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The novel, *The Bride Price*, was written in 1976 by a talented Nigerian writer named Buchi Emecheta. Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944. The novel, *The Bride Price,* also takes place in Lagos, Nigeria and is based around an Igbo family. In Nigeria, Igbo is one of the three largest and most dominant ethnic groups. The story is about a little girl named Aku-nna, and her little brother Nna-nndo struggling with the loss of the head of their family, their father Ezekial. The two children face many trials and tribulations, which all stem from the loss of their father. Although they still have their mother, Ma Blackie, in Nigerian culture, no family is ever the same without the father. Ma Blackie eventually remarries another man, and continues her family. The problem arises when Aku-nna decides she wants to marry Chike, a descendant of slaves, and go against her step-father’s orders of marrying a man with a superior background who will provide a generous bride price. In Nigerian culture, any marriage with an unpaid bride price will not end happily. In turn, after Akun-na marries Chike and becomes pregnant, she dies in child birth which is said to be the curse of the unpaid bride price. The book comments on the unequal role and treatment of women in Nigeria and the effect of these elements in relationship to Nigerian women’s confidence and dignity. Throughout the book, Emecheta criticizes and undermines the men of Nigeria and the Nigerian customs and traditions, which both cause women to be treated unequally. Emecheta uses the characterization of Akun-na, the role of Ezekial and Ma Blackie’s new husband and the bride price as ways to criticize the culture and the men of Nigeria.

Emecheta precisely constructed the character named Akun-na. Throughout Emecheta’s life, she had always been submissive and passive, and Akun-na seems to be a representation of the author. As the story begins, Akun-na’s confidence is at an all-time low. An example of this is when the narrator states, “Akun-na knew that she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this marriage. Not only was she a girl but she was much too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump little girl for a daughter” (pg.9). This quote makes the reader feel sympathetic for Akun-na and demonstrates the structure of the Nigerian culture. Through this quote, the author demonstrates the unequal treatment of women. In the Nigerian culture, the men in the family were most important, then the mother, then the daughter. It was said to be a blessing when a woman had a son, and a curse or a disgrace when women had daughters. The author criticizes this cultural view by making the reader feel bad for Akun-na, that she feels she has no worth. Being a woman in Nigerian culture was hard and depressing. Akun-na begins to find herself and her independence as the book moves on. The characterization of Akun-na is a representation of the rights that women began to gain over time in Nigeria. As Akun-na gained a voice and more independence, she began to not rely on others and their opinions of her and she simply did what made her happy. Although her step-father did not want her to be with Chike, she followed her heart and married him while ignoring the curse of the unpaid bride price. The author used Akun-na’s situation to help us to not only understand the status of women in post-colonial Nigeria, but to understand the progress they have made as well. The progress that Nigerian women have made is one of main components that Nigeria fights for. Their national motto is “Peace and Unity, Strength and Progress”. This is a representation of what the country as a whole stands for.

Emecheta strongly criticizes the role of the men in the Nigerian culture in *The Bride Price*. Ezekial’s role in beginning of the story is to be the head of the family and to support his family. Throughout the story, Emecheta tries to make the reader feel bad for the women in the story and she also makes the men always look like the bad guys. When Ezekial falls ill and must go to the hospital, he is not man enough to tell his children the extent of his illness. He does not want to disclose how ill he is due to his pride and his role to be the provider and the head of the household. Emecheta’s characterization of Ezekial presents him as a typical strong, Nigerian man who is suffering from an illness, which makes him feel as less of a man. He tries to be strong for his image and his family, which causes him to hide his ailments. He tells his children that he is going to the hospital and will be back in a few hours, but he never returns. Soon after Ezekial’s departure, Akun-na and Nna-nndo get word that their father has died. In Nigerian culture this is extremely tragic due to the father being the most important figure in the family. Ezekial’s death was such a tragedy to his family because his wife was in Igbdo trying to become fertile again, instead of at home taking care of the children. When Ezekial died, his wife, Ma Blackie, came back to take care of the children. After Ezekial’s death, the narrarator stated, “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“(pg.28). This shows that the mother has little to no importance in the structure and function of the family. A family without a male figure has no rank in society and is rarely recognized. Ma Blackie knowing how the Nigerian culture was, she abruptly moved her family back to Igbdo. Ma Blackie is forced to remarry quickly, because a widowed woman in Nigerian culture is seen as extremely weak. When she gets remarried, she marries the brother of her late husband, who has numerous wives. Emecheta also uses the characterization of Ma Blackie’s new husband to criticize the men of the Nigerian culture. She speaks of all his wives in a negative connotation and makes it a type a war between Ma Blackie and the other wives because her daughter is continuing to go to school. Nigeria’s Penal Code states that men have the right to beat their wives as long as they do not cause permanent physical injury. This shows the difference between American culture and Nigerian culture in the way men treat their women. Women in the American culture are treated with respect and they have the same rights as men. Compared to American culture, Nigerian women have less rights and freedom. We also see a demonstration of how the women are treated after the death of Ezekial. Akun-na is forced to be the crier at her father’s funeral and has many jobs and duties, while her brother has nothing more to do than to choose who would be sitting next to his father’s dead body during the funeral.

Another representation of how the women in Nigeria had no legitimate rights is the use of the bride price. The bride price is a payment made by the family of the groom to the father of the bride. The bride price can vary in amounts depending on several components of the bride including looks, education, family rank, etc. This shows the degrading ways in which the women in Nigeria are treated. The author presents this issue with Akun-na being at the center of the situation. Akun-na’s step-father is eager for her to get married because she is very beautiful and she received more education than most women. Akun-na’s step father wanted to pick the perfect wealthy man with high ranks for his step daughter to marry. In the Nigerian culture there are three main types of marriage which include religious marriage, civil marriage and traditional marriage. Akun-na’s step father wants her to have a traditional and arranged marriage in which he picked the ideal man for her. When Akun-na’s step father chooses a wealthy and high-ranked man for her to marry, she reveals that she is beginning to fall in love with her teacher. The problem with her falling in love with her teacher, Chike, is that her father will never approve of their marriage because Chike is a decedent of slaves. The bride price is a major representation of the power the men have over the women in the Nigerian culture. Emecheta criticizes the Nigerian custom of the bride price by creating the character Akun-na who rebels against the teachings of the Nigerian culture. Emecheta uses Akun-na to demonstrate the suppression Nigerian women experience from men in their lives.

Emecheta uses various components of the book such as the characterization of Akun-na, the role of Ezekial and Ma Blackie’s new husband and the bride price as ways to criticize the culture and the men of Nigeria. In the book, there is a strong criticism of the Nigerian culture and customs as a whole. The author focuses on how the men treat the women in the story and she uses Akun-na as a way to express her views. Akun-na is a representation of everything the author believes in which is that women should have equal ranks to men and women should also be respected. Emecheta gives an abundance of examples where the men of the story and clearly following the customs of the Nigerian culture, which Emecheta does not like. The moment when the woman gains her power is when Akun-na marries Chike, despite the disapproval of her step-father. The marriage of Akun-na and Chike is a representation of the progress Emecheta wanted to see occur to the women of Nigeria. In conclusion, this book criticizes and undermines the Nigerian culture and traditions in many ways. This causes the reader to be skeptical of the Nigerian customs, and hopefully begin new traditions that they can call their own.

Works Cited

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