Gender Roles

In the United States women are valued as important to society. 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 cultures place the same value on women as the United States. In other places of the world like Nigeria and South Africa women are subjected to an extreme patriarchal society dominated by men. In *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta and *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee Aku-nna and Susan experience oppression through, societal normality’s, a lack of a voice, and abuse.

One example of oppression seen in *The Bride Price* is society’s normality’s experienced in Nigerian culture. As a woman Aku-nna will be sold for a profit to her husband and be a servant to him and his family for the rest of her life. Aku-nna is directly translated to mean “father’s wealth.” Women in Nigerian culture are a financial investment. It is a normality that they are sold to marriage. They marry their husband not for love but rather for the financial gain of their father. Their main goal is to please males, first their father by getting a high bride price, then their husbands by being a good servant. Susan is also expected to be obedient to men. “’While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct!’” ( Coetzee, 20) Cruso expected Susan to follow his instructions of the island rules. Cruso made the rules to keep Susan safe. Aku-nna sees being sold off to her husband as a normality. Susan disobeys Cruso’s rules and explores the island. Susan does not listen to the expectations although they are imposed on her. Both Susan and Aku-nna experience expectations of society to be obedient to men, however, Susan is more challenging to the normality’s of society.

Another example of oppression of women experienced by both Susan and Aku-nna is a lack of voice. “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. Nigerian culture is strict on women not having a voice. Susan begs Cruso to keep a journal of the island, as she wants to document her time away from home. However, she is denied the access and opportunity to record her experiences. The lack of records of the time on the island makes it hard for Susan to recall everything that happened on the island. Aku-nna challenges her lack of voice by getting an education. She is allowed to further her education which increases her value. Susan publishes her time on the island which gives her a voice, however, it is regulated by Foe. “I am not a story, Mr. Foe….But my life did not begin with the waves.” (Coetzee, 131) Susan experienced oppression while trying to publish her story because her voice was limited by Mr.Foe. Aku-nna gained a voice by furthering her education. Whereas, Susan was denied full privilege in sharing her story the way she wanted. Susan’s voice was limited by a male, continuing the oppression.

One last example of oppression in Nigerian and South African culture seen through Aku-nna and Susan is the strict gender expectations. “Aku-nna arrived at her new home limp, half-conscience, and half clothed.” (Emecheta, 133) 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. Susan was called a whore by Mr.Foe after sleeping with him, an act that was mutual. Mr. Foe constantly shuts down Susan’s ideas and even runs away. She was homeless with Friday and experienced much mental abuse from Mr.Foe. Whereas Aku-nna was physically abused Susan was mentally abused on and off the island. Sexual acts before marriage are considered impure in Nigerian culture. However, Susan embraces her body and has sex with both Cruso and Mr.Foe. Susan is more challenging of expectations of society.