

*Review*

# Tradition versus Modernity: A study on Emecheta's The Bride Price

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Buchi Emecheta's (1976) in 'The Bride Price' shows the confrontation of tradition and modernity in African society, where the traditional tribes are looking for their own power and custom; but a young heroine- Aku-nna- decides to go beyond all those totalities and make a free play of the structure. She tends to create a new discourse that rejects the fundamental immobility of African traditional society. This conflict can be discussed within the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism. Structuralism looks for one fixed center and meaning, while post-structuralism talks for decentralizing the center of any kinds of totality. Buchi Emecheta in her novel depicts the clash between the traditional customs of a small Ibo village in Nigeria and the growing influence of Africa's European colonizers, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. European colonization has had two sides for Africa. While it has controlled political autonomy on the continent, it has also brought modernization, which in itself has shown to be as equally problematic, particularly when the issues of traditional African values come into play. Yet the complexity of these issues is not fully addressed until the subject of female subordination within traditional African society taken into consideration. The present study depicts the challenges between tradition and modernity in African traditional society, where people are defined through their customs and traditions.

**Key words:** African society, tradition, modernity, structuralism, post-structuralism, colonization, identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Structure has been an issue of discussion for critics during the history of literary criticism. From one side, the concept of structure is as old as the idea of knowledge in western science. The structuralism has always been offered a fixed position or a presence, which gives it a centrality and limits thereby the "play of the structure" (Derrida, 1972: 90). This old method works on the organizing and orienting principles, which hold together the system. No substitution of terms, contents or elements is possible. The center is at the center of totality.

On the other side, post-structuralist critics such as Derrida believe that the phenomenon of rupture is an essential part of the structure. There is both a desire for a center in the constitution of structure and the process of

signification, which necessitates this displacement or substitution. The center is thus removed into its substitute- it has been de-centered. So the center cannot be thought as presence- being or a fixed one. Rather the center can be regarded as a function, in which countless sign-substitutes come and play. This leads to the thesis that everything is discourse.

The two mentioned paragraphs depict the conflict between structuralism and post- structuralism. This conflict is what Buchi Emecheta (1976) illustrates in her novel- The Bride Price. She shows the confrontation of tradition and modernity in the African society, where the traditional tribes are looking for their own power and totality, but a young heroine- Aku-nna- tends to go beyond all those totalities and make a free play of the structure. She desires to create a new discourse that rejects the fundamental immobility of African traditional society. Derrida (1972) in his essay Structure, Sign and Playcites Nietzsche as a thinker who represents his

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critiquing of the concept of Truth and Being as absolutes and rather substitutes the concept of the play, interpretation and sign- without present Truth. It is the issue that concerns Emecheta concerns in her novel. Through ethnology, Emecheta attempts to present a character, who aims to decentralize and destabilize the traditional structure from its historically dominant discourse.

Buchi Emecheta in her novel 'The Bride Price' (1976) depicts the clash between the traditional customs of a small Ibo village in Nigeria and the growing influence of Africa's European colonizers, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. European colonization has been a complicated matter for Africa. While it has dealt with the political autonomy on the continent, it has also brought modernization, which in itself has proven to be as equally problematic, particularly when the issues of traditional African values come into play. Yet the complexity of these issues is not fully addressed until it deals with the subject of female subordination within traditional African society. Buchi Emecheta in 'The Bride Price' looks at the conflicts that arise when modernization clashes with traditions from a feminine perspective, addressing particularly how modernization has opened up new options for African women, but at the same time created crack between those new models and old ones. In order to understand how those conflicts come about, it is important to look at the contradictions in both modern and traditional roles for women. The role that women play in traditional African society is that of subordination to their male counterparts. While African women can attain certain degrees of power and wealth within their communities (for instance, in many villages, women control the marketplace and are able to generate great wealth and power), their role within the African traditional society is still to support and be secondary to men. This issue plays itself out in a number of different ways, particularly in terms of proper behavior and marriage. Proper feminine behavior-meekness, subordination to male intellectualism and power, and acceptance of male behavior-eternalizes the hierarchical models found in traditional African societies. It also ensures that these models will not be challenged and therefore passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, modernity places higher values on individualism, free will, and self-determination. While modernity does not eliminate traditional models of female behavior (particularly in European models), it does offer more flexibility in options of self-definition, whereas in traditional models, identity is defined in relation to what is necessary for the community. In traditional African society, Women are viewed as property within traditional societies, inhibiting self-determination and freedom. The title of Emecheta's novel addresses this issue. Bride prices are compensations given to the bride's family as reparation for the loss of a productive member. Yet such arrangements do not allow for personal choice and free

will. Therefore, those with a modern or europeanized will find conflict in reconciling their own individual desires within a traditional environment. Emecheta addresses this conflict in 'The Bride Price' when Aku-nna falls in love with and marries Chike.

The conflict between tradition and modernity in the African traditional society is what Derrida feels between structuralism and post-structuralism. From one side the African traditional society is self-absorbed and immersed in its own totality and traditions. Totality, religion and tradition are institutionalized in that society. From the other side, colonizers bring a wave of modernity and add new voices to the traditional society that is in favor of its own wholeness in the sense that the system functions as a unit and is not looking for something new. The conflict here occurs between the traditional tribal generations and those young people, such as Aku-nna and Chike, who are exposed to the colonizers' new discourse. Buchi Emecheta in 'The Bride Price' depicts this clash between structuralism and post-structuralism, or more precisely between tradition and modernity. 'The Bride Price' follows the conflict between the growing modern values that are swiftly changing African lives and the traditional ways Africans continue to cling to. It is also a criticism against those traditional values, especially when they concern women's rights and autonomy.

### THE DESIRE FOR AUTONOMY

'The Bride Price' follows the story of Aku-nna, a young girl whose life is shattered after the death of her father. Aku-nna joins her mother, Ma Blackie, and brother to live in her uncle's compound. There, Ma Blackie eventually marries Okonkwo, the uncle, as is the custom of the widow to marry into the brother-in-law. Little consideration is given to Aku-nna's own desires and when they are, she is allowed to continue her education; it is only because it will raise her value as a bride. In essence, Aku-nna's worth in the family is not that dissimilar from a slave.

The bride price, a fee that is traditionally paid by the husband's family for the wife, is a theme that knits its way throughout the novel. Emecheta uses this practice of bride price to literally, as well as symbolically, represent women's submission to men in African culture. Emecheta also looks at the caste system in Nigerian culture that discriminates against descendants of slaves. Slavery in Africa consisted of one tribe kidnapping people from another tribe, then holding them captive and forcing them to work. Sometimes slaves were buried alive with their masters when their masters died. Descendants of slaves, although they were eventually freed under colonial rule, were never considered members of their adopted villages no matter how long they lived there, or how successful they became. Emecheta in 'The Bride Price' investigate the themes of gender discrimination in a traditional

society that is in war with modernity. Emecheta confronts the urban center of Lagos to rural Ibadan. In Lagos, many of the Ibo have yielded to modern "European" ways or at least a fusion of the modern and traditional: "Lagos was such an unfortunate conglomeration of both [European and African] that you ended up not knowing to which you belong" (Emecheta, *The Bride Price*: 16). The whole novel, from the setting to the characters and their lifestyle, shows a kind of transition between tradition and modernity and vice versa. Emecheta refers to the point that characters, in a primary society that is recently exposed to the industry and modernity, are vulnerable in confrontation with changes.

Emecheta concerns about a society in which characters and plots reflect social system, which historically has diminished women. Akụ-nna's tragedy in 'The Bride Price' is the tragedy of exile from modernity to tradition and vice versa. Margaret Green argues:

In considering the question of social stability one must recognize, in the first place, that there is a general acceptance of the existing form of society. There are many personal dissatisfactions and criticisms, but they do not lead to general criticism of the status quo or demands for a revolution or a new order. (Green, 1947: 37).

Akụ-nna tends to rebel against some social norms and calls for a revolution, but maybe she is not supported by the other parts of the society, because the whole society has still its traditions and looks for its own totality. The traditional tribal society does not like to be decentralized by the invasion of modernity, so by hook and by crook attempts to confirm its own power. Akụ-nna is between two powers and even is confused to choose and support which of them. From one side, she remembers her father and mother's proverbs, stories, rituals and taboos that now accumulate in her mind as a great and implacable subconscious. On the other side, as a modern, educated woman, she rails against the hypocrisy and injustice to women inherent in tradition. But, she cannot fight the strength of her Ibo customs; she neither can root them out from her own heart and mind nor from the hearts and minds of her people; in this sense, she prefers to be reflective and dynamic toward her society and traditions. She desires to call for the death of all those gods who are standing for her fate, but she cannot because from one side she sees them as a part of her past and from the other, she does not have enough power to rebel against all of them. In her novel, Emecheta (maybe) like Nietzsche wants to call for "the death of God" through Akụ-nna; but she knows that in that confined society her voice will not be heard. So, indirectly she addresses the issue of power. Emecheta indirectly illustrates that "God, Man, Progress, and History itself die to profit the code" (Baudrillard, 1983:111).

Thus, the death of her father can be symbolic as the family is de-centered from a masculine power, but in the African tribal society in the death of the father center goes for the uncle. Not only does the death of the father depict the rituals of mourning and burial, but is also a prelude to the custom of transferring the widow and the family to the surviving brother who then can exercise his rights of inheritance; a practice which ensures the status of woman as possession instead of person. The helpless Akụ-nna and her brother Nna-nda live in a world where they have no control over the rules that shape their lives:

Learning in school the European ways of living and coming home to be faced with the countless and unchanging traditions of their own people. Yet, they were like helpless fishes caught in a net; they could not as it were go back into the sea, for they were trapped fast, and yet they were still alive because the fisherman was busy debating within himself whether it was worth killing them to take home, seeing as they were such small fry (*The Bride Price*: 82).

Dramatically, the novel works very much like a fairy tale where the child- Akụ-nna- disobeys the parent –the tribe. Chike, the teacher whom Akụ-nna loves, represents the radical who attempts to change and modernize things; but as an "osu" he is doubly damned: he is respected as a teacher, but the traditional taboo against the osu slave cult prohibits his entering into the tribe, so that both his politics and his birthright exclude him. Akụ-nna is the innocent child who must learn, choose, and suffer. In the Akụ-nna's institutionalized world osu has no power and voice, as such Akụ-nna is under the male dominant society, Chike as an osu is oppressed by the same society. In this sense, both Akụ-nna and Chike share something in common; both are oppressed people who tend to go beyond their oppression and the confined society. The narrative development traces Akụ-nna's growth to womanhood, the evolution of her personality and her awareness of the tribal imperatives, sanctions, institutions, rituals, traditions, and values inherent in the community code. Akụ-nna is kidnapped by a jealous suitor, who, according to an ancient custom, can claim a wife by kidnapping her and buying a lock of her hair. Chike dramatically rescues Akụ-nna and they elope to another village; their union doubly dangerous, first, in defiance of the taboo against inter-marriage between slave and free families, and second, as a challenge to the old curse that any women who marry without her family's approval and whose bride price has not been paid will die in childbirth. Okonkwo refuses to accept either the marriage or 'The Bride Price' and Akụ-nna fulfills the curse when she dies in childbirth. In his seminal essay, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science* Derrida (1972) argues for a theory of play that calls into question the "structuration of structure". The

transcendental that stands behind and authorizes the very possibility of stable and centered structures. The play of difference within language is "permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin"; it is "the movement of supplementary" (Derrida, 1978: 289). For Derrida, Supplementation is a substitution, or something that insinuates itself in-the-place-of something else. Aku-nna represents herself through the function of supplementary and creates the opportunity to express her own self and meaning. She is against the repressive morality and narrow-mindedness of Ibuza and decides to escape from that society to go beyond all traditional norms.

Emecheta concerns the power of tribal religious belief, nearly in the tradition of the folk tale with its moral for a conclusion; as the language of the novel's ending suggests:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional superstition 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 over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody's guess. (The Bride Price: 168)

Clearly, Emecheta acknowledges and respects the power of religion, yet one inclines to examine the final question "why" in the light of the sociological evidence that formulates the body of the novel and deepens it beyond the parameters of an extended folk tale. Emecheta attempts to say that Aku-nna does not die entirely because of supernatural intervention and native superstition. She dies because of fear and diminution in the face of an alienated life, and on this basis, her death devolves from the central thesis of the novel; that fate or destiny is not found on the mysterious predispositions of inscrutable forces; but as Lloyd Brown writes, "on the function of social institutions and the shaping patterns of cultural traditions" as these conspire to control the ascendancy of personal autonomy. Brown (1981) continues that "...the fate of each woman is ultimately determined by the extent to which she accepts or rejects the communal will" (Brown, 1981:149). Emecheta's thematic concerns inform the structure of the novel, as that one learns with Aku-nna as she grows through various fundamental roles; as daughter, as prospective bride, as age-group member and as wife and through life's various fundamental experiences: death, puberty, courtship, marriage, and child birth- all of this between

the pulls of the life-dividing magnets of communal will and the imperatives towards one's own independent identity. She wants to make an independent identity for herself against all the limitations of the tribal society where:

[...] people did not need newspapers and radios as local media; such modern means of spreading information were alien to them and, what was more, were too slow, and you had to be able to read and write in order to follow them. The elderly, who made the decisions about the life of a girl like Aku-nna, could do without such literary knowledge. What was the point of bothering to learn the alphabet, of what use would it be to them? It would not tell them, which was the best season for planting yams; it would not tell them what their fate with a particular woman might be. They had their own methods of knowing these things without the benefits of the ABC. (The Bride Price: 115).

Obviously, the tribal society has its own lifestyle that is different from what a girl like Aku-nna desires to experience. But, she is unable to experience her favorite lifestyle without the support of the whole society. She is damned to her predetermined fate. Emecheta through this single paragraph portrays that it is the society that defines the person and determines her/ his fate.

Emecheta in her novel displays the power of the tribal influence that even education or modernity cannot resist against. Strongly, Aku feels that if 'The Bride Price' is not paid, she will die, just as she feels the strength of the taboo about crossing the stream; her death is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. Emecheta sees the African woman perpetually involved in a struggle for self within the context of tribal tradition. 'The Bride Price' ends with failed rebellion. The novel demonstrates a failure of the rebel-protagonist, but it also demonstrates that modern life, even in a tribal setting cannot be lived alone, without a community or a belief system. In a tribal society, center is still at the center and the play of substitution is failed.

## CONCLUSION

The most intriguing conclusion of this paper is that in the eye of the rural and traditional communities, customary authorities are considered far more legitimate catalysts compared to the new changes and modernity raised by the colonizers. Although Aku-nna tends to break the center and decentralize the society of traditional power, she is not successful because she does not have the public acceptance. Progress in any society requires adapting, changing, and in some cases abandoning traditional ideas and behaviors. It also includes borrowing and adopting ideas from other cultural contexts. But, in a tribal society there is not such an acceptance of changing

and adapting new cultures and behavior. Aku-nna goes against some traditions and customs but, finally, buys the curse for herself. In that kind of traditional and confined society, she has no way to victory and her story is just a lesson for the other young people who desire to follow her way. It seems that Emecheta in her depiction of the conflict between tradition and modernity shows the victory of tradition and the failure of modernity brought by colonizers into a tribal society.

Although, Emecheta illustrates the victory of tradition on modernity through Aku-nna, she wants to say that the problem "is not this or that African tradition or custom but rather the general idea that custom and tradition are some kind of heavy burden that Africa must carry" (Odhiambo, 2002, *The Cultural Dimensions of Development in Africa*: 11). Emecheta is in quest of decentralizing the tribal society of the ruling customs and traditions, but she sees it would be impossible without a community and belief system. Therefore, the center is still

at the center of totality in African traditional society.

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