

BRIDE VALUE: A FEMINIST READING OF BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE BRIDE PRICE*

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Received: 29 November 2019

Accepted: 12 December 2019

Abstract

The Bride Price is one of the most influential modern novels authored by Buchi Emecheta through which the voice of a female character is expressed. The study has two points of discussion: the first deals with patriarchal society in which women suffer and become the only victims, and the second does with African culture from which Emecheta criticizes severely. Men have all the powers in controlling the whole family. The traditional society of Africa follows their culture as it is especially in paying the bride from the groom's family. The paper aims at both men and women to keep this belief for the rest of their life no matter how modern the society has become. To some extent, the idea of "double colonization" proposed by Peterson and Rutherford (1986) will be identified in the paper and further explanation will be given. The paper also is an attempt to analyze the reflection of the African system related to marriage in the novel; as similar idea can be found in Iraqi Kurdistan that would be counted as the main objective behind writing the current paper. Furthermore, it shows some cultural similarities between both countries. By applying "double colonization" theory, the researcher confirms that Emecheta's female characters suffer a traumatic experience in which they are controlled by two colonizers: the power of males and the reality of colonization. The researcher tries to send his messages through this paper out to avoid such conflicts and spread self and cultural awareness among the society.

Keywords: slavery, female, bride, sacrifice, conflict, price.

1. Introduction

Buchi Emecheta was born in Nigeria in 1944 during the Second World War; then, immigrated to the UK from 1962 from where he started writing more than twenty books; *The Second Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1975) and *The Slave Girl* (1977) are among those pioneering and masterpiece works published in London. Her thematic issues cover areas such as slavery, freedom, sacrifice, and womanhood through which she receives recognition and honours. Dawson in her "Beyond Imperial Feminism: Buchi Emecheta's London Novels and Black British Women's Emancipation" confirms that "the first successful black woman novelist living in Britain after 1948" (Dawson, 2007: 117).

In addition, she has also that determined the voice of women in most of her books, opposing any barriers given to women in terms of oppression, slavery, racism, and colours. Precisely, Aku-nna, as a victim and protagonist, lives within a family in Ibuza in which her

stepfather gives his permission to allow her to get married with a condition of offering a generous bride price. In addition, the novel is divided into ten sections; each under a different heading starting from "The Bride Price" to the last one "Tempting Providence".

There are two things to be discussed in the study: patriarchal society and culture issues in Africa and how women suffer in the twentieth-century era under the strict rules of tradition. Peterson and Rutherford (1986) use the idea of 'Double Colonization' and this is applied throughout the study.

2. Literature Review

Hooks in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984) defines feminism politically "a movement to end sexist oppression" (Peterson and Rutherford: 1986). While it is defined culturally by Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1985) as "it is a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas, and behaviour uniquely, or traditionally characteristics of women" (Ibid, 131). Furthermore, black female writers, including Toni Morrison, have considered the issue of women in their writings. Emecheta follows the same path in depicting the reality of black women in Nigeria and the consequences of their traditions. The word "black writer" or "black feminism" is repeated several times as this distinguishes black to white writers and its preference is obvious by female black writers. (Collins, 1996)

Collins (1996) tells the readers from the beginning of the novels that she describes her mother by having "a few enemies" calling her mother "the palm-tree woman". The first indication of commenting on their physical shape and a certain colour "black", as her mother is also called Ma Blackie. Either in addition, Emecheta uses the colour "black" several times, on purpose or unconsciously; it is regarded as an annoying word for her and for the completely black society. In terms of colour use, and she shares the same view of the American female black novelist Toni Morrison especially in her "Sula" (1972) and "The Bluest Eyes" (1970).

Regarding the story, Aku-nna feels depressed and disgraced by living with her unfortunate family, her mother's pregnancy issue and losing her real father and remarrying her mother to her uncle, "It is so even in Nigeria: when you have lost your father you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without ahead." (Emecheta, 1977: 25).

Furthermore, "double colonization" is also evident in the novel. Peterson and Rutherford use the term to show how women simultaneously have gone through the bitter experience of oppression of colonialism and patriarchy as well. They both argue, "Women are subject to representations in colonial discourses in ways which collude with patriarchal values."

In that case, 'a double colonization' belongs to the fact that women are twice colonized: first from colonialist and patriarchal ones too. It is a challenge for African women too facing "double colonization". Aku-nna is taken as one of the examples on the trend. Other instances are given related to this issue. Kabbani in her *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (1994) analyses the problem of the Eastern women suffering from the power of the Orient. Additionally, eastern women are seen as an object of desire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Therefore, patriarchal values in colonial discourses influence both colonized and colonizing women. The patriarchal systems are added to the community in which women are forced to do whatever is required from males.

In another story, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) is another example where females are exploited. Emecheta depicts the life of Nnu Ego, living in Ibuza. Her father, Agbadi, makes his own choice in marrying her to Amatokwu; in return, he will receive his 'bride price'. The situation is getting complicated when the husband finds out that she cannot be pregnant and his father finds other women for him. When Nnu Ego asks him that she misses her former intimacy, her husband replies: "What do you want me to do?" Amatokwu asked. "I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you do not appeal to me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones." (Ibid, p.32)

This moment demonstrates how Nnu Ego is important to Amatokwu as a means of physical need and the male line is detected. It also perceives the idea of male power in Ibuza community through which harsh words are used against women. After several beatings and insults by her husband, she wants to go back to her father's house but she is rejected as her father thinks that she brings shame on the family. Thus, Susheila Nasta states that in her introduction to *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (1991) male-centred ideologies covers the whole community of Africa; it is tradition and patriarchy, which support males ignoring the total picture of women. (Ibid, p. xv)

3. Research Method

The study is a qualitative research method as it reflects African literature; no numerical data collection is used, since the work is completed the theoretical one and it is only based on personal ideas, paraphrasing, and summarizing of previous studies in the current field. Moreover, the study is rather new to that point that none of the references can be found on Kurdish society; to that mean, the researcher takes benefit from previous studies that have been done in the current field but from the English and European perspective. As a result, personal ideas based on background knowledge have been used to relate the current work to the problems that are occurring nowadays in the Iraqi Kurdistan. The analysis is taken from the text by using the theory of "Double Colonization" by Peterson and Rutherford (1986). The uniqueness of the study lies in its first publication related to the given novel and its similarities in Kurdistan of Iraq. Thus, the significance of the theory and its content are valuable to the analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

Naming Aku-nna, which means literally "father's wealth", is a barrier in making her own voice in deciding what she wants and what she does not want. One of those is her marriage process on which she is forced to marry a rich family and a good deal of price must be given in hand immediately and in return. She is unable to resist the decision, Emecheta wants to show that a woman can also voice out her/their decision(s). It is also an attack on the traditions in Nigeria in making women silent and in order not to reject any decision from males, a patriarchal society she is against it or them.

Therefore, the beginning of the novel is a nightmare for Aku-nna, a woman who has a lot of spirits and plans to make many changes in her society. The dichotomies between modern and traditions are a major concern for Emecheta in colonial Africa; for instance, in burying her father's saying,

Ezekiel Odia's funeral was, like all such ceremonies in colonial Africa, a mixture of the traditional and the European. Emphasis was always placed on the European aspect. The

European ways were considered modern, the African old-fashioned. Lagos culture was such an unfortunate conglomeration of both that you ended up not knowing to which you belonged... Ezekiel was a typical product of this cultural mix. He would preach the Gospel on Sundays, he would sing praises to the European Living God, he would force his children to pray every morning...he was buried in the same way that he had lived: in a conflict of two cultures. (Emecheta, 1977: 26).

Emecheta's voice goes through several female characters not only Aku-nna, the protagonist, but also it goes through her mother and her aunt too, Auntie Matlida. The reason behind this is only an emphasis on the suffering of women in Africa. Additionally, they all suffer from a certain issue; a direct quotation to give that hints every woman under that fate and must accept for what they have been given. Auntie Matlida says,

This is the fate of us women. There is nothing we can do about it. We just have to learn to accept... Aku-nna was sure they were saying all this by way of consolation and also to prepare her for what was going. They had tried to do so, but they had not succeeded. If anything, they had intensified her fear of the unknown. What was her fate going to be, she wondered? (Emecheta, 1977: 37).

Aku-nna's marriage price is one of which her uncle insists to be achieved. Chukwuma (1989) claims two key terms in her article, Positivism and The Female Crisis: Novels of Buchi Emecheta, that in Emecheta's novels: "The true test of woman continues to be the marriage institution (. . .) through it; a woman attains a status acclaimed by the society and fulfils the biological need of procreation and companionship." (Ibid, 1989: 5) and Emecheta's emphasis in *The Slave Girl* (1977) that every woman must get married either they are free or slaves.

Thus, marriage is a centre socially to be seen among people, but in a way with price or with force. For Aku-nna, finishing her education is more important than everything else is; she insists and goes to the school where she meets Chike, one of her teacher. They both fall in love and plan to get married as she turns eighteen years old. In the end, they both get married happily but she dies at childbirth and names the babe "Joy". The name suggests a brighter future for the new female generation. For Emecheta, to overcome these problems, one must become a victim and die.

Emecheta's constant examples are obvious in the novel, stating in Ibuza as all the blames go to the girls. She does not only bring the issue to the world, it rather takes some sort of questioning by putting a question mark behind these beliefs. Precisely, women are the only victims in the community where she lives, blamed, and forced and are all on the women and just women. For Emecheta, the case of black women is inevitable, and the issue will continue. The only way to be away from these problems is to escape; that is the reason Emecheta names one of the sections as Escape.

The black female writers try to find a way for the protagonist, for example in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) Consolata dies at the end of the novel, so Consolata and Aku-nna both share the same escapism, which is death. The story is told through rumours to other girls that without bride payment, as she will die at the first childbirth. Another way can be to make the marriage happen is "kidnapping" which is a common tactic in Africa towards weak women. It is an exploitation of the women to force them agrees on the marriage. In addition, Emecheta is against such tradition in which victimization covers women in Africa. According to this, many women cannot resist and Emecheta shows it through the voice of Aku-naa: 'This is the end of all my dreams', she thought. 'They are kidnapping me.' (Ibid, p.65)

Emecheta is precise in making the picture of womanhood where silence, victim, and suffering are the guests. Patriarchal systems are relevant in question and double colonization by men that are depicted thoroughly in the novel. Moreover, *Aku-nna* and *Nnu Ego* are both Emecheta's victim through which the silent voice is given and to be spread around the world. 'A Double Colonization' used by Kristen H. Peterson and Anna Rutherford (1986) is evident in the novel to confirm that women in Ibuza, Nigeria, is a consistent issue without end. Furthermore, Emecheta's *Aku-nna* and *Nnu Ego* are two female victims whose unheard voice remains as they are suffocated and drowned within a community, where male power is over-controlling.

In line with this, Pasaribu et.al. (2017) explains the female issue in Victorian time through economical problems and family fortune. The idea of taking fortune or bride price is similar in way Emecheta brings up black women while Austen's characters are white. They share the same view in showing men are superior to women. Austen criticizes those who see women as inferior in terms of social status, economic, and value. Meanwhile, Emecheta elaborates further on the suffering of black women in a closed society where bride price becomes bride suffering for the rest of their life.

5. Conclusion

Emecheta is an outstanding feminist figure in African Modern Literature. Her fame lies in the portrayal of the black female in the society of Nigeria. Her female characters can be witnesses in supporting her work. Emecheta denotes her indirect anger in ethical cultural value as a group for the completely black community, a community that lacks societal support and vitality. They need a place where womanhood can be practiced like the rest of the women regardless of race, sex, and gender. *The Bride Price* is a message for the worldwide in proving that women can be women by themselves, able to make decision and changes. Indeed, *Aku-nna* stands alone among the people in Ibuza, Nigeria. A woman whose voice cannot be repressed and she rejects all the forms of traditions where patriarchy rules.

The study does not only reflect the real-life which is happening in Africa; however, this work is selected deliberately as in the researcher's country the same issue covers the mind of his society like a black cloud. Indeed the researcher tries to send his messages through this paper out to avoid such conflicts and spread self and cultural awareness among the society. Unpleasantly and unfortunately, under the name of religion, male dominancy controls the women's power and has full action as it can be seen in Africa and many other countries that women's right is nothing but some white ink on a piece of black paper. For sure, after the innovation of technology and world modernization, the existence of this idea would be rather a shame; in contrast, it still exists in the country of the researcher and many other under developing countries.

Concisely, to be precise and obvious, this paper is not only written to show the taste of the novel and give a literary analysis in one hand; on the contrary, raising self-awareness might be the main goal and objective behind this tiny research. Indeed, plenty of limitations disturb the idea of the researcher; but, still, none could able to stop him from sending out his words to tell the world that there should be an end of different kinds of tyrannies; such as marriage by force, male dominancy, degrading and underestimating women power, counting them as the third party.

As a brief overview of what is said above, female's marriage should be in their hands rather than selling them in the homes like a market place similar to any other goods. However, innovation and technologies are spreading their wings over the world, but words

and literature can be more effective in educating people and opening their thinking capacity. It is the right time to bring the change or just like those countries, where colour is a matter, soon gender differences will be a spread issue in case no solution can be found.

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