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## **The Shackles of Colonialism: A Reading of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price***

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**Abstract:** Colonization and Christianity are seen to go hand in hand as the lands of Niger are occupied and its people enslaved. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is a story of an Ibo- Victorian woman who lives her twice colonized existence trying to make sense of the two legacies which have taken her captive. It is a feminist reading of the malpractices existing in a society which treats its women like commodities. Caught in the world of Colonial domination and Ibo patriarchy, the woman's position is reduced to that of a rag doll who is tossed about mercilessly. She becomes a pawn in the hands of the members of her society, her own family and the family she is married into. The faulty legal systems do not provide succor to the deprived even as the Osus continue to be treated as slaves inspite of a law which makes discrimination punishable.

This Paper will study the travails of the twice colonized woman through a close reading of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*.

**Keywords:** Ibo, Patriarchy, Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*.

Colonialism is a complex phenomenon. It is not merely about a foreign power taking over the "natives", its tentacles go much deeper. It is a phenomenon which makes slaves of follow human beings both physically and mentally. The mental shackles leave an everlasting damage so much so that years after colonization, the Neo -Colonial forces hold sway over the psyche of the erstwhile colonized nations. A lot of scholarship has gone into legitimizing colonization while playing lip service to the tenets of equality, fraternity and liberty. As the tension between liberal thoughts and colonialism continued to fight for space, the latter reached its zenith owing to the access to power and money that accompanied this mission. In order that colonialism gains



legitimacy, the binaries of ‘slave and master’, ‘civilized and uncivilized’, ‘cultured and uncultured’ were created and nurtured. In the preface to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre writes:

Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men and one thousand five hundred million natives. The former had the world; and the others the use of it. Between the two there were hired kinglets, overlords and bourgeoisie, sham from the beginning to the end, which served as go betweens. In the colonies the truth stood naked, but the citizens of the mother country preferred it with clothes on: the natives had to love them, something in the way mothers are loved. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 8)

The gendered colonial subject labours under the double yoke of patriarchy and colonialism and in the Ibo scenario – she leads a complex life as she tries to retain her cultural mores of the traditional past and at the same time, wishes to don the robes of her Victorian sister. The Ibo – Victorian woman is bereft of the singularity and pride of her precolonial past nor does she have the cushioning of the clannish support. She, therefore, exists as a vessel where confusion and conformity coexist. Aku Nna, the central protagonist of *The Bride Price* is a living example of the contradictions of her times who lives to please her father, allows her virginity to be the deciding factor of her life, dares to fall in love with a man of slave origins and finally unable to bridge the contradictions in the society, breathes her last hoping that her daughter’s life will be more fulfilling than hers. *The Bride Price* shows the complexities of the time where the proud Ibo clans have fallen giving rise to a regressive society which blindly apes its colonial masters while playing lip service to traditions which are seeped in patriarchy and misogyny.

### ***The Bride Price***

*The Bride Price* written in 1976 is Emecheta’s reflection on the changing times of the Colonial Iboland. It is set five years after the Second World War. The African men have been forced to fight



a war which has little relevance to them. The scars of the war affect their lives and change them irrevocably. The society too is turbulent. A new-fangled and fashionable European world view is seen jostling for space with the traditional way of life. Most Ibos do what seems most sensible to them – adopt Christianity as it assures them a white man’s job but in their heart of hearts, they remain just as traditional. In this world men have forgotten to be “men”. Gone is the erstwhile pride of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Here, men copy their European masters. While they perform domestic labour at the White man’s house, in their own houses they seek to lord it over their women. In the village, too, it is a story of extremes. The families who have not converted to Christianity, bend backwards to preserve their traditionalism. There is a degree of savageness about it as they know they are fighting a losing battle. In this world of confusion women lose out on their erstwhile status of being a good trader and sometimes even a title holder. Schooled in the European worldview they are taught to be like their Victorian sister – shy, reticent and entirely dependent on their men for all decision of their lives.

*The Bride Price* is the story of a young girl of thirteen called Aku- Nna. Caught in the crossfire of cultures, she is seen to epitomize the passivity expected out of women of her times. It is not as if she has no feelings but she has been schooled to please her father and her husband and she puts her life into it. Unable to negotiate between the Christian values she learns at school and the taboos of the land, she breathes her last in the hope that her daughter might have a better life than her. What is ironic is the fact that she also proves correct the age- old taboo of the land that if the bride price is not accepted by the bride’s parent, the marriage remains unblessed and therefore cursed.

The women in *The Bride Price* do not have the courage of Ona in *The Joy of Motherhood*, nor do they struggle to find their foothold in an alien world like Nnu Ego. It is almost as if these women have come to terms with their fate. Aku- Nana is Ona’s and Nnu Ego’s very patient sister. She knows that she can be of no joy to her parents as she’s only a girl but she aspires to marry rich so that her loving father may enjoy a large bride price. “Aku- Nna knew that she was too



insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this unfortunate marriage. Not only was she a girl but she was much too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump girl for a daughter”. (*The Bride Price* 3)

Although she failed to please her parents with her physical being, Aku- Nna’s father named her “Her father’s wealth”. He knew his shy daughter would marry well and bring him pride the only way a daughter could. She would fetch him a handsome bride price. “He had named her Aku- Nna, meaning literally ‘father’s wealth’, knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to.” (*The Bride Price* 4)

The world of Lagos painted by Emecheta depicts the changing face of Iboland which is reflected, among several things, in the twin legal system that was followed. In Nigeria in the early fifties there were two legal systems – the British judicial system and the customary judicial system. The dual system of courts seen in *The Bride Price* had been evolving through the colonial period and had evolved even further into a converted dual system after nationalism. According to Isichei:

Law was central to colonialism in Africa as conceived and implemented by Europeans and as understood, experienced and used by Africans. Law and courts, police and prisons formed essential elements in European efforts to establish and maintain political domination. They were instrumental as well in reshaping local economies to promote the production of exports for European markets and the mobilization of labour for African and European enterprises... Finally, Europeans believed that they were in Africa for the local people’s own good. The idea of rule of law seemed to them to provide evidence of this fact, and it powerfully legitimized colonial rule. (*A History of the Ibo People* 56)

The legal system is important as Emecheta discusses the legal battle between the Ofulues and the Obidis. The actual historical and political background of Ibuza helps explain why Emecheta portrays that “the whole town of Ibuza” turned out against the alien and slave Ofulue family in the British law court. Having grown up in Lagos, Aku Nna is ignorant of the marriage customs in



Ibuza. She falls in love with her teacher, Chike, who is an Osu, or a slave. Though Chike has attended St. Thomas' Teacher's Training in Ibuza, people still call him "descendent of slave", behind his back. Aku Nna is quite unaware of the stigma which is attached to Chike's family. In 1956, the Act of Emancipation of the Abolition of Osu law was passed. This law makes it illegal for anyone to be called by the name of Osu. In spite of the law, the social ostracism continued to remain.

According to the Ibo customs, Aku -nna is eligible for legal customary marriage when she begins to menstruate around age fifteen. Here, Emecheta follows the Ibo tradition in portraying that most Ibo girls were betrothed and entered an arranged customary marriage soon after their first menstruation. The sociologist in Emecheta continues to interpret for the West, the various cultural practices of the Ibo- Yoruba culture. The customs followed by the people have a mixture of both the traditional and colonial cultures. Among the Ibos who had embraced Christianity, a chose link with the traditional practices continued to remain. A marriage would be performed with all the traditional rituals and then the couple would seek blessings from the church. A funeral would have all the traditional trappings and a priest would be called in from the church to be a part of it. This rather interesting coexistence of cultures is seen in the Odia household. Aku-Nna's mother Ma Blackie is not able to conceive easily like most women. In order to produce more sons, she is sent to all the native doctors in Lagos. When this fails, she is made to join the Cherubim and Seraphim sect as they have a "strange" way of praying. Finally, when nothing works Ma Blackie leaves for her home town Ibuza to pray to the river goddess to give her more children. Though Ezekiel Odia is a peaceful man he never stops telling his wife that considering the fact that he had paid a large bride price for her there was very little to show for their marriage for all she had given him was one son. But being a monogamous man at heart he refused to marry again. Also, the strain of the city life showed in his decision as he knew he could scarce cope with more wives and a very large family. Ezekiel Odia, in life and death, mirrored the confusion of mixed cultures. While he liked to proclaim himself a practicing Christian he would not hesitate to go to a native doctor. He even



keeps a magical potion hidden behind the picture of their church marriage. The traditional beliefs were considered timeless and a part of one's daily existence whereas everything European was seen to be modern and therefore fashionable. Commenting on the mixed cultures Emecheta writes:

Lagos culture was such an unfortunate conglomeration of both so that you ended up not knowing to which you belonged. In his lifetime 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, and to pray before and after meals but this did not prevent him calling in a native medicine man when the time arose. (*The Bride Price* 5)

Ezekiel Odi in life and death signifies the conglomeration of cultures which has created a great chasm and confusion in his psyche. When he dies all hell breaks loose as there is a debate on whether he should go to the earth as the Ibo customs demand or to the heaven as preached by the church. While the Christian choristers try to outdo the pagan ones, little Nna-nndo, his son is called upon to decide his dead father's fate. He chooses heaven as it seems more attractive which annoy his male relatives but the women seem happy with his choice. Anything European had to be more attractive than its native counterpart.

*The Bride Price* is characterized by women who have forgotten their past glory. So caught up they are in the social web of confused existence that their position is lamentable. There is not a single voice of reason here. Women are shown to be toeing the line of their men unquestioningly. Both Ma Blackie and Aku-Nna represent this kind of women. Aku-Nna displays her independence only once when she lies to her husband who tries to make love to her forcibly. Otherwise, she is seen as a placid and a fairly meek woman. She is also physically underdeveloped which is the reason for her death during childbirth. She does not even try to will herself to live. When Ezekiel dies Aku-Nna mourns the death of both her parents. According to the Ibo custom if you lose your father you



are orphaned as the mother does not count as a parent. There is a description of the widowhood rites which Ma Blackie is forced to go through.

Aku-Nna is proved right as immediately after her husband's death Ma Blackie is forced to come back to the village Ibuza which is the land of her in laws. Her period of mourning is more than other women as her husband had cut a lock of her hair. Such a woman could never leave her husband and if he dies, her period of mourning would be for nine moons rather than the customary seven moons. After the mourning, Ma Blackie would be inherited by her husband's brother. The mourning too is rather severe for the woman. "Ma Blackie was to remain alone in this special hut; not until the months of mourning were over could she visit people in their homes. She must never have a bath. No pair of scissors nor comb should touch her hair. She must wear continually the same old smoked rags." (*The Bride Price* 72)

Aku-Nna has a very short life. She dies at the age of sixteen. In all sixteen years of her life, she plays out the role of a virtuous Ibo- Victorian woman. So influenced is she by her school and its teachings that she models her life on the Christian tenets. In the world where she grows up the two world views are preached simultaneously and she spends her entire life trying to make sense of it. As a traditional Ibo girl her mind knows no peace till her bride price is accepted by her uncle and as a student of a Christian school, she is not able to discriminate against a family of descendants of slaves therefore committing the most 'heinous' crime of falling in love with Chike, an Osu. Osus are untouchables and it is unthinkable for 'free borns' to associate with them. Right from her childhood Aku-Nna is a shy and reticent child. It is almost as if she knows how inconsequential her life is to her family and chooses not to question it. She has been trained to do the household work which she does with as much perfection as she can manage. Her school is of great delight to her and she is immensely thankful to her mother for letting her continue in school even in Ibuza. As Aku-Nna grows up she slowly becomes aware of the puberty rites practiced by the clan. When a girl comes of age, sacrifices are made for her well- being. There are several menstrual taboos she has to





adhere to. She must not visit the stream nor must she enter the household where the man of the family had a 'Eze' of "Alo" title.

It is also her ignorance of the traditional Ibo beliefs that results in her falling in love with Chike, the descendant of a slave. Chike is their school teacher who nurtures a soft corner for Aku-Nna. He is educated, kind and comes from a well to do family. But unfortunately, he also happens to be a descendant of a slave women. The prejudices against the slave families run so deep that though Chike and his brothers are educated they are not allowed to marry any women of the village. A slave is not allowed to look upon a free born with desire. Chike is duly warned by his father not to look upon Aku-Nna with desire because he can never aspire to have her. But Chike's father also know of the immense greed of Okonkwo and wish to play upon it by paying him a very big bride price. It is at this point of time that disaster strikes and yet another heinous act is perpetrated as Aku-Nna is kidnapped by Okoboshi. This incident plays out yet another crime against women but according to the social diktats there is nothing anyone can do to save Aku-Nna. All a lover was expected to do was to cut off a lock of hair from his beloved and she was forced to belong to him for life.

Even as they were doing all this, they knew it was useless. Aku-Nna had gone. All that man responsible had to do was to cut a lock of her hair –'isi nmo' – and she would belong to him for life. Or he could force her into sleeping with him, and if she refused this his people would assist him by holding her down till she was disvirgined. And when that had been done, no other person would want to take her anymore. (*The Bride Price* 138)

When Aku-Nna realized that all doors have been closed for her she decides to pay Okoboshi in his own coins. She tells him that she is not a virgin and that she has been disvirgined by a slave born. This is Aku Nna's sole act of rebellion which results in her complete debasement in the village society but earns her a life in the city of Asaba with her true love, Chike.



Chike gets a good job at the oil fields and the newly-weds start their life with mutual understanding and love. In the village their names are sullied and those associated with them are punished. But Aku Nna continues to remain conflicted and eventually breathes her last after giving birth to a daughter. Emecheta ironically comments on Aku-Nna's life saying that she had actually proved true the age-old taboo of dying at childbirth if the bride price was not paid. In spite of Aku-Nna's and her husband's Western education they are not able to fight against the dogmatic rules of the society. They fall prey to the greed and lust of their own people for daring to disobey and craft a life of their own.

So it was that Chika and Aku-Nna substantiated the traditional superstition that they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-Nna's death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children's children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold that existed for a very long time. (*The Bride Price* 135)

Slave imagery dominates *The Bride Price*. It's prevalent through the text and links it to Emecheta's other slave narrative, *The Slave Girl*. On Chike's first visit to Aku Nna's patrilineal home after she has become secretly eligible for marriage, his family's slave background dominates the scene. The lovers sit on a mat on a mud couch. The wealth of symbolism simply reflected in a woven mat arises from the mat's origin and history. It was made in Sierra Leone and brought to Lagos. Lagos had a history of many former slaves settled there. Perhaps half the population of Lagos in 1850 was slaves, most of whom became rich and powerful, similar to the Ofulues in Ibuza. (*A History of the Ibo People* 67) More slavery symbolism is contained in the detail that the mat was made in Sierra Leone.



*The Bride Price* is set in a momentous phase in Nigerian history. The co-existence of the British and Nigerian cultural mores and legal systems play out in the backdrop of the star - crossed love story. Emecheta's ending is rather ambiguous but her sympathies very obviously lie with the women who have become pawns in this culture of one upmanship.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we see that Colonialism creates innumerable complexities in the Ibo society. By creating a newfangled elite culture, the society faces stratification like never before. The traditional Ibo society respects money and wealth but it has to be earned with solid hard work. With the white man's jobs, the concept of white collared job is introduced. Farming is looked down upon and there is a mass exodus towards the cities. The traditional Ibo clannish structure crumbles. With money becoming the buzzword of existence, ethics are entirely forgotten. All this coupled with a new religion which is also the key to the rosy lifestyle of the Whites, further complicated matters. In all this the women's life is no better than that of a slave girl. Bereft of the cushioning provided by the traditional societies, she is left to fend for herself in this alien world. Caught in the crossfire of the changing society, she is trapped body and mind. But even in this pitiable condition she has a mind of her own. She struggles against her bondages, falls, but struggles again. In spite of the severe oppression one cannot but admire her indomitable spirit.

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