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Religious Persecution of the Characters in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta

N. Sinthuja¹, Dr.A.A.Jayashree Prabhakar²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, INDIA

²HoD I/C, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, INDIA

Abstract

The second generation Nigerian Ibo women writer Buchi Emecheta is a prominent women writer who has created a path for the contemporary Nigerian women writers. Emecheta is greatly inspired by her own Nigerian culture and her experiences in her life in London. She pens down a Nigerian woman's struggle for her independence and personhood. In all her works we could see the subjugation of women in the name of culture, custom and tradition. Emecheta shows how the Igbo women are naively made to accept the orders of their community that eventually lead to their death. All her women characters Akunna, Chike, and Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price* (1976), Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl* (1977), Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) are all the victims of the discriminative customs and rituals.

Keywords: African society, Igbo community, customs, gender based, women exploitation.

African Traditional Society

There are about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria. The eastern part of Nigeria comprise of five states – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. All these states are occupied by the people of Igbo ethnic groups and hence it is the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria. Igbo people speak Igbo language and all the Igbo people of the Igbo land are guided by the customary law. Customary laws are accepted rules of conduct; practices and beliefs that are so vital and intrinsic that a part of a social and economic system believes and treats as if they were laws. This customary law is general to everyone and there are no exceptions between men and women, poor and rich, young and old, ordinary citizen and titled people. All these laws are buried deep in the mind and the heart of the Igbo people, particularly the elders. These elders serve as the custodian and they evoke them when the need arises.

Some of the customs and rituals practiced by the Igbo people are the osu caste system, polygamy, wife-inheritance, human sacrifices, slavery and slave trade, female genital mutilation, disinheritance of women, child-betrothal, killing of twins, ignominious treatment of barren women and illegitimate children. All these traditional practices are acts of violence and indignity to their victims. However some of these customs are not in practices as development begins but few Gender-based practices such as widow inheritance, disinheritance of women and abuses of girls born out of wedlock are still thriving among the people of Igbo land. Thus an Igbo woman goes through a horrifying treatment from her birth till her death in the name of tradition.

However, all these customs are gender based which are harmful, degrading and oppressive to both women and girl child. The discriminatory customary practices are targeted towards women and girl child as they are considered as the vulnerable group among the Igbo people. The Igbo women as a

daughter, wife and a mother are all subjected to this evil customary practices which strips off their personhood, self-identity and their rights. Few male and female writers like Chinua Achebe, Ifeoma Okoye, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta have presented the harmful customary practices of their Igbo society.

In an African society the traditional tribes have got their own set of rules and customs where they keep looking for their own power. In *The Bride Price* (1976), Emecheta has presented many customs such as the osu caste system, widow inheritance, bride price and the consequences of going against the customs and the rules of the Igbo society. The novel is about a young girl Aku-nna and her failure in life by going against the society. Aku-nna's life is shattered as soon as her father's loss. The death of her father created a void within the family. The center of the family was lost and immediately this center moves on to the surviving brother of the dead father. Aku-nna's mother, Ma Blackie eventually marries Okonkwo, the uncle as per the custom. Aku-nna and her brother Nna-nnda is also under the control of their uncle and they have no choice and their desires in life are totally ignored. Emecheta describes their position as,

“Yet, they are like helpless fishes caught in a net; they could not as it were go back into the sea, for they are 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)

Thus the rituals of mourning and burial of the deceased father is followed by the custom of transferring the widow and her children to the surviving brother. This practice makes women a mere possession instead of a person. The personal choice or the emotions of the widow are totally neglected. This practice of widow inheritance is also seen in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

In Nigerian culture there is also a discrimination against the descendants of slave. Traditionally there are two classes of people in Igboland - the Nwadiala and the Osu. The Nwadiala are the 'sons of the soil' and so they are the masters. The Osu people are regarded as the slaves, strangers, outcasts and untouchables who are dedicated to the deities of the Igboland. The Osu caste system is a practice in Igboland where the social interactions and the marriage with the osu people is totally discouraged and considered a taboo.

Aku-nna grows and falls in love with her teacher Chike Ofulue, a prosperous osu. She elopes with Chike to Ughelli and starts a happy life. Here Aku-nna goes against her society by marrying an osu and also there is a belief that any women who marry without her bride price being paid will die during her childbirth. Okonkwo neither accepted their marriage nor the Bride price. Aku-nna's rebel against the Igbo customs created a guilt and fear which eventually lead to her death at the time of her childbirth. Thus she fulfills her curse. Every girl in Ibuza was told about Aku-nna's death and to reinforce the taboos of the Igboland. Emecheta shows the power of the tribal religious belief in the tradition of folktale in the novel as,

“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 on every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the phase of every modernization, until the present day.” (*The Bride price*,168).

This shows how the society looks upon the customs as a total structure to be followed and passed down from one generation to another, and not to be challenged or rebel against it.

In traditional African society women are always subordinate to their male counterparts. They are meek, subordinate to male power and their intellectualism. Women are viewed as mere property, a valuable commodity ready to be exchanged. The traditional practice of getting Bride price from groom for the bride's family shows the vulnerable status of women. This practice inhibits freedom, self-

determination and free will. The traditional African society is self – absorbed and immersed in its religion and tradition.

In *The Joys of motherhood* (1979), Emecheta presents the oppressive and the unfair treatment towards women. This novel portrays the realistic picture of womanhood. Emecheta shows how the society has made the women to accept the joys of motherhood as an act of servitude for her husband. Women are voiceless before their husband. Nnu Ego is the only child of Agbadi and Ona. Ona plays a subordinate role before Agbadi's suppressive role. Agunwa, is Agbadi's senior wife and soon after he marries Ona, Agunwa has been displaced from her place. In traditional African society all women have to accept the patriarchal ideology of sharing husband. This practice creates a loss of self identity within the female characters and they are blindly made to accept their submissive role. This was also the situation of Nnu Ego when her first husband Amatokwu marries another women as she cannot bear children. She was not only losing her position as senior wife but also her identity. This is evident when Amatokwu asks:

“What do you want me to do?” Amatokwu asked. —I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you do not appeal to me any more”. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 32)

Emecheta shows how a woman is respected in society only if she can give children, especially male children to her husband. Nnu Ego is a naive girl who always yearns for the joy that motherhood would bring her. Thus Nnu Ego's first marriage comes to an end. In African culture, marriage and motherhood are upheld status of a woman. Motherhood helps in the building of social relationships, and to create identity within the society.

In her second marriage Nnu Ego bears several children both boys and girls and she takes pride of her sons. She gives enough education to her sons and culturally they are expected to take care of their mother. Her sons did not take care of her or support her financially. Her life is filled with isolation and despair. Nnu Ego's hope and joy shatters as she is made to die alone at the side of the road. Thus inspite of bearing children especially male children, Nnu Ego's aspiration of a being a mother is totally dispiriting. Thus bearing and raising children is not only painful but also a mother spends her life as a slave to her children.

The author also discusses the cruel treatment upon the slaves in the novel. It is the tradition in the Igbo society where the slaves are also buried alive along with their masters soon after their death. The slave woman is Agunwa's slave. She is forced to die along with her mistress when she dies. Thus a slave woman is always entrapped in the clutches of patriarchy and slavery. The masters not only decide their lives but also their death. This master-slave or the dominator-dominated relationships is evident in the African traditional society.

Buchi Emecheta produced *The Slave Girl* (1977) where she portrays the female protagonist Ogbanje Ojebeta's life experience as a prisoner. Emecheta shows the social revelation of women's fate through the protagonist. Ojebeta's parents Okweukwu and Omeadi Oda die in an epidemic, leaving her with her two brothers. Her eldest brother Okolie becomes her guardian, and sells seven year old Ojebeta as a slave to pay for his coming of age ceremony. She becomes a slave of Ma Palagada, a trader in Onitsha along with six other slaves. She becomes a domestic slave and lost her identity forever. The social impact of slavery in colonial Africa is evident. The little girl is lost and cries out to her dead mother,

“Save me, Mother, for now I am lost.”

Ojebeta is helpless and screams:

“Let me go, let me go!” (*The Slave Girl*, 59)

This is not the cry of Ojebeta but the cry of every girl in Ibuza. Emecheta presents Ojebeta as a dying fish where she presents the journey of the protagonist from her girlhood to a permanent slave hood. Ojebeta was a very precious child to her parents, as she survived after the death of many girl children. She was just looked as a source of income by her brothers after their parent's loss. She became a prey for her brother's needs and she soon lost all the love, care and trust that once she received from her parents. Ojebeta marries Jacob as it's a tradition for every women to get married be it a slave or a free women. She learns that women are always a slave to the masculine society. Before marriage she belongs to her own family, then she is sold to a master as a slave and when she grows to a young lady, the master would get the bride price and sell her to her husband. They are always controlled or under the vigilance of men from birth till death in the form of father, brother, boss, husband and sons.

Emecheta also brings out the brutal treatment of the slaves by their masters. Ojebeta was given the duty to look after the grandchildren of Ma Palagada and her daughter Victoria. But she faced harsh and cruel treatment from Victoria as she was always hitting, pushing and spitting at Ojebeta . Victoria even shouts at her as:

“You good-for-nothing slave! You bush slave!” (The Slave Girl, 114)

The slave women were also sexually harassed by their male masters. This relation between the master and slave was traditionally accepted by the society. Chicago a seventeen year old slave was victim of such molestation. She was a plaything in the hands of Pa Palagada, the husband of Ma Palagada and Clifford, her son. She was also impregnated by Pa Palagada. She could never raise voice against the physical violence she went through as she is a slave to her masters. She cries out to her fellow slaves,

“I was foolish in those days. I was bending down sweeping the floor when he came up behind me and jumped on me. He pulled at the small breasts I had then...I was not at all developed...It hurt so, and I screamed. Do you know what he did? He slapped me on both sides of my face. I cried and told his mother, and was ordered to shut up. He must have told some story to his father, because for quite a long time he would cane me mercilessly for any little thing I did.” (The Slave Girl, 94)

A slave can never go against their masters. They must always be loyal and obedient despite of all the insult and the humiliation they face. Slavery in Africa has become a barbaric trade of the white men.

Emecheta in her novels shows the bond between the individual, society and tradition. She also brings out the vulnerability of the African women to self-induced forms of oppression. The Igbo women's traditional beliefs and customary practices only degrade her from her standards and also dehumanize her personhood. Though the influence of education and Christianity tries to bring some development and changes in the society, the Igbo people still clings on to their laws. Thus traditional African society is a fixed social reality.

Conclusion

The role of the women in the traditional African society is always submissive to men. This traditional patriarchal society has fixed certain feminine behaviours which should be followed by women without questioning and must also be passed over from generation to generation as it is rule to do so. A women is named as a 'good' women if she remains subordinate to the male power and intellectual, remains meek and weak. All the traditional beliefs look upon women as a mere lifeless object, a worthy property thus inhibiting self-determination and freedom. They cannot challenge the traditional pressures of their community and so they are forced to abide them. The well being of the community lies in the liberation of women from all sorts of oppression in the name of culture.

Emecheta criticizes the customs and the beliefs of the Ibo people as they privilege only male and subjugate women in all forms. In all her novels Emecheta portrays her surrounding community as the antagonist. Every novels of her describes the experience of black women and her surroundings. Throughout the history women have been silenced by the cultural domination. They are the barriers for

the development of women. Their voices were always suppressed in the name of culture. All the women characters fall as a prey to the traditional demands that are imposed upon them by their society.

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