CHAPTER – 3

TRAGEDY OF A HALF REBEL -

THE BRIDE PRICE
Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) invokes the 'voice' and 'perspective' of the African Woman. It portrays an Ibo girl's adolescent fragility and power. It explores the enslavement and degradation of women through rigidly enforced rules of conduct and social and religious taboos. Emecheta in this novel presents the African woman in a new light. *The Bride Price* is one of the novels that represents the quintessence of Emecheta's views on feminism. Emecheta in this novel shows how numerous indigenous African customs and superstitions oppress and degrade the female.

*The Bride Price* presents the pathetic tale of Akunna, an educated girl in a traditional Ibuza society who tries to asunder from the ruthless, meaningless, derogatory customs of her society but ultimately is engulfed by these evil forces.

Emecheta, in this novel, as usual, vividly portrays the taboos of the society, victimization of women, enslavement of several forms as she does in all her novels. But at one point, this novel can be segregated from other ones so much so that it apparently suggests
that even education fails to emancipate women from the clutches of customs and conventions.

The protagonist of the novel, Akunna, struggles to carve out an identity for herself amongst the dictates of patriarchy. Defying the age old irrational and blind traditions of the society and her family, she marries a slave descendant without the customary bride price. Commenting on the novel, Katherine Frank says, "... it is a romantic love story in the Romeo Juliet pattern... set in modern Nigeria exposing the crushing force of a traditional society." The struggle of the two young lovers is actually not against custom but to live within it. But the custom does not accommodate them. Their rebellion amounts to the breach of the tradition and defiance of taboo and the consequences of such a rebellion against social norms are tragic.

Akunna, the protagonist at the opening of the novel is comfortably placed with her father Ezekiel Odia working in a Nigerian Engine factory, her mother Ma Blackie, a huge woman with a smiling face, and her little brother, Nnanndo at Lagos. Akunna has a special bond with her father, "... a kind of closeness to which she could not give name" (10). Like the title of the book, her name symbolizes, "father's wealth... she was going to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price" (10). Akunna is ready at first to accept the role allotted to her as a daughter, she is determined not to let her father down.
Unfortunately Akunna's beloved father falls sick and before going on his last journey to the hospital, he reminds his daughter — "always remember that you are mine" and they "should try to be a glory to his name", because they were his life. Emecheta's women protagonists are depicted as belonging at every stage of their lives to some male figure — as a female child grows from girlhood to womanhood to motherhood. She is controlled and owned by her father, her husband, then her sons. For Akunna at the beginning, it is a happy ownership.

The unheralded death of Ezekiel, changes her whole life. Rose Ure Mezu says "The narrative of The Bride Price concerns conflict with and alienation from the structure of traditional community from the moment that thirteen year old Akunna loses her father." In Igbo society it is the father and not the mother who is believed to be one's life and shelter. Hence at the death of Akunna's father, Emecheta Comments:

It is so even today in Nigeria, when you have lost your father, you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family, is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family, such traditions do not change very much. (28)
Emecheta's comment is further supported by the musings of Akunna, which reveal the pathos of her situation when she says, "it is not that we have no father anymore, we have no parents anymore ...... so, not only have we lost our father we have lost our shelter, our life" (28).

The purpose of a woman in the traditional Igbo society is two fold. The first one being the bride price she will fetch on marriage and the second one, her ability to bear children, preferably sons and nothing beyond these. Even though Akunna's mother is alive, she is treated as an orphan. It is inevitable for them to return to Ibuza. When the head of the family dies, custom insists upon the dissolution of the family. Okonkwo, the brother of Akunna's deceased father inherits them. He is obliged to receive them and assumes the responsibility of caring for the family as the custom dictates him. Akunna begins to worry about the unknown future since she is apprehensive of the role that awaits her as a rural woman:

...... what she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her she would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman. She had heard that a farmer husband did not give housekeeping money, as her father had given her mother (p.53).

This very thought begins to disturb her mind even as Okonkwo, Akunna's uncle begins to see her as a good commodity to fetch money. He thinks,
Akunna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride price will come to me, you see the trend today, that the educated girls fetch more money (p.75).

Okonkwo under the pretext of taking over his rights and duties as a father, wants to get Akunna married off to a man who could afford to pay him the highest bride price. In his heart of hearts he cherishes a selfish motive of becoming an obi, a chief for which he has to offer expensive gifts to the Gods and the bride price received for Akunna would serve his purpose. Since “education significantly raises the amount a father can ask for his daughter’s head”⁶, he selfishly thinks, “Akunna had to be allowed to stay in school so that she could be married to a rich man, from one of those newly prosperous families springing up like mushrooms all over Ibuza”. (p.75)

The shift from urban Lagos to rural Ibuza reduces Akunna to a state of loneliness. She was born in Lagos and attended school in Lagos. So she does not consider Ibuza her home. But now she is forced to learn the traditional laws of Ibuza. She feels as if she is trapped between two opposite cultural strands. The pregnancy of her mother Ma Blackie through her uncle makes her feel more inadequate. Though she and her brother start adjusting to Ibuza traditions, she continues to possess a feeling of alienation. Moreover Akunna is considered as a ‘ogbanje’ (living dead) right from her childhood because of her lack of proper physical growth and her ill health. The myth of ‘ogbanje’ according to the tradition of the Ibo
community says that an 'ogbanje' does not belong to this world. It is also believed that an ogbanje had to die young because their friends in the other world call them back and such women do not survive after the birth of their first child.

Okonkwo's busy polygamous household fails to lap Akunna, the tender mimosa. Her Mother Ma Blackie who engulfs herself in the politics of Okonkwo's household, rarely pays heed to Akunna. On the other hand Ngbeke, Okonkwo's first wife is envious of Ma Blackie and her children. She is against Akunna's education because she fears that Ma Blackie would claim Akunna's bride price for Nnanndo's school fees. Perhaps all these circumstances of uneasiness draw Akunna towards Chike, her school master. Now at the age of fifteen, she falls in love with this school teacher of her's who is an Osu, the son of a former slave. Osus, the outcasts are believed to be the descendants of slaves. Emecheta brings about a special twist in the novel by forwarding the question of slave versus free born through the love affair of Akunna and Chike. Though the slaves gain more through the white man's education and tend to rise to important positions they do not enjoy an equal status with the free born. There is always an unbridgeable gap between them. Hence the traditional standards make Chike an ineligible suiter to Akunna inspite of his professional elegance.

Chike and Akunna are madly in love with each other. Chike is the only solace to Akunna. He stands as a moral support to her.
Even when she attains maturity it is Chike who understands her condition, brings two white tablets and a glass of water and gives her a big wool jacket. He advises her not to tell anyone about her attainment of maturity until the examinations are over. Akunna feels deeply ashamed of her condition. She begins to fear, thinking, “so now I am a woman too. I can be married, anyone can cut a piece of my hair and carry me away that was the tradition” (42) and she goes home feeling “so many things had happened to her in one day, so many things she did not understand” (45).

Both Akunna and Chike meet secretly by the river, Asaba. When it comes to be known to everybody they are strictly warned. Chike’s father is worried about his son’s affair with Akunna because of the traditional constraints on them. On the other hand Chike is very particular about his love with Akunna. That is why when he is warned by his father he makes it clear to his father saying, “I want Akunna, father, there is no other girl in this world for me” (45). His father, a kind man, advises him, “Do not harm this girl. All girls must be virgins when they go to their husbands” (47). Noticing Chike’s strong love for Akunna, he assures Chike, “Tell me when she is ready to the marriage and I’ll visit her family and ask for her in the proper way” (47). Through this Emecheta tries to show that Chike’s father, though a slave, is much more civilized than the free born barbarian, Okonkwo.
Akunna’s secret of the attainment of maturity which she hides even from her mother is disclosed when she goes out along with her friends in search of firewood. Since the Nwanza family, the Obidi family, and the Chigboes have already asked for her, Ogugua, her friend says, “now lots more men will ask for you and you will fetch the big bride price and everyone will be glad” (49). Akunna is deluged in misery since she intends to teach for a year or two before she got married. When Okonkwo becomes aware of her maturity, he arranges a celebration for Akunna thinking, “Now the girls bride price will come to me, I wonder who will pay the highest price” (51). Many young men of the Ibuza village, including Chike come to visit her with presents. Chike hits Okoboshi when he misbehaves with Akunna.

Emecheta in this novel shows how women are treated as marketable commodities. The women in African traditional society become stolen goods if they are neither inherited nor sold. This is the fate of even Akunna. Emecheta focusses on the custom which lets an Ibuza boy make a girl his, by sneaking up and cutting a lock of her hair. Perhaps that is why, “Many girls cropped their hair very close, those who wanted long hair wore a head scarf most of the time”. But Akunna is very unfortunate to fall a victim to this custom. She is spirited away in the middle of the night by Okoboshi while practicing a special dance called Oja. All of a sudden Okoboshi’s crude and repulsive men appear, kidnap her and carry her away. While on the other hand as irony would have it, now that Akunna has passed the examination, Chike hopes
that his father would meet Akunna’s uncle, Okonkwo to ask for Akunna with the offer of the bride price of hundred pounds.

Ultimately Akunna’s people hear the ominous sounds of gun shots and wedding music. Immediately a thought flashes through the intelligent mind of Chike that, “they have kidnapped Akunna for their son Okoboshi” (58). When the news of the kidnap spreads like wild fire, the villagers, shocked and stunned, begin to search for Akunna though they are aware that their search ends in nothing but vain.

All he (Okoboshi) had to do was cut a curl of her hair. ‘Isinmo’ – and she would belong to him for life or he could force her into sleeping with him, and if she refused his people would assist him in holding her down until she was disvirgined and when that had been done, no other person would want to take her anywhere, …. the men would not be blamed at all, because it was their custom (132-135)

Soon after the kidnap few members from the Obidi family come to Okonkwo to inform that Akunna was sleeping peacefully on the bed specially decorated for her and Okoboshi. They agree on a small bride price and the greedy Okonkwo has no other alternative. Okoboshi’s mother in the process of convincing Akunna says “No girl from a good family like yours could possibly marrying a slave” (134). In the traditional society of Ibuza though normal relations with the descendants of the slaves are
acceptable, vital matters like marriage, religion, and ceremonies are not accepted. Even Okoboshi's sister advises her to yield to her brother or else he would be constrained to involve the Ibuza custom to force her. Although this forceful marriage could have been prevented by Akunna's uncle or her mother none of them raise any objection. For them material wealth, social recognition, and social interests are more important than Akunna's dignity, happiness and her claim to love. Akunna feels mentally exhausted and she turns into a rebel:

If she ever got out of this alive, there was no man for her but Chike, slave or not slave. A kind of strength came to her, from where she did not know she knew only that, for once in her life, she intended to stand up for herself, to fight for herself, for her honor, this was going to be the deciding moment of her existence (136).

When Okoboshi tries to submit her to making love, she fights like a wild creature for her honour. To defend her chastity she taunts him:

The son of a dog chief, if the best he can manage to steal for his son is a girl who had been taught what men taste like by the son of a slave ...... you think I am a virgin. I tell you a better man has been have before you. I have slept with him many times. (138).

For this, Akunna is dubbed as a slave. They give her the treatment that a slave would be given since she had an intimate
relationship with a slave. Rose ure mezu says, “To her society, vaunting fornications with an OSU is the last straw and the stain on her family and friends is indelible.” According to the Ibuza tradition, “if a bride was a virgin her new family had to bring her father wine. If she was not a virgin they brought an empty pot.” (61). Okonkwo feels very much degraded when he is sent an empty pot. Next morning, with a dirty torn skirt, Akunna goes to the stream to fetch water. While she moves like an old woman, she thinks, ‘This is the end’. “Now Chike will turn me away too, Okoboshi did not cut a piece of my hair last night why should he? I am worthless, I can run away if I want but to where can I go?” (56)

If Akunna went back to her home, her uncle would mercilessly end her since she has broken their laws. But to her surprise, Chike appears and rescues her and they elope to Asaba, from where with the help of a driver they proceed to Ughelli. Instead of living hypocritically, taking false refuge in morals, customs, and tradition, she takes in courage to flee from all these. For a time, Akunna is extremely happy with Chike. He serves as a solid pillar of strength, inspiration, and encouragement. To some extent he is responsible for her growth as a student, her successful completion of her secondary education, and her development as an individual, independent, and self determining human being.

Chike offers to educate her brother and send money to her mother so that she could be independent. This magnanimity of Chike makes Akunna say,
Oh! Will you do all that for me? I will serve you until I die. I will be a good wife to you and love you in this world and next world, until the end of time. (69)

Chike's friend Ben Adegor promises Akunna a teaching job in his school and also suggests a job for Chike at the oil company. All this is unbelievable to Akunna and she thanks God and prays, "Everything has been too easy for us. It's too good to be true. Dear God, don't let anything happen to destroy our joy" (70). Chike loves her a lot and hence he decides to marry her. He ideally thinks, "No matter what they have done to her. I will still marry her, even if she is expecting Okoboshi's child" (71). Even his father supports him saying, "Never blame a woman for something that had happened in the past. It is the future that matters" (72). Chike is naturally surprised and delighted when Akunna tells him that she has defended her chastity by taunting Okoboshi.

People at Ibuza become infuriated when they come to know about the elopement of Akunna with Chike. All of them feel that such an elopement brought shame on the whole village. This perhaps has a bad effect on Okonkowo. He feels degraded, blames Ma Blackie for all this and retaliates by following the ruthless custom of Ibuza: "In Ibuza if a man divorced or no longer wanted his wife, he would expose his backside to her in public" (158) Ma Blackie who has no more to help her daughter because of her powerlessness is thus punished.
Akunna is very much delighted to hear from Chike that his father has consented to the proposal of their wedding and has given them a wedding present of hundred pounds. Their wedding takes place at the white man's church. They establish a true marriage of equality as both work outside their home and share domestic chores within. Lloyd W. Brown commenting on their marriage says, "... it is the ceremonial climax of her rebellion against entrenched sexual roles and other social customs which she perceives as limiting and demeaning." The great irony of their union is that they are thankful to the traditional society because it has oppressed them and this has enabled them to enjoy a perfect oneness at least for a short period. Akunna becomes a teacher and Chike the manager of the oil company. They have lot of money, and are delighted with this happy turn of events.

Emecheta exposes the crushing force of a traditional society like Ibuza far beyond its limits. The point that she tries to highlight is that there is no escape, no cloistered environment which can subsist the union of Akunna and Chike. Akunna advises Chike to pay the bride price to Okonkowo because of the traditional injunction that, "If the bride price is not paid the bride will die in child birth (73)". Though Chike's father offers to pay the bride price, Okonkwo refuses to accept the money saying, "No girl in my family, shall be the bride of a slave" (75) He does not take their marriage into consideration. This vengeance is not calmed even by this. He makes a voodoo doll in Akunna's image and pierces it.
with a needle there by resorting to black magic. Thus he intends to destroy Akunna completely.

In the meantime, Akunna becomes pregnant just at the age of sixteen. Emecheta, through the doctor hints at the anticipatory death of Akunna, when he says to Chike that she was too young for pregnancy and has hardly enough blood for herself. He prepares Chike for the worst. On the other hand, as Okonkwo continues his black magic, Akunna begins to hear her uncle's voice calling her to return. She says to Chike's father: "I know my uncle does not want ever to accept the bride price, he calls me back in the wind, when I am alone ... I don't want to die, father" (163). She pleads with Chike: "Please my husband, don't let him take me! Please don't, please!" (163). But the love and compassion of Chike fail to help her since he himself is "doomed to social approbation and isolation because of his ancestry." As the centuries of taboos and superstitious legends overwhelm Akunna's desire to live, she dies shortly, leaving a daughter whom they call 'Joy'. Emecheta closes the novel in her characteristically ironical manner:

Every girl born in Ibuza after Akunna'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 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 (168).

Thus Akunna's tragic fate is appropriated by the very power she sought to overcome, and is perverted into a threatening exemplary tale to coerce and intimidate women into obedience to traditional society and the men who rule it\textsuperscript{10}.

Though people believe that she dies because her bride price was not paid due to the disobedience and condemn her for her rebellion against the norms, her young age, tender physique, and the years of under nourishment, cannot be ignored. Nobody criticizes Okonkowo for his stubborn refusal to accept the bride price because he is adhering to custom. Since Akunna is not conforming to the custom she is blamed. In a society such as Akunna's the emancipation of women is partially achieved. It continues to create the conflicts which destroy the people who unleashed them.

Katherine Frank observes, "Despite her education and bravery in defying her family and village, and despite the sustaining power of the love of Chike, Akunna is ultimately destroyed by traditional society"\textsuperscript{11}.

The central message of the novel that Emecheta tries to convey is that only those people who possess a strong will to free themselves completely from the fetters of tradition have the opportunity to find a cheerful life outside of these fetters and not the people, though
rebellious, still suffer under the social dogmas. As the tradition is strongly entrenched in the society and their attendant sanctions still dominate Akunna’s mind she believes that, since the bride price was not paid, she would never survive her pregnancy. This traditional superstition consequently destroys her.

Akunna’s death is a resultant of her fragile conscience combined with her own intrinsic historicity. This makes it explicit that even education in Africa fails to lift the people, particularly women, from the mire of superstitions. This may be because even the education system is a product of that society which allows very less scope for the over-all development of an individual, especially a woman.

Even a man of scholastic knowledge like Chilke cannot come to Akunna’s rescue, primarily because he himself is a prisoner of his racial or social hierarchical debasement and the subsequent psychological inferiorities emanating from it. Akunna’s death is caused more by her own sense of betrayal towards the society than the society’s conspiracy against her. She is doomed because she has accommodated an inerasable view, may be a guilty feeling that she has done something sacrilegious and hence will not survive her first pregnancy, as the customs stress. Akunna and Chike though well educated do not understand the basic health threat that pregnancy at a tender age and that too for a weakling like Akunna can be harmful.
Though Akunna fails to resist her fate she dies before she achieves the fulfillment of her love, the union, the true marriage, the survival of the fruit of her married bliss, ‘Joy’ points forward to the new order.

Although tradition claims another victim it is not triumphant. The victor disgraces itself as it claims its victim, the loving and hopeful Akunna. 


References


7. Rose Ure Mezu, p.131-146.


10. Katherine Frank., p.486
