

Cultural Dynamics In Buchi Emechta's The Bride Price And The Slave Girl

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Abstract

Africa has got a rich and unique cultural heritage. The elders of the community pass over the African culture to the younger generation orally and through the written form. Africa being colonised by the European noticed a shift of culture. The impact of alien culture on African culture was visible during the phase of colonisation. Cultural hegemony is the main component of European culture. Cultural hegemony is infused into the African culture. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry is visible in Buchi Emechta's *The Bride Price and The Slave Girl*. Her protagonist Aku-nna and Obejeta symbolises cultural exchange.

Keywords: *Cultural Dynamics, Cultural Hegemony, Cultural Hybridity, Hybridity, Mimicry*

Introduction

Africa has a well-knit, integrated homogenous culture. The uniqueness and richness of the African culture is handed down in the oral as well as the written form. Culture is inherited from the elders of the community. This is known as enculturation. William Haviland et al. define the process in *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge* as "Enculturation by which culture is passed from one generation to the next and through which individuals become a member of the society" (14). The heritage African people share have their own sovereignty, dignity and personality.

Culture is dynamic. It keeps on changing. The impact of the alien culture on the African culture is noticed during the phase of colonization from 1885-1960. The imperialist conditions the colonizer. Fidel Castro in *On Imperialist Globalization* observes that the imperialist will use "all its might and force to keep away anything that stands in its way and culture is one of those things very much in its way" (88). The Europeans colonized Africa and their encroachment is not a mere political strategy but a systematic plan of action that has its impact on the behaviour and the psychology of the Africans too. They are tagged as underprivileged, deprived of a position in the society and reduced to submissive objects. Edward Said and Frantz Fanon raised their voice for the weaker section, the colonizer through their works. The influence the West tries to lay on the East is exposed. The unethical political practice, attempts to act upon the native culture, wipe their identity through oppressive crafty strategy are brought to light. They attempt to decolonise the colonizer.

The main component of European culture is cultural hegemony. The Europeans identify themselves as superior in comparison with the people and culture of the non-Europeans. This leadership of culture is what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci has identified as hegemony. Hegemony deals with the nature of authority. The acceptance of authority is made possible not by direct force of power but by passive, slow incognisant willingness to be submissive. It is a persuasive force over independent people who agree in terms with the dominant group.

Thomas R. Bates in "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony" comments that in *Quaderni del Carcere* Gramsci's theory of hegemony lies as fragments and scattered. Bates analyzes Gramsci's idea of hegemony, "that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas" (351). He points out that in *Ill Materialism Storico* Gramsci observes that the western civilization survived considering ideology as an important factor. Ideas play a key function in protecting the "ideological unity of a whole social bloc" (351). Men are ruled by ideas.

The colonisers convinces the other classes and rules. Educational institutions, churches, journals, libraries and clubs are the components of the civil society. They influence the public behavioural pattern and construct the ideology of the colonisers as a preferred one. It is a slow, long and persistent process. Gradually and steadily the ruling class develops the attitude self – negation on the ruled. Benevolence, philanthropy, and humanitarianism are the shield that the ruling class used. Amicable approach is employed by the colonisers to keep the colonised under their clutches.

Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* - a collection of essays published in 1994, Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity and mimicry to analyse the complex nature of culture. Bhabha shows the colonialism's histories and culture to understand the cross - cultural relationships. Colonization is a period when various cultural interaction and contact took place. Bhabha exposes the brutal force the colonizer employed to

dominate, exploit and oppress the native's land and economy. Bhabha highlights how the West justifies colonization on the pretext that the West's mission is to civilise the East. The Europeans assume their culture to be superior and the Non-Europeans culture to be inferior. In the process of colonization the Europeans pose to help the Non-Europeans to improve and enhance their culture. To quote Bhabha from *The Location of Culture*, the Europeans "construe the colonizer as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and institution" (70).

Culture is like a fluid in perpetual motion and ever changing process according to the needs of the society. For Bhabha there is no uncontaminated culture either in Africa, Europe or elsewhere. Pure culture does not exist in reality but as a myth. There are series of inclusion and exclusion of cultural values. Bhabha sees culture as a changeable essence. Culture has the tendency to change, transform and flux. Mixedness or interconnectedness is associated with Bhabha's term 'hybridity'. Bhabha de-establishes the concept of binary existences of superior and inferior culture, pure and impure culture.

Buchi Emecheta a Nigerian novelist explores cultural hybridity in her novels. She has been noted as "the first successful black women novelist living in Britain after 1948 (117)". In most of her fiction Emecheta types her experiences as a Black in Britain. She chronicles the cultural struggles she faced in a White man's land. As Bhabha points out culture is like water that moves and changes according to the demand of time and place so does Emecheta's protagonist follows hybrid culture. The tension between modernity and tradition is visible in her novels.

The Bride Price the existence of bicultural situation in native Africa is evident. Buchi Emecheta offers a vivid description of life in urban Lagos, the capital of Nigeria and Ibuza a rural setting. To quote Marie Linton Umeh in her introduction to *The Bride Price*, she states Buchi Emecheta "explores many layers of conflict within the changing Ibo culture" (2). The existence of biculturalism is an unfortunate conglomeration of the European culture and the African culture and ultimately not knowing to which culture one belongs to.

Aku-nna is exposed to the urban and rural life and she finds herself stranded as to which culture to follow. Life in urban Lagos permits her to have her education without any hindrance. Her father encourages her to pursue higher education. In the rural Ibuza she has a doubt if she would be able continue her standard six. Aku-nna knew she would be married off soon. She prefers to marry someone in Lagos rather than in Ibuza. She did not want to work strenuously in the farm. She did not want a farmer husband for he would not give the house keeping money to his wife as her father did in Lagos. Aku-nna finds people in the rural to be relaxed and naturally more beautiful than her relatives in Lagos. She finds the whole adult world complicated in Ibuza. She is shocked to know rich male traders have mistress. She questions, "Did all men behave like that? Was her father like that?" (61). She dismisses the thought that her father and well dressed civil servants are not so.

Although the Odia family profess to be modern they did not renounce the traditional practices, customs and belief that run in their blood. The law of Ibuza restricts girls marrying any male from the Osu family. The Osu are regarded as slaves in the eyes of the Ibuza people. Ma Blackie has a soft corner for Chike Ofulue, a slave descendant but caught in Ibuza tradition she dismisses Chike befriending Aku-nna the daughter of a free born person. She does not want to breach the traditional customs.

Aku-nna did not let custom and tradition take its course. In a state of cultural confusion she elopes with Chike. Aku-nna's uncle refuses to take the bride price offered. She obliges to the traditional belief, she fears, "If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child" (168). Aku-nna throughout the fiction baffles between the practices in urban and rural. She is in a state of in betweenness. She inspires to follow the modern principles but is in constant fear of the ancient tradition.

Sandra Lilyana in "The Disruption of Home and Identity in Black British Writing" discusses the situation of people in diasporic situation, "Originating from one place and culture but living in another apparently creates a problem of displacement and dispossession" (119). In a displaced and dispossessed situation she embraces her love and also she fears her Igbo custom would punish her. The doctor recommends her to stick on to a healthy diet. She is weak because of bad feeding in her youth. She does not consider it to be a physical alignment but submits herself to the traditional customs. She allows the customs of bride price to take the upper hand. In spite of Chike's support and comfort she is tormented by her uncle's voice calling her back to her family in the village. Aku-nna dies giving birth to a girl child. The tradition tenet of bride price wins. Buchi Emecheta in her autobiography *Head above Water* states her intention of creating Aku-nna:

... who had an almost identical upbringing to mine and who deliberately chose her own husband because she was modern but was not quite strong enough to shake off all the tradition and taboos that had gone into making her the type of girl she was. Guilt for going against her mother and her uncle killed her when she was but to give birth to her first baby. If one could not abide by the group laws, then one was an outsider, a radical, someone different

who had found a way of living and being happy outside the group. Aku-nna was too young to do that. She had to die. (165-166)

The image of slavery is dominant in *The Bride Price*. *The Slave Girl* shares slave narrative in the flow of the fiction. *The Slave Girl* was published when Britain took over Nigeria. The people of Iboza did not know the Portuguese were overthrown by British. They were unable to make distinction between pale-skin people. Buchi Emecheta points out the innocence and incorrupt nature of the African people as she states, "They knew nothing of what was happening; they did not know that there were other ways of robbing people of their birthright than by war. The African of those days was very trusting" (15).

The Slave Girl is a story of mixed cultures - tribal, European, Christian - in the first decades of the 20th century. It is a simple prose with profound message against slavery and points out the political and social backgrounds which leads to Europeans wipe the native African identity. The Europeans are aware of the hostile attitude of the native elders towards the British. The younger generation is targeted with promising prospective. Buchi Emecheta traces the unfriendly temperament of the natives towards the whites as she writes:

An English District Officer had been sent to the troublesome town of Iboza, where in the year 1900 the elders resisted the whites administrators. Other officers were dispatched there in 1909, and they were sent packing not only by elders but also by their notorious malaria mosquitoes, and many other such tropical insect soldiers. It happened that one District Officer who survived was so ill he could hardly walk, and all his guides had fled in the face of Iboza determination – it was not for nothing that these people were nicknamed "those Ibos who would rather fight than eat. (14)

The White man uses strategical plans to invade the psyche of the natives. The White men attract the natives by offering them jobs, improving their economic status and influence the slaves with a promising and respectable position which the natives deny them. Okwuekwu is offered job in the court. Despite the opposition of his clan man he accepts the job. He is proud that he has a white man's job which he considers being white collared apart from his agrarian background. They employ the divide and rule policy. Richard Morrock in "Heritage of Strife: The Effects of Colonialist "Divide and Rule" Strategy upon the Colonized Peoples" affirms the colonizers used the strategy of divide and rule as,

a policy that has played a crucial part in ensuring the stability – indeed, the viability – of nearly major colonial system the conscious efforts of an imperialist power to create and/or turn to its own advantage the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, tribal, or religious difference within the population of a subjugated colony. (129)

Ma Palagada symbolises cultural exchange. She has two daughters with a Portuguese merchant. When he returns to his native land he leaves Ma fortunes which enable her to establish clothes firm in the market of Onitsha. Ma has the privilege to deal UAC the imperial corporate and gain success in her trade. Ma does not intentionally join the market women in the rebel against the white administration. She firmly states, "I am not going to take part in such senseless fighting. It is all silly and idiotic (132)". It is evident Ma is caught in the strategic trap laid by the whites which promotes the financial status and make them economically stable. The Palagadas are a site where the imported faith is transfused. Omar Sougou displays the intentions of the West in *Writing across Cultures Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta* as:

Christianity symbolizes money and power. Conversion to it bestows on the merchant privileges such as the monopoly and preferential trade terms that Ma Palagada enjoys. The ideology of the colonial order penetrates the semi-agrarian Otu Onitsha and its pre-industrial economy in the guise of "evening tea". the Palagadas, subscribe to the new ideology and constitute a new class in the process of formation. (79)

Ma's slaves are permitted to attend the local Church Missionary Society School. The slaves develop a reluctance to follow their tradition. They readily accept the civilising mission of the whites. The slaves consider their attitude and behaviour to be polished and refined by the lessons Mrs. Simpson teaches them. Ojebeta is pleased with her improvement in her accent. It is noted that, "gone was her abrasive Iboza accent; she now spoke like a girl born in Onitsha, with rounded "Rs" and a slowness of delivery, each word drawn out" (107). Ojebeta is enrolled in the academy which Mrs Simpson runs to better her behaviour. She willingly submits and welcomes Mrs Simpson's lessons which are different from the duties the traditional teenager is expected to know. She is "taught how to bake cakes from maize flour, how to lift their long dress decorously when they walked to church; they were taught how to crochet and how to embroider chain - stitches in patterns. Ojebeta was delighted and she asks no questions" (131).

Being in a bicultural environment, Ojebeta appreciates the European style and develops an illusion of elitism. She has preference for foreign clothes and fashion. Ojebeta looks down upon the natives; she considers them ugly with tobacco dark teeth and their laugh to be unpleasantly harsh. The comparison she draws is, "the everyday clothes she was wearing were like velvet compared with the rags and faded outfits these women wore to market. Another great difference was in the way they talked which seemed brusque and loud to Ojebeta now. Also their skin, even

that of young girls, seemed burnt, dark and rough, or dry and lacking moisture” (148). Similar to Aku-nna, she is not willing to marry a farmer. She regards farmers as bush men. She considers man with a western identity to be gentle and wants to marry a man in white man’s style.

Buchi Emecheta’s *Aku-nna* and *Obejeta* are in a dilemma and oscillate between two cultures. They are unable to decide whether to adhere to the rich indigenous culture or the western tradition. Emecheta’s novels are troubled with the idea of home and identity. Her character’s idea for a home and an identity is disrupted. Reading her fictions the reader’s are led through transcultural circumstances. Cultural fragmentation is visible. The characters waver between modern and ancient, rural and urban societies. They try to embrace both old and new customs and practices.

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