

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

CUSTOMS VERSUS ECONOMY: A STUDY ON BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE
BRIDE PRICE.

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B.Muthulakshmi; Customs Versus Economy: A Study On Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(7). ISSN 1567-214x
Keywords: Culture and tradition, custom and evil practices, liberation through education

Abstract

The actual lives of women remain an untold story in the history of the Black women. They shed blood in their daily lives to lead a liberated and happy life. Unfortunately they are inflicted with oppression and a suppressed life which they eagerly pass on to their next girl child. *The Bride Price* focuses on the emancipation of women by providing proper education, breaking gender inequalities, customs and breaking the bondage with vague culture and traditions. The author has vividly described the problems of the Nigerian women in the Post- Colonial era, especially chained by their own men who always dominate and disregard them as human beings under the mask of custom and traditions. The novel portrays how the evils of culture and traditions and the insensible sexuality determine the dignity of women, which can ultimately be over thrown by self-confidence and bravery.

Introduction

The Nigerian born novelist, Florence Onyebuchi (Buchi) Emecheta has authored several books including, novels, plays, an autobiography and works for children. Her notable works include, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Second Class Citizen*, *In the Ditch* and *The Slave Girl*. One of her famous novels, *The Bride Price* written in 1976 is being taken up for the study. Emecheta believed that the concept of poverty and suppression of women is universal. Her motto was, longer the women stay still; their problems become identical despite of their nativity. Women were neglected from doing against men's will. Her quest for education, equality, self- confidence and dignity can be seen in most of herworks.

Education in the *Bride Price*

The Bride Price has the central theme as how education assists women to break the chains of the subduing and the smothering practices of the old

customs and traditions. The author has also in part, inculcated the problems of women in Nigeria after Colonization. It also explains how harmful the cultural practices which shackle women from acting out on their own will. Women are also human beings with feelings and emotions which urge them to express, packed with varied thoughts to convert into actions and are surrounded by dreams and opinions to voice out. Women in Nigeria are not only chained but are caged, as expressed by Maya Angelou in one of her poems, "Caged Birds".

In *The Bride Price*, Aku- nnaOdia, the protagonist was a young girl of thirteen when she lost her father, Ezekiel Odia. She was known as her "father's wealth" as she would bring a good sum of bride price once she would get married. It was a tradition followed in Nigeria. Being the epitome of a self-confident woman, Aku- nna wanted to retain her dignity. She educated herself and strived to live an independent life. But Ezekiel was ashamed of his unhealthy and skinny daughter who was called an Ogbanje, a living dead. He was worried because a living dead was demeaned by men and would not gain him much price.

Soon after the death of Ezekiel, Ma Blackie returned to Lagos to bring her children to Ibuza, which was a small town where the old traditions were firmly constructed. This area of the plot sowed the seed for the drastic journey of Aku- nna. As the father was the shelter of the family, Odia's death took away all their hopes. The agony of Aku- nna while mourning for her dead father could be seen as; "Who will send me to school now? Who will feed me? Who will be a good husband to Nne?" (TBP 30).

The scar took too long to heal until a man came to take care of her. As Emecheta says, "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" (TBP 38). The very thought of marrying a man whom she did not know bothered her. She imagined how her life would be, like a page in a fictional story, with so many twists. Aku-nna was too young to undergo all this, but she was no different from the other women in the town who also grew up under same circumstances. This shows how women were dependent on men in Nigeria. They were not only forced to follow the traditions but were suppressed under the mask of patriarchy.

Gender Roles

Gender roles play a significant role in the lives of Black women. The novel provides a clear picture to this concept, when the other wives of OkonkwoOdia did not like Ma Blackie working and paying for her children's education. When women in the Black community were educated, they were cornered. They were jealous of her children who had no support from their step-father and leans only on the wealth of their mother, Ma Blackie. A woman who does not like another woman to be independent is the pathetic state of the Black women community. As all the women had undergone the same practices, they did not want another woman to enjoy the

Privileges which were extinct to them. They are well used to these old

customs and follow it with much pride.

A woman's marriage depends on the father who decides it by the weight of the bride price. The novel justifies the idea that the domestic practice of marriage is also performed from the economical point of view. Quoting de Beauvoir Tolan remarks, "... marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity" (LTC 321).

The "girl" has to accept the groom, regardless of her liking on another man or her disregard to the man whom her father had accepted the bride price. Ironically, it was hard for a woman to be under the command of her own father, who used to sell his own child. Their arrogance had no bounds. If a man could not pay the bride price to the girl's father, he could just come out of the bushes and cut a curl of the girl's hair to make her his bride. This was the reality when Okoboshi kidnapped Aku- nna. Though he was aware of her affair with the school teacher Chike, he wanted to have her as his woman. Ma Blackie was also unwillingly married to Okwonko's elder brother. As Ogugua, the cousin of Aku- nna says, "You're almost fourteen years old and you still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for" (TBP, 64). Poor woman! She had to stay in a mourning hut for nine full moons. She had to mourn for her dead husband even if she wants to forget the past and move on with her children's life. As said in the novel, "Ma Blackie was to remain alone in this special hut; not until the months of mourning were over could she visit people in their homes. She must never have a bath. No pair of scissors or comb must touch her hair. She must wear continually the same old smoked rags" (TBP 71). But when a man lost his wife, he married another woman to get rid of his agony.

Custom and Evil Practices

The customs were at odds for both the sexes. A man with many wives could become an Obi, the chief, but a girl who had adventures before marriage was never respected. This has been vividly portrayed in the novel when Okoboshi ill-treated Aku- nna for pretending to be an immoral woman, so that he would reject her. In spite of her innocence and purity, she was disregarded as a human being and was thrown away. As described in the novel, "This is going to be an extremely busy day for you, my educated bride. Get out and find a gourd to take to the stream. The older women will ask you what happened and you will have to tell them your story yourself" (TBP 140). Later, he sent an empty pot to Okwonko's family as a symbol of the impurity in Aku- nna, whom he had kidnapped. Okoboshi showed how men could be cruel towards women when they were insulted.

A woman's worth is dignified by the bride price that she might bring to her father. Unfortunately, Aku-nna loved her teacher, who was a descendant of slave. This shattered the hope of Okonkwo for a wealthy bride price. Her "new brothers" were even ready to kill her if she married the slave. As slaves were educated under the European colony, after their independence in 1960, they occupied the highest position and became the masters. Unvaryingly, Ma

Blackie was educated and wanted her children to be more enlightened than her. This was disliked by both men and women in Okwonko's family. A serious social disparity prevailed in the society. An educated Aku-nna was regarded as a proud lady by her new family. Education for women was considered unproductive. But it helped Aku-nna in a crucial moment to be brave and assured when she made an attempt to escape from Okoboshi's cruelty. This sort of liberation was never expected from a woman in Nigeria. Any man like Okoboshi can treat the lady, the same way he dealt with Aku-nna.

Ultimately, Aku-nna was able to find a man of her choice, despite the disapproval of her father's family. This resulted in the divorce of Ma Blackie with Okwonko. He also made a doll that represented Aku-nna to torture her to death because he had lost a wealthy bride price from Okoboshi's family. She fell ill and died at child birth. Though she was dead she was able to live her life with joy and satisfaction. She broke all the bondages that suppressed her from living a free life.

Every woman portrayed in the novel is under some bondage that stops them from living their own life. Ma Blackie, the mother had to leave her children alone to her husband to Ibuza to plead the Goddess to give her another child. Their lives were filled with ironies. Aku-nna had to undergo several hardships to marry the man she wanted, but finally she could not live long as it was believed to be a death caused by the superstitious belief that the unaccepted bride price would kill the bride at her first child birth. Ogugua, cousin of Aku-nna, was adapted to the evil customs and traditions followed in her native town. There were instincts in the novel describing her awareness about the culture and to which she is flexible. Even the other wives of Okwonko were deep rooted in these practices that made them treat their fellow sister with jealousy and inequality.

Summation

Emecheta has beautifully portrayed the evils of the society that played a vital role in the lives of women and especially young girls who had to undergo numerous sufferings despite their education and rights. Women education, equality and the will power to overcome male chauvinism under customs and cultural practices can defend women from living a pathetic and an unsuccessfullife.

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