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AUTOCRATIC STUDY OF BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE BRIDE PRICE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to reflect the African culture of marriage and of paying bride price in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price*. Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian novelist, tremendously illustrates the issues related to the mainstream African women's experience. This paper also brings out the position of the girl children in the African homes and their sufferings in a depressing male dominated society. The clash of cultures and motherhood stands as the two widest themes in African Literature that is embodied with myth and superstition, finds a very prominent role in oral tradition as well as in written tradition. In this novel, the novelist upholds the women's experience in the traditional Igbo society where all the characters are searching for self complexion, a distinct way of feeling to be a part of large culture/community.

Key words: African Homes, Myth, Superstition, Bride Price, Buchi Emecheta.

INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta is one of the African writers who tremendously portrayed the issues that are related to mainstream African women's experience. Many of his poems throw light on the plight of women in African cultures and she uses characterisation and theme as tools to develop her heroines. The scarcity of female novelists stands as a reason for the male writers and critics of African literature to lack the feminine point of view for over a long period of time. In every parts of the world, the institution of marriage is being practiced and it plays an important role in traditional African society. Even today in many literatures, especially in African literature, women are being represented largely within the traditional milieu. In some African novels, women are expected to fulfill the roles set by their society which is male dominated. In *The Bride Price*, the author incorporates the economic value that is placed on the woman and the theme of marriage is introduced right at the beginning of the novel. Chukukere G.C. in his work *Gender voices and choices: Redefining women in Contemporary African Fiction* says "*The Bride price* (1976) is Emecheta's first fully-fledged novel and pursues with the same vigour previous concerns, especially those that relate to the disadvantages of women" (83). In *Positivism and the Female Crisis: Novels of Buchi Emecheta*, Helen Chukwuma claims that in Emecheta's novels: "The true test of women continues to be the marriage institution... Through it a woman attains a status acclaimed by the society and fulfils the biological need of procreation and companionship".

DISCUSSION

Culture circumscribes then whole array of affinities and exercises in any given society and thus it is regarded as the substratum of development. Cham (1985) affirms

Any movement in society must have its feet firmly rooted in healthy cultural grounds if it is to be of any lasting and meaningful value to the welfare of individuals and society at large. A healthy culture is

one that is often referred to as a cultural of equality, a culture free from of exploitation and above all, a culture rooted in the true traditions of the people”(Buchi EMEcheta in *Perspectives On Nigerian Literature*, 100).

Almost most of the cultural practices are against female folks and it is quiet surprising. Nevertheless as Africans, we cannot do without obeying the culture and tradition of our land because, they have become something passed on from one generation to the other. Most of these practices affect women and the society takes it effortlessly. According to Lewis (1995) “African cultural practices have been weapons for enforcing women’s obedience...Cultural has been seen as an edifice of unchanging institution, traditions, identities...” Also, Osayimwense Osa in her work *“The Bride Price: a Masterpiece of African Youth literature”*, depicts the protagonist Aku-nna’s growth from childhood to juvenility by reflecting the various levels that she passes through. Osa accurately notices that “her development is plagued early by two traumatic experiences- the death of her father and her subsequent relocation from cosmopolitan Lagos into a conservative, traditional Ibuza... Aku-nna’s plight in okonkwo’s home, the antagonisms of Okonkwo’s wives...” (28)

Buchi Emecheta reflected the oppression of the girl-children through the character of Aku-nna. Aku-nna is the heroine of the novel who faces many problems from her society. After the death of her father Ezekiel Odia, Aku-nna along with her brother and mother are taken care of by her father’s brother Okonkwo Odia in Ibuza.

It is even today in Nigeria, when you have lost your father you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to (be) boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much. (*The Bride Price*, 25)

Some feminist critics assert that ‘the oppression of the woman starts in the home’. One of the recurrent themes that expose mothers as oppressors of their own sex is that of male preference and subjugation of the girl child to psychological torture. Ma Blackie, Aku-nna’s mother, has some money and with the help of that money she sends her children to school. Aku-nna is thin and beautiful and she attracts many young men in Ibuza, albeit, she has not yet started to menstruate. Aku-nna’s new father begins to prepare for large bride price. Meanwhile, Aku-nna falls in love with her teacher, Chike Ofulue, who is the descendant of slaves (Osu). When Aku-nna begins menstruating, the sign is that she is old enough to get married. Many young men come to court her and Okonkwo receives considerable offers. One night when she and some girls of her age-group are practicing a dance for the upcoming Christmas celebration, some men burst in and kidnap her. After facing series of miseries Aku-nna eloped with Chike Ofulue. Okonkwo’s dream is that he wants her step-daughter to be Obi (the chief). Unfortunately she broken his father’s dream and her father did not receive any bride price from Chike. As life goes on, Aku-nna gives birth to a child and dies. The story ends unhappily and Emecheta signified these issues and leaves it up to the reader to resolve on whether or not there are solutions. Gariagan Gift, in one of her interviews afore said that “Until women stop dissenting each other, rather focus on the unique feature of community, low self-esteem is inevitable, which she said she begins from the home front-mother’s been the major instigator, player, and executer to their girl child”. (2014)

In the traditional patriarchy society of Africa, marriage is appeared with great significance and solemnity. Usually for the further descendants of the groom’s family, the bride and groom marry and their duty is to procreate. In African custom of marriage, the groom has to pay in terms of money or properties to the bride’s family. In Africa, bride price is one of the widely practiced social customs of Africa within the marriage institution wherein the prospective groom has to pay in terms of money or properties to the bride’s family. Bride price is paid commonly in the form of money however, other items such as “cowries”, “yams”, “farmlands”, “palm wines” animals like “goats”, “cows” etc. are also given. The bride dies in childbirth, if the bride price is not paid and it is commonly believed by all the people of Africa no matter how modern the society has become. Male writers emerged from African by glorifying women and present them with recognition and self-respect. As for instance Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the protagonist Okonkwo seeks comfort and spends the seven years exile in his mother’s native village Mbanta. The novel explains that in African society the Earth is considered as a “mother’ and also portrays the tradition to pacify the Earth Goddess. Such representation of women as Goddess and Mothers are reflected in the writings of African

women. Being a writer of male dominated society Buchi Emecheta writes about the difficult situation of African women in the male dominated society. She never hesitates to expose the misconduct and savage behaviour done by African men on women. She is one among such writers whose literary works focus at altering the stereotypical representation of African women.

The Africans adopted the technique of abducting and marrying the woman forcefully when the woman doesn't agree for the marriage. Another means of making a marriage happen when the woman doesn't agree is the adoption of kidnapping and marrying the woman forcefully. Such strategies are followed by the African men to exploit the weak women and Emecheta exhibits how a woman is enforced and cheated in the traditional African society. Instead of raising their voice against the oppression, the African women tend to believe the notion that whatever a man does is always right in a patriarchal society. Emecheta shown the pliable nature of such women through Aku-nna: 'This is the end of all my dreams', she thought. 'They are kidnapped me' (56). The behaviour of African men towards women seems cruel and if she refuses the marriage, she is very likely to be sexually exploited not only by the unwanted groom but also would be helped by the groom's male friends: "... he could force her to sleep with him, and if she was unwilling his friends could hold her down. Perhaps that had happened to Aku-nna" (60)

The significance on the virginity or purity of African woman is mirrored at the time of marriage which is not only made for higher bride price but for the fact that every African woman at the time of marriage which is not only made for higher bride price but for all the fact that every African woman going against this traditional law of society is consequently forbidden and considered to have committed a heinous crime. Emecheta shows the inhuman and beastly act of Okoboshi towards Aku-nna when she announced that she was not a virgin. He even hit her thrice:

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... Soon I shall marry the girl of my choice, and you will fetch and carry for her! Now get out of my bed! He hit her once more. She fell onto the floor and lost consciousness. (*The Bride Price*, 64)

Christian marriage is a very important impact on the traditional African culture brought by colonization and the increasingly acceptance of western culture and lifestyle can be seen in the novel. Aku-nna's father in the beginning of the novel emphasized that he deserved to get more sons since he had married Aku-nna's mother not only in the traditional way but also in the Church. Even Aku-nna dreamt of getting married in the same two ways- 'one for the beautiful goddesses of Ibuza and one for the white man's god in church' (3). Also the christening of Aku-nna and Chike's English bed by Chike's friend Ben adegor as "Joy" clearly indicates the acceptance of western culture which is more liberating to African men and women from their own inescapable cultures and taboos. What Emecheta tries to project is that people like Aku-nna and Chike, victims of sexism and casteism, find solace in the new culture brought by colonisation. In spite of their self individuality and western education, both Aku-nna and Chike becomes victim of the male dominated African society. According to Lloyd Brown, the heroine's final destruction "...is itself a demonstration of the degree to which her will is dominated her conscious act of revolt". (*Women writers in Black Africa*, 52)

The African men and women cannot ignore is the myth behind the unpaid bride price. . Similarly as stated earlier, the culture of bride price is very much prevalent and practiced in Africa. The title of the novel *The Bride Price* holds importance with the context of the plot. Without the bride price the husband cannot claim the children born by his wife as his own i.e., the bride price is mandatory. The name "Aku-nna" literally means "Father's wealth". Emecheta feels that various forms of male oppression which have been sanctioned by the patriarchal society need to be scrutinized and readdressed. In traditional African society the birth of the female child is viewed as a means to fetch a good bride price. Okonkwo, stepfather of Aku-nna, also expected huge bride price out of Aku-nna's marriage for his own good i.e., to use the money in his becoming of an Obi. In fact, her education was allowed to continue as an educated girl was more desirable for marriage for they fetch higher bride price. Education acts as a liberating force in Emecheta's novels. It is through education that allowed Chike to dream about their new lives where Aku-nna could teach in a school as a teacher while Chike in oil company so that they could earn independently. However, his plan got shattered when Aku-nna eloped with Chike Ofulue, a descendant of slave. Even though chike offered the bride price, Okonkwo refused to

accept it. A very shocking yet often true fact is that if a groom's family fails to give the bride price to the bride's family at the time of marriage, the bride dies in childbirth. Consequently, due to malnutrition and young age, Aku-nna died in childbirth fulfilling the prophecy. As a social writer, Emecheta tries to bring home the message that breaking the law of the society is always tragic:

Afterwards every girl in Ibuza was told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike. 'If you want to live a long time,' they were told, 'you must accept the husband that your people choose you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child. (*The Bride Price*, 85)

CONCLUSION

A brief picture of culture of bride price and African marriage are emulated in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. She espouses the skill of writing to reveal the strict customs of marriage and bride price, and joining social events i.e., "bride price" and "marriage", without any one of these seems to be incomplete in the African society. Through her autobiographical novel, Emecheta has successfully brought a miserable image of Nigerian women and their portrayal in the society. This novel clearly illustrating what happens in her life. Eustace Palmer, an African critic gives her feminist point of view, who states that, "*scarcely any other African novelist has succeeded in probing the female mind and displaying the female personality with such precision.*" Emecheta brilliantly captured real consequences about women oppression of their girl child and inequality that dwells in the female folk. However, she concludes her plot in a cliff hanging, for those wanting their child to live longer, with bride price becomes a psycho appraisal to all women. In her generation too it is compulsory to pay for the bride price. Through this novel the author stresses the requirement to educate oneself to overcome the customs and practices that neither provide them solutions to all miseries faced by the traditional African women nor elevate the women's status. In doing so, the wish of the author is to guard the old traditions and customs since ignoring of such cultures and practices usually leads to death no matter the reason is ritualistic or scientific. The life the protagonist has no image of her own because she has been governed and controlled by the dreams of her father or even her husband for that matter. The painful thing that can ever happen to a woman is a complete elimination of her self-identity. She becomes totally non-existent, non-entity; a complete annihilation of self and her self-identity. This is the most painful thing that can ever happen to a woman. Being a woman writer, Emecheta suspects a need to distinguish the grievances of the woman of her society.

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