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Representation of Nigerian Women in Buchi Emecheta

The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood



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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian women have its own niche and place in the society. Buchi Emecheta portrays the real African women without playing down the negativity meted to them in the society. Her keen awareness about traditional customs helps her to successfully focus the minute details of the women in her novels.

The Bride Price deals with the black women who have suffered marginalization, and oppression because of gender politics. Emecheta focuses on the culture of paying bride price and how it plays an important part in the lives of both African men and women. **The Joys of Motherhood** narrates the story of a traditional African woman. The protagonist knows her identity and its completion in having many children especially the boy one.

Further the paper will expose the injustice of traditional, male-oriented African social customs that relegate women to a life of child-bearing, servitude, and victimization. Her protagonists are the representation and illustration of the value of education and self-determination for aspiring young women who struggle against sexual discrimination, racism, and unhappy marital arrangements to achieve individuality and independence.

KEYWORDS

African culture, women, marriage, sexual discrimination, individuality.

RESEARCH PAPER

Buchi Emecheta is one of the excellent African writers. She is the most important female authors to emerge from postcolonial Africa. Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta is distinguished for her vivid descriptions of female subordination and conflicting cultural values in modern Africa. Her writing explores Igbo culture, both before and after colonialism's impact. She exposes problems and proposes solutions, but above all, she challenges. She critiques what are thought to be the common relationships and patterns between individuals and society, humanity and nature, and men and women (Fishburn, 1995: 48).

In Nigeria, women have gone into professions that were once regarded as exclusively for men. This is to say that Nigeria women are achieving progressing and achieving goals in their life. Religiously, feminism is believed to be evil and being regarded as a rebellious act of the female gender. There are many issues militating against feminism in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Different supportive organizations such as National Council of Women Society (NCWAS), The Women in Nigeria (WIN), and The Nigeria Association of Women Advancement (NAWA) are supporting in the upliftment of women. Buchi Emecheta often regarded as a feminist writer, illustrates the value of education and self-determination for aspiring young women who struggle against sexual discrimination, racism, and unhappy marital arrangements to achieve individuality and independence. Emecheta's fiction has set up an example for African heritage and folklore that reflects the divided loyalties of Africans torn between the competing claims of tradition and modernization.

The Bride Price is Buchi Emecheta's the first authentic novel after her two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*). It deals with the gender politics which humiliates women's status in patriarchal society. As the novel opens, we are made familiar with the family of Aku-nna, an adolescent girl, who moves from Lagos, where she and her brother Nna-Ndo spent their childhood, to the village of Ibuza, in Nigeria. The novel highlights the gender politics in African society in which women and girls are the victims of African customs like arranged marriages, polygamy and perpetual pregnancy.

The Bride Price is a record of gender politics in African traditions where Aku-nna, the heroine of the novel is victimized in terms of her bride price. According to the custom bride price is one of the tools of patriarchal system that a groom is supposed to pay a price to his bride's paternal relative. As usual in traditional African society too, a female child is oppressed as an inferior

gender and male child is given preferences. The patriarchal system believes in male-authority while female entity is thrown into her inferior status. The status of woman is measured in the context of child-bearing. Aku-nna's father would always quarrel with his wife Ma Blackie over the issue of childlessness, reminding her: "I paid the normal bride price for you ... But what have you given me – just one son!" (2). To bring her husband's dream into reality Ma Blackie decides to walk "the two hundred mile journey to her home town of Ibuza. There she asked the river goddess to send her a baby" (2). It shows that the African society oppresses a woman by implying the gender politics. To realize their gender identity, African women also undertake painstaking challenges to please their dominant patriarchy. After her father's death, her mother is inherited by her uncle Okonkwo and consequently, Aku-nna returns to Ibuza with her mother. Polygamy, another significant tool of gender politics of traditional Africa, becomes a part of female oppression. When Aku-nna reaches Ibuza her step-sister, Ogugua informs her, "You still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people! Your mother will become my father's wife. My father has inherited everything your father owned, and he has 'inherited' your mother too" (23). Aku-nna's life in Ibuza is an account of her oppressive treatment inflicted by the gender politics of the patriarchal tradition. Aku-nna's uncle Okonkwo, being the head of the family is supposed to be the patriarchal authority and it is believed that women should obey him.

In the course of narrative, Okonkwo is presented as the spokesman of oppression. He declares to his sons: "Akunna and your sister Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me" (30). A woman is treated as a possession, a commodity exchanged for good bride price. Aku-nna is treated as a commodity by Okonkwo to earn wealth, thus, a woman is oppressed by the world of male-dominant authority. Okonkwo is presented as an oppressive dominant male, who took his revenge by divorcing Ma Blackie when he discovers Aku-nna's elopement with Chike. He practices black "magic" to destroy Aku-nna using the doll like "Aku-nna's face and there was a needle through its heart" (74). With such a traditional practice, the African dominant patriarchy would oppress the women. In the novel, it is believed that Aku-nna meets her tragic death due to the patriarchal oppressive practice implied by Okonkwo. Emecheta has maintained a balance in her emotions without idealizing her patriarchal customs that oppress woman in spite of considering her as a human being.

The other way in which a young woman is exploited is, when she reaches at her puberty, the patriarchal society declares her to be capable for marriage after her menstrual cycle. However, a

young woman in patriarchal African society is not always safe, so she finds in a frequent tension that any unwanted suitor who could cut a lock of her hair. In the traditional practice of the patriarchal system, a man who cuts a lock of any marriageable girl becomes her husband without paying her bride price. Emecheta narrates: Aman with no money to pay a bride price could hide the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from a girl's head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and no other man could have her (48). It's really the height of exploitation.

Thus, the African patriarchal system allows a male to oppress the female. Aku-nna also confronts similar patriarchal injustice when reaches at her at her puberty. The traditional patriarchy can insult a woman in any way to satisfy its manly lust. When Okoboshi enters into Aku-nna's hut, he "put his hand inside her shirt" for squeezing her breast (52). The patriarchal system allows a man to demoralize a woman in terms of his superiority complex. When Aku-nna shows her unconcern to Okoboshi, he kidnaps her against her wish and Aku-nna declares: "This is the end of all my dreams" (56). Okonkwo declares: "She is virgin ... Nobody has touched her. You must bring me a big pot full of wine" (61). According to the tradition of African society, the purity of a woman is decided in terms of the traditional beliefs that if a bride is virgin her new family had to bring her father wine and if not, then they are supposed to bring an empty pot. It shows that African patriarchal culture doesn't leave any chance to oppress a woman.

To keep virginity until her marriage is a strict code of conduct imposed by the patriarchal system upon a woman. If a woman fails in her purity, the patriarchal system forbids her an opportunity to live a life. On the contrary, the same patriarchy allows a man for his illicit ways without testing man's virginity. When Okoboshi enters desires to ruin her virginity, tactfully she declares that she is not virgin. When the African dominant patriarchy is threatened by a woman, it is inevitable for her to face an oppressive punishment:

Okoboshi hit her across the face with all his strength. 'You dirty animal!' he shouted. 'Do you think I want to touch you now? Slave-girl!' He hit her again. 'I never really wanted you anyway! ... Soon I shall marry the girl of my choice (64). When Aku-nna elopes with Chike, a descendent slave and marries to him, Okonkwo denies her bride price from Chike. It is a belief that if a woman's husband fails to pay her bride price, the bride dies in child birth. This blind belief entraps a woman in its wings that psychologically, she loses her confidence and finally meets her

death. Akunna, because of her psychological inclination towards such a belief confronts her death.

Afterwards every girl in Ibuza was told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike. 'If you want to live long time', they were told, 'you must accept the husband that your people choose for you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child.' (85) Thus, the effects of oppression last long upon the mind of a woman. Commenting upon the tragic end of Akunn, Joya Uraizee states: Aku-nna is subaltern not because of her social class but because of her gender. She is static and homogenized, silenced and sexually violated. Her marriage against social customs brings, on herself and her family, social disgrace, exile, and death (Uraizee; 2000: 66).

BuchiEmecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* tells the story of Nnu Ego, a rural Igbo woman. Nnu Ego finds herself in Lagos, the urbanized capital of Nigeria. Through the feminist lens, patriarchy is frequently considered to be a main factor at play in the oppression of women within both tribal and colonized countries. Throughout the novel, Emecheta inserts evident contradictions that blur the lines between opportunity and victimization, making it difficult to judge Nnu Ego's character. These contradictions are evident in the portrayals of polygamy and economics within Lagos.

The *Joys of Motherhood* unfolds events in Nigeria during the period of time that it was invaded and colonized by British imperialism "in 1930 and moving forward to the time of independence from colonial rule" (Killam, 2004, p. 42). Killam (2004) asserts that until late 18 century contact between Europe and Africa was limited to slave trade. But since 1780, a new interest appeared. They sought a market to offer their goods and to develop their religion in Africa. Through developing the theory of social Darwinism, this idea was formed by Europeans that they were superior. Therefore, they were responsible to give Africans identity, civilization, religion and rule. That was the way they justified colonial expansion in Africa. As a result, African formal colonization began from 1885 (p. 48).

The main character, Nnu Ego, battles with accepting the new culture, Lagos, without abandoning her native culture. Her Igbo background is a patriarchal one where marriage and having children are the most important goals for a woman. A sense of community is highly valued, and people are seen for what they can contribute to their society. On the other hand, the culture of Lagos stresses money and individual success. Having many children in Lagos is not valued rather is

considered as a burden as it can cause financial burdens. Men compete for jobs and families compete for housing. There are also several operating forces at play within the novel that affect Nnu Ego in a way that make it difficult to critique her character. The degrading work force, World War II and the Christian concept of heaven play major roles in exacerbating her subjugation. These forces along with motherhood and the mentioned contradictions open a window into Emecheta's intentions in writing such a limited character as Nnu Ego.

It becomes evident that Buchi Emecheta is purposely writing Nnu Ego as a limited character that plays a role in her own oppression while simultaneously relinquishing her of blame. While in Lagos, she acquires a junior wife, Adaku, and fails at creating a bond with her. She makes poor decisions in regard to community, family, economics and most importantly, motherhood. These ultimately lead her to loneliness and defeat. At the end of the novel and after approximately twenty years in Lagos, Nnu Ego dies alone in a ditch. She does not reap the benefits from motherhood that she hoped for over the years. Her poor decisions show to be a symptom of her displacement rather than mere personality traits.

Killam (2004) asserts that Emecheta highlights the way in which the patriarchal discourse values male child more than female one. "Daughters are valuable only in terms of the bride price they may eventually command. Nue Ego sees that money earned from her daughters' marriages can go toward paying for her sons' education". (p. 44) Mohanty (2003) believes, by constructing rules on family, sexuality, home, division of labor, education and so on, colonialist racial, patriarchal relations of rule increase the inequalities in society.

Emecheta focuses on "gender inequality" in the colonial and indigenous patriarchal society, determines the value of human being: male child given excess importance while female child is considered as "other". We are told that how Adaku is disdained by Nwakusor because she is not the mother of the male child. She was regarded as one without any historical identity when she was told, "you Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are" (Emecheta, 2011, p. 166). So, female's identity is constructed through her relationship with a patriarchal society. Since "identity has a close-knit relationship with the place [ever one] lives in" (Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi 2014: 656), female's identity is constructed through her relationship with a patriarchal society.

In Emecheta's novel, Ibuza women have the monthly meeting in Lagos which seems to be as a women empowerment. They help each other in order to both make life easier for themselves and have a life of their own. This statement is documented in the following extract. Whilst Nnu Ego

suffers from poverty, other Ibuza women taught her how to start her own business so that she would not have only one outfit to wear. They let her borrow five shillings from the women's fund and advised her to buy tins of cigarettes and packets of matches (Emecheta, 2011, p. 52). Unlike other black feminists who merely struggle to expose African women's racial oppression within the colonial society or the effects of racism on Afro-American women, Emecheta attempts to highlight black women's oppression within the patriarchal Igbo society as well. Besides criticizing racism and the economic, political and cultural effects of colonialism on the disempowered African women's lives, she, in her novels, criticizes the way in which the patriarchal tradition views Igbo women and dominant them. She goes further to give voice to the subaltern African women through her female characters.

Regarding Emecheta's new critical view, Bazin (1985) asserts that "Emecheta's heroine Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* ventures into feminist consciousness, the awaking of self to the inequities in Igbo cultures, such as son preference, polygamy, rigid sex roles, and a glorification of motherhood, which all render women powerless" (p. 155). Ona who lives in Ibuza, a traditional village, takes the position of a male child for her father who has not any boy, with all power and responsibility the first son has. Hence, the traditional patriarchy offers her the male power but it gives her sense of femininity. Just once, when Agbadi was nearly dead she let her steely mask to remove. Moreover, she is not permitted to have a husband. Her father had remarked that her daughter should never marry. She is, also, not permitted to keep her girl, Nnu Ego. Just after her father's death, she goes to Agbadi's compound to live with him and her girl. And by this, she, indeed, disobeys the traditional patriarchy. Soon, Ona gives birth to a new child but both die. Emecheta, in her discussion on Ona's death, highlights the power of patriarchal regime over female's live and freedom. In her interview, she mentions that: "Ona had to die because she disobeyed tradition by moving to Agbadi's compound" (qtd. in Willey, 2000, p. 6).

Thus, Emecheta's *The Bride Price* shows that a woman is badly oppressed in the African culture that finally she had no choice but to confront her death. By bringing these implications, Emecheta wants to bring a drastic change in her traditional society that the women may be treated on the ground of human values. This change will lead to the nation building free from gender-bias. Buchi Emecheta further in her novel *The Bride Price* focuses on the practice of bride price to literally, as well as symbolically, represent women's submission to men in African

culture. Male domination is not the only theme of this book but also looks at the caste system in Nigerian culture that discriminates against descendents of slaves.

Moreover, the *Joys of Motherhood* examines the extent to which the female characters are disempowered and disenfranchised by patriarchal relations. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, highlights the extent to which women and their sexual pleasure are disregarded. The novel is notable for the change from traditional mores to westernized rules of living that the colonial world has to imbibe. The imported cultural values and outlook are passed on to the colonized African, thus bringing on feelings of ambivalence in them, where they constantly oscillate between the old and the new world order. The book takes us on a journey in understanding and accepting the new ways of people yet clinging to their traditional values. This book provides excellent insight to the effects of colonialism on native Nigerians.

Emecheta, as a Nigerian woman, is the best person to rewrite the story of marginalization and suffering of Nigerian women and her novel is an essential source of knowledge about them. Emecheta's works therefore, start a turning point in Nigerian literature and is one of the best sources for the empowerment of women in the traditional patriarchal society.

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