

CULTURAL CHAINS: EXPLORING FEMALE SUBJUGATION IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the roots of oppression in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, focusing on how traditional customs, gender roles, and socio-economic structures contribute to the subjugation of women in post-colonial Nigerian society. Through the experiences of the protagonist, *Aku-nna*, Emecheta critiques the patriarchal norms that govern marriage, family, and female agency. The concept of the bride price itself emerges as a symbol of commodification and control, reducing women to objects of economic transaction.*

*This study analyzes how cultural expectations, enforced by both men and women within the community, perpetuate cycles of oppression and silence female voices. By highlighting *Aku-nna*'s resistance and eventual tragic fate, the novel underscores the challenges faced by women who defy oppressive traditions. The paper concludes that Emecheta not only exposes these deeply rooted forms of injustice but also calls for a re-evaluation of cultural practices in the pursuit of gender equity.*

Buchi Emecheta is an African writer who achieves unlimited credit for her writings. Her writings highlight the condition of African women after colonization. African women are pushed to the periphery and they are considered as marginalized in their own society. Emecheta's works are documented with the themes like racism, sexism, tradition troubles and subjugation of women. Emecheta gives voice for the voiceless women and shows how they suffered through cultural domination. Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Bride Price* is selected for the study

Cultural Subjugation relates with how people suffer exclusion and how their social behavior is affected in the social and cultural domains. The word 'culture' is described by

Edward B. Taylor in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871) as, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor 01). The definition of ‘culture’ by Taylor describes the complete nature of traditions. Culture includes a varied range of human occurrences, physical successes and customs, attitudes and emotions accepted and passed on by communication from one generation to the next. Fafunwa examines tradition passes by generational lineage.

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments. (Fafunwa 48)

Tradition refers to the conventions followed in a specific group of society, their language, religion, food, social customs and their beliefs. The word ‘tradition’ signifies the long- established customs or beliefs that are passed on from one generation to another. Traditions are the values that are observed through family, community and the society. The book *Tradition and Modernity* (1997) by Kwame Gyekye describes:

. . . sociologists and anthropologists depict the notion of the traditional as rural, agrarian, pre-scientific, resistant to change and innovation, and bound by the perception of its past. In contrast, the moderns had characterized as scientific, innovative, and future oriented and urbanized. (Gyekye 217)

In this perspective, Gyekye suggests a more perfect description of tradition as, “any cultural product that had created and pursued by generations and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present” (Gyekye 221).

Social and traditional practices accepted by the people with great devotion are passed on from one generation to another generation. Tradition is followed by the new generations for two reasons. First, it is observed as a symbol of giving respect to the elder generations and their opinions. Next it, it serves as a social and traditional device in allotting

various kinds of sexual roles in the society .The characteristics of Igbo tradition can be understood from Igbo oral genres which might have been associated with the English traditional stories. Moreover, the rules of the Igbo community have a greater part in degenerating the improvement of women, practices such as inheriting the widows and educating the boys. The traditional approaches about women are destructive of the subordinate position of women under men. The conflict in the position of women reproduces the double role played by all men regardless of their own beliefs.

Women in the Igbo society are suppressed, subjugated, oppressed and pushed to the periphery. Their position as the second sex is not self imposed certainly no woman wants to be so. This situation is imposed upon them through many external factors from which women are helpless to liberate themselves. External factors refer to the society in which women live. The Igbo society is determined by its culture.

According to Igbo tradition, women are related to inactivity and silence in the society. In Igbo Community, women expect men to respect them for their feminine qualities and women are the main speakers instructing the slavish ideas of womanhood. These girls are suitable to the right position as called by Ifo. Marie Umeh in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* says:

Women narrators keep alive what discriminates against their own existence. Even before girls had the ability to reflect the patriarchal norms and values which underlie Ifo, they have already internalized their dogmas as normality. (Umeh 43)

Before the society regulates the norms of conduct for women, they themselves adapt to the regulations, which highlights the patriarchal nature as a routine of their day-to-day life.

As Lloyd Brown believes “Of all the women writers in contemporary African literature Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct feminist protest” (Brown 35). Buchi Emecheta’s protagonists are oppressed because of the traditions in the Igbo culture that holds up against the liberation of women, restricts their freedom and emphasizes the need for their slavish faithfulness.

The traditional influences successfully capture Igbo culture through numerous beliefs

and restrictions regarding childbirth, polygamy and inter caste marriage relationships. Buchi Emecheta pays her acknowledgement to her 'Big Mother' who was her aunt. Her narrative strategy boosted Emecheta to reveal the struggles of the women faced by the traditions of Africa

But the Ibo story teller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt. [. . .] It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a storyteller, like my Big Mother. (Emecheta 173)

Many factors in the Igbo culture affect and subjugate women .The first factor is the infertility that decides the role of women in African culture. Infertility is a cultural taboo. If a woman does not have the opportunity to conceive soon after her marriage, she is termed as a 'barren woman'. The part taken by women in African tradition interrogates the place of Motherhood in the production, circulation and consumption of items in African tradition.

Motherhood is regularly definite as a regular position of belief and behaviour that is switched on by pregnancy and by the birth of a baby. In Igbo society motherhood is wrapped in cultural issues including less number of birth, more gestation and infertility of a woman. According to the critic, Katherine Frank "the only power a woman possesses is her procreative power and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable both in her own eyes and those of her culture" (Frank 488).

Levirate Marriage is another practice in the Igbo culture subjugating women. It is a kind of marriage in which the deceased man's brother is obliged to marry his dead brother's wife. The word 'levirate' is derived from Latin word *levir* meaning 'husband's brother'. Such marriage is equivalent to domestic slavery wherein the male suppresses the female. The African women have no suffrage rights, the right to accuse or the right to own property. They have no possession of their salaries or their belongings. They are not allowed to live an independent life. After the marriage, the rights of a woman are legally given to her husband that they become one entity.

The husband signifies this entity and thus gains the control of all property, earnings and money. In addition, she must endure and share her wealth and the material belongings with her husband. The African wife becomes his property and she gives him absolute rights

over her body, mind and family. According to Simone de Beauvoir,

Man does not address his appeal to woman herself: it is men's society that allows each of its members to accomplish himself as husband and father; woman, integrated as slave or vassal into the family group dominated by fathers and brothers, has always been given in marriage to males by other males. (Beauvoir 503)

The harmful result of the conventional practice of widow inheritance is seen in the personality of Ma Blackie in Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price*.

In *The Bride Price* Okonkwo inherits Ma Blackie after the death of Ezekiel, the brother of Okonkwo and the husband of Ma Blackie. This practice exposes the misery of women and the girls, in the traditions of patriarchal society. Ma Blackie categorized by Emecheta signifies the image of African womanhood well defined by the customary extract belief in African culture. In the opening pages of the novel the character Ma Blackie is represented as absent. Her absence signifies the unimportance of women in Ibo culture and this condition of non-identity established by Ezekiel Odia's farewell terms to his children "Always remember that you are mine" (13). This reappearance of the expression at the opening section imprinted the power of patriarchal prices is strictly followed by the Ibo people. The power of patriarchy characteristically driven Ma Blackie into forgetfulness from the lives of her children. In the beginning, Ma Blackie is exposed as physically absent from Lagos as she goes to her native village to find a remedy for her infertility. According to the critic Omar Sougou in *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the fiction of Buchi Emecheta*: Just as she is not present in the initial part of the novel and during Ezekiel Odia's funeral, so she is absent from her daughter's life. Ma's physical strength and stature as a giant of a woman so tall and straight had countered by her self-effacement before the authority of tradition. (Sougou 65)

It was customary for a widow to get married to any male relation belonging to her late husband's family. Women are not allowed to rebel against the traditional custom.. In *The Bride Price* Ma Blackie's relationship with Akunna is on the decline due to her second marriage with Okonkwo. She automatically obeys and satisfies the need of her new husband, Okonkwo. The marriage of Ma Blackie affects Akunna a lot in her life. Her absence of closeness and passionate relationship with her daughter makes Ma Blackie to

adopt the customs of giving importance to her spouse.

Next it shows the tradition of marriage through the character Akunna for the importance of bride price that she fetches through marriage. The critic Pauline Ada Uwaleweh remarks “the culture of naming, hinting at the outset that as female, her parents value her primarily for the bride prices he would fetch upon her marriage”. Bride price is one of the customs that exists in the Igbo community. Women are considered as a source of money that can be used at their disposal. The idea of the bride price as a source of income has been in existence for a very long time, and is still in existence. Emecheta portrays the practice that has been carried out in the gloomy light. In the novel Akunna agrees to the traditional performs of Ibuza society. After the death of her father, Akunna is to be married off immediately after she attains puberty. The purpose of her bride price is to pay the fees of her brother’s education. Afterwards her stepfather plans to use her bride price money for attaining a greater title than that of Eze. Robin Fox states that,

The phenomenon of the bride price has been of considerable interest to anthropologist and comparative sociologists who study family structure and organization. The transfers of property, which frequently accompany marriages in other cultures, may be as important in maintaining alliances between the spouse’s respective kin groups as the marriage itself. (Fox 179)

Therefore, the documented action of bride price suggests the tradition under practice in the Ibuza society.

The novel points out the western education given to the sons of Mr.Ofulue. Mr. Ofulue, Chike’s father, buys a huge area of land to be cultivated. He is aware of the value of education and he wishes his sons to be well educated. They belong to the family of Oshus, the descendant of slaves and are the first generation to get western education, and are placed in a good and highly regarded jobs. Mr.Ofulue works as a headmaster, the brother of Chike becomes a gynecologist and Chike turns to be a schoolteacher. This fact is seen in the subsequent lines, “In the olden days, slaves used to be sent there to missionary schools simply to appease the disapproval of the white missionaries; but later evidences show that it was these same educated slaves who ended up commanding key position” (74).

The novel talks about the education offered to the family of the slaves. They knew the importance of education in the world. The missionaries provide awareness about the importance of education so that they need not suffer to feed their family and to go in search of a job to bring up their own family. Therefore, these novels stress the importance of

education and the role played by education in the Nigerian society.

Society consists of social, political and economic structures. The African family is the fundamental unit of the society which includes the religious political and other authorized units.

Important factor among these is the economic condition. The African family with a warm, loving relationship between husband and his wife, father and son, mother and daughter and so on. It is quite apparent that the concept of family in Africa is much wider than the Western concept.

African women acquire their economic skills in Ibuza. The most widespread popular business is retail trade. The African women involve in trade to support their family, to feed, and to earn money.

The people in the land of Igbo call the medicinal men as 'dibia', and the medicinal man force Ma Blackie to go back to her native land Ibuza. She strictly follows the rules that are scheduled by the medicine man and she wants to drink the potions prepared by the medicinal men in order to bear the next child. Ma Blackie tries her level best to purify herself surrender to the river Oboshi to remove her infertility "Other women living in the same compound make songs of Ma Blackie's childlessness" (09). From this novel, one can understand the importance of the river God.

The novel mentions the importance about the personal goddess, 'Chi' believed by every Igbo people. According to the Ibuza custom, "if a bride was a virgin her new family had to bring her father wine. If she was not a virgin, they brought an empty pot" (Monica 39). The chief of the community prohibits the marriage between slaves and freeborn. When Akunna elopes with Chike, Okonkwo felt disgraced and determines to wreak vengeance. Okonkwo does not accept the bride price given by the father of Chike.

To take revenge on his stepdaughter Okonkwo sculpts a statue impaling it with the needles in front of their goddess, 'Chi'. "You made a small doll in the exact image of the person and pierced the heart of the doll with a needle, or alternatively set it alight and allowed it to burn

gradually" (156). Okonkwo believed in their god so that Akunna's betrayal leads to the act of black magic. The spiritual trust laid on the river God is strongly highlighted.

Another incident of superstition mentioned in *The Bride Price* is the forgiveness attributed to river Goddess for her sin. Akunna appeals to river Goddess to forgive her sin because she had crossed the stream during her unclean time. Akunna prays to god to forgive

her and requests not to punish her. She is consoled after her prayer, and recognises that the river Goddess will forgive her sin for polluting her holiness because she does not know the tradition followed by the people. Lailah Gifty Akita in her work *Pearls of Wisdom: Great Minds* says, “You heard my petition. You have answered my plea. May your name be glorified and be praised” (Akita 02). Later, Ma Blackie offers the river Goddess one-day old chick to the stream. The following lines prove their faith:

It had decided that the god of the river would forgive Akunna this time, for how was a girl to know when and where she would become a woman? It had agreed, however, that she should walk through the swallow waters as quickly as possible, and not linger to bathe and the very next day Ma Blackie would have to come and sacrifice a day-old chick to the stream.
(110)

The Igbo women never blame their river goddess. They take the unpleasant incidents as their fate destined for them. They have a strong faith on their river goddess. On the day of Akunna’s birth, a terrible incident happens in Ibuza as hundreds of young girls drowned in the river Niger. This incident shakes the whole town of Ibuza people.

The girls between the age group of fourteen to fifteen go to buy clothes for them from the Onitsha Market. Their forthcoming entry into their new husband’s house is the reason to purchase the new clothes. While crossing a river on their way back to the market, “their way back they were unfortunately overtaken by a storm so violent that nearly all those in the open and unprotected canoes lost their lives” (101).

The people of Ibuza mourn for many months for the death of the young girls. Their goddess does not leave them alone in sorrow. Instead, the goddess gives the gift of pregnancy to many young women. Linda Evans Shepherd says in her work *Stress Cure: Praying your way to personal Peace* as “Just when it seems as if trouble is set to destroy your hope, future, or family, god’s resurrection power can help you rise above it all” (Shepherd 91- 2). After several months all women give birth to girls making the people understand that their goddess replaced the dead girls by the new born babies. These age group girls are born during the time when “River Niger ate the children of Ibuza” (101).

The Ibuza people do not point the finger at their goddess for the death of the girls. They console the mothers of the girls that their girls had very much wanted to serve their god and so they have been taken to her palace: “that their daughter had been chosen to serve at the court of the beautiful goddess of the river, nullified the pangs of pain to no small extent” (101). This consoles them to a great extent. Even if there young girls are dead, they

praise and worship their river goddess with whole heart. This terrible incident proves the faith and the belief of the Ibuza people on the river goddess.

Traditional dances play a major role in African culture. During Christmas, the relatives come to their family house to have fun and entertainment. Traditional dances play a major role in African cultures. Young girls and boys mainly perform these dances. Dance teach the meaning of moral values and their traditional qualities, to inculcate a helping tendency to those in need and to have a good time with the community. The young girls belong to the age group of Akunna.

Akunna is fifteen years old and these age group girls believe that this is their last Christmas being celebrated in their native land along with the peer group dancers.

The young girls entertain the relatives by their traditional African dance. However, Akunna is quite different from the other traditional girls. While, the Ibuza girls get ready for their dance, Akunna prepares for her examination. This examination would decide her future. She decides to wait for two weeks until the publication of the results. After her examinations, she too joins the dance circle. Akunna is also talented in singing and is gifted with a good voice.

The dance teacher asks Akunna to sing the praise song. She learns the traditional praise songs with the help of Ogugua. In the name of praise song, they say thanks for the goddess, and mourn for the dead souls. Akunna sings the solo praising song and the other girls join her in the chorus of the song. This shows Akunna's singing talent "Akunna was to sing praise name and tell the audience in 'aja' song ... The other girls would join in the chorus, singing Ah... eee..." (102-03).

The young Igbo girls dream of buying their special outfit for the ritual and entertainment dance. They work hard to earn the money to buy the outfit, by selling firewood; and helping the rich people to carry their baskets to markets. They work the whole year to get the outfit. The most important ornament for the dance is the waist bead named as '*jigida*'. The waist bead is a costly ornament for the dance and it gives the identity among the traditional society.

The tradition of the wearing of the waist beads is associated to the meaning and the holiness of the waist, and the special importance of the waist bead helps a woman to display her figure or shape among the young girls. Normally, waist bead is recommended to be worn below the portion of their belly which gives them a special beauty to the dance. The waist bead is decorated with different valuable materials like pearl, gems, glass, and plastic, wood

or with clay. Women wear various patterns and sizes for the dance. The great admiration of their body is pointed out by the charm of their beads.

A string of beads worn around the waist by African women can be said to be sacredly associated to their femininity and must respect by all men. The '*jigida*' is a set of beads strung along a wire or cord, worn at the waist, traditionally by African women but today women the world over make the JIGIDA as the exclusive symbol of their femininity. (Iroegbu)

The transparent dress for the dance exposes their tattoos in their body parts. The blue coloured tattoo marks on their back and all around their body gives them a pride among the other girls. The young girls wear red and black beads on their waist for their dancing.

They worked and save money to buy their '*jigida*' the red and black beads, which they would wear above their bikini like pants. Apart from these, their tops would be bare displaying the blue coloured tattoos that went round their backs then under their young breasts and met at their heart. (103)

While the young girls look happy, the old women lament about their present condition. During their youth, they had been very busy with preparations for the ritual dance, the outfit for the dance, their young breasts fit and their body flexible for the dance to entertain. Now in their old age they can only admire with a little jealousy, the active young dancers. Their work is to fill the pipe for the male members of the family, chewing tobacco in their toothless mouth. They always lament about their plight to their grandchildren as "When we were young and our breasts were tight as tied ropes, we did the '*aja*' dance. It was the best dance in the whole land, and we did it" (103).

It is evident that the novel *The Bride Price*, denounce African values that present socio-cultural and existential distinction to men folk at the expense of women and ridicules those norms, which suggest that women's input is narrowed down to communal matters, singing, dancing, procreation and discharging of other household duties. These novels expose the harms troubling the African environment such as the rejection of education to women by the male dominant discriminatory society. The Igbo community renders women as powerless and weak, with the depression of women's entity, and preference for boy child who perpetuates the family's lineage.

Tradition and consciousness are equally important terms. The individuals around a specific region or place and more importantly the community in which they are a part of, are born and brought up with the ethics, customs and rituals practised in that community. Most of

the earlier cultures are predominantly patriarchal, with an exception to a few. In accordance to this, Igbo community that had centred on Nigeria had its own culture and tradition. Their rituals had favoured men and subjugated women on a greater scale. This eventually has led to loss of self- identity in women, which in turn has affected their social consciousness. The trauma and agony encountered by African women in the face of cultural subjugation lead to generational anxiety and loss of their individual as well as cultural identity.

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