

To Be or Not To Be? Culture Violation and Emancipation in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

M. Krishnaraj

Associate Professor and Head Kandaswami Kandar's College Velur, Nammakkal (Dist),
India

Abstract

The Bride Price, published in 1976 is one of the first literary milestones that explore the uncompromising spirit of Aku-nna who audaciously rejects the Nigerian cultural and traditional lore to seek solace from the uncontrollable pressure and unfair hegemony that the Ibo community offers. The novel subtly protests the view of women valued only in terms of money or body rather than spirits and understanding. She is allowed a diploma only to enhance a maximum bride price. Emecheta's novel defies the social and marital convention that sees women as a source of wealth or a commodity.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Violation, Emancipation, Social

The name Aku-nna, which means, Father's wealth, is an economic indoctrination. Emecheta has chosen the name being fully aware of the commoditization of women in the name of creating a marital bond that not only subdues women but also positions them as a property than treating them an asset. The novel becomes a vehicle of social change from the archetypal and traditional outlook that has chained women in the names of cultures, taboos, patriarchal codes, myths, communal harmony, ethnicity, solidarity and rightful deprivations. She is alienated from the social strata in the names of utilitarianism and ownership by the patriarchal order because they are physically and psychologically inferior. Akunna experiences a dual ownership in the novel. The first is the ownership by her father who gives her a sense of identity and belongingness. The second is the ownership that her uncle gives, in the name of bride price and a liability. After her father's demise, she is not only alienated from her family but also from her community, Ibuza.

The customary practices of marrying off Aku-nna after her father's death and her attainment of puberty was to serve a dual purpose. The money could be used to pay her brother's fees and her uncle was desirous of gaining a title that would fetch him much more esteem than his present one, Eze. Consequently, Aku-nna chose to marry the man of her choice and deliberately defied the societal conventions and customs.

Aku-nna feels that the custom is more inhuman and makes people more unhappy. She is also emotionally blackmailed by her cousin to back off from her romantic relationships stating that, her father would not have allowed her to get into any relationship outside their clan had he been alive. Aku-nna has two choices at hand, one is to sustain and succumb to the familial and social pressures and the other is to refute the wishes and demands of her family by seeking a guilt free life away from the tyranny and torments of her community. She chose the latter to overcome the guilt of betraying herself and her love. She feels out of place when her individuality is not able to operate under societal and traditional factors. Aku-nna was doggedly resilient to explore and sense the premonitions that surrounded her life but still she could not but help trusting her

own self, upholding to her own decisive instincts to get what she needed from life and marriage. Diny Thomas Kutty and Dr. Helen Unius Backiavathy in their article titled, “ Struggle of the Abject: Portrayal of Culture and Orphan hood in Buchi Emecheta’s The Bride price observes,

Emechetta illustrated the taboos which obliterate the life of a young girl, Aku-nna and abiding the superstitions molded on an orphan out of her and generated her insecurity and emotional imbalance which finally amalgamated into a psychological trauma which resulted in her tragic end. Emechata through her novel, tried to throw light on to the dark arenas, of culture. (08)

The conflict of Aku -nna can be seen as a collide between western ideologies and Ibo moralities, which are well set and clearly defined. She became the best of both worlds and the worst of both worlds simultaneously. Chike, on the contrary was also more westernized than imbibing in him the attitude of slavery and submission. Chike, taught at a teacher training college, was in his early thirties, he was more humane and outspoken which made Aku-nna fall for him. Her life at Lagos brought her more modernity than what Ibuza culture would have taught her, had she been more akin to the rural Ibuza customs.

The conflict in the novel does not spring from her marriage to Chike but rather begins with her entry into Ibuza village following her father’s death. She violates the customs and norms even before meeting Chike. To begin with, puberty signifies a transition from childhood to womanhood. It is a moment of joy and celebration. Aku-nna conceals her attaining puberty for she feared that she would be married off to someone unknown. She fears womanhood as a biological and psychological entrapment because the beginnings of oppression begin after puberty. As feared by her, Aku-nna’s mother details and outlines all traditions and taboos she is required to abide to post puberty.

The girls of marriageable age at Ibuza are taught the importance and significance of the customary practice of bride price. They are also informed of the consequences of an unpaid or unaccepted bride price, which would either result in a failed marriage or a premature death of a woman. Aku-nna was not schooled in these traditional thoughts because her western education not only changed her outlook towards life, but also gave her the tenacity to defy the set norms and standards.

At a later point of time, Aku-nna is abducted by Okoboshi, her prospective husband. Aku-nna lies that she had slept with Chike in spite of knowing fully well that her chastity would be at stake in front of her community if she acceded to premarital sex. She brings in a self- inflicted disgrace to escape the forced marriage thereby defying the existing customs and the tradition of purity in sexuality before marriage. After a runaway marriage with Chike, Aku-nna dreams of a glorious and a prosperous life after marriage. Aku-nna begins to teach at a school and Chike too finds employment at Lagos following rapid industrialization. Their happiness is doubled and their joy gets multiplied with Aku-nna announces her pregnancy to Chike. The happiness is ephemeral and tradition takes turns to avenge her for her insidiousness. She is biologically weak at the first place and therefore the doctor warns her of a complicated pregnancy in case she had to continue further with the gestation. She is hurt and upset with the fact that Okonkwo has still not forgiven her for her cultural defiance. Psychologically, she is guilt ridden because, the thought of unpaid bride price boomerangs her to testify the fact that she would not

survive to see her first child. She dies, giving birth to a small girl by name Joy. Her death marks her end of all struggles and tussles she encountered with herself and her people.

Emecheta accepts that Aku-nna was her alter ego and was purposely created to gratify her own guilt of a troubled and a failed marriage. Aku-nna was too young to be able to understand whatever she had done to herself and to her family in the name of modernity and independence.

One of the reasons of her untimely death is the lack of proximity between herself and her mother, Ma Blackie. Firstly, Ezekiel gave Aku-nna more care than she could ever dream of. Second, her mother was alienated as much as Aku-nna was, following her father's death. After Ezekiel died, his wife is compelled to undergo a torturous mourning ritual for a period of nine months. During which, she was expected to wear only rags, must have none to meet her or talk to her. She was to live in a secluded place away from the hustles of everyday life. These nine months of her confinement made her alienated not only from Aku-nna but also from her clan.

Ma Blackie becomes the fourth wife to Okonkwo and begins to slowly get to the grooves of a second marriage and a pregnancy. Her new life at Ibuza neither gave her time for herself nor for her daughter Aku-nna. This was one of the reasons for Aku-nna's alienation and indecisiveness that made her more confused and vulnerable to biological and cultural snares in the name of love and defiant independence. She is made to understand that patriarchy gives men more freedom to wield the framework of social, sexual, psychological, physical and moral hegemony over women, because they are the weaker sex.

Aku-nna frees herself only from the molestations of Okoboshi but never from the tentacles of tradition and its tenets. She died not because of the death prophecy but because, she was too weak and much malnourished for a pregnancy. Added to it was a mounting stress, and loads of guilt which made her die sooner than she expected. She died hopeless and helpless making one realize the absurdity of child marriages which make girls like Aku-nna anemic and a malnourished victim.

The entire novel is an earnest record of events which reflect the life of the novelist Buchi Emecheta. The novel therefore is atonement though psychologically, to present the life of her own self wherein she tries to overcome the guilt of having married a man outside the African traditions and living a life of sinful existence. The novel is unique when the novelist had set its tone and temperament by making it more instructive than appealing. One could see that the novel had two different ends when it was published. The first climax was more optimistic where the heroine does not die and lives a life happily married after the birth of her child. The second climax is most chilling when the novelist writes with remorse and sympathy where she kills her own protagonist after child birth.

The entire novel is a record of a superstition which was ardently followed and practiced across Nigeria, the practice of giving money for the marriage of daughter. It is a reversal of the system of dowry which is a practice in the Indian custom. The novel says, "If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child" (168). The novel focuses on the colonial culture of having to follow the system of education and religion as laid down by the English men. To the west, the Africans were more brutal and the most barbaric and therefore the English education and Christianity would help them come out of their crude behavior patterns. The novel is an attempt to

show two of the most ambivalent customs in vogue. On the one hand, the writer takes pride in highlighting the culture of her own home town in Logos where it was customary to marry a daughter with huge bride price. On the other hand, the novel also highlights the madness which the people of Africa in general thought that it was right to ape the culture of the west. One could find that Akku-nna fell in love with Chike, not because, she liked him, but because she liked his attitude of imitating the west in his way of life and attitude.

In one of the instances of the novel, one could find that the heroine, gets her monthly cycle and suffers the most due to excruciating pain when Chike, comes to her to give her a sanitary napkin so as to denote his love and the modernization with which he impressed her. The love with Chike, a man from the lower rank was accentuated by the western ideals he had abided. Another reason for the runaway marriage was the fact that Akku-nna wanted to bid adieu to the traditional and dogmatic practices which were in vogue in her village then. Although Aku-nna took an audacious step of marrying against the wishes of her parents, without giving the required bride price, her death at the end of the novel is a warning to her fellow African girls that the violation of custom would result in the death of the custom and the person concerned. Her death therefore need not be looked at the point of science where one could interpret the fact that she was malnourished and did not have the necessary energy for giving birth of a child. It was because; she defied the customs of her soil. The novel is the result of the deliberate choice which was made to choose between the love for a man and the love for culture, customs and traditions. The novelist chose the winning of the latter at last.

Works Cited

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