

## **Struggle of the Abject; Portrayal of Culture and Orphan hood in Buchi Emecheta's the Bride Price**

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### **Abstract**

The African continent exemplified life enlightened with culture and many of the African novels are the embodiment of the portrayal of culture within the African Society. Customs and traditions cease to enlighten when it turns out to be a taboo, instead it hastens annihilation. Buchi Emecheta, the prolific writer from Africa transcended her writing to the next level by delving deep into the soul of Africa. This paper is an attempt to examine how Emecheta illustrated the taboos which obliterate the life of a young girl Aku-nna and abiding the superstitions molded an orphan out of her and generated insecurity and emotional imbalance which finally amalgamated into a psychological trauma which resulted in her tragic end. Emecheta through this novel tried to throw light on to the dark arenas of culture. Read from different perspectives the novel offers an assurance towards a better future.

**Keywords:** African culture, Customs, Tradition, Women, Orphan hood

### **Introduction**

As man without women and society without culture is absurd, man and culture is intertwined and coexistent. Culture defines the best as code of conduct created and exercised by people for the benefit of people in a society, it laid the foundation of any society in which civilization occurs. Buchi Emecheta being an African born writer dodging culture from her writing is bizarre. Loaded with Nigerian culture, the novel *The Bride Price* remains a piece of cake for the readers, as it travels through the soul of the country. Africans took pride in their culture and worshipped it very religiously from time immemorial, as they are blessed with rich cultural traditions and customs.

African culture bestowed man the supreme authority over his family including women and children as Africa is a society built on the norms of patriarchy. He has to provide and protect his wives and children with whatever he earns. Imbibed with that he should not be questioned by his wife since she is bound to respect and obey him in and out. A wife's sole responsibility is to procreate for him as much as possible to increase the strength of his family and nurture his children and a childless woman is out of the scenario. The patriarchal conditioning is so immersed intensely into the psyche of women which shackled their basic sense of reasoning too. So when a father dies in the family it is believed that the children have become orphans though their mother subsists. Emecheta illustrates the unvarnished truth of African culture which fetters a woman in all aspects of her life in the absence of the protection of a man.

Aku-nna, a thirteen year old girl and her brother Nna-nndo, an eleven year old boy suddenly became bereaved of a family when their father Ezekiel died very unexpectedly due to a terminal wound he had in his leg. Aku-nna being inherently weak, felt devastated with the news of her father's death as she identified the fact that she is going to be an orphan from that day. Nna-nndo blurted out the very next moment he heard his father's demise "we have no father anymore. There is no longer any schooling for me. This is the end."(28) The children had not only lost their father, but also their entire childhood and life.

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 a head: a family without a shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much. (28)

Orphan hood is considered as the most dreadful state of living one should ever live to. An orphan is defined as a child who has lost both the parents to death, however many organizations like UNICEF accepts children who have lost only one parent mostly termed as half or single orphan in consideration with their dire state of living.

The US Immigration and Nationality Act section 101(b)(1)(F), defines an orphan as:

A child under the age of sixteen...who is an orphan because of the death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or loss from both parents or for whom the sole or surviving parent is incapable of providing the proper care.(1952)

A hideous situation where a child's life is shaped by circumstances which is out of his or her control. Suddenly propelled out of a comfort zone, perplexed and puzzled by the surroundings a child may become frantic towards the world who takes advantage of their dire need of love and affection. A legitimate family cannot be replaced with a forged one since parents do more than anybody else in the world can substitute with.

### **Protection of woman as the responsibility of man**

African culture insists that a woman should be consistently under the protection of a man and existence denying the male supremacy is detestable among African women. Women are indoctrinated with men's supremacy and authoritativeness so as to remain under the custody of a man. Aku-nna's family as well as all their belonging was inherited by her father's brother Okonkwo residing in the village named Ibuza. His ritual marriage with Ma Blackie made Okonkwo the sole authority over her family along with his many other wives and children. New to the place Aku-nna struggled to adapt to her new locale. The consequence was she was torn between many customs and traditions and she endured isolation and estrangement in the midst of numerous people. When Okonkwo decided to continue her schooling everybody in his family misconceived it as a concern for his brother's daughter which again proved erroneous. In the traditional Ibuza everyman yearns to become an Obi, a title given for chieftaincy. It will make an individual all powerful over the people of the village. Emecheta mimics the aspiration of the man to dominate his fellow beings, however modern he is. In the inner-self everyman's desire is to have maximum control over his woman and surroundings. It is with this selfish motive, initially doubtful Okonkwo later decided to send Aku-nna to school as it will fetch him more bride price by which he could consummate the celebrity status and titles he craved for.

It is evident that protection is taken for granted by the society since many men came forward to protect Akunna. Matchmaking was so rampant that many of the boys in Ibuza wanted to marry Aku-nna.

This girl was not exceptionally beautiful. In fact but for her education, there was nothing extraordinarily attractive about her. What appealed to all of them, though they did not realize it then, was the gentle helplessness about her. (119)

All of them is actually driven with the universal concept of prey and the predator. The predator trifled with the emotions of the prey till he finds the later psychologically

exasperated. The suitors were sure that if they get married to Aku-nna she will always remain a submissive wife and can be manipulated as per their whims and fancies, ultimately it is understood that even Aku-nna's boyfriend Chike loved her because of the fragility she had in her character, though it was a true love. Aku-nna in fact missed the secure hand of a parent and got a protecting hand who tries to manipulate her weakness.

### **Political complexity inside the family**

Polygamy was a conventional custom prevalent in Nigerian culture. A man could marry as many wives as he likes at any period of his lifetime and there will be many additions if any of his brothers made an untimely end. All the properties of the man including his wives and children is inherited by his elder brother, if the person concerning has no elder brother or any brothers then 'the properties' will be handed over to his cousin. Likewise Aku-nna, her brother and her mother comes to Okonkwo's house as an inherited property. Okonkwo Odia already owned three wives and their children of various age. Each of them scorned the other without reaching the surface and it was rather a cold war happening inside the family. Each woman in the family would be competing to procreate as many as possible in order to propitiate the husband. The false exhibition of endearment was a common scene which honeyed the withered relationships inside a single family making it more complex than societal politics.

Everybody in Okonkwo's family detested Ma Blackie and her children. Soon Ma Blackie identified herself as one among the wives and she too decided to try her hand in the family politics. Ma Blackie tried to excel the other wives and moulded a conniver out of her. Okonkwo's elder wife labeled Aku-nna as an ogbanje, a "living dead". Nobody cared to question this as Ma Blackie was so immersed in the family politics and also she inclined herself to Okonkwo as he gave her the long awaited child through which she proved her reproductive powers and regained her respect in the society. Her younger brother Nna-ndo was too young to question anything.

She had lost her father. Her mother was literally, lost to her, so deeply was Ma engulfed in the affairs of Okonkwo's household; it was difficult sometimes to remember that she had been married to Aku-nna's father.(89)

The mother never spared her time for her children, leaving them forlorn and abandoned; consequently Aku-nna and Nna-ndo familiarized themselves being an orphan and an outcaste inside their own family. It caused severe mental trauma in the teenage girl as she

was left unattended by her parents. The girl strove to capture attention and love from outside as she did not receive it inside the family. The story relates hoe the same happened with Aku-nna in the case of Chike.

### **Gender Roles and Camouflaged Sexism**

Africa has entrenched its roots firm and deep based on the custom of patriarchy. Emecheta articulates the accurate picture of a neglected section in disguise of the most glorified community. Women are labeled as divine beings and worshipped by the people of Africa on one hand, but concerning domestic violence and exploitation against women, the continent remains intact. A woman is considered worthless if barren and it is the same with those who bore only girls. Women are respected if they extend the family tree of her husband by giving birth to worthy and legendry sons. Men are more important than the women in the family. Ma Blackie travelled more than two hundred miles to placate the river goddess Oboshi, in order to give birth to more sons. In African culture a man is honored depending on the number of sons he bore and hence Ezekiel condemned her for giving him only one son. "I paid double the normal bride price for you; he told her. '... and we were married in church. But what have you given me- just one son!' he did not speak of Aku-nna. She was only a girl".(3) Though Ezekiel loved Aku-nna, she was too insignificant to be mentioned as his child because the society had taught him so. In Okonkwo's home also nobody questioned why Nna-nndo was sent to school and no one bothered or considered Aku-nna. The culture moulded an orphan out of her and she in turn evolved to be an introvert, insecure and emotionally needy.

Africa had its own rituals and customs regarding marriage as any other culture. The head of the family decided and bargained the bride price and when negotiated, fixed the deal. Bride price is the custom practiced by African society that when a woman was given in marriage the groom's family had to pay a lump sum to the bride's father in exchange of the girl. If a man has no money to pay the bride price, then he can forcibly cut a lock of hair from the girls head, and then she belonged to him and it is also acceptable to kidnap a girl and marry her without the consent. In either way the girl has no say in her own life. In addition the taboo entrusted the death of a girl in her first childbirth if the bride price is not paid.

When Okoboshi kidnapped Aku-nna to marry her she anticipated orphan hood when nobody requisitioned her at the time instead they abhorred her regarding the lie she said to Okoboshi, that she had already lost her virginity to somebody else. The scandal

humiliated Okonkwo and his whole clan since their culture held virginity immensely sacred for an unmarried woman. Emecheta focused on the deplorable lack of bond between Ma Blackie and her daughter. Aku-nna was being ignored and abandoned whenever she was at the peak of helplessness and she was able to identify that Orphan hood was not similar for both men and women but was excruciating for a girl.

### **Biological Father v/s Surrogate Father**

The role played by a father in his son's or daughter's life is exceptionally phenomenal. A father guarantees the audacity and security his child necessitates and he provides, protects and treasures his children. A father intentionally or unintentionally establishes an emotional balance in his children and this same perception of security and love binds man to the heavenly father. But a query remains unsettled, whether every child in this world gets same privileges. Aku-nna one among the hapless is bewildered with her inauspicious life. Akin to an orphaned child when Aku-nna loses her father, she loses her identity, emotional stability and is vulnerable to multiple psychological disorders. "Aku-nna knew that there was a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist between her and her mother."(12)

Relocated from Lagos Aku-nna confronted her surrogate father Okonkwo imposed upon her by the society built on culture and traditions. Emecheta paints Okonkwo's character to that of a typical chauvinist hegemonic African man. He being the supreme authority contemplates and decides on every single individual's life in his family for which they are supposed to follow or obey. He let Aku-nna continue her schooling not out of affection but for his own gain, profit motive drives him narcissistic. Concerning Aku-nna's marriage Okonkwo never consented her love for Chike since his genes counts back to the Osu, the slave community. Gruesome in his attitude he neglected the bride price offered by Chike's father, no matter how huge the amount is. Neither he exonerated Aku-nna, but he created certain kind of demonianism to eradicate her from the universe.

It was known in Ibuza that if you wish to get rid of someone who lived far away, 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... the victim usually died very slowly and very painfully. (156)

Aku-nna impregnated with Chike's child eventually turned anemic and feeble insisting herself it to be the result of Okonkwo's black art. Psychologically traumatized Aku-nna

asks Chike, whether her own father would have behaved the same. "I wonder why people hate one another so? Do you think my own father would have been so bitter?" Aku-nna's brother Nna-ndo also expressed his regret for the death of their father.

I wish our father had not died. We would still be in Lagos. I hate that man Okonkwo for marrying our mother. I hate this town. I hate what they are doing to you.(143)

The protagonist and her brother distinguished a difference between a biological father and a surrogate father. However stringent he is, a real father will never do anything which causes harm to his children. The lack of fatherly affection and concern is what is missing in a surrogate father.

## **Conclusion**

Culture may be seen as a pivotal point for enriching the identity of children. Culture also serves as a store of knowledge, values, connectedness, belonging and traditional practice, which is regarded as being essential to the general well-being of the child (Kayombo et al., 2005). Culture is something which enhances an individual's character but it takes a negative twist when it blindly follows certain taboos which may result in the complete destruction of a man. Aku-nna was a victim of taboos till the very end of her life.

Emecheta has explored the taboos that prevailed in the Nigerian society which should have been excommunicated so far. The author utilized the character Aku-nna who confronted numerable atrocities due to customs and traditions. Withstanding remains unsettled she concluded her life in tragedy, affected with emotional and psychological trauma Aku-nna expired pitifully in her first childbirth due to malnutrition and anemia. But society confirmed the superstitions behind her death. The ultimate reason behind all these mishaps is the death of her father or in other words Aku-nna became an orphan. Emecheta exposes the Nigerian society and their cultural aspects in all its true colours which gained her acceptance and acclaimed her as a genuine writer on an international scenario.

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