

How is Teenage Pregnancy Portrayed in Okechukwu Nzelu's novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*? How has Teenage Pregnancy Changed Today?

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Abstract:

Throughout Okechukwu Nzelu's novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, teenage pregnancy plays a significant role. My article aims to inform readers of the struggles that young, pregnant women faced in the 1990s. Teenage pregnancy is a complicated coming of age issue, and so my article aims to break through the barrier of 'awkwardness'. This allows people of all ages to read and discuss. My central discussion in this article focuses on the similarities and differences between teenage pregnancy in the 1990s and today's society. Societal attitudes have changed, and the support that these women receive has improved significantly, although we still have further improvements to create.

Okechukwu Nzelu's novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, explores many issues surrounding religion, homosexuality, race, identity, and most importantly for this article, pregnancy. The novel is set in 1992, when Joanie fell pregnant, but due to this being a coming of age story about Joanie's daughter, Nnenna, the novel moves through the years. Throughout this article, there are comparative statistics for teenage pregnancies in the 1990s vs today, as well as how the issue is portrayed and explored throughout Nzelu's novel.

Before reading this or any form of information about adolescent women conceiving, it is clear to see that the process of giving birth for all ages has become easier over the years, but it is interesting to further understand how support and medical care has developed from the 1990s to today. As well as comparing these statistics, an analysis of the health risks for teenage pregnancies is undertaken towards the end of this article, although Nzelu did not write about any of these risks in his novel. This may be due to the fact that Nzelu wanted to present the positive attributes of young pregnancy, and create a feel good novel from dark issues.

The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney is set in the early 1990s; this is when the rate of teenage pregnancies was at its highest since the 1970s. According to an article by Rodrigo, studies show that the most common factors influencing teenage pregnancy at this time were, and still are today, include: living in a lower-class area or home, income, a lack of sex education in schools, gender inequality, limited access to sexual health services, and sexualised media and TV exposure¹.

When reading Okechukwu Nzelu's novel, we soon realise that Joanie, Nnenna's mother, may have come from a lower-class family; however, her acceptance into Cambridge suggests Joanie was able to climb higher up the social class ladder, meaning that her pregnancy is quite surprising for someone of her success.

Joanie was one of the very first women who made it into Cambridge during the early 1990s. This meant that, while at Cambridge, Joanie would have experienced gender inequality. However, Nzelu used Joanie's story to create a compelling female character that powered through university; it is simultaneously carrying a child without a male figure to aid her. To most women, teenage pregnancy is recognised as a mistake as well as a health risk. However, when reading *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* the quote 'with the arrival of a child, could Joan repair the thing in her that was broken?'² implies that Joanie saw having a baby as a fresh start, and something to give her a new purpose in life. Seeing the positives in adolescent pregnancy is not a conventional narrative in any book, and so Nzelu took a risk in turning such a prevalent issue at that time into something worthwhile; forming a powerful feminist character that touched the hearts of readers.

Recklessness seems to be the main description of how a young woman falls pregnant. However, Joanie in Nzelu's novel is an intelligent and un-problematic girl. Throughout the novel, Nzelu battles the pessimistic norms of teenage pregnancy and creates a successful relationship between mother and daughter. Joanie's parents abandoned her when she fell

¹ Rodrigo, *Analysis on Teenage Pregnancy in the UK*, published November 13th 2012, accessed 2nd January 2020, <https://writepass.com/journal/2012/11/analysis-on-teenage-pregnancy-in-the-uk/>.

² Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, Dialogue books, October 2019, page 301.

pregnant with Nnenna, and yet she was able to raise her daughter alone and gift Nnenna a happy life.

In today's society, pregnant women under twenty have rapidly decreased, and over the last ten years, teenage pregnancies have decreased by 60%. Pregnancy statistics, released in 2019 by Chemist for U, suggests this drastic decrease in teenage pregnancies could be linked to 'lower alcohol consumption along with an increase in spending time with family'³. In addition to this, sex education is also slowly becoming more common in schools, as well as information about contraception. However, contraception is still not widely popular with the youth and so STDs, as well as young pregnancies, are a serious issue. Nonetheless, most people during the 1990s saw STDs as a much smaller problem than teenage pregnancy. Although, STDs can be highly dangerous and so today's society is focusing on the health risks and prevention of this much more than before.

Nowadays, there are more support systems in the UK to help with either abortion or providing the young woman on information about becoming a mother (or adoption). One example of this is the Care to Learn scheme, which aids in childcare costs while the teenager is in education. There is also a Family Nurse Partnership, in which a nurse visits the young woman's house and supports her and the child until the child is two⁴. Support systems, such as the above, were not funded during the 1990s. This is accurate in *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* as Nzelu suggests to his readers that Joanie raised Nnenna with very little support. During the 1990s, and beforehand, people worried only about how to prevent teenage pregnancy, not what to do once a young adult fell pregnant.

Research from 1997 tells us that women living in lower socioeconomic backgrounds became more likely to conceive under the age of twenty⁵. Furthermore, these areas have also proven to have the lowest GCSE results. Some examples of these areas in the UK include Nottingham, Middlesbrough, Bristol, East Lincolnshire, Stoke on Trent, and Manchester which has the highest rate for teenage pregnancies. It is intriguing to note that Manchester was on record for the highest rate of teenage pregnancies as this is where Joanie and her daughter, Nnenna, live in Nzelu's novel; could this be an intentional connection?

The study also showed that there was a 'north-south divide'⁶ for the amount of teenage births in England and the number of abortions. The South resulted in choosing abortion more commonly, whereas the North chose maternity more popularly. Although *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* was set in 1992, these statistics are still close enough to the time to believe that things were very similar at the time of Joanie's conception.

On the other hand, the health risks of conceiving under the age of twenty, one article suggests that most teenagers are too scared to tell anyone about their pregnancy, and so medical care

³ Chemist 4 U, *UK 2019 Pregnancy statistics*, published 22nd February 2019, accessed 2nd January 2020, <https://www.chemist-4-u.com/guides/pregnancy-baby/uk-2019-pregnancy-statistics/>.

⁴ NHS, *Teenage Pregnancy Support*, published 5th April 2018, accessed 2nd January 2020 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/teenager-pregnant/>.

⁵ Nicola Haines, *Conceptions in England and Wales: 2014*, released 9th March 2016, accessed 3rd January 2020, ons.gov.uk.

⁶ Haines, *Conceptions in England and Wales: 2014*.

will not be offered to them⁷. In Joanie's circumstance, this was true. The quote 'She didn't have any brothers or sisters, any other family she could call on'⁸ suggests that the only person she felt comfortable enough telling was her Aunt Mary. Furthermore, the only reason she was seeking medical help was due to her fainting, so the doctors were the ones to tell Joanie that she was pregnant; therefore, she did not have to go through the awkwardness of seeking help herself. Losing the help of doctors and medical care can only increase the risks for pregnant women, 'health risks such as anaemia, high blood pressure, premature birth'⁹ can lead to vital organ damage and complications with the pregnancy and baby's health. Young pregnant women can also become at high risk of developing STDs and depression¹⁰.

Although teenage pregnancy is still looked down upon in today's society, and while there are still many health risks to be aware of, the amount of support offered from medical professionals has grown, along with financial support. Nzelu's novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, presents to readers both the struggles and the successes of conceiving at a young age, proving to readers that sometimes such a negatively judged problem can turn out to be a joy.

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⁷ Debolina Raja, *9 Health Risks and Realities of Teenage Pregnancy*, published 4th April 2019, accessed 3rd January 2020, https://www.momjunction.com/articles/health-risks-of-teenage-pregnancy_00377831/.

⁸ Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, page 281.

⁹ Raja, *9 Health Risks and Realities of Teenage Pregnancy*.

¹⁰ Raja, *9 Health Risks and Realities of Teenage Pregnancy*.