



# PREDICAMENT OF PROTAGONISTS IN THE NOVELS OF BUCHI EMECHETA

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## Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian writer highlights the predicament of Aku-nna in patriarchal society. Women are usually victimized in a patriarchal order. They are denied education and freedom. The two protagonists considered for analysis in the paper are Aku-nna and Nnu Ego. Aku-nna, the protagonist of the novel, *The Bride Price* is suppressed by patriarchal society in means of her education, marriage and basic human rights. According to the custom of Nigerian culture, Aku-nna, is inherited by her father's brother Okonkwo along with her mother and brother, after the death of her father Odi Ezekiel. Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* is suppressed by patriarchal society. Nnu Ego's first marriage becomes bitter when she fails to have children. This leads her husband to marry another girl, which is the custom of Nigerian culture.

The culture of Igbo community is conservative in nature which prevents women to have self-identity. The subjectivity of Women in Nigeria, remain subjective right from their childhood and continue throughout their life due to social conditioning. Aku-nna and Nnu Ego became the victims of such custom. They were de-humanized by patriarchal society and succumb to death.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Predicament, Subjugation, Victimization

**Introduction:**

Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian writer in English born in Lagos in 1944. She presents the predicament of women in the modern changing society of Africa. She portrays women's struggle for economic and social independence and the clash between the modern and traditional values of Nigeria in her novels. Emecheta explores various themes like bride price, plight of women, fertility, motherhood and oppression in her novels. She pleads for the growth of both men and women of Nigeria in one of her interviews.

In her interview Buchi Emecheta says,

I am a feminist with a small "f". I love men and good men are the salt of the earth ... Personally, I'd like to see an ideal happy marriage. But if it doesn't work for goodness sake, call it off. (Umeh 1996 345)

The novel, *The Bride Price* focuses on the predicament of Aku-nna, the protagonist. Aku-nna is the daughter of Ezekiel Odia and Ma Blackie. After the death of her father, she is inherited by her uncle Okonkwo in Ibuza. She goes to Ibuza with her mother and brother Nna-ndo. She begins to fall in love with Chike, her school teacher in Ibuza who is an osu, which means, an outcast. When she gets her first menstruation, she hides it from her family members because they would hasten her to marry her off soon to get a bride price. Bride Price is the sum of money given to bride's family to marry the daughter of the family. The one who gives a good amount of bride price would get the bride. Okonkwo is an ambitious man. He wants to acquire the "Eze" title which is possible only if he has money. He decides to use the bride price that would be given by the suitor to marry Aku-nna. Buchi Emecheta portrays the fact that women are regarded as materials and goods through the character Aku-nna. In *A Powerful Female Voice*, Eustace Palmer says

Emecheta regards traditional society as one of the forces encouraging the degradation of the female. Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in traditional society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives, their main use is as vehicles for procreating children... if they are daughters. The father's only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price (21).

Aku-nna's second menstruation is revealed by her and the suitors visit her house with gifts. Ma Blackie helps the suitors to see her daughter and give their presents. Aku-nna feels embarrassed and she dislikes 'night-play' which is one of the customs of Ibuza. Even parents do not come in the way of the suitors if they indulge in night play with their daughter. This emphasizes that women are seen as a sexual object by the patriarchal society who framed those customs.

The household errands are generally taken care by woman. Although they work hard, they are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of the labour. Even though woman fetches water from the stream she is not allowed to use water in her hut. The water that has been fetched by woman is for her husband and the other male members in the family. Women have to go to the stream to bath and wash their clothes. If unclean, women are not allowed to step into the stream. It is a sin for women to take bath in a stream during unclean period. Aku-nna cleans herself and has used all the water.

During her first menstruation Aku-nna feels sick and lies down in her hut. When Nna-nndo returns back home, he gets angry and gives her a heavy blow on her when she lies that her mother has used up all water that she has fetched. Nna-nndo says, "It's about time you decided whether you are going to stay alive with us or die. Today foot, tomorrow head- all on you alone! (95). It is the girl's responsibility to do all the household duties, whereas the boys in the family are looked upon as masters.

According to Ibuza culture, if a man kidnaps a woman, and cuts her hair, she belongs to him and she should never leave him. A lock of hair is enough for the patriarchal society to subjugate the woman throughout their life. Aku-nna becomes one of the victims of this culture. She is kidnapped by Okoboshi. Okoboshi, one of the suitors forces her for the night play when Chike enters Aku-nna's hut to see her. Chike strikes Okoboshi when the latter squeezes the breasts of Aku-nna and hurts her. Having succeeded in owning Aku-nna, he tries to execute physical violence on her. Unable to bear this insult, Okoboshi kidnaps Aku-nna and cuts her lock of hair. He attempts to rape her – the action which is accepted by Ibuza community. Aku-nna escapes by telling a lie that she has lost her virginity to Chike. Okoboshi believes it. Aku-nna is beaten mercilessly by Okoboshi and his relatives for losing her virginity. The very next day, when Okoboshi goes to tell her family members that she has lost her virginity, she carries a keg which is half filled with wine, another Ibuza tradition.

A keg of wine, that is fully filled is carried by groom's house to the bride's house the next day after the wedding night. This is a practice to make known to the society the purity of the woman wedded. Okoboshi believes the lies of Aku-nna and to prove her that she is not a pure woman tells that "my father and I and my people will go your parents with an almost empty keg of palm, wine, and we shall present your mother with the clan towel, since there is nothing inside you but shame." (140). Okonkwo subjugates Akunna and never empathizes her. She is considered just as a property or object in patriarchal society. Sarah M. Grimke says,

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his unselfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind: and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought, and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior. (101)

Patriarchy imposes inferiority where women are oppressed and exploited for the convenience of male. Aku-nna gets upset when her step-father refuses bride price from Chike. She is much worried and thinks that she would die during childbirth as it is believed in Ibo culture, if the bride price is not accepted by the bride's family, then the bride would die in childbirth. This hard feeling haunts her until her childbirth. Atlast, Aku-nna dies after giving birth to a child and becomes a victim of the crude culture framed by patriarchal society.

*The Joys of Motherhood* focusses on the predicament of Nnu Ego, the protagonist. This novel is written in the background of the Second world War, which offers colonial inferences on natives and the predicament that the women of Nigeria undergo in the patriarchal society. In the words of Florence Stratton, "Recolonized woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structure of an indigenous patriarchy of a foreign masculinist colonialism" (2).

The role of woman in Ibo society is to give birth to children, particularly male children. If a woman is infertile, she is considered as a failed woman, if she gives birth to a girl child, she would lose honour. The woman who gives birth to a male child would be honoured and would get the preferences as a senior wife. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego experiences difficulties and dilemma throughout the novel. Nnu Ego is the daughter of Agbadi who is married to Amatokwu. She

experiences the first difficulty in her life when she fails to give birth to a child. According to the Nigerian culture, if the wife is barren, she has to find another wife for her husband. Amatokwu marries another woman and Nnu Ego stays in a nearby house. She has lost the position of the senior wife just because she is barren. Amatokwu's people find a new wife for him.

Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. My father is desperate. It is now known that your chi came from the people down by the river. Their women are said to be very strong. I am sorry, Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people (30).

Many a night she cried and shed "tears of frustration and hopelessness" (31).

Nnu Ego suffers physically and emotionally which is evident in the opening of the novel. She attempts suicide as a result of the death of her first son born to her second husband Nnaife. During this period, she is helped by her neighbours, but her husband fails to understand the state of Nnu Ego, which hurts her a lot. After several years of this incident, she gives birth to two sons and twin daughters. Her struggle never ends even after she becomes the mother of four children. Nnaife goes to work in the British army. During his absence, Nnu Ego and their children are evacuated from their house by British army to occupy their house. She manages to get a house for rent but leads a miserable life.

Nnaife inherits the wife of his brother, as it is the custom of Nigeria, and it becomes an added burden to Nnu Ego. When his second wife Adaku comes to live with Nnaife, Nnu Ego shows her disinterest towards her and suffers mentally. She is unable to share her husband's love with another woman. Nnaife never bothers about her emotions. He starts living happily with this second wife in the same house. "Nnu Ego bit her teeth into her baby's night clothes to prevent herself from screaming." (139).

Nnaife gets a job as a grass cutter and gives a small amount of money to the family which irritates Nnu Ego because the money he brings is not enough for the meal of the large family. When she shouts at him to earn more, he asks her to manage the family as she is given preferences as a senior wife.

Whenever it comes to sacrifice then everyone reminds me about being the senior wife, but if there is something to gain, I am told to be quiet because wanting a good thing does not befit my education. I can understand the value of being a senior wife in Iboze, not here, Nnaife. (150)

Nnu Ego looks after all the household duties and earns money by running a small business. Nnaife stays at home without any job. Nnu Ego toils day and night for food and for the education of her children.

Nnu Ego is frustrated when Nnaife makes her brother's wife pregnant and brings home the third wife Okpo. Nnu Ego looks after everyone along with her own children. She trusts that her sons would work after their education and reduce the family burden. But Oshio, the eldest son of Nnaife and Nnu Ego betrays them by taking a decision to continue his education in the university of America. She collapses when she comes to know that her daughter has eloped with the son of a butcher. Finally, she breaths her last in a roadside ditch without anyone near her.

After such wandering on one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother (253).

Even after her death, people spread stories about Nnu Ego that she is a wicked woman, because she never answers prayers for the women who appeal to her to make them fertile. "Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace" (254). She gives everything to her children when she is alive and receives nothing from them in return when she is alive.

## Conclusion

The protagonists of Buchi Emecheta struggle throughout their life as a wife and mother and it never ends until their death. Buchi Emecheta portrays the plight of woman in Ibo society which is very harsh towards the woman who is incapable of bearing children and the refusal of recognition to the woman who sacrifices everything for her family.

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