theory of "hysterical misery into common unhappiness" finds its full meaning. In this regard, Stephen Frosh in his article entitled "SIGMUND FREUD" from *Routledge Handbook of Psychoanalytic Political Theory*, quotes Freud as follows:

'Our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience', he wrote (Freud 1930:76-77). And early on, in *Studies on Hysteria*, he had set up an interlocutor who asked him, 'Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life. You cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me, then?' To which Freud famously replied, 'you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness' (Freud 1893:305). (Frosh, 2020: 20)

As per the above, Freud's concept is divided into two main components, that is 'Hysterical Misery' and 'Common Unhappiness'. First, it is critical to understand what does 'Hysterical Misery' stand for? It is essential to note that, by 'Hysterical Misery', Freud means a state of extreme psychological suffering or emotional pain. Then, what does 'Common Unhappiness' stand for? It is noteworthy to mention that, by 'Common Unhappiness', Freud refers to the deep-rooted challenges and struggles that involve the human experience, such as frustration, failure, and loss. Freud suggests through the above mentioned theory that a person may find a relief from an intense psychological suffering if he or she convinces himself or herself that what

is happening to him or to her, is part of normal cycle of common pains and suffering to all human beings, that is ordinary unhappiness. Freud's theory of 'hysterical misery into common unhappiness' will be applied in the lines below.

The main object of this paper consists of analyzing to the extent to highlight how Freud's above mentioned theory is applied on characters of Anglophone African Literature. In this vein, the following lines from *The Bride Price* are noteworthy:

Ma Blackie, he affirmed, was to stay in Ibuza and have her system purified by the clear and unpolluted water from the Oboshi river; the river and the goddess of the river were gifts to all Ibuza's sons and daughters to come to have themselves cleansed by the river whenever they found themselves in difficulties in distant places of work. (Emecheta, 1976:47-48)

In light of the above, here is a case where Ma Blackie, a daughter of Igbo community who comes back to her home town Ibuza, to seek for help regarding both her infertility issue and intense psychological pain. In fact, African communities in general and Igbo community in particular, view women as being the cause of infertility in the marriage. Ma Blackie one of the protagonists of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, was brought up in such an environment, where lack of fertility is due to wives. This collective mind contributes to increase the level of Ma Blackie's emotional pain or distress. She used to give birth to children ; but now she is no more able to do so. Ma Blackie's new condition causes her a lot of pain and distress in Lagos. She decides to go back to home town Ibuza to find a solution or relief from her intense suffering.

When Ma Blackie arrives in Ibuza she receives a psychological therapy which gives her relief from her extreme psychological suffering. It is made clear to Ma Blackie that what she is going through is common experience of other community members too. It is confirmed that the water of Oboshi river is gifted by nature to purify her childbearing system and to provide her, and other Ibuza's community members relief . whenever, Igbo community members are confronted with difficulties and pains in remote places; they have just to come back home and take a little of this water. In doing so, this explanation regarding Oboshi river water healing power given to Ma Blackie, in order to lessen her intense psychological suffering.

This sheds a light on the community members' capacity to bring relief to those who have intense psychological distress or suffering. The community members make the sufferers understand that what they are going through is part of normal cycle of human life daily experience. Viewed on that perspective, Ma Blackie's Intense psychological suffering or distress is transformed by her community to ordinary unhappiness.

This is how Freud's theory of 'Hysterical misery into common unhappiness' is applied in Anglophone African Literature through characters such as Ma Blackie, one of the protagonists of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. when a character displays a behavior of intense psychological suffering and let it to be transformed to ordinary unhappiness thanks to the help of her community members. This enables the extreme psychological distress to be converted into a manageable common unhappiness.

There is Aristotle's theory of catharsis which matches to some extent to Freud's theory above. In this context, the following paragraph of Jon Baskin's article 'Habits of Mind' from *Ordinary Unhappiness, The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*, is noteworthy:

The Beginning with Aristotle's idea of catharsis - according to which citizens purged their unproductive emotions at the theater so that they could become more virtuous and rational citizens outside of it- many such apologies have been attempted over the years, by philosophers, by literary critics, and sometimes by philosophically inclined artists like Tolstoy. (Baskin, 2019:2)

In view of all that, Jon Baskin refers to Aristotle's theory of catharsis in which suffering or unhappiness also called unproductive emotions. This theory is based on the fact of getting rid of unwanted feelings or emotions. The process of catharsis for the sufferer, consists of going to attend the dramatic performances and plays in the theater, in order to throw away suffering or unhappiness. In other words, the plays and dramatic performances may transform the sufferer's perspective of suffering, once outside of the theater. He or she will become more rational and virtuous. In doing so, the sufferer will view his or her psychological distress, as being part of daily life experience.

After having illustrated how Aristotle's catharsis theory agrees to some extent with Freud's theory of 'hysterical misery into common unhappiness', with a common ground a relief from psychological distress or unproductive emotions. There is another case where intense suffering of a character is transformed to ordinary unhappiness.

Nnu Ego, one of the characters of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, whose behavior harmonizes with of Freud's above theory. First it is critical to analyze the immediate environment in which Nnu Ego lives, their collective mind; and then it will be highlighted how Freud's theory of "hysterical Misery into common Unhappiness" is applied in her case. The following paragraph of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is worthy of attention:

At the farm Amatokwu kept ordering her about as he would any farm help. She stood in the middle of the farm and said abruptly, Amatokwu, remember when I first came to your house? Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? What happened to us,

Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? Do you think I don't suffer too?

What do you want me to do? Amatokwu asked. 'I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don't appeal any more. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by nery female who is all bones.' (Emecheta, 1979:32)

In view of the above, it is vital to contextualize the cause of Nnu Ego's extreme psychological distress or pain. In fact, Nnu Ego is in the Igbo community, where lack of fertility is considered like a sin and a curse. Igbo society highly values childbearing and fertility. So, Nnu Ego's barren condition, endangers her marital relation with her husband Amatokwu.

Amatokwu considers Nnu Ego no more as his senior wife with all privileges belonging to this position in Igbo community in particular, and in African communities in general. That is why, when Amatokwu is in the farm with Nnu Ego, his senior wife, he keeps on asking her to perform several tasks like a slave. Sometimes, he sends her a straightforward insult regarding her barren condition.

Amatokwu continuous insults toward Nnu Ego, cause her intense psychological suffering. This extreme distress is perceived through Nnu Ego's question to Amatokwu, her husband. She asks him if her infertility is caused by her herself or if she is the one who wishes the lack of children in their marital relation. Nnu Ego even reminds her husband that she is suffering from the lack of offspring too. Through the lines of the above quote, it is crystal clear that Nnu Ego goes through a deep and intense psychological distress. This suffering is caused by pressure from both the Igbo community and her husband.

However, Nnu Ego's co-wife's behavior of sharing child custody contributes to relieve her suffering. This enables Nnu Ego to find relief and peace of mind by considering her extreme suffering, as part of all humans normal routine. In this respect, the lines below from *The Joys of Motherhood* are significant:

Nnu Ego's relationship with the other women in the Amatokwu compound was amicable. The younger wife did not keep her new son to herself but allowed Nnu Ego as the senior wife to share in looking after him. Many an evening neighbors would hear Nnu Ego calling the younger woman to come for her crying baby. 'This daughter of Agbadi,' the older women remarked, 'she is so fond of babies and yet they have been denied her'. (Emecheta, 1979:33)

It is crucial to emphasize that Nnu Ego is Amatokwu's senior wife, Amatokwu's younger wife accepts to share her child custody with Nnu Ego. This conveys a very symbolic and comforting message to Nnu Ego. She wants to show that she understands her husband's senior wife's intense psychological suffering. But at the same time, her attitude elucidates that Nnu Ego's distress is just a normal course of life experience. That is why, younger wife does not consider Nnu Ego's barren condition like a curse. Younger wife continues to share her son custody with senior wife, despite, the condescending look their husband and the Igbo community have on Nnu Ego.

This positive attitude of Amatokwu's younger wife contributes to relieve Nnu Ego's intense suffering. By accepting the young wife's proposal of sharing the child custody, Nnu Ego let her intense psychological suffering to be transformed to ordinary unhappiness. This is how Freud's theory of "hysterical misery into common unhappiness" is displayed by Nnu Ego, one of the protagonists of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, two cases in which suffering has been converted to ordinary unhappiness are worth paying attention to. That are the cases of Ma Blackie, a character of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, and Nnu Ego, a character of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Concerning Ma Blackie, when she arrives in Ibuza she receives a psychological therapy in order to relieve her from extreme psychological suffering. It is made clear to Ma Blackie that the infertility she has now is common experience of other community members too. However, the water of Oboshi river is gifted by nature to purify her childbearing system and to provide her, and other Ibuza's community members relief from intense suffering or difficulties. whenever they are confronted with difficulties and pains in remote places; they have just to come back home and take a little of this water.

This is to shed a light on the capacity of Igbo community members, portrayed by Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, to bring relief to those who are in intense psychological suffering. It is presented to them that intense suffering or pains are part of normal cycle of human life daily experience. Viewed on that perspective, Ma Blackie's intense psychological suffering or distress is transformed by her community to ordinary unhappiness.

With regard to Nnu Ego, Amatokwu's younger wife agrees to share her child custody with senior wife. This conveys a comforting and uplifting message to Nnu Ego. She shows to her husband's senior wife that as younger wife, she understands the suffering Nnu Ego is going through. But at the same time, this indirect message converts senior wife's intense suffering to a normal course of life experience. This is the reason why, Nnu Ego's barren condition does not matter for young wife. She continues to share her son custody with senior wife, despite the condescending look Amatokwu's their husband, and the Igbo community have on Nnu Ego.

This positive attitude of Amatokwu's younger wife contributes to relieve Nnu Ego's intense suffering. By accepting the young wife's proposal of sharing the child custody, Nnu Ego let her intense psychological suffering to be transformed to ordinary unhappiness.

This is how Freud's theory of "hysterical misery into common unhappiness" is perceived through the behaviour of Ma Blackie, a character of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, and Nnu Ego, a character of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.

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