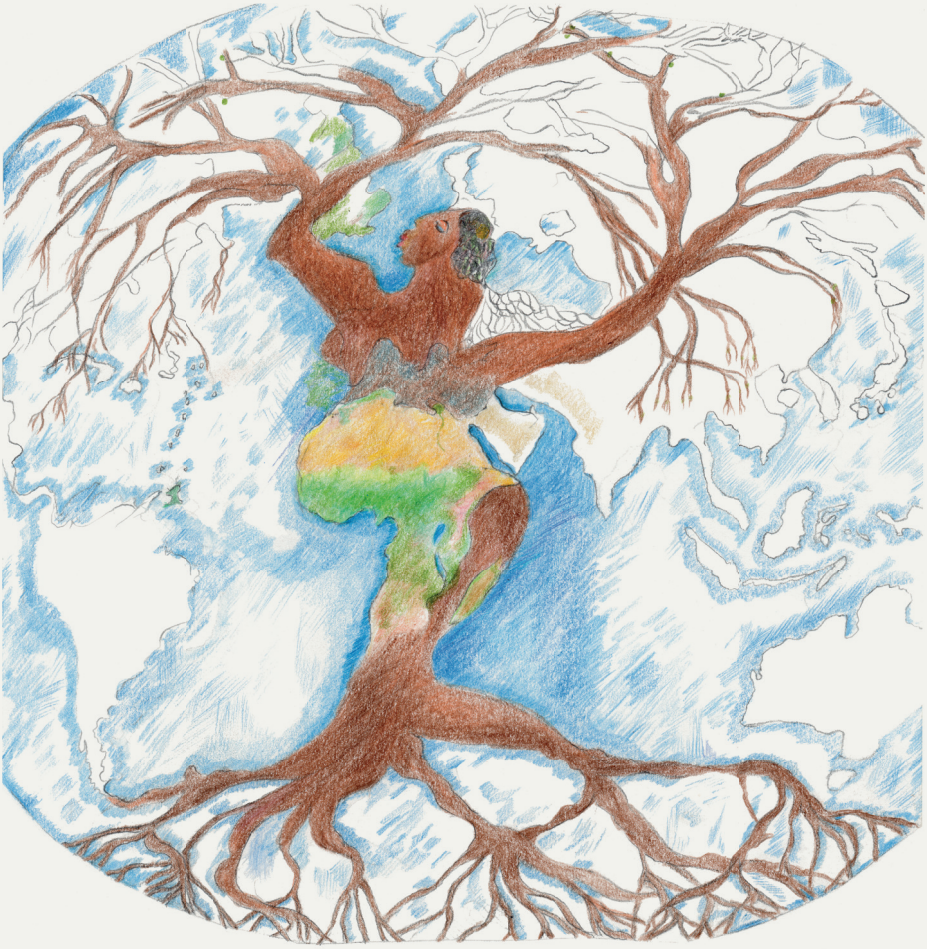
MODERN CLASSICS

Buchi Emecheta

The Joys of Motherhood



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Joys of Motherhood

Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos in 1944. She was orphaned by the age of 11 and moved to the UK with her husband in 1960. When her marriage broke down, she raised her five young children as a single mother.

Emecheta began writing about her experiences for the *New Statesman* in 1972, and these columns formed the basis for her first published novel, *In the Ditch*. She went on to publish a second semi-autobiographical novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, in 1974, followed by many more during her thirty-year writing career, including the critically acclaimed *The Joys of Motherhood*. Alongside these novels, Emecheta also published several children's stories, wrote a television play and continued as a regular contributor to the *New Statesman* as well as the *Guardian* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Emecheta received a number of literary awards and accolades over the years, including the 1977 Jock Campbell New Statesman award for her novel *Slave Girl*. She died in London in 2017.

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BUCHI EMECHETA

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Alison and Busby 1979
First published in Penguin Classics 2022
001

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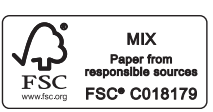
Set in 11.25/14pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–57813–1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To all mothers

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1

The Mother

Nnu Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into vacancy. Her feet were light and she walked as if in a daze, not conscious of using those feet. She collided with the door, moved away from it and across the veranda, on to the green grass that formed part of the servants' quarters. The grass was moist with dew under her bare feet. Her whole body felt the hazy mist in the air, and part of her felt herself brushing against the white master's washing on the line. This made her whirl round with a jerk, like a puppet reaching the end of its string. She now faced the road, having decided to use her eyes, her front instead of her back. She ran, her feet lighter still, as if her eyes now that she was using them gave her extra lightness. She ran, past the master's bungalow, past the side garden, and shot into the untarred gravel road; her senses were momentarily stunned by the colour of the road which seemed to be that of blood and water. She hurried on beyond this short road that led to the big tarred one, ran like someone pursued, looking behind her only once to make sure she was not being followed. She ran as if she would never stop.

The year was 1934 and the place was Lagos, then a British colony. The Yaba housing estate, a little distance from the island, had been built by the British for the British, though many Africans like Nnu Ego's husband worked there as servants and houseboys; a few foreign blacks who were junior clerks lived in

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some of the modest estate houses. Even then Lagos was growing fast and would soon be the capital of a newly formed country called Nigeria.

Nnu Ego darted past the Zabo market stalls covered with red corrugated-iron sheets which, just like the wet grass and the gravel on the ground, were glistening with the morning dew. She in her state did not seem to be seeing all this, yet her subconscious was taking it in. Little sharp stones in the footpath pricked her soles as she reached Baddley Avenue; she felt and at the same time did not feel the pain. This was also true of the pain in her young and unsupported breasts, now filling fast with milk since the birth of her baby boy four weeks before.

Her baby . . . her baby! Nnu Ego's arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk trickling out, wetting her buba blouse; and the other choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But, unlike the milk, this pain could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was there inside her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she be able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way.

Her strength was unflagging. One or two early risers saw her, tried to stop her and ask where she was going. For they saw a young woman of twenty-five, with long hair not too tidily plaited and with no head-tie to cover it, wearing a loose house buba and a faded lappa to match tied tightly around her thin waist, and they guessed that all was far from well. Apart from the fact that her outfit was too shabby to be worn outside her home and her hair too untidy to be left uncovered, there was an unearthly kind of wildness in her eyes that betrayed a troubled

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spirit. But so agile and so swift were her movements that she dodged the many who tried to help her.

By the time she reached Oyingbo market, the sun was peeping out from behind the morning clouds. She was nearing a busy part of the town and there were already people about. The early market sellers were making their way to the stalls in single file, their various bundles tied and balanced unwaveringly on their heads. She collided with an angry Hausa beggar who, vacating one of the open stalls where he had spent the night, was heading for the tarred road to start his day's begging. He was blind and walked with his stick held menacingly straight in front of him; his other hand clutched shakily at his begging calabash. Nnu Ego in her haste almost knocked the poor man down, running straight into him as if she too was without the use of her eyes. There followed a loud curse, and an unintelligible outpouring from the mouth of the beggar in his native Hausa language, which few people in Lagos understood. His calabash went flying from his shaky hand, and he swung his stick in the air to emphasise his loud curse.

'*Dan duru ba!*' he shouted. He imagined that, early as it was, he was being attacked by money snatchers who were wont to rob the beggars, especially blind ones, of their daily alms. Nnu Ego just managed to escape the fury of the beggar's stick as she picked up the calabash for him. She did this wordlessly though she was breathing hard. There was nothing she could have said to this man who was enjoying his anger, recounting what he thought was about to happen to him in Hausa. He went on cursing and swinging his stick in the air as Nnu Ego left him.

She began to feel fatigued, and from time to time whimpered like a frightened child; yet she walked fast, resentful that she should feel any physical hurt at all. As she walked, pain and anger fought inside her; sometimes anger came to the fore, but the emotional pain always won. And that was what she wanted

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to end, very, very quickly. She would soon be there, she told herself. It would all soon be over, right there under the deep water that ran below Carter Bridge. Then she would be able to seek out and meet her *chi*, her personal god, and she would ask her why she had punished her so. She knew her *chi* was a woman, not just because to her way of thinking only a woman would be so thorough in punishing another. Apart from that, had she not been told many times at home in Ibuza that her *chi* was a slave woman who had been forced to die with her mistress when the latter was being buried? So the slave woman was making sure that Nnu Ego's own life was nothing but a catalogue of disasters. Well, now she was going to her, to the unforgiving slave princess from a foreign land, to talk it all over with her, not on this earth but in the land of the dead, there deep beneath the waters of the sea.

It is said that those about to die, be it by drowning or by a gradual terminal illness, use their last few moments of consciousness going through their life kaleidoscopically, and Nnu Ego was no exception. Hers had started twenty-five years previously in a little Ibo town called Ibuza.

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2

The Mother's Mother

Nwokocha Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief. He was a great wrestler, and was glib and gifted in oratory. His speeches were highly spiced with sharp anecdotes and thoughtful proverbs. He was taller than most and, since he was born in an age when physical prowess determined one's role in life, people naturally accepted him as a leader. Like most handsome men who are aware of their charismatic image, he had many women in his time. Whenever they raided a neighbouring village, Agbadi was sure to come back with the best-looking women. He had a soft spot for those from big houses, daughters of chiefs and rich men. He knew from experience that such women had an extra confidence and sauciness even in captivity. And that type of arrogance, which even captivity could not diminish, seemed to excite some wicked trait in him. In his young days, a woman who gave in to a man without first fighting for her honour was never respected. To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after his time, with Christianity and other changes. Most of the women Nwokocha Agbadi chose as his wives and even slaves were those who could match his arrogance, his biting sarcasm, his painful jokes, and also, when the mood called, his human tenderness.

He married a few women in the traditional sense, but as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go further afield for some other

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exciting, tall and proud female. This predilection of his extended to his mistresses as well.

Agbadi was from Ogboli, a village of people who, legend said, had lived in that part of what is now Ibuza before the Eastern Ibo people from Isu came and settled there with them. The Ogboli people allowed the founder of Ibuza to stay, and bestowed titles on him and his descendants. They also inherited most of the widows of the newcomers. This was the arrangement for a long time, until the people of Ibuza grew in number and strength, and those of Ogboli somehow diminished. It is still not known why this was so, though some claim that many of them emigrated to neighbouring towns like Asaba. But that is by the way. The Ibuza people, who came from the eastern part of Nigeria, fought and won many civil battles against their hosts. They won their freedom of movement to the extent that they started crowning themselves and refused to send their wives to the Ogboli people again.

During the time of Nwokocha Agbadi the town had become known as Ibuza, and Ogboli was then one of the villages that made up the town. The glory was still there, and the Ogboli people still regarded themselves as the sons of the soil, even though the soil had long been taken away from under their feet. Two of Agbadi's wives came from Ibuza, two from his own village of Ogboli, three were slaves he had captured during his wanderings; and he also had two mistresses.

One of these mistresses was a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance. So stubborn was she that she refused to live with Agbadi. Men being what they are, he preferred spending his free time with her, with this woman who enjoyed humiliating him by refusing to be his wife. Many a night she would send him away, saying she did not feel like having anything to do with him, even though Agbadi was not supposed to be the kind of man women

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should say such things to. But she refused to be dazzled by his wealth, his name or his handsomeness. People said that Nwokocha Agbadi spent all his life on this earth courting his Ona.

Ona was Agbadi's name for her, not the name originally given to her. Her father was a chief, too, and Agbadi had seen her as a child following her father about. People used to find it strange that a chief like Obi Umunna would go about unashamedly pulling a tiny toddler with him. But her father told people that his little girl was his ornament. Agbadi then said, jokingly, 'Why don't you wear her round your neck, like an *ona*, a "priceless jewel"?' People had laughed. But the name stuck. It never occurred to him that he would be one of the men to ask for her when she grew up. Her father, despite having several wives, had few children, and in fact no living son at all, but Ona grew to fill her father's expectation. He had maintained that she must never marry; his daughter was never going to stoop to any man. She was free to have men, however, and if she bore a son, he would take her father's name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made.

She was of medium height, and had skin like that of half-ripe palm nuts, smooth, light coffee in colour. Her hair, closely cropped, fitted her skull like a hat atop a head that seemed to be thrust out of her shoulders by a strong, long powerful neck. When she walked, her expensive waist-beads, made of the best coral, murmured, and for men raised in that culture, who knew the sound of each bead, this added to her allurement. She had been used all her life to walking in bush paths, so she knew the tricks of avoiding thorns, using the balls of her feet rather than putting her full weight on her soles. This gave her movement the air of a mysterious and yet exciting cat. She had a trick of pointing her chin forward, as if she saw with it instead of her eyes, which were black-rimmed and seemed sunken into her head. Like most of her people, she had little patience for walking, and

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as she ran, in the same way as young girls would run to the stream or run out of their homesteads to find out what was going on, she would cup her hands to support her breasts, which swung with bare health. She seldom wore any tops, neither did she tie her lappa over her breasts like the old women. But she had many waist lappas, and expensive changes of coral beads for her neck and waist. Greenish-black tattoos stood out richly against her brown skin. Though she was always scantily dressed, she frequently made people aware of being a conservative, haughty presence, cold as steel and remote as any woman royally born. When she sat, and curled her long legs together in feminine modesty, one knew that she had style, this only daughter of Obi Umunna.

Nwokocha Agbadi would not have minded sending all his wives away just to live with this one woman. But that was not to be. People said she had had him bewitched, that she had a kind of power over him; what person in his right mind would leave his big spacious household and women who were willing to worship and serve him in all things to go after a rude, egocentric woman who had been spoilt by her father? This story gained credence particularly when Agbadi's young wives showed signs of sexual neglect. He would be reminded to do his duty by them, then when they became pregnant he would not be seen in their huts until the time came for him to mate them again. But whenever he returned from his many wanderings he would go and stay with his Ona.

It was during one rainy season that Nwokocha Agbadi went to hunt some elephants which he and his age-group knew would be crossing the bush marshes called Ude. He came too near one of the heavy creatures on this occasion, and that single slip almost led to a terrible disaster. He was thrown with a mighty tusk into a nearby wild sugar-cane bush and he landed in the bubbly black mud. The animal was so enraged that, uncharacteristically for a

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big elephant, it chased after him blindly, bellowing like a great locomotive, so that the very ground seemed about to give way at its heavy approach. Agbadi reacted quickly. He was pinned to the sugar-cane bush unable to move his body, none the less with a practised hand he aimed his spear and threw it under the belly of the angry animal. It roared, but still made a determined assault on Agbadi, almost tearing his arm from his shoulder, attacking him with a fury increased by the painful spear under it. The elephant roared and fell, but not before it had wounded Agbadi so badly that he himself suspected he was nearing his end. The other hunters, hearing the commotion, rushed to the scene and quickly finished off the elephant, which was still very alive and kicking furiously. They saw Nwokocha Agbadi bleeding to death. His shoulder bone was thrust out of his skin, and the elephant's tusks had indented his side. The men gathered and with bamboo splints tied the twisted shoulder, though they could do little about the bleeding side; judging from the pool of blood that was fast forming around him, they doubted that he would last long. Agbadi soon passed out and it seemed to all that he had died. The oldest man of the group took his *otuogwu* cloth which he had left in a dry hilly place by the stream, rolled Agbadi in it as if he were a dead person, then the anxious hunters carried him in a bigger bamboo crate which they had quickly constructed, and made their way gradually and sadly home.

The procession of dignified men emerging from the belly of the bush into the town was a moving spectacle. It was obvious to those farmers on their way to their lands that something was very wrong, but if they suspected the truth, they could not yet show grief: Nwokocha Agbadi was not only a chief but an important one, therefore the disclosure of his death would have to comply with certain cultural laws – there must be gun shots, and two or three goats must be slaughtered before the announcement. Anyone who started grieving before the official proclamation

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would be made to pay fines equivalent to three goats. So people watched the hunters' approach in awe, wondering who it was that had been so mummified. Women and children ran from their homesteads to witness the sight, and observant people noticed that the only chief missing among the returning hunters was Nwokocha Agbadi. His carriers were followed by four hefty male slaves dragging the dead elephant, groaning and sweating with the weight of the beast. People knew then that Agbadi had either been badly wounded or killed while hunting the elephant! Word circulated in whispers.

When Ona heard of it, the more vulnerable personality underneath her daily steely mask came out. She dashed out from where she was sitting by her father and soon caught up with the carriers.

'Tell me, please say something, is my lover dead?' she asked anxiously as she galloped after them on the balls of her feet, her waist-beads rumbling to the rhythm of her movements.

She held on first to this man, asking the same question, then to that one, begging him to say something. She pestered Agbadi's closest and oldest friend Obi Idayi, so much so that he lost his temper. He had ignored her for some time, and never had any love for this wild uncontrolled woman. He did not know what Agbadi found in her. Now he stopped in his heavy stride and snapped.

'In life you tortured him, teased him with your body. Now that he is dead, you cry for his manhood.'

Ona was stunned. She held her hands over her head and spoke like someone hypnotised: 'It can't be. It just can't be.'

Some older women standing by hushed her, saying, 'He may be your lover, girl, but don't forget that he is Nwokocha Agbadi. Watch your tongue.'

With fear and apprehension lightening her brain, Ona followed the carriers to Ogboli.

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Agbadi was placed in the centre of his courtyard. The medicine man was able to detect a very faint life in him, although his breathing was toilsome and indicated that he was a dying man. They had to massage his heart into activity again. All his wives were shooed away, but Ona fought and clawed to be allowed to stay and would let no one touch Agbadi except herself. His people did not much like her, yet they respected her as the only woman who could make Agbadi really happy, so the medicine man let her attend to him. So frightened was she in the aftermath of the accident that, together with the men sitting around Agbadi, she forgot that food was meant to be eaten and that night was meant for sleep.

Goats were slaughtered every day to appease Agbadi's *chi*; others were left alive by river banks and at Ude to appease the other gods. The thought of going home never occurred to Ona, not even on the fourth day. Nor did her possessive father call for her, for he understood her plight; hers were civilised people and they trusted her. For the first time, she realised how attached she was to this man Nwokocha Agbadi, though he was cruel in his imperiousness. His tongue was biting like the edge of a circumcision blade. He ruled his family and children as if he were a god. Yet he gave her his love without reservation, and she enjoyed it; she suspected, however, that her fate would be the same as that of his other women should she consent to become one of his wives. No, maybe the best way to keep his love was not to let that happen. But if he were to die now . . . God, she would will herself death too! All the same, she would rather have her tongue pulled out of her head than let that beast of a man know how much she cared. That, she decided, would be his lot for being so domineering and having such a foul temper. She watched over him closely and told herself that she would go if he should start showing signs of being on the mend.

On the fifth day he opened his eyes without any help from the

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medicine man. Ona was so surprised that she simply stared back at him. Her first impulsive act was to scream her joy; then she remembered her self control. Agbadi looked at her for a split second, his eyes unfocused. For that small time, he looked so dependent that Ona felt like gathering him in her arms and singing to him, as one would do to a baby. He started to chew the side of his mouth, a habit of his which she knew from experience was normally the prelude to a hurtful remark. He looked at her sitting there cross-legged beside him, one of her knees almost touching his head which was supported by a wooden head-rest. He said nothing but his sharp mind had taken in the whole situation. Still biting the corner of his lower lip, he allowed his eyes to wander over her from head to toe. Then he simply rolled away and closed his eyes again. She did not doubt that the light in the open courtyard where he was lying was too strong for his eyes, since he had not opened them for five long days, but she had not missed his look of derision. What a way to thank her for all her help!

She did not tell anyone that Agbadi had regained consciousness; she watched hopefully, yet with fear, for further signs of recovery. That evening while she was trying to ease the bamboo splints that had been fixed to straighten his shoulder, two men had to hold his strong long legs to prevent him from kicking. He groaned in pain, and she was told to mop up the fresh blood oozing from the wound. She heard herself saying, 'You have borne the pain like a man. The bones are set now; you only have the wound, and this will heal in a day or two.'

Agbadi's eyes flew open, and this time they were clear and evil. His white teeth flashed in a sardonic smile. He chuckled wickedly, then said roughly, 'What would you have done without your lover, Ona?'

'If you don't stop talking that way, I shall throw this calabash of medicine at you and walk out of here back to my father's

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compound. You're much better now, judging from the sharpness of your tongue.'

Her eyes burned with hot tears, but she controlled and never shed them, sensing that nothing would please her lover more than to see her face awash with tears of frustration. She got up from Agbadi's goatskin rug and began to make her way out of the compound.

'You can't go now. You have to finish what you started,' Agbadi observed.

She whirled round. 'Who is going to stop me? Who dares to stop me? You?' she wailed, very near hysteria. 'Bah! You think you have the right to play God, just because you are Agbadi? You have your wives – they can look after you. You have your slaves – let them mop up your stinking blood!'

'My wives are too much in love with me to stand by and see me in pain. I need a heartless woman like you . . . a woman whose heart is made of stone to stay and watch men remove my splints and not drown me with tears. I will die if you go.'

'You will die if I go?' Ona sneered, jutting her pointed chin into the air and throwing back her head in feigned amusement. 'A statement like that coming from the great Agbadi! So you are just an ordinary person after all – no, not an ordinary man but a spoilt child who cries when his mother leaves him. Nwokocha Agbadi, hurry up and die, because I'm going back to my father's compound. My heart is not made of stone but I would rather die than let it soften for the likes of you.'

'I did not say I am dying because you are so indispensable . . .' This was followed by his low, mocking laughter. He was joined by his close friend Idayi, and they seemed to be enjoying her discomfiture.

Then Idayi coughed gently. 'Look, Agbadi,' he warned, 'if you don't stop chuckling you'll start to bleed again. As for you, our Ona, you have lain there by him these five days, when he

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had lost his power of speech. Now that he can talk, you want him to kneel down and say "thank you", eh?'

'Yes, why not? Haven't I done enough for that? I left my father's compound to come here –'

'I didn't ask you to come, remember,' Agbadi put in, determined to be the proud hunter till death.

'Oh, you have nerve!'

'All right, all right,' Idayi intervened again, seeing that Ona was becoming more and more angry. If her self-control was allowed to snap she might well throw the calabash as she threatened. 'In a day or two he will get better, Ona. Then you can go back to your people. We are grateful to you and to your father, I assure you. If Agbadi were to lower himself to thank you, I am sure you would stop caring for him. You need a man, Ona, not a snail. We all know you. For a while I thought we were losing our giant for ever. Well, don't worry, he is still too weak to bother any woman for many days, but what he needs is the comfort of your nearness, though he won't admit it. The sun is going down now; he needs to be brought his blood meal, if you want him to heal properly,' Idayi said with his usual studied calmness.

Ona went to do as she was told, thinking to herself how unfair it was that Agbadi should accuse her of having a heart of stone. How else could she behave since she could not marry him? Because her father had no son, she had been dedicated to the gods to produce children in his name, not that of any husband. Oh, how torn she was between two men: she had to be loyal to her father, as well as to her lover Agbadi.

There were many friends and wellwishers in Agbadi's compound when she brought the meal from the medicine man's hut, knelt down and silently began to feed Agbadi.

Then the familiar salutation 'He who keeps peace' could be heard from people outside, and Ona knew that her father Obi Umunna had come to pay Agbadi a visit. Agbadi looked at her

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in silent appeal and the message was clear: he did not want her to leave yet.

'How can you be so strong and yet so soft, Agbadi?' she asked him in a low voice so that the well-wishers would not hear.

In answer, he simply smiled non-committally.

Obi Umunna approached and said airily: 'So how is the lucky man? You are very lucky, my friend. Bring your best drink and kolanuts and let us pray for long life and thank your *chi* for rescuing you.'

'You are right,' Idayi agreed. 'I was just telling your daughter that for a while we thought we would lose him. But, my friend, I hope you are not here to take her home. She is not ready yet.'

'And how is my Ona?' Obi Umunna asked after watching her for a few moments.

'He who keeps peace,' she replied, 'I am being well looked after, Father.'

'Good; but remember that you are not married to Agbadi. I don't want his money. You must come home as soon as he is better.'

'Why do you not turn her into a man?' Agbadi said bitingly. 'Clinging to your daughter as if –'

'I am not here to argue with you, Agbadi; you are sick. And we have gone through this argument so many times before. My daughter will marry no one.'

Ona purposely spooned some of the meal near Agbadi's nose, as a way of telling him not to insult her father in her presence.

Agbadi coughed and remarked: 'A daughter who you have not even taught how to feed a sick man . . .'

'Oh, Agbadi!' Ona gasped.

'Kolanut and palm wine are here,' Idayi said as one of Agbadi's children brought in the wooden tray with refreshments. 'Let us pray to our ancestors.'

Being the oldest man in the courtyard, Idayi said the prayers.

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He prayed to the almighty Olisa to cure his good friend Nwokocha Agbadi and begged him to give them all good health. Agbadi lay silently on his back on the goatskin, sometimes gazing at the bamboo ceiling, sometimes letting out grunts in agreement with the many prayers being said. For most of the time his eyes were closed, and the sweat on his matted chest had to be mopped with cold water time and time again.

Agbadi had slept so much in the day that, now he was feeling better, he was finding it difficult to sleep the night through. He must have dozed for a while, none the less, for when he opened his eyes, the whole compound was quiet. Cool night air blew in through the open roof window and he could hear his goats grunting. He heard a light breathing nearby on a separate goatskin. Now he remembered – Ona was there lying beside him. He watched her bare breasts rising and falling as she breathed, and noted with amusement how she made sure to stay as far away from him as possible, though in unconscious defiance, like everything else she did, her leg was thrust out so that it was almost touching him. 'The heartless bitch,' he thought, 'I will teach her.' He winced as his still-sore shoulder protested, but he managed to turn fully on to his side and gazed his fill at her. To think that in that proud head, held high even in sleep, and to think that in those breasts, two beautiful firm mounds on her chest looking like calabashes turned upside-down, there was some tenderness was momentarily incredible to him. He felt himself burn.

Then the anger came to him again as he remembered how many times this young woman had teased and demeaned him sexually. He felt like jumping on her, clawing at her, hurting her. Then again the thought that she needed him and was there just for his sake came uppermost in his mind and won against the vengeful impulse. He found himself rolling towards her, giving her nipples gentle lover's bites, letting his tongue glide down the

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hollow in the centre of her breasts and then back again. He caressed her thigh with his good hand, moving to her small night lappa and fingering her coral waist-beads. Ona gasped and opened her eyes. She wanted to scream. But Agbadi was faster, more experienced. He slid on his belly, like a big black snake, and covered her mouth with his. He did not let her mouth free for a very long time. She struggled fiercely like a trapped animal, but Agbadi was becoming himself again. He was still weak, but not weak enough to ignore his desire. He worked on her, breaking down all her resistance. He stroked and explored with his perfect hand, banking heavily on the fact that Ona was a woman, a mature woman, who had had him many a time. And he was right. Her struggling and kicking lessened. She started to moan and groan instead, like a woman in labour. He kept on, and would not let go, so masterful was he in this art. He knew he had reduced her to longing and craving for him. He knew he had won. He wanted her completely humiliated in her burning desire. And Ona knew. So she tried to counteract her feelings in the only way she guessed would not give her away.

'I know you are too ill to take me,' she murmured.

'No, my Ona, I am waiting for you to be ready.'

She felt like screaming to let free the burning of her body. How could one's body betray one so! She should have got up and run out, but something was holding her there; she did not know what and she did not care. She wanted to be relieved of the fire inside her. 'Please, I am in pain.'

'Yes,' came his confident reply. 'I want you to be.'

She melted and could say no more. She wept and the sobs she was trying to suppress shook her whole being. He felt it, chuckled, and remarked thickly, 'Please, Ona, don't wake the whole household.'

Either she did not hear, or he wanted her to do just that, for he gave her two painful bites in between her breasts, and she in

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desperation clawed at him, and was grateful when at last she felt him inside her.

He came deceptively gently, and so unprepared was she for the passionate thrust which followed that she screamed, so piercingly she was even surprised at her own voice: 'Agbadi, you are splitting me into two!'

Suddenly the whole courtyard seemed to be filled with moving people. A voice, a male voice, which later she recognised to be that of Agbadi's friend Obi Idayi, shouted from the corner of the open courtyard: 'Agbadi! Agbadi! Are you all right?'

Again came that low laughter Ona loved and yet loathed so much. 'I am fine, my friend. You go to sleep. I am only giving my woman her pleasures.'

Grunting like an excited animal with a helpless prey, he left her abruptly, still unsatiated, and rolled painfully to the other side of the goatskin. Having hurt her on purpose for the benefit of his people sleeping in the courtyard, he had had his satisfaction.

She hated him at that moment. 'All this show just for your people, Agbadi?' she whispered. Unable to help herself, she began to cry quietly.

Then he was sorry for her. He moved her closer to him and, letting her curl up to him, encouraged her to get the bitterness off her chest. He felt her hot tears flowing, but he said nothing, just went on tracing the contours of those offending nipples.

Agbadi's senior wife, Agunwa, became ill that very night. Some said later that she sacrificed herself for her husband; but a few had noticed that it was bad for her morale to hear her husband giving pleasure to another woman in the same courtyard where she slept, and to such a woman who openly treated the man they all worshipped so badly. A woman who was troublesome and impetuous, who had the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman.

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Agbadi and Ona were still sleeping the following morning when the alarm was raised by one of the children.

'Wake up, Father, wake up! Our mother is having a seizure.'

'What?' Agbadi barked. 'What is the matter with her? She was all right last night.' Momentarily he forgot himself and made as if to get up; Ona, wide awake now, restrained him. 'Damn this shoulder,' he grumbled. 'But what is the matter with Agunwa?'

'That's what we are trying to find out,' said the reassuring voice of Idayi, who had been keeping vigil over his friend.

'Lie still, Agbadi,' other voices advised.

He watched helplessly as they took his senior wife away to her hut in her own part of the compound. 'Send her my medicine man. What is the matter with the woman?' he fumed.

Soon his friend came from Agunwa's hut and told him, 'Your chief wife is very ill. Your *dibia* is doing all he can for her, but I don't think she will survive.'

'Why, Idayi, why at this time?'

'Nobody knows when their time will come. Your wife Agunwa is no exception. The strain of your illness . . . since the day we brought you back from Ude, she has watched over you from that corner of your courtyard. She was even here last night.'

'Oh, come, my friend. What are you trying to tell me? She's my chief wife, I took her to Udo the day I became an Obi. She is the mother of my grown sons. You are wrong, Idayi, to suggest she might be sore or bitter just because last night with Ona I amused myself a little. Agunwa is too mature to mind that. Why, if she behaved like that what kind of example would that be to the younger wives?'

'You talk of last night as only a little amusement. But it kept all of us awake. You and your Ona woke the very dead . . .'

Goats and hens were sacrificed in an attempt to save Agunwa. When, on the eighteenth day, Agbadi was able to get up and move about with the help of one of his male slaves and a stick,

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the first place he visited was his senior wife's hut. He was shocked to see her. She was too far gone to even know of his presence.

He looked around and saw two of his grown sons watching him. 'Your mother is a good woman. So unobtrusive, so quiet. I don't know who else will help me keep an eye on those young wives of mine, and see to the smooth running of my household.'

Two days later, Agunwa died and Agbadi sent a big cow to her people to announce her death. Having died a 'complete woman', she was to be buried in her husband's compound.

'Make sure that her slave and her cooking things go with her. We must all mourn her.'

Ona moved about like a quiet wife. She knew that people blamed her for Agunwa's death though no one had the courage to say so openly. That night, after she had given Agbadi his meal and helped his men rub life into his stiff side and shoulder, she curled up to him and asked: 'Would you like me to go now? My father will be worrying, wondering what your people are saying.'

'And what are my people saying, woman? That I took my mistress in my own courtyard, and that I take her every night as I see fit? Is that it? Haven't I got enough to worry about without you adding your bit? Go to sleep, Ona, you're tired and you don't look too well to me. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day. The burial of a chief's wife is not a small thing in Ibuza.'

The funeral dancing and feasting started very early in the morning and went on throughout the day. Different groups of people came and went and had to be entertained. In the evening it was time to put Agunwa in her grave. All the things that she would need in her afterlife were gathered and arranged in her wooden coffin which was made of the best mahogany Agbadi could find. Then her personal slave was ceremoniously called in a loud voice by the medicine man: she must be laid inside the

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