

Women as a Commodifying Entity: Nuances of Gender Divide in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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Abstract

Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta is an African novelist, playwright and essayist with a keen concern shown towards the female population of Nigeria, who are grounded by the power dynamics of traditional Igbo culture. Buchi Emecheta's writings are the paramount manifestation of the Igbo culture prevalent in Nigeria, which objectify women as mere commodities. It denies the fundamental rights of women in the community and marginalises them as the entities for sexual and household purposes. Apart from the gender discrepancies in Igbo society, her writings narrate the personal turmoil confronted by Emecheta as an African woman in the city of Great Britain with four children. The novel *The Bride Price* was published in 1976 amalgamating autobiographical features and the general plight of African women in a typical Igbo society. The paper is a deliberation on how the bride price has forfeited the life of the protagonist Akunna. Moreover, it is an analysis of how the narrative has reaffirmed the shackles of patriarchy in designing a woman's life in a male predominated community.

Keywords: Womanism, Feminism, Igbo Culture, patriarchy.

Introduction

The novel *The Bride Price* (1976) narrates the events in the life a Nigerian girl named Akunna, set in the backdrop of African provinces, Lagos and Ibuza. Akunna lost her father in childhood and continued to live with her mother and brother. Later her mother married father's brother Okonkwo Odia and Akunna lived under his protection. Stepfather sent her to school to have proper education. In other sense it was an attempt to increase the market value of Akunna's

bride price. With the huge amount of bride price, Okonkwo could be the chief of the clan. Unfortunately, Akkuna shattered his conspiracy after running away with his teacher Chike Ofulue. Her departure with Chike was a method of protest to stand along with the Nigerian 'osu' (slave) community. Her stepfather rejected the bride price offered by Chike. The novel has an abrupt end of Akuna's death after her first child birth. Emecheta has declared the condition of women in a society of Africa where they have to exist without the help of the men. "It is so even 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 ahead" (Emecheta 81).

Igbo Culture: a Patriarchal Tradition

Igbo Culture is the age old tradition and custom followed by the indigenous population of the Southern part of Nigeria. The peculiarity followed in art, music, marriage, dress, food and culture conforms to the Igbo tradition as one of the various inter- cultures prevalent in the African subcontinent. Their music typically is the amalgamation of the high and low music representative of the high culture of Igbo community. The Igbo artifacts constitute various masquerades and exotic animal masks, symbolising the abstract entities of Igbo Community. Marriage is the supreme manifestation of patriarchal hegemony in Igbo community. The indigenous masculine population of Igbo community functions as the power hegemony upon the female inmates. The price offered by the groom to the paternal relatives of the bride in an Igbo community is often regarded as the bride price which symbolises marriage as an economical affair rather than family harmony. Igbo people treat women not as human beings, but as a commodity to fetch reasonable prices in the market of traditional marriage. Despite the bride price, the subsistence of polygamy is another entity prevalent in Igbo community that prohibits female existence as a boon. For a man

of African origin, marrying a woman with a big inheritance is appraised as a method to enrich financial stability. Naturally, men would be more inclined to follow the tradition of polygamy.

Masculine Hegemony and Gender Politics in *The Bride Price*

The novel narrates the unstable marriage relationship between Akunna's mother and father. His perception towards marriage is revealed through his words to his wife, "I paid the normal bride price for you ... But what have you given me – just one son!" (Emecheta 2). He ponders his wife as a sexual object to satisfy his libido and a body to pursue his progeny. His wife undertakes a long journey by walking miles to fulfill her husband's dream. In the absence of a male, a woman's existence is questioned and she is transformed into an object owned by any relatives of her husband. In the case of Akunna's mother she is sent to the faraway island of Ibuza to live with her husband's brother, Oknokwo. Her inheritance, including her daughter, became the property of Oknokwo.

Oknokwo is the supreme manifestation of the patriarch in the island of Ibuza which is an enclosed entity of oppression. To Oknokwo, the newly wedded wife is his lawful inheritance and her daughters are the weapons to accumulate bride price and to ensure his position as the chief of the tribe. Akunna's helplessness is clearly manifested by Emecheta in her words "Can't you see that you have no father anymore? You are an orphan now, and you have to learn to take care of whatever clothes you have. Nobody is going to buy you anymore until you marry. Then your husband will take care of you" (Emecheta 38).

Oknokwo's resentment reaches the height when he comes to know about Akunna's elopement with the man named Chikke. He was deprived of all the opportunities to be the chief of the clan by owning the bride price. He even seeks the help of the black magic to diminish her body

by making a doll resembling the face of Akunna and “there was a needle through its heart” (Emecheta 74).

Akunna confronts her final end after the delivery of her first child which reinstates Igbo tradition of bride price. The incident is further manipulatively narrated by the male patriarchs of the Igbo community to the Igbo women. They were told to follow the communal codes intact; otherwise they would be subjected to premature death accompanied with the first child birth. The Igbo society declares a woman to be fit for marriage after her puberty age. Every woman character in the novel is forced to encounter certain social exclusion in terms of gender. Ma Blackie, the mother is forced to have a second child from the Goddess and to be left alone in the custody of her husband’s brother. Akunna too, thrived to possess a life she desires, but ended in ultimate chaos of her death.

Conclusion

Though Emecheta has tried to present the predicament of the African women, she ends the novel with an ambiguous end of the unexpected death of the protagonist. Akunna’s death followed by her child birth is synonymous with the Igbo tradition. The Igbo community vehemently follows the belief that the women without the bride price will confront untimely death during the pregnancy. She is being treated as a subaltern deprived of the basic rights offered to a human being. She is sentenced to double oppression, primarily as a basis of a woman and secondarily as an African black woman. Apart from presenting her protagonist as an emancipated heroine, Akunna is the realistic representation of a black woman in a society biased by gender politics and double oppression. Similarly, the author has narrated a protagonist who departs away from the shackles of patriarchy. Her attempt to elope with the Chikke proved her to be a woman

of self identity. Unlike the other female protagonists of African fiction, Akunna encounters her final days with utmost psychological trauma after her marriage and childbirth.

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