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Reflection of African Marriage and Culture of Bride Price in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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Abstract:

The social institution of marriage and the culture of paying bride price are interlinked and form an important part in the lives of African men and women. Like other communities, the African society has its own series of events that takes place before and after marriage such as the hunting of bride by going to the prospective bride's hut before marriage and the inheritance of a widow and her family by the brother-in-law after the death of the husband. The traditional society of Africa strictly follows the culture of paying "bride price" by the groom's family failing to which consequently lead to the death of the bride in her first childbirth. The African men and women strongly hold this belief no matter how modern the society has become in order to avoid death. In the light of these social practices and taboos prevalent in the African society, the paper is an attempt to analyse the reflection of the African system of marriage and the very culture of paying bride price in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price*.

Keywords: African women, bride price, marriage, traditional and patriarchal society.

The union of man and woman is universally and socially acknowledged by the institution of marriage. It is one of the oldest rituals to be practiced even today in every parts of the world. Marriage is an important part of the traditional African society and is one of the largely reflected issues in African literature. According to Lauretta Ngcobo, in her essay entitled "African Motherhood-Myth and Reality" which appeared in *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1986* edited by Kirsten H. Petersen, the concept of marriage in African context is similar with any other community:

As elsewhere, marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group. (1986: 141)

Helen Chukwuma claims in her article, *Positivism and the Female Crisis: Novels of Buchi Emecheta*, that in Emecheta's novels:

The true test of woman 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. (1989: 5)

In one of her novels, *The Slave Girl* (1977), Emecheta has also emphasized the need and compulsion for marriage in the context of an African slave girl Ojebeta Ogbanje:

Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. (1977: 113)

Marriage in the traditional patriarchal society of Africa is performed with great importance and dignity. The bride and the groom marry for further lineage of the groom's family. The duties of the newlywed wife and husband are to procreate and provide for the family. But with this social practice of marriage comes with other traditional customs which are very much indispensable in the African society without which the marriage is incomplete. 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 mostly in the form of money however, other items such as "palm wines", "cowries", "yams", "farmlands", animals like "cows", "goats" etc. are also given. There is a belief in African society that if the bride price is not paid then, the bride dies in childbirth. The African men and women strongly hold this belief no matter how modern the society has become in order to avoid death. Male writers from Africa glorify women and present them with dignity and honour in their writings. As for instance Chinua Achebe's protagonist Okonkwo, in the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), seeks solace and spends the seven years exile in his mother's native village Mbanta. The novel also describes the rituals to appease the Earth Goddess (in African society, the Earth is considered a "mother") by making sacrifices. Such glorification of women as Goddesses and Mothers are reflected in the writings of African male writers. Breaking away from such type of writing in which traditional African women are glorified, Buchi Emecheta writes of the predicament of African women in the male dominated society. Without any hesitation, Emecheta outrightly exposes the malpractices and inhuman treatments done by African men on women. Emecheta is one of the literary artists whose works aim at changing the stereotypical image of African women in society.

The novel *The Bride Price* (1976), one of the three historical novels written by Buchi Emecheta, is a record of the fictional character Aku-nna and her journey from childhood to her short-lived motherhood set at the backdrop of traditional African society of Lagos and Ibuza in the late 1950s. After the death of her father, Ezekiel Odia, Aku-nna along with her mother and brother are inherited by dead father's elder brother Okonkwo Odia in Ibuza. Aku-nna's education is allowed to continue by her new father thinking that it will fetch a good "bride price". However, Aku-nna elopes with her teacher, Chike Ofulue whose forefathers were *Osu* (slaves). Aku-nna's act shatters her step-father's dream of becoming an Obi (the Chief) with the help of her bride price. Okonkwo dismisses Aku-nna and refuses to receive the bride price from Chike. The ultimate outcome of it is Aku-nna's death in her first childbirth. Emecheta presents a very hard hitting attack on the traditional culture of Africa which paralyzes the women mentally, emotionally and psychologically.

As feminism was a liberation movement of women for equal socio-political rights as men by the "white" women in the west in late 19th century, however it failed to consider the plights and issues of "black", "coloured" or Third World women. In this context, the novel *The Bride Price* can be best studied and analysed from the womanist perspective as expounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunwemi and Alice Walker. Just as feminism is against the discrimination of women based on gender, womanism is against the discrimination of women based on both gender and race. The term "womanist" is generally considered to have first introduced by the famous Afro-American novelist Alice Walker in her 1983 book *In*

Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. As Walker skilfully contrasts the difference between the terms “feminism” and “womanism” in terms of colour:

womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (1983: xii)

In the words of Patricia Hill Collins:

black women are “womanist” while white women remain merely “feminist” (1996: 10)

Buchi Emecheta as a womanist writer writes about the socio-cultural practices experienced by the black women in Africa. But what makes Emecheta a balanced writer is that she maintains a perfect equilibrium between her emotions and intellectualism, never idealizes her African traditional customs and beliefs which put enormous pressure upon the woman relegating her to the margin. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, in this regard, states that Emecheta “deals mainly with the black woman as the victim of black patriarchy” (1985: 67). She captures every detail of the traditional customs that makes womankind- a victim. As for instance, the practice of polygamy in which African man like Okonkwo appear as symbolic representation of male hegemony which leaves the African women like Ma Blackie and Akunna with no voice of their own as well as the malpractices of cutting of lock of hair of the women and declaring them as wives by the traditional African men. Women have been represented as the “weaker sex” or the “second sex” and stereotyped with negative qualities such as sensitive, emotional, fragile, indecisive, submissive etc. To quote Simone de Beauvoir in this context:

To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile. (1956: 334)

Such stereotyping of women exists in Africa within the institution of marriage. The African husband overpowers and leads his family while the wife is restricted within the domestic walls of household chores and the rearing and nurturing of children. This has led to the notion of “Father is Supreme” or “Father is the shelter” (Emecheta 1976: 12) in every patriarchal society. One of the agencies through which traditional African men enjoy this authority and supremacy is “marriage”. With marriage comes the power of African men to suppress their women. Every important decisions of society are taken by men only while the women remain either as audience or follower. As for instance, the inheritance of a widow by the next male member of the dead husband is decided by society which is patriarchal through and through. The use of the word “inherited” (p. 23) by the writer shows that African men consider women as “properties” or “commodities” that can be transferred or owned.

The purpose of marriage in traditional African society is to help the husband’s family grow. The most celebrated possession of an African woman is to give birth to a male child. The impact of the preoccupation of the African society with the bearing of children is strongly negative as it is evident in Ma Blackie’s effort to even walk a “two-hundred mile journey to her home town of Ibuza. There she asked the river goddess to send her a baby” (p.2). An African woman is ready to take all kinds of pain just to save her marriage. Ironically, the birth of a female child is less wanted and celebrated. She is socially and culturally looked down upon with contempt if she fails to give birth to a son. This very gender bias in preferring the birth of a male child is reflected in the text. Akunna’s father expects more sons from Ma Blackie for he has paid double bride price:

I paid double the normal bride price for you; he told her. ‘And we were married in church. But what have you given me- just one son!’

He did not speak of Akunna. She was only a girl. (p.2)

Life of an African widow passes through several events which are portrayed by the writer through the character of Ma Blackie as a man in a traditional African society is considered the head of a family. Emecheta explains:

It has always been like that in Nigeria. When you have lost your father, you have lost everything. Your mother is only a woman; she cannot do anything for you. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without a home. (p.12)

After a husband's death, a typical and traditional widow is expected to live a life in a deplorable condition. Such as staying in a separate "mourning hut" for nine complete months without changing clothes or taking a bath in which she is forced to mourn for her death husband. Also the inheriting of a widow and her family (children) by the next brother-in-law adds more dilemmas for the fact that she alone cannot survive with her children but to be owned and ruled by another man. This way, a widow is socially accepted in a traditional society of Africa and it is only womenfolk who suffer in the name of culture and tradition.

As the African society practice other form of marriage such as polygamy in which a man marries more than one woman, the chance of creating jealousy and insecurity among the wives is high. Polygamy, the very tradition that installs man to male chauvinism and male hegemony is resented by Emecheta. The jealousy among the wives is highlighted by Emecheta when Okonkwo Odia, elder brother of late Ezekiel Odia, marries Ma Blackie as his fourth wife. Ngbeke, the first wife of Okonkwo, shows her hatred and jealousy against Ma Blackie and Aku-nna. She wants Aku-nna to be an Ogbanje, a Nigerian word meaning "living dead":

Yes, I'm sure Aku-nna is an ogbanje', she said. 'She's too quiet (...) An ogbanje doesn't belong in this world. They all die young, usually at the birth of their first child. They have to die young, because their friends in the other world call them back. I'm glad that none of my daughters is an ogbanje. (p.33)

It can be understood that Emecheta dislikes the scorning off at the birth of female child. So, she exposes the greediness of African men in expecting huge bride price from their daughters. Bride price is widely accepted and practiced culture of African society. The oxford dictionaries give the definition of "bride price" as a sum of money or quantity of goods given to a bride's family by that of groom in some tribal societies. To quote Roopali Sircar on the main reasons for the culture of paying bride price in African marriage:

High bride wealth in the form of money and cattle was given to the bride's people, in exchange the woman's sexual and reproductive powers were surrendered to the man and his lineage. (1995: 26-27)

The marriageable age of an African woman begin from the moment she attains her puberty. The younger the age of the African woman the more chances to get her married off early with higher bride price. The novel depicts that there is no joy on the fact of becoming a woman with the onset of menstrual cycle. Rather, it creates a psychosis in African women for they are vulnerable to unwanted suitors who can cut a lock of hair and announce the woman (the victim) as his wife without even paying the bride price. Emecheta writes:

(...) in Ibuza an innocent young girls was not always safe. A man with no money to pay a bride price could hide behind 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. (p.48)

As a ritual of African marriage, the society allows young men to visit young women who have attained puberty. The young men get a chance to become the suitor for these women. When Aku-nna becomes a woman, she is thronged in by many suitors including Chike, the slave and Okoboshi, the proud and rude man. Okoboshi insults Chike for being a descendant of a slave and also tries to exploit Aku-nna physically. There is a stiff competition among the African men when it comes to marriage. They compete for the youngest woman who can be very productive. The fight between Chike and Okoboshi is a clear evidence of the competition. The only difference is that Chike fights for his love of Aku-nna while Okoboshi more for his sexual satisfaction.

Another means of making a marriage happen when the woman doesn't agree is the adoption of kidnapping and marrying the woman forcefully. Such tactics are adopted by the African men to exploit the weak women. Emecheta shows how a woman is victimized and exploited in a traditional African society. And to worsen the scenario, instead of raising a voice against it, the African women easily submit to the exploitative men without a fight because of the notion that whatever a man does is always right in a patriarchal society. Emecheta exposes the submissive nature of such women through Aku-nna:

'This is the end of all my dreams', she thought. 'They are kidnapping me'. (p.56)

The height of African men's atrocities towards the women is too severe to be even considered. If she denies 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. (p.60)

The novel reflects the emphasis on the virginity or purity of African woman at the time of marriage which is not only made for higher bride price but for the fact that every African woman should be a virgin till she gets married. An African woman going against this traditional law of the 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. (p.64)

A very important impact on the traditional African culture brought by colonisation is the Christian marriage. The progressively acceptance of western culture and lifestyle can be seen in the novel. Aku-nna's father in the beginning of the novel emphasised 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 goddess of Ibuza and one for the white man's god in church'. (p.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.

The myth behind unpaid bride price is something which the African men and women cannot ignore. 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 significance with the context of the story. The bride price is mandatory in African marriage without which the husband cannot claim the children born by his wife as his own. The protagonist of the novel is named as “Aku-nna” by her father which 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. The birth of a female child is viewed as a means to fetch a good bride price. Aku-nna’s stepfather Okonkwo 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 (the Chief). 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 for you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child. (p.85)

Conclusion:

A detailed image of African marriage and the culture of bride price is reflected in Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Bride Price*. Emecheta adopts the art of writing to expose the strict customs of marriage and bride price where only the male members decide and settle everything from preparing a mourning hut of a widow to educating girl child for higher bride price hence making the benefit of male members. The novel portrays the linking social events i.e., “marriage” and “bride price” without which each of the social events remains incomplete in the African society. In the novel, the writer emphasises the need to educate oneself and to overcome the orthodoxical customs and rituals that neither elevate the women’s status nor provide solution to all miseries faced by the traditional African women. In doing so, an urge of the writer is also apparent to preserve the age old custom since defying of such customs and cultures often leads to death no matter the reason is scientific or ritualistic. African woman has no identity of her own. Her life has to be constantly controlled and governed by the whims of her father or even her husband for that matter. 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. As a woman writer, Emecheta feels a desperate need to champion the grievances of the woman of her society.

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