Representing the African Culture 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 from an important part in the lives of African men and woman. Like other communities, the African society has its own series of events that take 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 in African strictly follows the culture of paying for her first childbirth. The African men and woman strongly hold third 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 analyses the reflection of the African system of marriage and the very culture of paying bride price in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price.*

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 Ngcobo (1986), in her essay entitled "African Motherhood-Myth and Reality" Which appeared in Criticism and ideology: Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm edited by Kisten H. Petersen, the concept of marriage in African context is similar with any other community:

As elsewhere, marriage amongst African 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 African implies transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group. (1986: 141)

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 (Emecheta, 1977: 113).

Marriage in the traditional patriarchal society of African 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 newly wed 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 indispensible 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", "and 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 woman strongly hold this belief no matter how modern the society has become in order to avoid death. Male writers from African glorify women and represent them dignified and honored 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 describe the rituals to appease the Earth Goddess (in African society, the Earth is considers a "mother") by making sacrifices. Such glorification of woman as Goddesses and mothers are reflected in the writings of African male writers. Breaking away from such type of writing in which traditional African woman are glorified, Buchi Emecheta writes of the predicament of African woman in the male dominated society. Without any hesitation, Emecheta out rightly exposes the malpractices and inhuman treatments done by African men and woman. Emecheta is one of the literary artists whose works aim at changing the stereotypical image woman 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 Akunna and her journey from childhood to her short-lived motherhood set at the backdrop of traditional African society of Lagos and lbuza in the late 1950s. After the death of her father, Ezekiel Odia, Akunna along with her mother and brother are inherited by dead father's elder brother Okonkwo Odia in lbuza. Akunna's education is allowed to continue by her new father thinking that it will fetch a good "bride price". However, Aku-nna elopes with teacher, Chike Ofulue whose forefathers were Osu (slaves). Akunna's act shatters her step-father's gream of becoming an Obi (the Chief) with the help of her bride price. Okonkwo dismisses Akunna and refuses to receive the bride price from Chike. The ultimate Outcome of it is Akunna's death in her first childbirth. Emecheta presents a biting

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", "colored" or Third World women. In this context, the novel The Bride Price can be best studied and analyzed from the womanist perspective as expounded by Chikewenye Oknojo Ogunwemi and Alice Walker. Just as feminism is against the discrimination of woman 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 been introduced by the famous In search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. In the words of Patricia Hill Collins: Black women, as a "womanist" while, white about the merely "feminist" (1996).

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 lbuza. 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.

The 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 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 window is expected to lead 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 family (children) by the next brother-in-law adds more dilemmas for the fact the she alone cannot survive with her children but to be owned and ruled by another man. This way, a window is socially accepted in a traditional society of Africa and it is only woman folk who suffer in the name of culture and tradition. As the African society practices other forms of marriage such as polygamy in which a man marries more than one woman, the chance of creating jealously and insecurity among the wives is high. Polygamy, the very tradition that installs man to male

chauvinism and male hegemony is resented by Embecheta. The jealously 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 jealously against Ma Blackie and Akunna. She wants Akunna to be an Ogbanje, a Nigerian word meaning "living dead".

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 Akunna 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 Akunna 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 Akunna while Okoboshi more for his sexual satisfaction.

Another means of making a marriage happen when the woman does not agree is the adopting the practice of kidnapping and marrying the woman. The 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. The height of African men's atrocity 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 could be helped by the groom's male friends.

The novel reflects the emphasis on the virginity or purity of African woman at the time of marriage which is not only made her 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.

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 within 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 "Akunna" by her father who 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.

Akunna's stepfather Okonkwo also expected huge bride price out of Akunna's marriage for his own good. 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 Akunna 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 Akunna 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, Akunna died in childbirth fulfilling the prophecy. As a socialist 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 Akunna 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.

A detailed image of African marriage and the culture of bride price are 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 emphasizes the need to educate oneself and to overcome the orthodox cal 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 and caprices 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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