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Radical Feminism: Patriarchy in *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta

Introduction

It is an old history that women have been treated inferiorly to men, no matter in familial, social, economic, legal, or political areas. “*But women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do*” (*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte). Therefore, in order to pursue a more equal treatment between the two genders, feminism sprouts. As the literary meaning, feminism is a movement that aims at promoting women’s human rights in all aspects. Most people believe that this movement was first developed in 19th century, and till now, in the 21th century, feminism is still prosperous. Besides, feminism has evolved into many more refined categories; radical feminism is just one of the types. Here, I want to analyze the novel, *The Bride Price* (Buchi Emecheta, 1976), through the theory of radical feminism, or more specifically, one of the major issues of discussion in radical feminism— patriarchy.

Before starting, a brief introduction to this novel may help readers know my

analysis better. This novel is about the adolescent life of a Nigerian girl, Aku-nna, whose name means “father’s wealth.” This way of naming for girls is common in Aku-nna’s village. The reason that Aku-nna is named this way may be that every boy there should pay the *bride price* to the bride’s family if he wants a wife. After Aku-nna’s father died, all of her father’s possessions, including his wife, should then belong to his brother according to the native custom. Therefore, Aku-nna should go to her uncle’s place, along with her mother. Aku-nna then started her new life. At the new school, Aku-nna met an enthusiastic teacher, Chike, who later fell in love with her. In fact, Chike’s family was rich enough to pay for Aku-nna’s bride price; however, they were not blessed to be a couple because Chike’s mother was a slave while Aku-nna was from a free family. With no any better choices, Chike decided to elope with Aku-nna. They lived a happy life afterwards. However, the happiness did not stay with them very long. Aku-nna died of childbirth. After her death, her story was told to warn the girls in her hometown because rumor had it that if a woman’s bride price was unpaid, she would die from childbirth of her first child.

Analysis

The ideology of patriarchy in this novel is very explicit, for Aku-nna has experienced much oppression from the constraints put on girls. The first inequality is

the meaning of her name: father's wealth. Originally, a name should be parents' gift for children; therefore, parents usually do their best to come up with a proper name which also implies parents' wishes towards the baby. However, Aku-nna was given a name which meant father's wealth. There are two points which show patriarchy in her name. The first one is "**father's**." Generally speaking, no matter from which aspect, each child should be seen as an individual life instead of parents' possessions. This word suggests that Aku-nna should always follow her father's will and should not be allowed to have her own thoughts because Aku-nna is just her **father's** property. The second point which expresses patriarchy ideology in her name is the last part of the meaning: wealth. This word indicates that Aku-nna is just some kind of tradable merchandise instead of a daughter, or even a person. This word also generates some negative connotation: in some worst situation, Aku-nna may be sold out by her father like a shepherd selling sheep. If putting the two parts of the meaning together, it will form a dual image of patriarchy, which strengthens the restrictions on Aku-nna.

Second, besides the meaning of Aku-nna's name, the *bride price* that every boy should pay if they want to marry a girl is another clue for patriarchy revealed in this novel. This clue is even more obvious than the meaning of *Aku-nna*: why is there no "*groom price*" but only bride price? What is the reason that not a girl pays the money

for marrying a boy? One of the possible explanations behind the local custom may be the “*patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, or, more specifically, social dominance of women by men*” (*Radical Feminism*, Jone Johnson Lewis). In Aku-nna’s hometown, the custom of bride price is more than objectifying women and seeing them as tradable goods, but an instrumentality for male showing their dominance over female. When it is a boy who pays for a *wife* instead of a girl paying for a husband, the behavior will fortify the thought and the traditional structure that men are superior to women. Because generally speaking, if someone can be bought by another, people will take it for granted that the buyers are superior (think about the slave system), let alone when it comes to *trade*, there is always a problem about *ownership*. The bride price is therefore actually an embodiment of patriarchy, which is also another shackle put on girls in Aku-nna’s hometown.

Last, in the end of this novel, Aku-nna is deemed evil because of her elopement with Chike. What is worse is that after she died, her death was told to warn the girls in her village because the villagers endeavor to make one point of view prevailing; that elopement is extremely wrong. Though from ethical aspect, elopement is indeed a controversial issue, it is another problem when it comes to the villagers' severe reaction towards Aku-nna’s elopement. Why do the villagers react so rigorously that they even pass this story down as a warning? In the traditional social structure, what

and how women should do is all at men's will. The uncontrollable behavior like elopement is exactly what the patriarchy society cannot tolerate. The behavior of elopement is not only the symbol of violation of the man-dominating system but also an ironic image of women's struggle. As to the possible reason for the villagers to pass Aku-nna's story down, it might be that men perceive the damage of this violation might bring; therefore, the villagers mold Aku-nna as an immoral woman to prevent another elopement, which means another violation of the system. Because obviously, a system that is always broken has no authority at all. If a system carries without any authority, people will start to question it, which is a situation that patriarchy society does not want to see.

In fact, there are many cases that children are *transferred* to another family for profits. However, among these cases, girls are much more *valuable* than boys. The reason of this phenomenon might be that in most society, only boys have the right to inherit from relatives while girls cannot. Besides, in many cultures, the marriage system requires girls to leave her original family and go to live with her husband's family, which in some cultures also means the girl should no longer have any connection with her original family. Therefore, many parents want to get rid of girls as soon as possible since parents cannot receive any inheritance nor take their daughters as one of the labor source for a long time because girls will leave home

soon after they get married. Then, how do parents receive their *rewards* for raising a daughter? The answer is exactly the bride price. This is one of the reasons that *Aku-nna* is named this way: one day she will finally leave her original family, but before she leaves, the family which will take her away should pay the money just like some merchandise is sold. This is also the most sarcastic part in the novel reading from the ideology of feminism because in fact, no matter which gender a person is, not a single human being is tradable.

Conclusion

Newborn babies cannot choose which gender they are just as they cannot choose which parents, countries, and societies that they are going to live their whole lives with. Therefore, people should not enforce any different treatment on one particular gender just like people should not stereotype any single person because of his or her family background. This novel reveals a lot of inferiority that girls have faced and through showing the shackles put on girls, the author also raises people's attention towards this issue: gender equality, one of the theme of feminism. However, "*how much feminism is present in a novel depends on how you define feminism*" (*Feminism: Buchi Emechta's Bride Price*, Marilyn). Therefore, when it comes to the answer about to what extent that the author combines the story with feminism, it always depends on

readers' own points of view.

Work Cited

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