Oppression of Women In Nigeria

Gender equality is fundamental in the United States. The women’s rights movement advocated and made great advances in the fight for gender quality. The United States is extremely fortunate to be a society where it is expected that women are allowed to make their own choices. However, not all societies’ posses the same mind set of women’s rights as the United States. Other countries such as Nigeria impose strict rules and regulations on women, subsequently taking away their free will. In *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta, women in Igbo culture experience oppression, which is shown through the society’s social norms, universal lack of women’s education, and Aku-nna experiencing frequent abuse.

One example of oppression seen in *The Bride Price* is the social normality’s expected from Aku-nna. Social normality’s are the behaviors, characteristics, and actions that are accepted by a particular society. Location influences social normality’s as different societies experience different expectations. Nigeria has a caste system as a social normality, which is a predetermined social status based on parent’s classification. The caste system offers little to no social mobility. Aku-nna was born in the touchable caste system. Although she was in the touchable caste system, the social normality’s expected of women put her at an inferior state of males, taking away her free will. An example of this is not being able to choose her husband. Emecheta describes the pain Aku-nna experiences by saying “Her heart ached and tears began to well up … she was going to be trapped into a marriage that she was helpless to prevent.”(Emecheta, 118) The lack of choice on who and when a woman will marry continues to oppress women. Although this is the normality, it takes away free will from women. The practice of early marriage is still a problem in Nigeria currently. (Akpan) Aku-nna can be directly translated to mean “fathers wealth.” The idea of father’s wealth refers to the idea that women in Nigerian culture are viewed as objects for financial gain. Young girls are sold off to a husband for a bride price. This act is purely based off of financial gain for the young women’s family. The *Girls Not Brides* foundation describes that currently in Nigeria forty three percent of girls are married off before their eighteenth birthday. (girsnotbrides.org) Ezekiel Odia, Aka-nna’s father described selling his daughter to marriage as “something to look forward to.”(Emecheta,10) Nigerian culture places importance of a daughters getting a good bride price. Emecheta says “A girl belonged to you today as your daughter, and tomorrow, before your very eyes, would go to another man in marriage.”(Emecheta,17) This social normality of young girls being sold to males is expected. Parents can quickly loose the connection they have for their daughter for financial revenue. Girls in Nigerian culture are viewed as objects, being used as their husband’s personal servants. Aku-nna is aware of the expectations imposed on her. She feels great pressure to honor her family and marry someone who can provide the family with a high bride price. Aku-nna was determined to “marry well, a rich man…be able to afford an expensive bride price.” (Emecheta 10) Nigerian society places stress on women to be worthy of a good bride price. They are married for money, not for love. Early marriage deprives young women from the opportunity to get formal education.

Another example of oppression in Aku-nna’s life is the universal lack of women’s education. When young women are married off they are subjected to a life of captivity. They spend their hours cleaning, cooking, and serving their husband’s wants and needs. Women are also taught not to explore and question. “Because in her culture…if so many questions had come from a young girl like herself it would have been considered even worse than bad manners.” (Emecheta, 27) Discouraging questions is a technique to keep women without a voice. The lack of voice attributes to the continuous oppression. Aku-nna was able to continue her education which gave her some free will. Her new father was opposed to her continuing her schooling; however, Aku-nna’s mother was the one paying for her to attend school. Aku-nna faced many challenges even when she was given the opportunity to get an education. She was bullied in the classroom. “The boys all laughed. Aku-nna burst into tears. The laughter grew louder than ever.” (Emecheta,88) The classroom was male majority with Aku-nna being the minority. She was bullied, teased, and harassed. NPR news covered a story where they discussed current discrimination against women in schools. When a young woman begins to menstruate, they are banished to the menstruation shed, where they are subjected to isolation. Many young girls do not enter their own homes while menstruating with the fear of getting beat. (Greenhalgh, Doucleff) This problem with menstruation fears often keeps women out of the educational system. Aku-nna’s father was not supportive of her education, saying that Aku-nna was not going to go to college. However, once he realized that a higher bride price is paid for educated women, he was in support. NPR news covered a story of a fifteen year old girl whose future was in the hands of one test. If she passed the test, she would not have to move into her husband’s house, however, if she did not pass she would move into her husband’s house and become a servant for him and his family. (Aizenman, Valentine) Aku-nna’s future was helped by education. She was able to continue her schooling and pass her test which allowed her to practice teaching. Schooling allowed her to get a job, make her own income, and broke the cycle of being dependent and submissive to males. CNN covered a story where one-hundred school girls were abducted from school. Boko Harman which translates to western education is a sin committed this terrible act. Aku-nna was receiving western education, learning and speaking in English. Western education shows the differences in cultures regarding women’s rights. Nigerian culture teaches women to be submissive and obedient to males. Abuse keeps women in a state of oppression.

A final example of oppression is Aku-nna’s frequent abuse from her family and other members of society. In American society, parents are expected to support and encourage their children. Children in Nigeria do not experience the same eternal love as children in America receive. Aku-nna’s mother says “’She is a coward, this daughter of mine’” (Emecheta, 68) Nigerian culture does not show empathy for young children. At a young age, children and boys are subjected to the reality of living in Nigeria. Their parents put them to work and make use of them. This idea of using children to their full potential often comes with mental and physical abuse. Aku-nna was mentally abused when her mother ridiculed her for not starting her menstrual cycle. When young women start their period society deems they are old enough to be sold to their husbands. Menstrual cycles can start as young as twelve years old and in Nigerian culture this is the age they are ready to be a wife. Children this young have not fully developed mentally or physically. The biggest cause of death for women in Nigeria is death during pregnancy. However, the social norm continues to enforce these conditions onto women. This constant pressure to be married off devalues women. Mothers and fathers subject their daughters to abuse by constantly enforcing that they are objects for selling, rather than a loved family member. Unicef states that in 2014, 12 million girls under the age of twenty have experienced forced sexual acts against their will. Aku-nna was kidnapped and almost forced into marriage. “Aku-nna arrived at her new home limp, half-conscience, and half clothed.” (Emecheta, 133) In Nigerian culture if you kidnap a young woman then de-virgin her, she is your wife. Aku-nna was kidnapped from chorus rehearsal and taken to an unfamiliar home. At her new home she was beaten badly when she spoke against her soon to be husband. The constant abuse women receive in Nigeria that is accepted as society’s norms continue to oppress women.

Women in Nigeria are subjected to a life of inferiority to males. This is expected in society as it is the society’s norms. Nigeria has a caste system, allowing little to no mobility in social status. The *Bride Price,* by Buchi Emecheta shows the oppression of women in Nigerian culture through Aku-nna. Aku-nna fights for her education which gives her free will, experiences frequent abuse from her family members and other members of society, and is oppressed by the society’s social norms. She is a representation of Nigerian culture and this book gives readers great insight to the realities of living in places where women are constantly oppressed.

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