



Dynamics of Tradition and Modernity in

Bride Price by Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract

African Literature in recent years especially after the independence from colonialism obtained a very gigantic position in the world literature and caused manifold critics to center their look on it. Most of the African writers have done their best to indicate the drawbacks of today and gaps of past in various forms. Although there is much criticism on Buchi Emecheta's *Bride Price*, in the realm of my research about the mentioned topic this aspect has been relatively overlooked. This paper is an attempt to elucidate and explore the vivid encounters of modernity and tradition with their dominances on each other from the perspective of the author who does her best to bring hope of the future back and eradicate the superstitions of the past in the sights of African varied castes by the novel *Bride Price* written by Buchi Emecheta. For the sake of achieving this goal, the novel will be examined from different perspectives related to feminism and the tribe's negative attitude towards it, slavery and its permanent root in the minds, education and its influence on the way of thinking, culture and acceptance of Superstitions as real life facts in various settings (urban and rural). At the end of this investigation via this novel we will come to this conclusion that even in the darkest part of Africa there is always hope, and in order to obtain the success of altering peoples formed minds a man should fight with everything even destiny. By exploring mentioned aspects it is expected that modernization should have upper hand in our lives over tradition.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Nigeria, slavery, bride price

1. Introduction

This paper aims to elucidate and explore the clear encounters of modernity and tradition with their dominances on each other from the perspective of the author who does her best to bring hope of the future back and eradicate the superstitions of the past in the sights of various African castes by the novel *Bride Price*; however, at the end of the story by the death of the protagonist it may figure other side for the aboriginal readers to carry on their insistence on their illusory traditions. *Bride Price* (First published in 1976) which is considerably written for western audience by Buchi Emecheta (1944) a prolific and famed Nigerian author demonstrates the unfairness of male sexism and caste constraints in her native country. Emecheta takes us back to Lagos and Ibuza during the 1950s, where the protagonist is Aku-nna, a young Nigerian girl whose father dies when she is thirteen, leaving her in the responsibility of her father's brother. Aku-nna is managed and permitted to remain in school only due to her uncle who believes it will intensify her bride price leading him to celebrity and the title he dreams. However, she falls in love with her teacher that affects Aku-nna's path of destiny and society beliefs. Chike Ofulue, her lover is a descendant of slave family whose social status totally disallows their involvement. Despite the protestations of her family and a would-be suitor who kidnaps her, Aku-nna elopes with Chike and dispossesses her uncle of her bride price. In the end Aku-nna succumbs in childbirth, fulfilling the fateful superstition that a woman whose bride price is unpaid will not survive the birth of her first child. By the termination of the novel we come to this conclusion that it was a bright overcome of tradition to modernity while



I believe that we should analyze it from varied points of view of the author who tries to mention loads of things against dominant and almost negative traditions covertly that brings her manifold significantly male opponent for her negative portrayal of Nigerian customs in Africa and proponent critics in the west for her depiction of reality the same as the other prestigious novelists of the continent.

2. Bride Price and Mortal Belief

In Igbo's culture, it is the father and not the mother who is believed to be one's life and shelter, that is if you lost your father you lost your both parents, your mother is only a woman and women are supposed to be boneless. For instance, three weeks later when the children learn their dad's death, Nna-ndo the protagonist's brother moans,

"We have no father anymore. There is no longer any schooling for me. This is the end". (P. 24)

The women are out of access to any authority in this society and families, their job is just to bear children and take care of them and their husbands and a childless woman has no worth, and in order to bear child the bride price is the first step and only element to ascertain this wish. Bride-price is money or property given by the bridegroom to the family of his bride. Such a system is still followed by the native Africans and Muslims in their religion. Big bride price is a great honor to bride and if a girl marries without the price, it is assumed that she is not a virgin or she is not worthy to marry. Ignoring it the death of the pregnant will be the conclusion for her. The same superstition is attributed to the expiration of Aku-nna's life with unpaid bride price at the beginning of their marriage; while the medicine science which is constructed on modern technologies and knowledge associates her death to malnutrition and anticipated the ongoing problems elaborately, as the clinic doctor says to Chike months before,

"Mr. Ofulue, your wife is so young, and small. She has been undernourishment for a long while, so you should have given her time to recuperate after you married before deciding on a baby... you must both be very careful. She has hardly enough blood for herself, let alone for a baby, but we shall do our best". (P. 168)

After Aku-nna's death her story was narrated orally with the intention of reinforcing the longstanding superstition. Therefore, with this strong belief that if a girl wants to survive the birth of her child and see her children her bride price should be paid by the husband, it is partly out of the question to modify the aborigines' ideas, although Aku-nna and Chike did it. They put feet on this false convention to indicate that every success in alteration needs a start, though encountering with defeat at the beginning.

African husbands think boys are more treasured than girls and they want their wives to bear boys more than girls. Since sons can transfer their names and way to other generations that brings this reason to husbands to put their more energy, money, emotions on their sons rather than girls and as the most important aspect of a girl for them is just her bride price. Unlike them, it is not that much imperative for Chike their child be a boy or girl, he mainly desires a healthy child to love them as Aku-nna asks Chike whether he would be disappointed if their child were girl, Chike replies,

"I won't mind a girl. The only thing is that people would think I make love to you night and day, because girls are love babies. I want our love to be private". (P. 167-168)

Chike does not want to believe that girl is good just for the sake of her bride price or boy is more central than even wife in the family. He needs his child or wife just for contented life and love. He is to replace love on wife and child with other material aspects of them without any expectations or return, unlike others he wants just to see her wife and child as lovely and emotional mankind. He believes there is no difference among humankind and they are all fairly equal. Aku-nna and Chike running away from all restrictions and injustices are in thought of a novel world with renewed ideas and fresh minds bursting with love and hope and free of any superstitions and disastrous customs.

By this perspective the author wants to revive the attempts of those who run away from irrational conventions of the land once upon with the purpose of achieving freedom. She does her best to depict that woman is far more



valuable than money and her value is not evaluated by her bride price. She is into creating a new perspective to the future, a future full of hope and independence for women, a future with beautiful lives without anxiety of bearing child and being free in making the destiny and selecting a person as a wife or husband with self-consciousness without any irrational forces. Emecheta is in effort to substitute new concepts of life and woman in the African society or in a broad level in the Globe.

3. Slavery

The other most demanding issue in this anti-traditional novel is the society's point of view against slavery and the slave's families. Slavery in Africa consisted of one tribe kidnapping people from another tribe, then holding them captive and forcing them to work. Slavery in the history of Nigeria has a deep root, to the extent that we are able to discover its effects and continuation in modern Nigeria as well. In Nigeria slavery was a trade for a long time and the owners could sell, exchange, lend or borrow them, mainly the female ones were used in sex affairs and males to outdoor jobs with excruciating conditions. Passing years, the ban of trafficking slaves in Nigeria at last enacted. It was used to bury a slave alive when his or her owner died. Descendants of slaves, although they were eventually freed under colonial rule, were never considered members of their adopted villages no matter how long they lived there, or how effective they became. They had no social status, no mandate in the community; they were inferior to the other social classes without attention to their knowledge and behaviors.

In the seventh chapter of the novel Emecheta goes on to depict the slavery background of school teacher Chike, the lover and then husband of Aku-nna. Chike had heard from his mother that their slavery tag started by their grandmother who was a princess captured in Ubuluukwu a small city near Ibuza, her master did not sell her since she was very pretty and decided to purchase a male slave to keep her, however she was buried alive with her master as a rule. This story was told to him occasionally which became a foreshadowing beginning of disasters of educated Chike. He was a very handsome, professional man and well known for girls who preferred not to pay attention to his background, however, he was crystal clearly a slave descendant and this issue was not ignorable for the society.

According to the people's standpoint the chief mistake of Chike was his love on Akku-nna, he should not have become into a girl who were not a slave, thanks to it, Akku-nna's step-father never accepted the bride price given by Chike's family after their escape from the city for good. The reaction of Okonkwo, Akku-nna's step-father confirms it,

At home in Ibuza, Okonkwo was again approached with bride price, but he still refused to consent to give his daughter to a slave. When somebody- no one knew who- took away the doll that looked like Asku-nna from the front of his chi, he thundered and raged like an animal and was determined to make another one. The new one he made was at a very expensive cost, for its aim was to call Aku-nna back from Ughelli through the wind". (P. 171)

Aku-nna and her husband fought for modernity against adverse customs produced by the peoples, their action's reactions in the land and the world was unbelievable even though they came to end with separation by death. In contrast with the aborigines Chike, Aku-nna, Chike's friend and his wife who were totally educated had dissimilar view on the issue of slavery, this problem for them had been solved since they knew that in modern life there were more imperative things for relying and thinking. They found out that education was the window to modernity and modern life far away traditions. In the novel it's understandable that there are two poles: one educated who consists of Chike's family, friends and students and the other uneducated inhabitants. Therefore, it is clear the dominance of the uneducated is more enormous and they possess the ability to overcome the educated easily; the same event that happened at the end of the story, but the author knew that this trivial group could be a good spark for commence of a big flame.

4. Modern Education Next to False Acceptation

In Nigeria, mainly in the past, the system of education was sort of patriarchal, even though education was not that much important at all. In this system majority of Nigerian parents, especially in large families for the sake of economic and poverty problems enrolled boys for schooling instead of or before girls. Some families also kept their daughters out of education and learning due to misinterpretation of the tenets of Islamic religion and old-fashioned believes, besides, if both genders were able to attend the classes in the school boys were the gender given more opportunities to ask and answer questions, to use learning materials, and to lead groups. Girls



were given less time on assignments than boys in primary and secondary school science classes, as mentioned above the reason of this inferiority was the significance of boys for their society in a way that boy was more important than even wife in the family. However, nowadays the nation's attitude towards schooling and gender has shifted totally by understanding the modernity and concept of equal rights for both sexes in humanity.

By this definition of education in Nigeria we encounter a paradox in the *Bride Price*, since a girl attends the school next to her brother very commonly and quite easily in order not to learn how to progress at the beginning but to sacrifice herself for his real father and then his husband later, however, this aim was alongside with lots of jealousy from the next-door families and others. Aku-nna at the beginning wanted to study in order to be an educated so that she could marry a rich man to whom his father approve him and bring her family a big bride price, as she did not want to see her father down in the dumps for the sake of financial problems, therefore, she did schooling just for fulfilling the fathers and family's ambitions. On the other hand, by the death of Aku-nna's father and his replace with her step father, Okonkwo, everything shaped another face and all dreams destroyed in despair, for, this time Okonkwo wanted the girl to study not to learn but to bring him a big bride price and fame. Okonkwo hoped to become Obi and take the title of Ezi, in order to achieve this he had to have a great deal of money to offer a valuable and priceless sacrifice to the gods. He thought Aku-nna's education was the tool for this goal as he said to Iloba, his own son about the reason of letting Aku-nna schooling,

"Aku-nna and Oguqua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me. You see the trend today, that the educated girls fetch more money". (P. 75)

But keeping on her studies, Aku-nna found out a new window for her life by understanding the modernity in school, she thereafter wanted to study in order to know the world, to know the people and to pass the boundaries of progress, this was impossible unless by the attendance of Chike that later became her husband. Education brought them modernity and made them understand the difference between reality and superstition in the society of that time which was very dominant and overcome.

Furthermore, Adegor and his wife who were both educated and teachers understood the difficult conditions of Chike without tracing back Chikes's background and slavery descendant and helped him to settle in a temporary house of them and then a permanent one without any expectation, even for a couple of days they were beside Chike and his wife to let them cope with the situation in the new town and lent the young couple some pieces of fundamental furniture which made Chike and her wife very merry.

Indirectly it is visible that Buchi Emecheta is in attempt to demonstrate the impacts of education on the attitudes of people and the rate of its power on changing them from tradition to modernity even in the way of thinking and behaving with other men, no matter in which circumstances among African specially Nigeria tribes and their members. She did her best to display that education can be a rudimentary element in escaping from superstition to self-consciousness, from reviving the dead past believes to making the live future wishes and hopes with glad and optimism, however, even nowadays a lot of people misuse the education mainly in higher levels to benefit from them like Okonkwo who strongly needed the Aku-nna's schooling in order to gain money for the sake of his dream of the key title among the elders of the tribes in the village although this out of logic and unfair dream never accomplished and became a terrible nightmare for him for the rest of his life and the family members who were looking for Aku-nna's schooling as an income resource.

5. Life in Lagos and Ibuza

Port Lagos used to be the capital of Nigeria for a while in the past and now has been replaced by Abuja and is considered as the economic and financial capital of that country. This wealthy and prolific port city is currently the third most populous city with more than eight million people after Cairo and Kinshasa in Africa and has been estimated to be the second fastest growing city in Africa. This shows that Lagos is a very modernized, civilized and developed city and relatively is far from traditional tribes and villages. Education in this city has been very significant and systematic especially for the children age up to nine.

On the other hands, some miles further from Lagos is Ibuza, an agrarian village of Ibo people who have a reputation for not minding what job they take on, so long as it brings money, a race that are principally business-mad, in a way that money is considered more essential than humanity there. Ibuza connotes a patriarchal estate that mean men are the dominant power of the land; even boys are considered more superior to wives of families. In the same way women are identified by their husbands and women without husband is out of



the question even after their husband's death they have to immediately marry the other one mainly with older brother of the husbands. Education, love, modernity, friendship are rare topics to discuss in this land, since the dwellers are partly hostile with them and on account of these explanations they majorly stay on the traditions of the past strongly instead of development. Their customs are considered as unbreakable ones and disobeying from them equals insult which results in death or discarding. In this part of the world titles are quiet vital for the men and they strain to be on the highest title, for achieving these awards they have to offer great and priceless sacrifices to the gods for accomplishing this wish they have got to have more money and for obtaining more money they have special look on their girls' bride price which is paid by the family of the boy who wants to marry.

Aku-nna with her family in Lagos had a happy and comfortable life, since everything was ready and accessible for them in this big and industrialized town, even though they were not opulent and had manifold problems but their life was out of stress and anxiety, Ma Blackei was always cheerful; Ezekiel was very respectful in his career and among the acquaintances; Aku-nna and Nna-nndo her brother, were very hopeful and ambitious to the future. Besides, neighbors were in touch with together and felt a kind of responsibility against each other. However this relative happiness and comfort in comparison with Ibuza took no longer and by the death of Ezekiel the father of the family, everything was reversed, as father in Nigerian culture is considered everything, it is understandable by the meanings of the kids, i.e. Aku-nna means *father's Wealth* and Nna-nndo means *father's shelter* and lack of father as mentioned before, means lack of both parents which is very excruciating for the children to cope with. They had to go back to Ibuza their home land, because Ma Blackei, mother of the family was unable to live alone and afford the family's financial issues.

Ma Blackei and her two children were ready to set out for their home town, Ibuza. This was the only thing to be done, when the head of a family was no more. Life is Lagos, like life in all capital cities, cost a great deal of money, and was not possible without a bread winner. In the Odia family, the bread winner had gone, so his dependants had to go back home to fend for themselves as best they could. There was nothing else to do; they had to go. (P.51)

This migration was very touchable and very demanding for the kids especially for Aku-nna as a girl. Coming from modernity to the land of superstitions and traditions that there was no smell of modernity can be difficult for everybody. In Ibuza, Aku-nna's mother due to working and pregnancy was far from her children which to somehow was a complete forgetting that was unbearable. Aku-nna experienced a new life in Ibuza under the authority of step-father living together with other children and families. Since Ibuza was very small land everybody knew each other, it was easy to make a person famous or infamous, for instance, when Aku-nna was kidnapped by Okoboshi, and while she had no sense on him for the sake of love of Chike, by special adroit tricks lied Okoboshi that Chike before him had slept with him for countless times and was not girl anymore; she did it in order to get rid of him and reach Chike. Becoming very irritated, Okoboshi and his family did everything to make Aku-nna notorious in the land.

6. Conclusion

Aku-nna and Chike played their role in the movie of life quiet excellently to proof that life is consist of love not money, people's background cannot be a good criterion for their evaluation and proof that the concept of slavery has been eliminated from dictionary of modernized society. They exhibited that life can be sweeter by understanding the meaning of sacrifice for each other. It was tangible that education could change the attitudes towards positive ways and modernity far from negative customs. Besides, education brings industry and progress to cities that lead to comfortable life and getting away from these cities towards small and underdeveloped towns with rooted barbaric superstitious traditions brings multiple difficulties.

Buchi Emecheta as one of the most debatable writers from Nigeria, did the best endeavors to demonstrate the culture and traditions of the Nigeria in the form of a tragedy novel to the world, she has been very ambitious and hopeful to see great changes in the attitudes of the African people about woman and her role in the family. I believe she has been very successful in this way since by publishing this novel, Emecheta has gained manifold critics from all over the world, they have divided into two groups, the firs group, i.e. Western critics acclaim her for her must-read novel, on the other hand, second group who are mainly from Africa complain and object for her novel because of depicting the traditions of Africa in a negative way.



In this paper the conflicts of modernity and traditions according to the mentioned novel are brought to the face and also according to the culture of Africa especially Nigeria, positive aspects of modernity and negative aspects of traditions mainly about women were spoken and it is expected that modernization should have upper hand in our lives over tradition. It should not be forgotten that woman the same as the other gender has been created by the same Lord with emotional features. We must come to this common sense that women are not objects while have equal rights the same as the men specially in the families that the weighty role is for wives in managing the house and bringing up the children. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that, the criteria that demonstrate the credit and level of the people in the varied societies are not race, color, religion or backgrounds, while it is the knowledge that is superior to other features in renovated globe, therefore, we can do our best to advance the knowledge and spread it in all over the world to have an enjoyable life and environment. Life is always good if we do not want to make it reversed.

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