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Facets of Alienation in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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Abstract

Alienation refers to the social alienation of people from aspects of their human nature. Marx believed that alienation is a systematic result of capitalism. When slavery has torn apart one's heritage, when the past is more real than the present and when the rage of a dead body can literally rock a house, then the traditional novel is no longer an adequate instrument. Images of women differ from country to country. What is the image of women conceived by African writers especially Buchi Emecheta? Their delineation is the image of women which gets reflected in literature. With changing times, the cachet of women in society has been constantly questioned and for centuries women have struggled to find their place in a world that is predominantly male oriented. Feminism among creators limited the extent of patriarchal society and believed in the potential of women. In creating such characters, the portrayal ranged from individuals to stereotypes of good and evil. Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Bride Price* has created women who are far from stereotypes. They are

represented in the shades of gray. The fiction represents the phallogentric macrocosm of the African life where women are placed below men and still feel confinement at various levels.

Keywords

Alienation; Women; Individuality; Identity.

Post-colonialism in Africa refers to the era between 1960 and 1970; during the period, African nations gained their independence from colonial rules, many authors were writing before and after independence and their works reflected the political and cultural conditions of their countries. African writers in this period wrote both in western language and in traditional African languages. Post colonial works often deal with conflicts between the past and the future and the difficulty of maintaining an African identity in the face of globalization. African women arrived on the literary scene much later than their male counterparts did. Cultural impediments to the education of women, coupled with the sexism of the colonial system kept girls out of the earliest missionary schools. In *The Bride Price* (1976), Emecheta illustrates the injustice of male chauvinism and caste restrictions in her native country. The story sets in Lagos and Ibadan during the 1950's. The protagonist is Aku-nna, a young Nigerian girl whose father dies when she is thirteen, leaving her in the charge of her father's brother. Aku-nna manages to remain in school only because her uncle believes it will increase her bride price. However, she falls in love with her teacher, Chike, a descendant of slaves whose social status prohibits their involvement. Despite the protestations of her family and a potential suitor who kidnaps her, Aku-nna dies during childbirth, fulfilling the fateful superstition that the women whose bride price is unpaid will not survive the birth of her first child.

Emecheta observes that "There's an old saying that "love will always find

a way". But is that true? What happens if love is forbidden by customs and tradition? How can love find a way then? Tradition is not an easy enemy to fight". The novel is particularly strong representation of the collective solidarity, with the voice of the tribe or the voices of the sub-groups of the tribe, changing the codes of conduct like a Greek chorus. *The Bride Price* is as much as acknowledgement of power of this tribal super-ego, as it is a diatribe against the old ways.

Aku-nna had a special bond with her father. Her name symbolizes Father's Wealth, which means she is going to marry a rich man of whom her father would approve and afford a more expensive Bride Price. Aku-nna, as a child does not mind belonging to the father to whom she feels bound by a kind of closeness to which she could not give name. Before going to the hospital, her father reminds her, "Always remember that you are mine" (BP 8). For Aku-nna, it was a blissful occasion for father represents a strong bond and refuge from which would later excluded by his death.

After, Aku-nna received the news of his father's death, she felt breathless and sharply painful. At the first chapter itself Emecheta makes her heroine isolated. Aku-nna herself said,

We have no father anymore. There is no longer any schooling for me. This is end. It is not that, we have no father anymore; we have no parents anymore. Did not our father rightly call you NnoOnndo, meaning'father is the shelter'? So not only have we lost a father, we have lost our life, our shelter! (BP 24)

In the absence of her biological father, her uncle, Okonkwo become her father reverts the right of ownership. Her alienation from the Ibuza community becomes total when her family moves down to rural Ibuza. Buchi Emecehta herself acknowledges this and for girl in Africa one should need a father figure. Her own father always called her "nnem" (BP 17).

Even though her mother is alive, Aku-nna is treated like an orphan. Aku-

nna perceives herself an orphan, as represented by the status, which children occupy as a result of the father's death. Life in Ibuza is the opposite of life in Lagos. It is dominated by traditional customs and beliefs. Christianity has developed appropriate ways in to the community. Aku-nna has educated in a school which is run by the church missionary. Igbo is evident with new beliefs and values are adapted into the fabric of Ibuza life. But in times of stress and crisis, traditional values are overwhelmed. According to this, Emecheta shows the plight of Aku-nna's alienation from traditional community. Aku-nna remains an alien from her own culture. Her alienation begins when her mother marries her husband's brother, Okonkwo. According to their Nigerian community, "When you have lost your father, you have lost parents, your mother is only a woman and woman are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, in fact a non existing family" (BP 25).

Aku-nna's life covers alienation from adolescence to adult age. At her adolescent age, even though she has father and mother, psychologically she is alienated from them. She herself thinks that she is too insignificant. This shows that she is always starved and not has healthy appetite like her brother, Nna-nno. Therefore, she physically and psychologically feels that she is not looking graceful and not blessed for a fortunate marriage. Aku-nna knows that there is a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist with her mother. This refusal of love with her mother is the reason for the oppression of the girl child.

Aku-nna fails to get love from her mother and father, even though, her mother is alive. Thus at her adolescent age, she supposed to long for their love and care and she felt all alone and isolated in both cosmopolitan Lagos and traditional Ibuza village. For most of the girls in Africa, oppression and isolation begin at home. Her mother Ma Blackie is busy with her new life at Ibuza in Okonkwo's hut because several years after the birth of her last son Ma

Blackie's own personal interest has been fulfilled. She betrays Aku-nna, who falls in love with Chike, an Osu slave.

Aku-nna suffers a psychological feeling of inadequacy at home because she is a girl. She felt alienated at home because she is girl. She felt alienated from her own people and from Ibuza's traditional society. Aku-nna is caught like a fish between traditional custom and her mind. To reflect Aku-nna's loneliness, Emecheta portrays Aku-nna as a girl who sits alone without mingling with others. She reveals that, Aku-nna is longing for someone to understand her and to save from traditional taboos. But when Aku-nna is in love with Chike, her cousin warns her not to get herself mixed up with that teacher. After a long confusion between tradition and her inner conflicts, she cleared that only a mad would call another man Osu. When Chike knows that Aku-nna finds herself isolated from everyone, he forgets his father's voice you will leave that girl alone. Chike knows Aku-nna's tragedy in spite of tradition and or due to social customs.

Aku-nna tends to rebel against some social norms and calls for revolution, but maybe she is not supported by the other parts of the society because, the whole society has its traditions and looks for its own totality. Aku-nna is in between the powers of tradition and male domination. She has the strength to fight against them. But all she needs is comfort and care from his love. Chike himself understood Aku-nna needs help to complete her education and longs for care. Aku-nna, who is living under male dominated society wonders at Chike's care and she notices that Chike called her Akum, meaning 'my wealth'. She does not want to be a belonging to him and be his wealth. Emecheta presents this kind of heroine, who does not want to be wealth or anything. Her heroines always want to be free from the restriction of their traditional customs and male dominated society.

When Chike asked Aku-nna, that had she not heard his ancestors are slaves and was never born in this land. Aku-nna breathlessly expressed her

love and her isolation: “There is no other person for me in this world, Chike. I don’t even know anyone else I always say the wrong thing do the wrong thing. You are the only person I know who I am not afraid of” (BP 100).

Chike’s love and care for Aku-nna is only for a short period but when everyone knows that she has grown as a woman, Aku-nna failed to receive his care. Thus, Aku-nna’s happiness turns to a kind of heavy sadness that hung solidly in her heart. She is beginning to feel that it is unjust that she is not allowed to say a word for her own life; she is beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all. Chike offeres little presents to Ma Blackie, but she refuses them and says that they were the price he naturally has to pay for befriending the daughter, of a free born person. It makes Aku-nna angry and she felt all alone has no one to support her.

Traditionally, the payment of bride price is widely accepted and regarded as a custom meant to honor the woman and her family and is justified for various reasons. The bride price is a sign of fulfillment of a customary marriage giving assurance and confidence to the parties involved. In this case, Chike had a fear that if the bride price is not paid, his bride would die at childbirth. So, he asked his father to offer Okonkwo a bride price of fifty pounds, double the amount that Ibuza custom originally bargain. But, when Okoboshi realized that she escaped, he told his parents and Okonkwo that he had cut a lock of her hair, according to their customs, she could not get away from her husband. This created long arguments and the Ibuza people got angry with Ofulues. However elders decide that Aku-nna has committed abomination and could not return to Ibuza with her slave husband anymore. Okonkwo did not accept any bride price from Chike, and he refused to accept, even when Chike is ready to offer him hundred pounds.

Aku-nna tries to satisfy her desire and overcome lack, but centuries of taboos and superstitious beliefs overwhelm her. Aku-nna herself fought for her breath. Everything about her seemed stretched to a breaking point. Chike,

although managed to calm her by being a loving and compassionate husband, cannot help her to endure sufferings and torture which she endures mentally. The social norms traditional taboos and her isolation are the root causes of her problem for her illness. Thus Aku-nna had a premature labor and happens to die leaving a daughter she called “joy” (BP 167).

The tribal society has its own lifestyle that is different from Aku-nna’s desire. Aku-nna is unable to experience her joy without the support of the whole society. Emecheta shows society that defines various stages of alienation and sufferings of Aku-nna. Even though Aku-nna is educated she cannot resist against her tradition. Aku-nna strongly believes that if the bride price is not paid, she will die just as she feels the strength of the taboos across the stream and calling her for death. Thus, Aku-nna and Chike’s story becomes a warning in Ibuza to any fledgling rebel who do not accept the husband chosen for her by her people and who do not pay the bride price seems to advocate conformity to traditional mores. Thus the tragic end to Chike and Aku-nna’s story supports the superstition that Aku-nna’s personal rebellion sets out destruction.

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