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The Degradation of Women in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*

From precolonial times to the 21st century, the roles of women are ever changing. Throughout most of history, women have been viewed as inferior to men, and Nigeria is no exception. In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*, the roles, and eventual degradation of women are brought to light through the main character Aku-nna, and her life experiences as a young girl in Nigeria. Women in Nigerian society have a certain role to be maintained, and throughout the novel it becomes clear to the reader what those roles are. Women in the novel and in Nigeria do not have the same amount or same access to education as men, due to the fact that many believe women do not need it in their culture. The novel also brings forth the different cultural practices that continue to degrade women. Even though some may not continue to be practiced in current day Nigeria, they have a large effect on the women in the novel. In the past, present day, and especially in the novel, women are objectified. They are strictly seen as something to be had or bought, and that issue can be found throughout western civilizations. Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* aids in bringing forth the degradation of women in Nigerian culture through the female character’s lack of education, critique of cultural practices, and the objectification of women.

Throughout history, education has always been something that women have had to fight for. Many cultures believe that women are meant to be wives and mothers, and argue that one does not need an education for that. In Nigeria, female education is very low, and it has only begun to increase within the last 20 years. A prominent cultural view is that it is better for a woman to stay at home and learn her responsibilities there, rather than attending school, for that is where she will be expected to be for most of her life. Nigerian culture sees males having a higher value than females and it is believed that the “imbalance in boys’ and girls’ participation in schooling was linked to the long-held belief in male superiority and female subordination” (Uwake). Due to the fact that female education is not the norm within their society, Nigerian women who want to receive an education have a hard time finding access to one, and when they do, it is not ensured to be the same quality education that males are receiving. In Nigeria, “the combined gross enrollment for the primary and secondary schools for females was 57%, compared to 71% for males in 2002” (Ojo). Due to the fact that females do not have that same access, there has been a gap created between genders in literacy rates and that has led to Nigeria having one of the lowest rate of female access to education. In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta demonstrates Nigeria’s lack of female education through the character Aku-nna. She has an intense desire to obtain her certificate, go to university, and pursue a career, but others around her have little faith that she will be able to do that. She is able to go to school because of the money that her mother has, but without that, it is likely she would not have had the ability to get an education. Chike says, “‘If you are going to sit there just dreaming all your life away you will fail the examination, and you know as well as I do that your people would never let you sit it again’” (Emecheta 90). Aku-nna and Chike both realize that the chance that Aku-nna has been awarded to get an education is very rare, and it is not to be taken lightly. Okonkwo says, “‘I would never do such a foolish thing as to pay for schooling…her mother pays for her. And she surely won’t be going on to any college’” (Emecheta 74). Most of the characters in the novel do not approve of Aku-nna’s aspirations, and believe that she should remain in the women’s rightful roles such as laborer or caretaker. The only time that the idea is relatively accepted is when Okonkwo realizes that Aku-nna will bring in a higher bride price due to the fact that she is educated. In Nigerian culture and the novel especially, education for women seems to be accepted only when it is convenient, and when it has something to offer in return. Emecheta shows the readers Nigerian culture through Aku-nna, and how real the issue was at the time, and how important it continues to be today. The lack of education both Aku-nna and real women have leads to the issue of degradation of women in Nigeria. They are not given the same opportunities, and are constantly seen as not only inferior, but unimportant.

Throughout the novel, Emecheta not only describes, but makes underlying critiques about some of the cultural practices in Nigeria when it comes to women. Most cultural practices can be seen as harmful or degrading to women, and some of the experiences that Aku-nna goes through shed light on those practices. In the novel, hair cutting is a large cultural practice that does not hurt the women physically, but emotionally. It is described that “a man with no money to pay a bride price could hide behind the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from a girl’s head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and no other man could have her” (Emecheta 48). Again, this is not something that physically harms the woman in any way, but it’s the idea of it that is degrading to women. As long as someone cuts a lock of hair, the woman is no longer free. Emecheta uses Aku-nna as an example of a woman who defies that. She ran away from Okoboshi, making sure that he did not cut her hair, because she knew that if that had happened, all of the freedom she had would be gone. Emecheta uses Aku-nna to criticize the practice of cutting hair and plant the idea that it is possible for a woman to defy the hold she has been put under. Another example is the idea of kidnapping. Towards the end of the novel, Aku-nna is kidnapped by Okoboshi, and he then tries to force her to have sex with him, claiming her as his. When the kidnapping is described, Aku-nna thinks, “So this was to be the end of [my] dreams. After everything, she was nothing but a common native girl kidnapped into being a bride” (Emecheta 126). This passage shows just how normal the practice of kidnapping is in their society. When she is being kidnapped, Aku-nna realizes that she is now just like every other girl. She will no longer be able to achieve her dreams or live freely. Emecheta comments through her writing just how often this happens in Nigerian society, and is criticizing how normal it has become. Both the act of hair cutting and kidnapping lead to the overall issue of degradation of women because women are treated as if the do not matter. Whether it is taking away someone’s freedom physically through kidnapping, or metaphorically through cutting off a lock of hair, Nigerian culture seems to condone the objectification of women, and see them merely as something to be owned.

An overall theme when it comes to any literature about women is objectification. In this novel especially, Nigerian women are continually seen as objects or as something to be bought. By the book’s very title, the main objectification of women in this novel is the act of the bride price. A bride price is something that has been present all throughout history; from early Mesopotamia, to Ancient Greece, Afghanistan, China, and Africa, each different country has their own different version of a bride price, but they all have the same goal: proving that a husband owns his wife. Although a bride price is paid to the family of the bride by the groom, it is still seen as a symbol of ownership. In many cultures today, things like this still exist. In the case of the novel, the Nigerian custom comes with a significant price: “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” (Emecheta 168). The women are constantly being objectified through this bride price, and the consequences it could have on their lives. The curse carried with it instills a fear within the women of the novel, causing them to be forced to follow its rules. While there are many other examples of objectification in the novel, Emecheta focuses on the bride price. Women in Nigeria, and all throughout the world, are seen as objects in some way. Whether it is just a sense of ownership through marriage, or paying an actual bride price, Emecheta brings forth the issues of objectification and degradation, causing the readers to realize just how real of a problem it is.

Women in Nigeria have faced many challenges throughout history, and continue to face some even today. Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Bride Price* is a perfect example of how culture in Nigeria has effected the life of a woman. Through things such as lack of education, cultural practices, and objectification, it is easy to see how the life of a woman an be degraded. Women are constantly seen as inferior to men, and treated as an object to be owned or purchased. Emecheta uses her novel to bring these issues to light through the main character Aku-nna, allowing readers to become more informed and better understand the life that these women actually live, and how degrading it can be.

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