

Voice of an Ibuza Woman: A study on Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price

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ABSTRACT

The Bride Price is one of Buchi Emecheta's most influential modern novels, which expresses the plight of African women from childhood to womanhood. The story is set in an industrialized urban center, and will later contrast with the traditional, society. Aku-nna wants to make her father proud of her and she is determined to marry well so as to bring her father good bride price. In Ibuza, Marriage arrangement involves the whole community and the bride must accept the husband chosen for her by her people. The bride price must also be paid otherwise the bride will die during childbirth. Relegated to the background by both the colonial powers and the patriarchal society, African women have become aware of their own marginalization and they have decided not to suffer the excesses of tradition but rather to resist some traditional beliefs that alienate their lives. From a feminist approach, this article tries to explore the trauma and experiences in a male-dominated society and the African women's role in the bride price negotiation. It also invites women to get rid of the traditional customs that inhibit and devastate lives.

Keys words: bride Price, Gender, Womanhood, Tradition, Modernism, Violence.

Bride price payment is one of the most widespread and popular practices not only in Nigeria but also in many African countries. The purpose of the bride price is to make the marriage official and traditionally valid. The bride price is solemn and sacred; it is a covenant between two families and their witnesses. During the ceremony, both family exchange and make promises for a good cohesion among members. The customary marriage is made official if the bride price is paid. In couples, where the bride price is not paid, the couple goes through troubles, and the children from such a couple are illegitimate. It is a dishonour and disrespect to the woman's family. The children from such union are the property of the woman's family and the husband has no right on them. In the online Oxford dictionary the bride price is defined as "the money or goods given by the kin of the groom to the kin of the bride on marriage. Although it is sometimes seen as compensatory payment to the natal family for the upbringing of the daughter, it varies inform and meaning across cultures. In some culture, the 'bride-price' may become the property of the bride, and is treated as an insurance against divorce."¹ In other words, people pay the bride price according to their belief, knowledge and the ruling system; it depends on a particular society. In the past it was a sign of a man's commitment to take care of his wife and is seen as a symbolic act and a necessary part of upholding culture, rather than a purchase. It was a way of thanking the

bride's family for bringing her up .getting married in Africa, has become a huge business. The wedding industry is making every single day millions of dollars.

. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) is the first authentic novel after her two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1975). The novel shows how the culture of paying bride price has become an important part of the lives of Ibuza people. As the novel opens, the family of Aku-nna, an adolescent girl, 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*, the case of Aku-nna, the heroine of the novel is victimized of these African customs. Emecheta motivates the reader to feel that the bride price and other systematic instances of misogyny are unacceptable.

Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* takes us back to Nigeria. The work, denounces the abuses of the patriarchal system, in other words she evokes the different ways girls are oppressed and unsafe in a dominated male society. In Ibuza, the oppression of the little girl begins from the cradle. Aku-nna's name, the central character of *The Bride Price*, translates as "father'swealth." Naming is a very important tool used among various African cultures to convey certain messages, either to an individual, family members or a community. A name can shape a person's character, mold their social identity, and even influence their destiny. The meaning attached to a name will determine much about the present and the future of a child. By calling a baby girl Aku-nna, Ezechiel already imposes his will which is that of marrying a rich man so that the bride price returns to him. This means that a child is born to do the will of the father or of a whole family in other words, the child who is born comes on a mission to enrich the family or to pay a debt. Akunna's father did not have a high social position. He was poor and could not assert himself as his fellows. He purposely names his daughter to fulfil a goal. This is illustrated in the statement: "he had named her Aku-nna, meaning literally 'father'swealth', knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price" (4). It becomes difficult for Aku-nna to have a say over her own life other than the one held by her family.

Akunna suffers oppression in terms of bride price. She finds herself frequently estranged by the tradition. The patriarchal context in which she finds herself disadvantages her. Unfortunately in Ibuza's culture the brother always inherits the wife of his deceased brother, which resulted in her mother being married as the 7th wife of her uncle. Okonkwo, her uncle who wanted to get titles at all costs, declared that the price would be his. When his sons raise a question about Aku-nna's education, he says: "Don't you know that I hope to become a chief, an Obi?" (28). In Ibuza, to become an Obi means "to offer a large, expensive gifts to the gods. Then he received the red hat which was the mark of a chief" (28-29).. Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time; their bride price will come to me. You see the trend today, that educated girls fetch more money (75).

Ibuza is a worse place for a girl to be born because of insecurity. In Ibuza, there is no law guaranteeing the safety of the girl child, which brings girls to defend themselves from aggressors and sometimes to become violent. When a girl reaches puberty, she is eligible for marriage after her first period. At this time she is exposed to all kinds of violence such as physical, verbal and moral. The suitors harass her and try to cut her hair. In the traditional practice a man who cuts a lock of any marriageable girl becomes her husband without paying her bride price. Consequently, in Ibuza the tension of insecurity is always hanged upon the head of young girl. Emecheta narrates: "A man 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). Emecheta describes misadventures and frustration in a male dominated society. In this sense Katherine Frank (1982) says:

Such customs and mores, in fact, are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression: inheritance of widows by their brothers in law, the custom that a man could make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendants of slaves, and numerous other inhibiting manifestations of traditional culture in *The Bride Price* are all determined and enforced by men. (483)

Emecheta has always lamented the plight of African women; she decried the oppression of women in the family and in her community. Aku-nna, after the first night, her suppose husband's mother knew that she was disvirgin "she spat at her and pointed without words at the water gourd", bending down to pick up a gourd, she felt the eyes of the other women on her back (146). Aku-nna has been subjected to excessive oppression, mockery, physical and psychological abuse just for committing a heinous act. Her mouth burned with pain as she rinsed it out with cold water.

African women are passive and force their daughters into forced marriages as the custom. Aku-nna was sure that her uncle would surely kill her on sight and she could not rely on her mother who would not be permitted to make any decision. The mother and daughter relationships are conflicting since the girl sometimes rebels and wants to speak her mind. Ma blackie Akun-na's mother only threatens her with her words. After the death of her father, Aku-nna should take care of herself, in other words, only marriage will get her out of trouble. For Ma Blackie, the fate of her daughter depends on the man who will marry her.

Aku-nna as for her, she is disappointed about her mother's passiveness; her inability to resist the patriarchal forms of oppression causes frustration in Aku-nna. She began to react against not only her mother but also against the society and community pressures and restrictions. This is illustrated in the statement: "she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all" (120). The statement expresses the younger generation's eagerness with the exploitation of woman and with confined, limiting roles. Emecheta portrays her female characters as mute and men followers.

Aku-nna is totally depressed and separated from her mother, she finally realises she has lost both father and mother. She escapes with Chike and unfortunately she dies when delivering. African mothers stay at their daughter's side when they deliver because daughters need their mother support and love at that precise time. The burden of the system is so heavy that Aku-nna feels oppressed and dehumanized, she then gives up.

Modernization has opened up new options for African girls. In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta points out the clashes between the new and the old. African girls can make several choices with the upcoming of European education; there are no more barriers that can hold them back. Aku-nna refuses to conform to the traditional Ibuza model and follow her own way. Her intellectual education made her realises that she deserves more than what the tradition offers her. She keeps on her studies and finds out a new hope for her life. In school, she wants to pursue her study as have an open mind. Education brought her freedom, she realises her dream of returning to the city and working as an intellectual woman. "What she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her. She would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman." (51). Through the character of Aku-nna, Emecheta is bringing hope to all African girls life.

Education can set every human free from the excessive traditional belief. Our culture must not destroy our lives, it should be rooted in equality, respect and free from all forms of exploitation and above all, a culture rooted in the true traditions of the people. Emecheta gives voice to the African woman and condemns the abusive bias of the patriarchal system.

Emecheta purposely introduces the modern medicine in her work which disproves the superstition about the

bride price. In Ibuza, everyone is convinced that Aku-nna died in childbirth because she disobeyed the customs, which say that a woman dies in childbirth when her bride price is not paid. However medicine science which is made on modern technologies and knowledge associates her death to malnutrition. Aku-nna's parents were unhappy about her refusal to conform to tradition, they even cursed her. In Africa, it is believed that parental curse can impact negatively a child's life. Joya Uraizee opines upon the tragic end of Aku-nna: "Aku-nna is subaltern not because of her social class but because of her gender. She is static and homogenized, silenced and sexually violated" (66). The diagnostic of the doctor is also relevant because if Aku-nna did not suffer from anemia she could have been saved. A pregnant woman who is undernourished is bound to have vitamin deficiencies, and she is exposed to high levels of malnutrition which damages the immune system.

The payment of the bride price encourages gender inequality. After the bride price setting, the husband becomes automatically the owner of the wife since he bought her from her parents. And the wife on her side is indebted to him and can only submit to his obligations. That creates male dominance and strengthens their hegemonic masculinities. However with modernity; the bride price has become a spectacular business for rich people so that poor suitors feel embarrassed. In the *The Bride Price*, the heroine finally collapsed since nobody in Ibuza supports her in the fight against patriarchal system oppression. From her feminist view, Emecheta is surely bringing about a change of mentality in African society. The bride price should not be a tool to enslave a girl child. She then promotes girl education and encourage women fold to solidarity and unity. Through the survival of Aku-nna's daughter (Joy), Emecheta is symbolizing hope for every single African woman that is to say from now; women are free to be educated and to choose their own husband in a modern society. Aku-nna is died but Joy continues the battle of freedom.

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