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## **Chronotopic Relevance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman***

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### **Abstract**

The article aims at showing how the chronotope in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman* functions as a nexus focalizing on the impact of tradition on female protagonists and their reactions to it. Emecheta's novel includes three chronotopes. The first underlines the role of the father in Aku-nna's life which seems idyllic due to the fatherly affection. The second parallels the family move to the village of Ibuza. Significant actions happen near the stream, including Aku-nna's disobedience to tradition exemplified by her meeting with her beloved Chike, an *osu*; an outcast with whom any relationship is banned by the village laws. Her elopement with Chike follows the emergence of another idyllic chronotope shortened by the spectral presence of tradition in Aku-nna's life ends when a caesarean section goes wrong. Likewise, Mokeddem's novel features the *Ksar* where Sultana lived and witnessed the accidental murder of her mother by her father. Though she has reached adulthood and become a doctor, she eludes any invitation to visit the *Ksar*. When at last she takes courage and enters it, she seems reconciled with her past and initiates a positive change in her village although its people keep ostracizing her because of her past of licentiousness.

Buchi Emecheta and Malika Mokeddem are two women writers, respectively from Nigeria and Algeria whose experiences in European exilic spaces were extremely reported in their fictions. Although these novelists are not to be considered as all-out feminists, still their experiences in relation to the highly domineering patriarchy of their native countries are quite significant. We shall try to examine these fictionalised facts through the chronotopic elements identified in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman*.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the word chronotope bears "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Bakhtin, 1990, p.84). This connectedness is shown by the fact that the spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (Bakhtin, 1990, p.84). Emecheta's *The Bride Price* predominantly includes two chronotopes : before the death of the father the idyllic chronotope of the family ends with the father's death in Lagos, in Ibuza, the chronotope of the stream and after Akunna's elopement with Chike, a love idyllic chronotope 'destroyed' by tradition and death. The first chronotope in the novel is the family

idyllic chronotope which Bakhtin characterizes as ‘the stable family and material goods..., how [the heroes] create fundamental, that is, family connections with people, how they limit their world to a well-defined place and a well-defined narrow circle of relatives, that is, to the family circle’(Bakhtin, 1990,p.225).

In this phase, Aku-nna follows the dictates of her family that she has learnt. She obeys her father, her cousins and looks after her brother. She is worried when her father does not come home and thinks beforehand how she can make him happy with her bride price when she gets married. She is ‘determined not to let her father down. She was going to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price’(p.4). Time in this phase, as Bakhtin explains, is ‘organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies’ (Bakhtin, 1990,p.226).

This chronotope is very appropriate inasmuch as in this phase the father is still alive; the family is presented as a solid entity to which Aku-nna adheres, and in this way patriarchy is held. Suranjita Ray stresses that ‘the first lessons of patriarchy are learnt in the family where the head of the family is a man/ father’ (Ray, n.d). However ,Anthony Barthelerny (1989) detects in this part of the novel time as a harbinger of Akunna’s predictable alienation from her culture. He writes that ‘time perception -that is how time is measured,viewed and lived... provides a gauge by which one can measure each character's alienation from her traditional culture and her own movement toward Western ways’ (p.560). In order to support his argument, he focuses on the following passage from the novel:

Long human shadows announced the approaching evening. From the nearby Loco yard came the penetrating sound of a siren, a gun was fired from somewhere in the docks, and everybody knew that it was four o'clock. Four o'clock was the time all manual workers went home. It was the time when all housewives stopped plaiting their hair, when they finished off their gossiping because their menfolk would soon be home, hungry, tired and irritable; so the women would rush to their kitchen to prepare the evening meal. Four o'clock was a very important hour in the lives of the families of men working at the Loco. At the house where Aku-nna and her parents lived, some houseboys had marked the sun's progress at four o'clock, just in case for some reason or other they missed the siren or the gun shot: at four, the sun keeping regular hours in Africa near the equator, would rest on the line drawn with charcoal on the outside of the kitchen wall (p.561).

Ibo people in Lagos rely on the sun not on the clock, a symbol of western industrial time, to know if it is due time to stop working and go home. Anthony Barthelerny concludes that ‘a charcoal line drawn on a wall serves as the literal point of contact between industrial, mechanical time and the natural, cyclical reckoning of time in *The Bride Price*’(p.562). When the sun touches this line, the residents of a Lagos compound know that it is four o'clock. In other words, in the westernized milieu of Lagos, the sun is the counterpart of the clock to meet chronology in the African traditional community. ‘Mechanical time has neither replaced the sun nor diminished its precision...the moment captures the fusion of African culture and Western ways’ (p.561-62). The narrator then sheds light on Akunna.

'Unconsciously, Aku-nna checked the kitchen wall, to see whether the sun had made a mistake for once, but it had not. The reflection rested perfectly on the charcoaled line'(p.17). Anthony Barthelerny remarks that she relies on the industrial clock ,i.e on the Western way to know chronology, yet she behaviouristically looks at the kitchen wall, i.e the traditional way of chronology :

Never having lived any place but Lagos, Aku-nna does not recognize the sun as the basis for time[...]. Aku-nna does not understand that the sun is no less precise nor less reliable than the clock at the Loco factory[...] Aku-nna understands, however, which chronology possesses power. If the Loco yard does not accurately announce four o'clock, the sun will have erred. Ironically, Akunna puts her faith in industrial calculation and the honesty of its timekeepers. In her mind, the ways of her people are but unreliable backups...However; she never fails to look at the mark on the wall (p.562).Her father's death demonstrates her practically direct contact with her tradition, its preponderance and power in Lagos. In other words the parallel to Aku-nna's father's death is the birth and might of tradition. 'With her father's death, the ancestral past resurges and drowns out the sound of sirens' (p.562). Instead, 'the traditional crying began. This was an art in itself' (p.26), and the artist is a traditional Aku-nna. 'On and on went Aku-nna repeating her father's attributes. She did not stop...nobody could stop her, for this was what expected of a daughter. People later remarked that for a girl not born in Ibusashe did not do too badly (p.27).It can be noticed that the death ceremony is Aku-nna's introduction and obedience to tradition. This death also prepares the narrative to move from the western time of the clock towards the African time of the cock (see p.31); thus a different chronotope.

Indeed, the father's death leads to the family move to Ibusa where another chronotope appears: the chronotope of the stream. We call it as such since Bakhtin gives the name of the chronotope according to where important actions happen. In this novel, many events happen near the stream. Whenever the stream is mentioned, the narrative introduces Ibusa's practices, Aku-nna's knowledge of them, and at the same time her refutation and opposition to them. Aboard the lorry to Ibusa, Aku-nna notices girls going to the streams(p.59). Among the passengers there are traders who after the sight of these girls 'compose lyrics' (p.59). Aku-nna starts to question their habit of not covering their tops of their bodies; implying her readiness not to imitate them; thus foreshadowing her inability to integrate Ibusa. Shortly after, Akunna, her mother and relatives rest on the banks of Atakpo stream. Aku-nna refuses to act like Ibusa girls; i.e to strip herself to have a bath as Ogugua, her cousin and her foil, does.

The chronotope of the stream in the novel bears the motif of meeting. The latter 'always enters as a constituent element of the plot into the concrete unity of the entire work and, consequently, is part of the concrete chronotope that subsumes it [...] it can serve as an opening, sometimes as a culmination, even as a denouement (a finale) of the plot'(Bakhtin,1990, pp.97-98).The meeting alluded to is between Aku-nna and Chike. It is a motif because of the repetitions of this meeting: it is near the stream where Aku-nna meets Chike accidentally. There she knows that he is an *osu*. 'No decent girl from a good Ibusa family is allowed to associate with him'(p.70). Another time is when she has been washing her clothes (p.81); the other time as lovers when she accompanies some girls.

The stream is also a place where girls should not go and cross during their menstruation cycle conjuring up an unclean status. Aku-nna's crossing of the stream, though unclean, is allegorical. It alludes to her eventual disobedience to tradition. This crossing is

traditionally illegal, but Ma Blackie would apologize and ‘sacrifice a day-old chick to the stream’(p.112). After coming back home Aku-nna’s social status changes. The crossing of the stream is also a crossing from girlhood to womanhood. Now, she is marriageable ; now she must make an end to her friendship with Chike. After lying about her virginity to Okoboshi, and after being beaten, she is ordered to take a gourd and go to the stream where she is socially ‘disgraced’

She was pushed outside .There were girls eager to see her, some to pity, most of them to mock and repeat the accusing description of her as an empty shell[...]she followed them to the stream, lagging behind all the way, overhearing their jeering remarks. She was being pulled along, mechanically like a being without a will. It was only at the stream that she realised the extent of beating she had received from her new people. Her mouth burned with pain[...][her new in-laws] wanted as many people as possible to take notice of her, to show her up to other younger girls who might be contemplating similar adventures.[...] this was the degree to which she had disgraced even her friends (p.147)

Furthermore because of this description, the chronotope of the stream is also a chronotope of the threshold which, for Bakhtin, ‘is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold’ (Bakhtin,1990, p.247). Remaining on its bank when Aku-nna should swim in, crossing it when she should not and meeting an *osu* near it help to classify the Ibuza chronotope of the stream as Aku-nna’s chronotope of the threshold. Victor Turner, following Van Gennep’s idea of the rites of the passage, writes that ‘all rites of passage or ‘transition’ are marked by three phases: separation, margin and aggregation. The first phase comprises a symbolic detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions or from both. During the liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the passenger) are ambiguous’ (Turner,1969, p.94). The liminal or the threshold people ‘are necessarily ambiguous... Liminal entities are neither here nor there ; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial’(Turner,1969, p.103). ‘Other characteristics are submissiveness and silence’(Turner,1969, p.125). Yet, the most important characteristic V. Turner considers is positionality; ‘[they] fall in the interstices of social structure...are on its margin or occupy its lowest rungs’(Turner,1969, p.125). He also finds out that it is in marginality, i.e liminality, that *communitas*, another word for anti-structure, appears. He writes:

For me, *communitas* emerges when social structure is not... *Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality, at the edges of structure...in inferiority(Turner,1969, p.128). Ketu H. Katrak (2006) notices that liminality is the outcome of internalized exile:

The process of the body being exiled brings female protagonists to a “liminal” state of consciousness... I interpret liminality as a space for the female protagonist to cope with, and at times, to transcend exile. They resist domination and attempt to reconnect with their bodies and communities( p.2)

These ideas may well suit the description of Aku-nna's character. In Lagos, Aku-nna experiences the separation from her father because of his death and generally prepares her separation from her society clearly seen in Ibuza where she becomes liminal. That is why she is most of the time silent, she sometimes criticizes her people's customs, but she practises some. She elopes with Chike and marries him without a bride price. Her deeds bring in *communitas*, a threat to the Ibuza traditional structure. Herein appears a struggle between *communitas* held by Aku-nna in an attempt to achieve a comfortable re-inscription, Chike and to some extent his family and structure held by Okonkwo, the whole family, and Okoboshi for the maintenance of the Ibuza inscription of women. The advocates of structure are determined to kill Aku-nna who now lives in Ughelli.

The change of space calls for a change in the chronotope. Indeed, after moving to the town of Ughelli a love idyll chronotope appears. In Ughelli, Aku-nna tastes a happy life with Chike to whom she is now married. Chike asks her to 'speak her wants to him' (p.162). This helps her to get a voice which her Ibuza society has culturally tried to stifle, though this voice starts to appear when she repulses Okoboshi. With Chike she seems 'enjoying what she seemed to be an endless honeymoon' (p.164). The latter is soon violated by Ibuza's tradition.

Because she has eloped with a 'slave', her step-father, Okonkwo, refuses to accept her bride price, divorces her mother, Ma Blackie, makes a doll in the image of Aku-nna and puts it in front of his *chi*, acts that express his determination to kill her in an attempt to clear his reputation sullied by Aku-nna's deeds. Indeed, he is so determined that he gnashes his teeth when he finds the doll taken away, he then makes another expensive doll destined to call her back from Ughelli through the wind. One may relate this voice to the patriarchal voice, i.e. the dictates of the Ibuza society in case a woman disregards its rules.

Aku-nna lives badly this trauma and does not enjoy her pregnancy. 'Over and over, she heard this voice calling her, telling her she must come back to her family' (p.172). Her trauma is intensified in her sleep and becomes common. Her life becomes so disturbed that she appears frail. She prematurely gives birth to her daughter after a caesarean operation and subsequently dies. It sounds as if tradition wins. Tradition has already ordained that when the bride price is not paid, the woman dies at her first childbirth. In a sense, Aku-nna's dramatic itinerary seems to imply that tradition cannot be transgressed without striking back at its transgressor(s). Overall, the change of the chronotope in this novel follows the change of the space where the action takes place. The chronotope of the stream is the most important one as it bears the antagonism between a traditional society ethos and a woman's struggle for her individuality.

Likewise, the chronotope in M. Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman* has a functional connotation. The novel opens with the protagonist, Sultana, who has been living in Montpellier. After learning the death of her beloved Yacine, she decides to go back to her village, Ain Nekhla to attend the funeral. It is true that Yacine's death brings Sultana back home to Ain Nekhla, yet there appears no strong factor or reason that can make her visit *the Ksar*, her original family house, her birthplace and her memory site. *Theksar* is viewed by Sultana as a spectre. She tells her friend Salah that she does not want to visit it (p.122) and that she does not know if she has enough courage to go there; being deserted is for her an additional reason not to (p.35). However, it is difficult for her to imagine *the ksar* dead (p.35), 'a site of ruin, abandoned by its inhabitants, haunted by emptiness and distant memories. It is a

place that reveals nothing except the desolate image of a past lifelong vanished... The *ksar* becomes, to borrow Bakhtin's word, a chronotope in which both space and time are reduced to a degree zero of human existence.' (Hamil, 2004, p.55). Hamil notices that 'in most Maghrebian novels in French, writers turn against their city of origin, precisely because it embodies for them an ensemble of oppressive symbols: tradition, the colonizer, the patriarch, the neocolonial politician, and most recently the Islamist zealot' (Hamil, p.53). Somehow, they turn back to their original chronotopes in order to denounce the different sorts of tyranny. For example, the *ksar* in this novel is so significant in Sultana's life that its abandonment implies 'a breaking free from the tyranny of spatial confinement and the gradual sedentarization of identity.' (Hamil, p.53). Furthermore, abandoning the *ksar* in the past implicitly means the erasure of the impact of tradition on Sultana. As Hamil writes:

As a birthplace, [the *ksar* ] stands for the memory of an absent mother... In this sense, the death of the mother represents for Sultana a symbolic release from the weight of a tradition... Mokeddem stages in a semiconscious removal of the mother. As a woman ... she is all the more predisposed to disengage her discourse from a patriarchal tradition that perpetuates woman's servility and silence (p.54).

In other words, Sultana is an orphan to whom tradition cannot be transmitted. Because the bearers of tradition are women and because of Sultana's mother's death, tradition witnesses a discontinuity that makes Sultana after her return home ready to denounce women's status in this tradition. It is this devaluation of tradition that makes her in a constant conflict with her people.

Indeed, her stay in her village is met with refutation from the villagers. As she is a woman who lives alone in Yacine's apartment, frequents men, drinks alcohol and drives her car at night, villagers assess her behaviour as anti-traditional and thus are afraid that she would contaminate the women of the village. After having heard violent statements about her late mother, Sultana, in an act of self-defence, goes to the *Ksar* (p.174); later she enters (p.218) and sits there amidst the ruins. She becomes speechless and motionless. Her friends, Salah and Vincent, bring her back and try to heat her cold body and refresh her lost mind. She, in a murmuring tone, narrates to both how her father accidentally murdered her mother. At the end of her narration, she makes a link between the past and the present. Her past anxiety is intensified by the current destabilized Algeria and by women's bitter status:

If Algeria had really been committed to the path of progress, if its leaders had really worked at making mentalities evolve, I would have no doubt recovered. I would have forgotten bit by bit. But the country's current events and the fate of women here constantly plunge me back into my past dramas, link me to all those women who are tyrannized. The persecutions and the humiliations endured by them reach me and reopen my wounds (p.133)

The *ksar* can be also classified as a chronotope of the threshold: threshold between past and present, between loss and belonging, between the status quo of Algeria and change. Moreover, if *Aku-nna's* chronotope of the stream bears her subsequent revolt; Sultana's chronotope of the *ksar* bears a subsequent reconciliation with the past that will lead her to an active rebellion against the upholders of an oppressive regime.

Indeed, Sultana after this episode seems fearless and resolute. When the mayor in front of a crowd of men asks her to leave the village, she speaks back angrily:

You are just a bunch of frustrated people, in your head and your underpants...your eyes are nothing but vermin. Vermin that constantly dirty, gnaw at, and devour women. (p. 138)

Her verbal reaction silences the men's crowd, as evidence of their astonishment: how can a woman 'speak back' to the men's community and insult its laws vis-à-vis the women of Ain Nekhla? After Sultana, the women of Ain Nekhla confront the mayor to whom they also speak back in an attempt to defend Sultana. After a period of subservience and silence, they speak out and attack the mayor to squash him; 'they were moving forward one step; he was backing up two' (p. 139). The mayor, who has owned *la parole*, is turned into a mute male as 'fear and astonishment made him swallow his tongue (p. 139) in a milieu dominated by women's 'laughter and mockery'. (p. 141). Subsequently, the women's revolt awakens some men's revolt against the mayor whom they refuse as their leader. The result is the emergence of a *communitas* that threatens the patriarchal structure of Ain Nekla. Women's *communitas* is also seen when women burn the town hall in revenge for the mayor's setting of Sultana's house on fire.

To conclude, the chronotope in both novels appears to be a vehicle that bears the female protagonist's rebellion against the traditional ethos that imprisons her in a confined space. The Ibuza stream and Ain Nekhlaksar witness the African woman's oppression in the name of tradition but subsequently attend women's attempts to go against and beyond its dictates.

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