

# The liminality of Identity of women in the Colonial Nigeria in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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## **Abstract**

*African feminism primarily argues that the representation of the African women in literature should be studied and analyzed, not only through the perspectives of Western feminist thought, but also with a great degree of cultural consciousness. In other words, any approach to the novels written by or representing African women must be aware that the perspectives promoted and discussed in the Western feminist discourse are mostly Eurocentric and therefore homogenizing and cannot be purely imported and imposed upon the culturally different African communities. Therefore, the reading of novels by female African authors is to be informed by the perspectives of African feminism which is obviously a sub-category of postcolonial thought. The present article demonstrates that in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, the Nigerian novelist, the cultural factors of the Igbo indigeneity form integral parts of both the creative work of the novelists and the identity and life of their protagonists. These aspects are studied with regard to the broader context of the current of African feminism that generally is a subdivision of postcolonial feminism, represented by thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty.*

**Key words:** *Buchi Emecheta, The Bride Price, postcolonial feminism, liminality, identity*

## **I. Introduction**

Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944. She is a member of Igbo tribe, one of the many tribes in Nigeris. In 1962, she moved to England to join her husband. Mother of five children, she left her husband in 1968. She worked to support her children and at the same time studied to earn a BSc at the University of London. She has written 22 novels since she published her first work, *In the Ditch* in 1972. Her other novels include *The Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *The Rape of Shavi* (1984), and *Kehinde* (1994). Her work has received vast admiration throughout the world and she is known mostly for her ironical picturing of the plight of the colonized Igbo woman who is strung between the suppressive system of

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patriarchal traditions and the encroachment of the colonial rule over these traditions. The following questions will be answered in the present paper:

-What are the specificities of the indigenous Igbo social familial system and how are these specificities represented in *The Bride Price* as identity-forming for the Igbo woman?

- How does the differences between the precolonial Igbo culture and colonial culture influence the lives and identity of the Igbo woman?

Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, written in 1956 is set in colonial Nigeria. By integrating the concepts of the indigenous social structure into the colonial setting and the way the rapid upheavals of the society at the hands of the colonizers affect the lives of her characters, she pictures the predicaments of women harmonizing the strict clan demands with the new society during its rapid pace of change under the colonial rule. The situation of women in her novels including *The Bride Price* is a liminal state from a socio-cultural point of view.

Liminality, literally meaning "being on-a-threshold", is used to refer to "a state or process which is betwixt and between the normal day to day cultural and social states of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status"(Turner 465). In Emecheta's novels of "the ancient generation" including *The Bride Price*, the life stories of the protagonists are in a liminal state between and betwixt two major dominances of their traditional family structures and the modern colonial rule. As a result, these women are deeply confused about their identity, and their concept of selfhood is totally damaged. The novel will be read in this part to reveal how in the course of colonization of the African tribal communities, here the Igbo ethnicity, the colonial regulations that resulted from a Eurocentric world view displaced the African tribal woman and deprived her of any 'subject position' in the new colonial discourse. Although the traditional system was also patriarchal and repressing for women, still the Igbo tribal women had their own special powers and social positions within that system that were taken from them during the process of modernism and urbanization.

## II. Summary of the Novel

The protagonist of *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna Odia, a teenage girl from Ibuza village of Igboland, lives with her parents and only brother in Lagos. Her mother, Ma Blackie, travels to Ibuza to visit a *dibia* in request for more children. Meanwhile, her husband, Ezekiel Odia, who suffers from an infection in his legs, is taken to the hospital and dies. During World War II, he had been forcefully taken to Burma by the British army and caught the sickness there. According to traditions, Ezekiel's brother, Okonkwu, becomes Ma Blackie's husband and they return to Ibuza to live with his family. In Ibuza, Aku-nna falls for the young school teacher of their village, Chike. The young man, being a descendent of slaves is not allowed to marry her, a free woman. Moreover, her uncle has great hope to obtain the high-rank title of *Ezo* by increasing his wealth after receiving Aku-nna's bride price. The situation becomes complicated when another family kidnaps Aku-nna as their bride, and traditionally no other man can marry her after a lock of her hair is cut off by the would-be husband. That night, Aku-nna informs the husband that she is not a virgin and has been with Chike. As a result the groom does not touch her and his family sends half-filled pots of palm wine to her *obi* as a sign of her being deflowered before marriage. Aku-nna and Chike fly to Ugheli where her health gradually declines.

Okonkwo admonishes Ma Blackie for bringing up such a disobedient daughter. He goes to a *dibia* for improvising witchcraft to call her back “through the wind”. Eventually, Aku-nna dies in childbirth and her story remains among the Igbo to always warn Igbo girls never to dare act against the dominant traditions of the tribe.

### III. Sense of Belonging and the Liminality of Identity: The Bride Price

In *The Bride Price* the principles that dominate Igbo women’s lives before colonization decline after the colonial rule takes control. Consequently, the women living in the colonial period experienced great confusion regarding their positions within the family and the larger community. Amadiume, like some other African critics, believes that along with official regulations imposed upon the Igbo people, the status of women declined both in family and in the society. Although the pre-colonial life for women was full of physical hardship and serious responsibilities in the family, still the traditional culture held great advantages for them. Amadiume argues that the dual-sex system of the extended family resulted in two separate sets of hierarchies, one for matrilineal and the other for patrilineal lines of the family. Every individual was responsible for a certain set of duties and nobody had a right to transgress their defined limitations. Moreover, the gender roles in this society did not correspond to the sex of the individual. Girls and women had their own age groups like men, and all had regular gatherings with their matrilineal and patrilineal relatives to discuss family issues and solve problems (*Re-inventing* 72).

Patrilineal hierarchy which is not sex-bound (because, for instance, daughters can become husbands) and ruled by the traits of competitiveness, valour, violence, and masculinism, is dependent upon the matrilineal part economically, and brings jural power. On the other hand, the matrilineal hierarchy is autonomous in its control of economy, owns its own land or garden, and is ruled by the ideals of love, compassion, and peace (*Re-inventing* 84). The gradual penetration of patriarchal values through the Arab-Islamic invasions and the effects of the forceful imposition of colonial rule weakened this dual social structure and caused great identity problems for the Igbo and degraded women’s position in the society.

Aku-nna of *The Bride Price*, like many other women, experiences this confusion in the colonial Nigeria. The importance of the indigenous sense of belonging to the family gradually appears to Aku-nna and her brother after their father’s death. All the relatives who live in Lagos gather at their humble house for a very elaborate funeral:

The people of Ibuza have a proverb which says that quarrels between relatives are only skin deep; they never penetrate to the bones. They have another saying, that on the day of blood relatives, friends go. This day then was the day of blood relatives. Aku-nna was learning. (*The Bride price* 18)

This amount of affection among the relatives is particularly true for the relatives who are descended from the same mother, and Aku-nna recognizes this cultural specificity, although she is confused at the complications of funeral rites as a combination of Igbo and Christian ceremonies. Moreover, the hybrid nature of this funeral is emphasized to foreshadow Aku-nna’s later confusion about her personal choice and her traditional duties:

Ezekiel Odiá's funeral was like all such ceremonies in colonial Africa, a mixture of the traditional and the European. Emphasis was always placed in the European aspect. The European ways were considered modern, the African old-fashioned. Lagos culture was such an unfortunate conglomeration of both that you ended up not knowing to which you belonged. (29)

This bewilderment worsens as Aku-nna is taken back to Ibuza with her mother and brother. She has been brought up in a modern city, gone to school and is considered a cultured and refined girl in a village like Ibuza where most women have no access to formal education at British schools. On their arrival in the village they are warmly received by a number of relatives. They all walk to her uncle's *obi* while the relatives carry their luggage for them. The narrow forest road, leading to their new residence has a mysterious and somehow terrifying aspect in Aku-nna's thought:

The forest became really dense like mysterious groves. Here you saw a narrow footpath like a red ribbon winding itself into the mysterious depth. There you saw a human figure merge as it were from a secret green retreat, carrying on her head a bunch of ripe, blood coloured palm fruits. (60)

Aku-nna's arrival in Ibuza, thus, is accompanied by two different feelings. One is the sense of belonging to a group of friendly women and girls who are ready to help. The other is aloofness, a sense of alienation from this strange forest with its "red roads" and "blood-red" palms. This feeling of loneliness grows in her as she feels the envy other girls feel towards her education and refined behaviour. Later on, Aku-nna becomes more confused between the emotions and love she has for her family, especially her mother, and her love for Chike. Her situation is like that of an entrapped bird.

The sense of belonging and affectionate behaviour is only one aspect of the traditional communal living in Ibuza. The identity and very being of the Igbo people is defined and formed in terms of their inter-dependence with their community. On their walk to Ibuza they see two young men on bicycles, one of them is Chike Ofulue, the village teacher with whom Aku-nna is to fall in love soon. As they greet Aku-nna and her relatives the narrator tells us in a very ironical tone how important it is in Ibuza to know the art of communal living,

Nearly everyone in Ibuza was related. They all knew each other, the tales of one another's ancestors, their histories and heroic deeds. Nothing was hidden in Ibuza. It was the duty of every member of the town to find out and know his neighbor's business.

For a while they all stood and chatted. The young men had that distinctive and good-humoured quality of ease which was the heritage of people who had long ago learned and absorbed the art of communal living. (39)

An individual's identity is completely determined by his/her place in the family and the larger community. Even the Christian missionaries and administrators should know the importance of relatives in the lives of Igbo people in order to better obtain their agreement and satisfaction. In their first day of school, the routine ceremonies are held:

The White man who was the head of the mission stood aside, looking very old and uncomfortable in his long white robe. . . . When the time came for announcements, the white man spoke in a strange sort of dialect which he seemed to think was Ibo. . . . He welcomed them all back after the holidays and said he hoped they would work even harder than they had the term before. He hoped that everybody's family was enjoying the best of health, and begged each member of the school to convey his own personal greetings and blessings to their mothers and fathers and cousins and friends. The whole school cheered. Reverend Osborne had captured the African spirit all right, after all. (48)

The social life and personal life are not separate entities in such a community. As Aku-nna and her brother soon are accustomed to this type inter-related life, they develop more skills of living as sociable individuals. As the narrator explains, one of the important social institutions in Igbo land is the system of 'age-groups'. Girls and boys who belong to each generation- that is usually at three years intervals- are considered to belong to the same 'age group'. They take part on rituals and dances together and strong bonds are formed among them as they share many experiences together, and throughout life, they are considered to be co-travelers. Each age group is known with a particular important event that happened contemporaneously with their birth. Emecheta has considered the tradition of 'age- groups' as a distinctive cultural feature of the Igbo people in comparison to the adherence of the Western women to their relationships with men:

We believe that we are here for many, many things, not just to cultivate ourselves, and make ourselves pretty for men. The beauty in sisterhood is when women reach the age of about forty. . . . In England, for example, I belong to the war-babies. They call us 'salt-less' babies, that means we were born in Nigeria when they didn't have salt because of the war. So in our village we were called 'the Saltless Women'. There are about sixteen of my age-group in London, and we have our own group here too. Last year a member of our group was in hospital and she said that other patients called her the Princess of Africa. On visiting days, the nurses and doctors invariably shooed us away. (Feminism 554)

Similarly, Aku-nna belongs to that generation of girls in Ibuza who were born around the year when hundreds of teen-age girls were drowned in the River Niger. "most of them had gone to Onitsha on that particular market day to buy clothes for going away to their new husbands' homes, and crossing the river on their way back they were unfortunately overtaken by a storm so violent that nearly all those in the open and unprotected canoes lost their lives" (51). At that time, the people consoled themselves by the belief that the goddess of the river has taken the girls to her under-water palace to serve her. Afterwards, many women became pregnant and many of them gave birth to daughters and there was a "joyous understanding that the river goddess has given these new baby girls to replace the ones she had taken" (ibid).

Aku-nna, therefore, belongs to this age group which is very popular. Its members were around fifteen years old. She starts to take dance lessons with them to prepare a special performance for Christmas as it was believed it would be their last year in their fathers' homes. It is from that dance class that she is kidnapped and forced to marriage.

All different aspects of the communal and family life in Ibuza are confusing to Aku-nna because she comes from a different kind of community in Lagos. However, it is not just Aku-nna who is suffering from this state of bewilderment and confusion, but every single character in the novel, and in general, the whole Igboland confronting the modern colonial regulations and new social system imposed upon their traditions are perplexed and confused. The imposition of the white man's law upon this people is depicted as the basic reason for Aku-nna's predicaments.

Aku-nna's uncle, who becomes her mother's husband, seeing her beauty and refinement, fancies a big bride price for Aku-nna, so that he can acquire the Igbo respectable title of *Eze*. From the very first day of their arrival it is well expressed that she is supposed to bring a lot of money to her family, as it is mentioned that "He was telling her, not in so many words, that she could never escape. She was trapped in the intricate web of Ibuza tradition. She must either obey or bring shame and destruction on her people" (166).

The main reason Aku-nna's uncle objected to her marriage with Chike is the fact that he is a descendant of slaves, a member of an '*oshu*' family. After slavery was announced illegal in Igboland, the masters sent their slaves to the Christian missionaries just not to "loose face with these Europeans who suddenly stopped buying slaves and turned into missionaries instead". These slaves and children of slaves became subsequently the "first teachers, headmasters, and later their children became the first doctors and lawyers in many Ibo towns" (50). The problem that rose later was the jealousy and spite felt by the now disempowered sons of the previous free men against this new generation of prosperous descendants of slaves.

Chike Ofulue's father is one of these educated slaves who is envied by everyone in Ibuza,

The people of Ibuza would never forgive him for being so prosperous. They would never forgive him having illustrious children, through whom the existence of a small town like theirs was being made known to the rest of Nigeria. Although he was a member of the Native Administration the people had never allowed him to become a chief; for, they reasoned, the day a slave becomes a chief in this town, then we know that our end is near. Ofulue was amused by it all; he did not intend to ask the people of Ibuza to bend over backwards for his sake. His children taught in their schools, his children treated their old people free in the hospitals. Yet they were still slaves, *oshu*. (51)

Although the senior Ofulue is very conservative in his relations with the Ibuza people still he knows that the long suppressed feelings of envy and anger would burst out if he and his family transgress the traditional beliefs. On such rule is that marriage between an *oshu* and a free person is forbidden. That is why he warns his young son not to mess with the people on their traditions by approaching one of their daughters. The power of these traditions is more than the European rules that ban slavery or the Christian statements like "We are all equal in the sight of the Lord." However, Aku-nna and Chike are unfortunate enough to fall victim to the clash between traditions and the colonial impact.

After Aku-nna lies about her virginity to Okoboshi, he beats her and shouts in rage:

If you really want to know, I was not keen on you anyway. My father wanted you simply to get even with his old enemy Ofulue, your slave lover's father. So you are not a virgin! That will be the greatest fun of it all. You will

remain my wife in name, but in a few months I shall marry the girl of my choice and you will have to fetch and carry for her and for my subsequent wives. Get out of my bed, you public bitch! (101)

Ofulue, Chike's father, had years ago bought a piece of land and planted cocoa beans and palm trees in it. After Aku-nna and Chike's elopement, her act is considered an act of abomination against the ancient traditions. but it was also a good excuse to take the revenge of accumulated jealousies and angers against Chike's family. Ofulue's farm was burned to ashes by the Ibuza people,

The shock of it didn't kill the old man off but it shook him badly. Left to him, he would have let sleeping dogs lie, since it would be impossible to discover who the culprit was, but his sons did not agree. . . So Ofulue's sons and daughters pooled their resources and sued the Obidi family. The whole of Ibuza came forward as witnesses against the Ofulues. But the law was based in English justice which did not make allowance for slaves, so the Ibuza people lost the case and were ordered to compensate the Ofulue family. And curses were equally heaped on the family that had started it all, Okonkwo's family.

Okonkwo, Aku-nna's uncle not only lost any prospect of achieving the Eze title, but also lost the good reputation he already had in his community. This complicated situation is what Emecheta succeeds to represent as an instant of the outcomes of the imposition of the European rules upon such a traditional community as the Igbo tribe.

Therefore, as it was mentioned before, the predicaments that each individual undergoes in the novel, is not only the result of the inflexible traditions or the or confrontation of individual and society, but also the unavoidable consequence of the culturally ignorant rules imported from a totally different society and imposed upon the Igbo people.

The personal choice of an Igbo woman once in the traditional community would have depended on her position within the extended family and the clan. In the absence of those traditional negotiating systems that would have allowed for mutual dialogue and understanding the traditions have turned into oppressive limitations. In fact, Aku-nna is identified as a member of the family as long as she obeys her uncle's demands, otherwise she is expelled from the family and damned by her *chi*. It is mentioned in the novel, she tries to negotiate her *chi* into changing her lot to a happy one by letting her marry the man she loves. *Chi*, therefore, functions as an intermediary between the individual wishes and desires and her responsibilities toward her society. Emecheta, in the first level, seems to be highly critical about the entangling traditions that approve of the annihilation of women who act as they wish as free individuals. However, in a deeper layer of the text, it becomes clear that it is not just the patriarchal discriminations that are questioned but also the very perplexity and alienation that occurs to women in the middle of confrontation of the old and new codes and regulations.

Aku-nna is born and trained in a different way from her cousins in Ibuza. Her dreams and ideals are different and, her individuality is developed more according to Western concepts of independence and free will than traditional concepts of communal welfare and traditional group-mind. Her sudden turn of lot brings her to great tumult in

identifying with either system. Aku-nna well represents any woman living in a colonial or postcolonial situation where neither the patriarchal nor the colonial discourse assigns a place to women. Hers is a liminal identity, neither traditional nor modern. As Spivak would argue, Aku-nna is a subaltern woman who does not occupy a 'subject position' in either discourse. In the discourse of tradition, she must obey the family's way to remain a 'good' daughter, wife, and mother. In the Western feminist discourse, her subjectivity is equally denied by the accusation of family bonds as entangling chains that ban women's progress and happiness (*Re-inventing* 23); none of the two discourses takes into account what her material situation is. A Western feminist reading of the novel would emphasize the victimization of women in the patriarchal community where a woman's body is the property of her family and not her own. She is deprived of free choice in marriage and love. Therefore, Aku-nna's elopement with Chike is translated as a willful act of courage and a sign of her individual maturity and independence. However, any critic who is aware of the depth and width of sense of belonging as an integral part of any Igbo woman would see the degree of perplexity and pain that Aku-nna feels as her identity is torn in two. She hears "voices through the wind" that call her back to her family, and her loss of vital energy leads to her ultimate death in childbirth.

This liminality of identity is not limited to Emecheta's fictional characters but also her own process of becoming a writer takes place in a typically liminal state. Her life span is extended in a liminal space and time at the same time. She experiences life events as culturally diverse as the traditional life in the Ibuza village and an arranged marriage on one hand, and writing novels and getting a scholarship with five children in London. There is little place for astonishments that all her major characters in her trilogy, pass liminal lives both in space and time.

Emecheta has called herself "a feminist with a small 'f'" ("Feminism with a Small 'f'" 553). There are many other African women critics and writers who refuse to be classified as feminists. The reason, besides all other explanations, is that African woman is deeply aware of the significant role a woman plays in the family, that indigenous African cultures were not centralized by men, and women were not just marginal appendices to men. They used to occupy their own place in the ideological framework and had a "subject position". In contrast, within the patriarchal colonial atmosphere, the ancient sociopolitical system diminished, and women's social and family status declined. Western feminist thought, although providing these authors with suitable theoretical foundations, has not traced the material situation of the women of the south through their specific socio-cultural histories. Therefore, Emecheta who knows the significance of traditional women's roles in Africa refuses the term "Feminist" as it is associated with Western feminist individualism that considers the family as the first exploitative social institution in the capitalist society.

Consequently, it is not surprising that traces of indigenous beliefs and practices are interwoven into these narratives which contribute to the reading of the pale palimpsest of the Igbo woman's material history. One such trace in Aku-nna's life is an underlying folktale that parallels the main narrative. It is about a group of Ibuza maidens who are drowned in Ibuza's beautiful Oboshi river. The people believe that their daughters have been selected by the goddess of the river to serve in her palace. In this way, they console themselves and justify the loss of their beloved daughters. Moreover, in the ancient times, there had used to be human sacrifices to this goddess and, they also regard it her majesty's rightful claim to her maidens (101).

On the other hand, after her flight to Ughera, Aku-nna is described as heavenly and sacred at several points: “They were very bright, those eyes, too bright to be earthly. The brownness of them mingled with some kind of angelic fire that gave them even more beauty” (165) and “Then he [Chike] walked quickly pass him and into the unnaturally clean white room, feeling as though he was entering a shrine. The surgeon left and he was alone with Aku-nna” (166). Here, the fact that Aku-nna is called back through the wind is parallel to the belief in the goddess claiming her maidens and taking them in a group, as if Aku-nna, who belongs to the world of Ibuza and tradition, is called back to her people.

#### IV. Conclusion

The tragedy of Aku-nna’s life is more about her torn identity between the modern and the traditional than her brutal suppression in a patriarchal culture. She culturally belongs to her people, to her traditional roots and ancestral behaviour, while her modern education in the Western style promotes romantic love and independent will. The Igbo sense of selfhood, as emphasized by Oyewumi, is deeply different from that of the Western individualism. Africans’ very sense of being involves their belonging to the group: family, ancestors, and relatives. As mentioned before, family structure and the matrilineal and patrilineal attachments and duties are the specific factor in the formation of the self-image of the Igbo woman. The crucial difference between the African and Western processes of the formation of the self-image or selfhood contradicts feminist interpretations of Aku-nna’s tragedy as mere proof of the brutality of fanatical traditionalism. Aku-nna suffers not only because she is swimming against the tide, but also because she is denying an important part of her ‘self’. Her tragedy, like Nnu Ego is her lost subject position. She suffers because she is no position to claim her subjective desire and action either in Ibuza or in Lagos. Each patriarchal discourse, one traditional and the other one colonial, claims her stance as subject and leaves no space for her voice to be heard.

Aku-nna is an Igbo girl, a daughter of the goddess of the river. Her happiness is not possible without the happiness of her family. In Ughera, the town they have escaped to, she hears voices in the wind that are calling her back to her ancestral being. Her uncle has arranged a *dibia* call her back. The traditional belief that might be interpreted as mere superstition, functions as an integral part of Igbo ‘group mind’ (16). As Emecheta puts it:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated a traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nna’s death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. 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. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody’s guess. (167)

Emecheta is aware of the depth and significance of sense of belonging among Igbo women, therefore, she has created a discourse where the Igbo woman can be read through the palimpsest of traditional and colonial texts.

Aku-nna's life story should be interpreted neither as that of a victim of patriarchy nor a rebellious individualist. Instead, her life is the fruit of the unfortunate imposition of colonial regulations and organizations upon a culturally incongruous world. Emecheta, as in other novels, has created an inter-text that represents the liminal space of identity where the clash of a subjugating ruling system and a repressed culture leads to the exacerbation of the subaltern women's condition of life. Despite colonial claims of improving women's condition by imposing the Westernized social institutions like educational, legal, and controlling organizations, African women suffered even more in this period, because their indigenous 'world-sense', in Oyewumi's words, is totally ignored by the new Western order.

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