



VOICES FROM THE MARGIN: A STUDY OF OSU CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE BRIDE PRICE

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Abstract

Discriminatory practices ingrained in the social fabric are evolved from hegemonic status given to certain groups. These binaries existing in the society assign power to the hegemonic groups marginalizing the weak sections better known as subalterns who even after so many years of independence are still living a colonized life and struggling to get themselves heard by the power. Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta raises such pertinent issues cropped up from the power dynamics in her novels. Her novels are the most authentic account of Nigerian voices suppressed by the power of colonization and patriarchy. Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* is rooted in Igbo traditions and presents the intricacies existing in the Igbo society. The present paper aims in projecting the exclusion of Osus from the traditional Igbo society of Free borns.

Keywords:Caste, Osu, Freeborns.

Introduction

Caste system is a kind of segmentation of a society into different groups on the basis of their birth. It is discriminating, cruel and degrading treatment of the vast majority of people who are lower in the social hierarchy. In many of the countries of Asia and Africa, caste is being practiced since ages and has become a major reason of exclusion of distinct population groups. As caste imposes enormous obstacles in the advancement and full attainment of civil political economic social and cultural rights. Indian sociologist G.S Ghuray writes:

We do not possess a real general definition of caste. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon .

However, he enlists six characteristics of caste in his model as-

- Caste is the segmentation of society into different groups on the basis of birth.
- It is hierarchal system wherein the upper caste like Brahmins in India are of superior rank while the shudras are in the lower rank.
- Restrictions on marital relations in other castes. Endogamy is prohibited while hypergamy is allowed in certain cases.
- Social intercourse and feeding in lower caste is strictly restricted as people of higher caste can't accept food and drink from lower caste.
- Segregation where individual caste living in the centre and other caste living on the periphery.
- Certain occupations taken up by the lower casts were forbidden for higher castes.

Above listed characteristics though are in Indian reference but still they are applicable in studying the caste dynamics in Nigeria too. As Nigeria in particular has certain traditions, customs cultures and beliefs that direct their social behaviour by implementing many do's and don'ts. These traditions are handed over from one generation to another generation. Traditionally there are two classes of people in Igboland –the Nwadiala and the Osu. The Nwadiala literally meant the son of the soil. They are the masters while the Osu are the people dedicated to the gods; so, they are regarded as slaves, strangers, outcasts and untouchables. The Osus are treated as inferior human beings and kept in a state of permanent and irreversible disability; they are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination. They are made to live separately from the freeborns; they reside very close to shrines and market places. The Osu are not allowed to dance, drink, hold hands, associate or have sexual relations with the Nwadiala. They are not even allowed to break kola nut at meetings or pour libation or pray to God on behalf of a freeborn at any community gathering. It is believed that such prayers will bring calamity and misfortune. According to human rights groups, some of the atrocities meted out against the Osu in Igboland include: parents administering poison to their children, disinheritance, ostracism, organized attacks, heaping harvest offering separately in churches, denial of membership in social clubs, violent disruption of marriage ceremonies, denial of chieftaincy titles, deprivation of property and expulsion of wives. The Osu caste discrimination is very pronounced in the area of marriage. An Osu cannot marry a freeborn. The belief is that any freeborn that marries an Osu defiles the family. So freeborn families are always up in arms against any of their members who wants to. marry an Osu. They go to any length to scuttle the plan. (Uchenna)

Thus, discrimination against Osus is the most prominent and most pronounced form of casteism. Osu is a caste determined by the heredity irrespective of the individual religious faith and practices and ironically, they are the first one who were the recipient of education.



Victor Dike in his long treatise exploring the discriminatory practices against Osu notes that an Osu is strictly seen and looked upon as an outcaste, untouchables and exclusive reserve of the Gods and Goddesses. It is a system variedly observed from one community to the other. The early Osu ranks were "non-celibate" and thus had families; and the offspring inherited their status. The community maintained a set of rules that regulated their interactions with the Osus, mostly out of fear (and or respect) for the powerful deities under which they thrived and performed their religious functions. For instance, intimate social interaction, including marriage, was forbidden between Osus and the Diala. In some communities, it is forbidden for the Diala to spill the blood of Osus (even in non-hostile situations butchered or prepared by an Osu). The list of items that maintain a social divide between the Osus and the Diala grew and till today, but they vary from place to place. Any person who breaches the rules regulating their interaction with the Osu automatically becomes an Osu. Even though the offenders may not physically relocate to cohabit with the Osus, they were (are) regarded and treated like an Osu by the rest of the community. Like the racism, Osuism have distorts and impedes normal interpersonal relationship between the Diala and Osu in Igboland.

Chinua Achebe vividly describes the plight of the Osus. Although the precise time the Osu system came into being is not certain. It is believed that ancient system has been around for more than six centuries. Who is an Osu –the outcast a person whose ancestors were sacrificed or dedicated to the local deity in the Igbo community to appease God. The Osu system is a societal institution borne out of a primitive traditional belief system coloured by superstition As in *Things fall Apart*, he writes:

...A person dedicated to God, a thing set apart –a taboo forever and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was infact an outcast, living in a special area of his village close to the shrine. Whenever he went, he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste –long tangled, dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died, he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (Achebe, p.156)

Chinua Achebe in another novel *No Longer at Ease* takes up the subject of Osu once again where Clara is burdened with her stigmatized Osu status. Since she is an outcast, she cannot marry the man whom she loves i.e., Obi. Obi fails to marry her as his mother gives him an ultimatum that Clara can be accepted only after her death. Finally, Clara leaves. Chinua Achebe in his book, *No longer At Ease*, aptly describes Osu thus: "Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to the idols, and thereafter he became an. outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever".

Buchi Emecheta, an eminent Nigerian woman writer has been one of the most powerful voice. She examines her ngerian roots and quite candidly portrays its true shades. She is unbiased in the representation of her culture. She has authored more than twenty books including books for children too. *The Bride Price* is one of her three historical novels rooted in traditional Iboza culture. Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Bride Price* unleashes the caste practices prevalent in the traditional Igbo society. Though the story of the novel is built around the clash between the tradition and modernity but the fabric of the traditional Igbo society is made up of these class distinctions that emerge as a taboo in the social development. *The Bride Price* is the story of Akunna who after the death of her father Ezekiel Odi migrates to Iboza to live with her uncle's family. Her mother Ma Blackie according to the tradition of levitation is inherited by her uncle Okonkwo. Dramatically the novel is just like a fairy tale where Akunna grows up in a controlled cultural atmosphere and rebels against the set norms of patriarchal society. She falls in love with her teacher Chike Ofule, an oshu. Chike despites of the fact of his being well educated teacher wants to modernize things in traditionally bound Iboza society but his descendance as Oshu restricts him. He is continually remarked by free borns as slave. The age-old cult of Oshu slave cult prohibits him from entering into the clan of freeborns.

Akunna's growing relationship with Chike Ofule brings out the intricacies of Iboza caste system as her association with Chike is disapproved by her clan.

When Akunna's step brothers Iloba and Osenekwu come across the the news of Chike's growing interest in Akunna, they feel offended

"The son of Ofule? You mean Chike, the school teacher? But he is the son of slaves, Mother, and he knows his place. Chike is only Akunna's teacher. He can't help talking to her because she is in his class. She couldn't be interested in him to that extent!" Iloba cried, his mouth tasting salty. If this was true, it was the greatest insult that could befall a family like theirs Which has never been tainted with the blood of a foreigner to say nothing of that of the descendents of slaves.

"I will kill her if this is true." Osenekwo swore to himself. (BP, 79)

Such remarks by the step brothers of Akunna portray the social stigma that is still found in the Nigerian society as also found in the Mid twentieth legal study by a distinguished lawyer, a study written after the act of emancipation of the abolition of Osu Law of 1956 (which made it illegal to call anyone slave



For though socially there are still numerous oru (ohu) [species of slave] in ibolandinspite of the act of Emancipation and the Abolition of OsuLaw,these can now own land as freely as anyone else.The social stigma remains,but as far as land rights are concerned partially every trace of legal disability is gone.AnOru may not marry a freeborn ,but he can purchase, lease or take a pledge of land from anyone within the village or town...

Today the position of descendents of the osu species of slaves]is quite different. There are no first generation of Osu of buy and delicate type any more. And though their descendents are still called by that dreadful name, though inter marriage between Osu and freeborn is still anathema, anOsu of this class can and does own land individually. (Obi,80-81,quoted in Emerging Perspective on BuchiEmecheta,)

Akunna and Chike are in love with each other and enjoy a secret courtship because there only he could overcome his disadvantage of being an outcast. Not only this he spends a lot to provide financial help to Akunna and her mother. This is quite ironical that that all these helps are accepted by her mother because they needed but they never accepted the man who supported them to meet their daily demands instead it is Ma Blackie who after discovering the fact that her daughter is inclined towards Chike, turns against her. When Akunna complains against Okoboshi's violent treatment of her during night games, she warns her ... I will kill you if you bring shame and dishonor on us. How can he hurt you with all these others watching and yet you allow a common...

Akunna sensed a saneness in the attitude of her mother regarding Chike as she didn't bring herself to use the word Slave for him like others. Because it was Chike who had made their stay in Ibuza possible by providing them all necessary stuff but the behaviour of her mother shocked her as she being beneficiary of Chike still considers him not deserving to her daughter just because of his slave origin.

Chike was well educated teacher. He has attended St.Thomas teacher's training college in Ibuza ,Nigeria in late 1940. Her grandmother had been a slave but her father was well educated in missionary school of Ibuza and his elder siblings were also well educated and rich and able to marry mates from other towns. He wanted to marry Akunna. All he wanted was to "take her away, running up the hills of Atakpo away to where they would see no one for many, many years to where they would be all by themselves like savages of old, he hunting for their food, she waiting at their abode to receive his love and to give him hers ... (BP,114)

As Akunna comes to the age of puberty she becomes eligible for the marriage and marriage according to these Ibo traditions are possible in that case also if a suitor cuts the lock of the girl.Akunna is allowed to study by Okonkwo only because of the expectation of high bride price that can be fetched by an educated girl . A high bride price may guarantee for the much sought after Eze title. Emecheta never hesitates in giving out the minute details. Akunna succeeds in hiding her menarche with the help of Chike but she fails to hide her second period. The news of her puberty and her alliance with that ChikeOfule, the son of the slave who had looked at the daughter of freeborn Ibuza citizen with desirous eyes' reach faster to the entire village.

Chike knows it that his slave origin will be an obstacle in his marriage with Akunna as he cannot present himself as a suitor. His way of courting Akunna was quite different from the the violent ways of possessing a girl prevalent in Ibuza Society. Chike was more than a teacher for her. It was he who had comforted her and somehow provided her that maternal affection which she couldn't get from MaBackie.

Victor Dike in his long essay raises a very pertinent question regarding the liminality of Osu who despite of attaining an elevated social status are still being excluded from freeborns's society. None of the suitors approaching for Akunna's hand was as eligible as Chike but he was not allowed to have any marital relations with Akunna or any of the girls of freeborns just because of his slave descendance.

Akunna lies Okoboshi that she has been in relation with slave.This arouses hatred in the entire clan and she is subjected to an abject life till she is once again saved by Chike who gets her liberated from the clutches of Okoboshi and takes her to the city . Akunna and Chike are married in a dramatic way but their marriage is not approved by Okonkwo who disagrees to the bride price offered to him by Chike's father Mr. Ofule. There is a common belief prevalent in African society that if a bride price of a woman remains unpaid, she dies during the childbirth.As Okonkwo refuses to accept the bride price rather practices black magic. He gets a doll replicating Akunna and pierces it with several needles to avenge her. Akunna's death during childbirth leaves a trail of questions as being a rebellious heroine, she finally surrenders to the customs housed in her.

Though the whole novel is a clash between tradition and modernity but it also underlines the complexities related to the subaltern status of Osus who despite of their advancement and being the first in receiving the elite class status are still being



discriminated only because of the origin. Such segregation made their identity quite paradoxical. Both Akunna and Chike are victimized by the strong hold of rigid customs.

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