



**A STUDY OF PRE-COLONIAL/ COLONIAL AFRICAN
WOMAN IN THE BRIDE PRICE AND THE JOYS OF
MOTHERHOOD**

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ABSTRACT

The tale of the African country is told in early African literature by male protagonists like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyika, and Cyprian Ekwensi. Generally speaking, the female characters are relegated to supporting roles, and their lives are presented as harmonious and satisfying as long as they adhere to the prescribed social norms. Women writers in Africa show the reader the other side of the story, illuminating the realities of women's lives in a patriarchal society by revealing the customs, superstitions, rules, and taboos that confine and diminish their very existence. Emecheta's paintings, on the other hand, are far more nuanced and reflective of a sophisticated understanding of social realities. Without sugarcoating the bad treatment African women get in society, Emecheta depicts the actual African lady. She does not, however, ignore the many admirable and constructive aspects of our culture's treatment of women. Ma Blackie from *Bride Price* represents the negative vision, while Ona from *Joys of Motherhood* represents the good. The ambiguous position that African women held in society are best shown by studying the gynography of Nigerian women, which is presented in *The International Women's Movement Anthology*, *Sisterhood is Global*.

KEYWORDS: - African Woman, Bride Price, Joys Of Motherhood, African women

INTRODUCTION

The property a woman brings into a marriage and her share of the money earned during the marriage belong to her. Polygamy is generally accepted and tolerated. The bride's family must pay the bride price to the bridegroom's. After being married, a lady is expected to adopt her new husband's surname. If a man has more than one wife, he must give each one the same treatment and provide them their own bedroom. In most cases, the father is awarded custody of his children; in the event of his death, his relatives would take up the role. Jobs as a parent are shared between two people. Because they are not legally considered his children, fathers

often refuse to pay for their daughters' education. (Morgan Five-Hundred).

The *Bride Price*, by Buchi Emecheta, was his first major foray into narrative fiction. The *Bride Price*, published in 1976, is about this woman's transition into adulthood and marriage; *The Slave Girl* is about her youth; and *The Joys of parenthood* is about, well, parenthood. Adah, her fictionalized self from *The Second Class Citizen*, wrote a book called *The Bride Price*, which she dedicated to her mother, Alice Ogbanje Emecheta. Aku-nna clearly sees parallels between herself and Ma Blackie, her fictional mother. The tale starts with Akunna and her brother NnaNdo returning to the Ibo



hamlet of Ibuza after spending their formative years in Lagos. Akunna, who was born at the tail end of WWII like Buchi Emecheta, beckons the reader to empathize with the writer. The novel focuses on how women might be held captive by conventional ideology even if they otherwise adhere to a more contemporary worldview. As the novel comes to a close, Emecheta reveals more personal details about herself: "In a personal way Emecheta draws a parallel between herself and the fictional Akunna and contends that she feels convinced that like Akunna, her own marriage broke up because she did not allow her prospective husband to pay her bride price" (Emenyonu 135). Like Emecheta's earlier works, *The Bride Price* meticulously depicts African culture and traditions from a female perspective, much like the novels of male authors like Achebe. She claims, "I write about Africa from the West and Africa for Africans..." When I sit down to write, I try to identify an issue in that culture from the perspective of a woman (Emenyonu 131). Emecheta highlights the negative aspects of African culture, particularly the stresses placed on women and the "weaker sex" through harmful practices like as polygamy, arranged marriages, constant pregnancy, and widowhood. In contrast to the masculine canon, her works focus on the struggle of women in society.

Emecheta does not hold back her criticism of the traditional African society that exploits, degrades, and abuses its women to the point that they are rendered mentally and psychologically paralyzed, despite the fact that she does admire some parts of African life. Emecheta believes that women are the most marginalized,

disadvantaged, and unfortunate people in society, hence she has made defending the rights of women her personal mission in life (Osa 124).

The ladies of the Dark Continent undergo a series of rites and ceremonies designed to welcome them into society. In *The Bride Price*, Buchi Emecheta meticulously details Akunna's immersion into traditional African society and its mores via the many religious and social rites that are an integral component of African culture. After the death of her father (the breadwinner in Western settings), Akunna and her family are seen returning to their traditional roots in Iboland from colonial Lagos. She is shocked by the funeral songs and rituals into facing realities like death in the family. Emecheta's seemingly endless anthropological descriptions in the book (possibly an attempt to one-up male authors like Achebe) serve only to distract from the story's primary focus. They aren't distractions since we can see how they connect to Akunna's growth as a woman and an African-American person. In *Bride Price*, Emecheta depicts a young African girl's coming-of-age via a variety of traditional African ceremonies. Time-honored practices, such as the burial ceremony, wake-up songs and dances, and the communal loud sorrow of the departed soul, are described, elucidating the civilization and culture of ancient Ibo society. The chapter entitled "Death," which is a true portrayal of a civilization with its various beliefs and taboos, then goes on to discuss the special ceremonies for the widows that come after a death. Emecheta illustrates the painful reality when she discusses the position of women in traditional African society, despite her deep affection for her culture and the old



rituals of the region. While sociological research suggests that women had a fair amount of independence, Bride Price contradicts this idea by depicting women like AkuNna and Ma Blackie as helpless victims of male privilege.

The story also incorporates other components of traditional African culture, such as teenage courtship rituals. Emecheta gives them the label "night games" to prove that women are enslaved: "Their custom allowed this." It wasn't unusual for boys to visit your home and playfully squeeze your breasts till they hurt (BP 99). Emecheta goes into great detail on the anthropological traditions of the country. She describes the age groups as having been "created at three year intervals," and then shows them doing fertility dances in honor of Akunna's passage into womanhood. By doing so, Emecheta shows how much the main character has come to embrace her African heritage. A paraphrase of Lloyd Brown's She matures as a person by coming to understand and appreciate the customs, norms, and institutions by which her group honors its history and shapes its future. Emecheta uses the description of other African rituals as a way to gain the reader's compassion for the ladies in his story (50). The strange traditions of the area, which cast women in the role of helpless victims, are a part of the story. Young women in Ibuza need to be ready for anything. Some poor young man would slip out of the bush and shave off a girl's curl, making her his forever and preventing her from ever seeing her parents again. Akunna experiences this at its worst when the cripple Okoboshi kidnaps her to make her his wife. The title "Bride Price" comes from a local tradition in which the

bridegroom's family traditionally presents the bride's family with a monetary gift based on their estimation of the bride's worth upon marriage. Only weddings that followed these rituals were recognized legally by the community. The narrative centers on characters who defy such norms.

THE BRIDE PRICE AND THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

In Bride Price, one of the things that people are rebelling against is polygamy, a horrible African practice that guarantees male power and chaos. Akunna is greeted by her cousin as soon as she returns to her original traditional hamlet with the words, "You still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people?" My father has inherited your mother (and everything of your father's hard-earned possessions) (63). Similarly, he was to get the bride price paid for Akunna when she was a girl. Since he wanted to be Obi, he was banking on the high bride price that an intelligent Akunna would bring. She runs away with Chike, a man of slave descent, when he rescues her from an abductor who is carrying out the dishonorable divorce of her mother and stepfather. It was common practice for a guy to publicly exhibit his privates to his wife if he no longer desired her (163). That's why her stepfather doesn't want Ma Blackie, wife number four. In Lagos, the woman's wonderful spouse was her only valuable asset; now she shares her husband with Ozubu. Ozubu was already envious of Okonkwo's second young wife. By telling Ma Blackie, "I don't know where that dry stick Ezebona is going to get children from," she reveals the local norms and practices. He is quite content to give her his whole fortune. However, he would remind my other roommate and me



that he spent twenty pounds on our heads whenever we complained of a headache. (BP 45) Emecheta uses snippets of conversations to illustrate the dehumanizing societal structure that permits male adultery. Emecheta condemns the practice of polygamy across Africa, describing how men deflowered young girls and adamantly required that their own wives remain virgins, as well as how young girls were married off to men old enough to be their fathers (99). Impotent men in these relationships sometimes turned a blind eye to their wives' extramarital affairs because they took pride in supplying yams to their wives' many homes. All of these practices and beliefs are indicative of a very patriarchal society in which women had a subservient role. Inheritance of widows by brothers-in-law, the custom that a man could make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendants of slaves, and a number of other stifling manifestations of traditional culture in *The Bride Price* are all determined and enforced by men, as Katherine Frank says. (Frank, *The Slave Girl's Tragic End*, page 483) Okonkwo, the patriarch of the family, exemplifies traditional male dominance in Africa. This is made very clear when he instructs Akunna (upon transitioning to a woman) to cut off all ties with Chike, the freed slave's descendent; their friendship is doomed. And yet, it must perish.

His tone just now was one of authority, of the type of power that is legitimized by the rule of law. Subtly, he was informing her that she was trapped and couldn't get away. As a result, she became entangled in the complex web of Ibo customs. (119)

Akunna's thoughts reveal the increasing influence traditional Africa was having on her mind. To add insult to injury, her father gave her the name "Akunna," which means "father,s wealth," since it was "the only consolation he could count on from her" (4) as a female child, according to legend. Once she is an orphan, she is informed, "until you marry," no one will care about her again. Your spouse will thereafter be responsible for your care. (36). Therefore, it has been unanimously decreed that a woman's ties to her husband are eternal, and that she is to spend the rest of her life in pleasant obedience to him. A single African lady had no standing in society. Your mother is merely a woman, and women are meant to be boneless, Akunna's cousin explains to her about the beliefs of the Ibuza people. A family without a father is essentially a nonexistent family; without a breadwinner, there is no safe place for the children to call home. Such customs seldom undergo significant alteration. (25) In this work, Emecheta focuses on the role of women in pre-colonial Africa. As a historical document, *Bride Price* lists the prevalent cultural norms and attitudes of the time period, many of which had negative effects on the country's most vulnerable citizens. The book *The Bride Price* uses its protagonist and antagonist to symbolize societal norms and superstitions. Chike represents the "untouchable" oshu/slave class while Akunna holds her father's dream for a bride price. Despite their inherent strength and resourcefulness, conventional norms and values crush Akunna and Chike because of their gender and their birth circumstances. As the novel's title implies, the woman is a saleable commodity who moves from one owner (her father) to



another (her husband), with the price of her body established in advance. Against the pleas of her halfbrothers, Okonkwo is paying for Akunna to stay in school a little longer than her contemporaries so that she might earn more money for the family. Numerous suitors are given the opportunity to perform physical sports with her in front of her mother in her hut before they are engaged. Since there was "no way of telling which of them would win her uncle's approval," (122) her thoughts about randomly entertaining them revealed the beginnings of a rebellion. As a result, African women are reduced to nothing more than auction items.

Even in Akunna's words of love and thanks to Chike, the slave mentality is present: "I shall serve you till I die." This shows that the position of the African woman is no better than that of a slave. I promise to be a supportive and kind wife (156). Akunna's death is the result of her conformist African mindset, which condemns her to hell for marrying a guy whose wedding price her father refused to pay. Her story was meant to teach a lesson that would strengthen patriarchy: Accepting the spouse selected for her by her people and paying the bride price were necessities if a girl wanted to live long enough to see her children's children. Without the bride price, she would die giving birth to her first child. This mental stranglehold persisted for a long period. (177) With this ironic decision from Ibuza, Emecheta brings the story to a close. The author uses irony as a weapon in each of her books to drive her message home. She mocks the outdated beliefs that stunt the population's mental development in *Bride Price*. When women are on the receiving end of patriarchal frameworks, readers feel

sorry for them. Slaves in *Bride Price* are also a marginalized group, with Chike standing in for them as their representative. Emecheta condemns the unreasonable prejudice that causes certain Africans to refer to a subset of their own people as "slaves" or "osu." From Akunna's friend Ogugua's initial warning to her to the heartrending wails of her mother, who, despite her liking for Chike, bewails her lot in being saddled with such a daughter, the attitude of the free born natives of Ibuza toward a relationship with a slave born is presented throughout the novel. Had "they ever seen a girl like this daughter of hers," who was coveted by so many fine families but instead chose a common one, they would have been shocked (125). To have a family's excellent ancestry tainted by slave blood was seen as the worst humiliation that could befall them. Emecheta exposes the absurdity of this classification by outlining the history and current situation of the Ofulues, the purported descendants of slaves.

Chike's great-grandmother was a princess who was taken in battle and sold into slavery. Several hundred years later, the Ofulues family had grown to become one of the most prominent and prosperous in the tribe. Chike belonged to a formerly enslaved class that had ascended to the middle class via exposure to Western culture and education. However, elder Ofulue's statements show the unreasonable and uncompromising attitude of the old concepts: While he served in the Native Administration, he was never recognized as a chief by the populace. His offspring served as educators and caregivers in their communities, providing free healthcare to the elderly. But they remained slaves all



the same, oshu. (86) Emecheta's *Bride Price*, like all postcolonial literature, is a record of the impact of colonialism on the native culture and environment. As time passes, Western values and customs infiltrate into the region, with mixed results for the future of the inhabitants.

It's possible that the blending of Eastern and Western cultures is one result of the cultural clash. The emergence of Chike reflects the gradual penetration of European ideas and customs into Iboland, Africa, and the subsequent Westernization of the region. Early chapters of the book provide a detailed description of the effects of colonial invasion and the ways in which local culture adapted to them.

AFRICAN WOMAN LIFE

The African woman's life was likewise firmly under the man's direction. They bore a double yoke, working both in the home and on the farm, for little financial reward. The Marxist idea of alienation is imposed in both the public sphere and private sphere for women. They have no say in their sexual and reproductive lives. This is especially important in African culture, where the father is considered the legal owner of any children born during the marriage, regardless of whether or not they are his biological offspring. Male ownership power in this system is indicative of the widespread sexism and heterosexism in Africa. In order to meet the emotional and financial requirements of the breadwinner, women had to put their own wants on the back burner. Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood*, which depicts the struggles of a black woman in a colonial setting, gives voice to these elements of women's subjection. Overall, the work forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable truth that African culture

was overtly patriarchal. Men and women have well defined roles in society: she provides for you and bears your children; you provide for her and take care of her. Men never look their age, whereas women might become unattractive with age. He has grown into his age with grace and dignity. (71)

In this society, African women are relegated to the position of mother. She would be branded a "failed woman" if she was unable to conceive, since this was an unforgivable sin in her society. When Nnu Ego's first marriage to Amatokwu ended in childlessness, he informed her cruelly that she had failed in her role and must make way for a new wife, denying her even the most fundamental of marital rights: I am a busy man. I can't risk passing on my sterile sperm to an unworthy female partner (32). This results in her being shamefully sent back to her father's home, where she is promptly wed to a Nnaife in Lagos. There, she gives birth to children (including males) with ferocity, while her co-wife, Adaku, takes the blame for failing to provide a male heir for her husband. Adaku's neighbor, who is conditioned to believe in the rightness of the patriarchal system, condemns her for her fight with Nnu Ego, saying that she has no right to speak up because she has failed to fulfill her role in life, which was to ensure her husband's immortality through the birth of male offspring. Polygamy is a similar evil. In traditional communities, polygamy was tolerated since women were seen as property. The familial unit, however, adhered to pragmatic norms of the day. It gave each woman privacy in her own dwelling and fostered female unity so that they might challenge their husbands' authority when necessary. However, the



man had responsibilities to his wife under these norms that he was expected to uphold regardless of his personal preferences. The women's group immediately put a stop to any insubordination. Amadi's *Estrangement* makes it obvious that in pre-colonial countries, women's associations had legal authority to enforce norms about interactions between the sexes. However, when times changed due to modernity, this method eventually failed. Such village-level safeguards were irrelevant in the city, where women were subjected to much greater levels of sexual and psychological abuse. *Joys of Motherhood* depicts this kind of situation. Sharing a spouse may cause worry for women on two fronts: their personal safety and the safety of their children. Both Nnu Ego and Adaku are uneasy about their own and their offspring's worth, which makes them distrustful of each other and prone to jealousy. Nnu Ego is envious of Adaku's commercial success, whereas Adaku would give up all she has to marry one of Nnu Ego's sons, according to Frank (*Death of the Slave Girl*, 488). As a result, Nnu Ego had more kids than she could handle, and Adaku, who couldn't have boys, turned to prostitution.

Africa's female population places a premium on childbearing. This work is a satirical takedown of conventional wisdom. In traditional African communities, a woman's worth was determined by her ability to have children. Women were expected to marry and have children as their only source of happiness throughout life. Women's entire worth lay in passing on the male gene and generating offspring for their male partners. Frank writes in *Death of the Slave Girl*, "a

woman's only power is her procreative power, and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable in her own eyes and in the eyes of those in her culture." Nnu Ego, who is bound by custom, sees childbirth as a source of pride and honor, and she believes she must protect this investment at all costs. Finally, she comes to terms with the fact that motherhood, far from being a source of happiness for her, has instead served as a kind of imprisonment, keeping her bound by her boundless love for her children.

CONCLUSION

The prevalent stereotype of an African woman is one of boundless vitality, exemplified by the image of a large lady supporting a kid in an oja while standing in the scorching heat. As researchers dig deeper into the lives of African women, they are uncovering a dynamic in the evolution of African women's perspectives on the world and their place in it. The African woman went through many mental shifts as seismic events like colonialism, civil conflict, and independence reshaped the continent. The cultural values of the people involved in these historical events left an imprint on the African continent. African women of the modern era are seen as walking representations of their staple food, pounded yam, which they spend their days laboriously preparing, while the concept of the legendary Amazonian woman warrior, who forms a socio-political as well as a sexual threat to the debilitating hegemonic discourses, is worlds apart (Nnoromale 182). This suggests that throughout this time period, African women experienced a significant cultural shift. The colonial process, which began in the 15th century and continued until the first part of the 20th century, was



a terrible confrontation between European powers and the African people. The Europeans hoped to inculcate in the Africans ideas of racial superiority and ethnocentrism that would persist for centuries. Even more devastating to the African woman was the colonial discourse, with its resolute standards of Victorian patriarchal conceptions. The colonial experience unquestionably altered the way African women think.

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