

# GOLDEN RESEARCH THOUGHTS

## THE GENDER POLITICS IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE BRIDE PRICE



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### Abstract :

Gender is rooted so thoroughly in our beliefs, actions and institutions, that it appears to us to be completely natural. To study gender is not simply as cause, but as effect; and not just as individual, but as social. The issues of the gender politics across the world have been a major focus of contemporary study. It is true that women are always at the receiving end. Therefore the Third World women writers have raised their voice for the need of a separate principle. They have mobilized, educated and encouraged other women. They have built up confidence and helped other women's consciousness.

This paper shows that the acknowledgment of human rights of the black women who have suffered marginalization, oppression, because of their sex. The paper advocates that equal opportunities be given to women to show their talent, instead of being tied down with the monotony of life as mothers, wives, financial supporter and sex partners. This paper thus reveals the politics of gender in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. The culture of paying bride price is interlinked and became an important part of the lives of African men and women. The African society follows such practice to marginalize its women as a gender politics. The present paper is an attempt to show the gender politics of the African marriage system of paying bride price in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*.

Keywords: Gender Politics, African Women, Marriage, Traditional Society.

## The Gender Politics In Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price

### INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta is one of Africa's the highly respected writers in present times. She was born in Lagos, Nigeria, on 21 July, 1944. At a young age, Emecheta was orphaned and she spent her early childhood years being educated at a missionary school. In 1960, at the age of sixteen, Emecheta was married to Sylvester Onwordi, a student to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven. After their marriage, Sylvester and Buchi moved to London. Over the course of her six year marriage, Emecheta gave birth to five children. Buchi Emecheta's works deal with the portrayal of the African woman. The main characters of her novels show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way by which to define femininity and womanhood.

*The Bride Price* (1976) is Buchi Emecheta's the first authentic novel after her two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1975). It deals with the gender politics which humiliates women's status in patriarchal society. As the novel opens, the family of Aku-nna, an adolescent girl, moves from Lagos, where she and her brother Nna-Ndo spent their childhood, to the village of Ibuza, in Nigeria. The novel highlights the gender politics in African society in which women and girls are the victims of African customs like arranged marriages, polygamy and perpetual pregnancy.

*The Bride Price* is a record of gender politics in African traditions where Aku-nna, the heroine of the novel is victimized in terms of her bride price. Bride price is one of the tools of patriarchal system that a groom is supposed to pay a price to his bride's paternal relative. In traditional African society, a female child is oppressed as an inferior gender and male child is given preferences. The patriarchal system believes in male-authority while female entity is thrown into her inferior status. The status of woman is measured in the context of child-bearing. Aku-nna's father would always quarrel with his wife Ma Blackie over the issue of childlessness, reminding her: "I paid the normal bride price for you . . . But what have you given me – just one son!" (2). To bring her husband's dream into reality Ma Blackie decides to walk "the two-hundred mile journey to her home town of Ibuza. There she asked the river goddess to send her a baby" (2). It shows that the African society oppresses a woman by implying the gender politics. To realize their gender identity, African women also undertake painstaking challenges to please their dominant patriarchy.

After her father's death, her mother is inherited by her uncle Okonkwo and consequently, Aku-nna returns to Ibuza with her mother. Polygamy, another significant tool of gender politics of traditional Africa, becomes a part of female oppression. When Aku-nna reaches Ibuza her step-sister, Ogugua informs her, "You still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people! Your mother will become my father's wife. My father has inherited everything your father owned, and he has 'inherited' your mother too"(23).

Aku-nna's life in Ibuza is an account of her oppressive treatment inflicted by the gender politics of the patriarchal tradition. In patriarchal family, women's status is inferior to men; hence, the patriarchal authorities can oppress women in terms of their traditions in Africa. Aku-nna's uncle Okonkwo, being the head of the family is supposed to be the patriarchal authority and it is believed that women should obey him.

In the course of narrative, Okonkwo is presented as the spokesman of oppression. He declares to his sons: "Aku-nna and your sister Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me"(30). In the gender politics of African society, a woman is oppressed in terms of bride-price. A woman is treated as a possession, a commodity exchanged for good bride price. When his sons raise a question about Aku-nna's education, he says: "Don't you know that I hope to become a chief, an *Obi*?" (28). Within the traditional and patriarchal system of Africa to become an *Obi* means "to offer a large, expensive gifts to the gods. Then he received the red hat which was the mark of a chief" (28-29). Okonkwo wants to earn that amount through Aku-nna's bride price. Aku-nna is treated as a commodity by Okonkwo to earn wealth, thus, a woman is oppressed by the world of male-dominant authority. Okonkwo is presented as an oppressive dominant male, who took his revenge by divorcing Ma Blackie when he discovers Aku-nna's elopement with Chike. He practices black "magic" to destroy Aku-nna using the doll like "Aku-nna's face and there was a needle through its heart"(74). With such a traditional practice, the African dominant patriarchy would oppress the women. In the novel, it is believed that Aku-nna meets her tragic death due to the patriarchal oppressive practice implied by Okonkwo.

Emecheta has maintained a balance in her emotions without idealizing her patriarchal customs that oppress woman in spite of considering her as a human being. While analyzing Emecheta's work, in her essay "The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi states that Emecheta "deals with black woman as the victim of black patriarchy" (Qtd. Bedana; 2014: 70).

In the gender politics of African male-dominated society a young woman is exploited with different ways. When a young woman reaches at her puberty, the patriarchal society declares her to be capable for marriage after her menstrual cycle. However, a young woman in patriarchal African society is not always safe, so she finds in a frequent tension that any unwanted suitor who could cut a lock of her hair. In the traditional practice of the patriarchal system, a man who cuts a lock of any marriageable girl becomes her husband without paying her bride price. Consequently, in Ibuza society, the tension of insecurity is always hanged upon the head of young girl. Emecheta narrates:

A man with no money to pay a bride price could hide the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from a girl's head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and no other man could have her (48).

Thus, the African patriarchal system implies the gender politics by allowing a male to oppress the female. Aku-nna also confronts similar patriarchal injustice when reaches at her at her puberty. The traditional patriarchy can insult a woman in any way to satisfy its manly lust. When Okoboshi enters into Aku-nna's hut, he "put his hand inside her shirt" for squeezing

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her breast (52). The gender politics of patriarchal system allows a man to demoralize a woman in terms of his superiority complex.

When Aku-nna shows her unconcern to Okoboshi, he kidnaps her against her wish and Aku-nna declares: "This is the end of all my dreams"(56). However, in such a game of the gender politics, the patriarchal society puts a charge against a woman and a man is left free to oppress a woman in terms of his dominant authority. Okonkwo declares: "She is virgin . . . Nobody has touched her. You must bring me a big pot full of wine"(61). In the gender politics of African society, the purity of a woman is decided in terms of the traditional beliefs that if a bride is virgin her new family had to bring her father wine and if not, then they are supposed to bring an empty pot. It shows that the gender politics of African patriarchal culture doesn't leave any chance to oppress a woman. There are various oppressive ways in African gender politics to victimize woman's life through which a woman cannot rescue her.

To keep virginity until her marriage is a strict code of conduct imposed by the gender politics of patriarchal system upon a woman. If a woman fails in her purity, the patriarchal system forbids her an opportunity to live a life. On the contrary, the same patriarchy allows a man for his illicit ways without testing man's virginity. When Okoboshi enters desires to ruin her virginity, tactfully she declares that she is not virgin. When the African dominant patriarchy is threatened by a woman, it is inevitable for her to face an oppressive punishment:

Okoboshi hit her across the face with all his strength. 'You dirty animal!' he shouted. 'Do you think I want to touch you now? Slave-girl!' He hit her again. 'I never really wanted you anyway! . . . Soon I shall marry the girl of my choice (64).

When Aku-nna elopes with Chike, a descendent slave and marries to him, Okonkwo denies her bride price from Chike. It is a belief that if a woman's husband fails to pay her bride price, the bride dies in child birth. This gender politics blind belief entraps a woman in its wings that psychologically, she loses her confidence and finally meets her death. Aku-nna, because of her psychological inclination towards such a belief confronts her death. The gender politics of African society until the last moment of woman's life doesn't leave to oppress her. Severe implications are left even after her death, and the gender politics imbibes them upon the subsequent young women:

Afterwards every girl in Ibuza was told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike. 'If you want to live long time', they were told, 'you must accept the husband that your people choose for you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child.' (85)

Thus, the effects of gender politics last long upon the mind of a woman. Commenting upon the tragic end of Aku-nna, Joya Uraizee states:

Aku-nna is subaltern not because of her social class but because of her gender. She is static and homogenized, silenced and sexually violated. Her marriage against social customs brings, on herself and her family, social disgrace, exile, and death (Uraizee; 2000: 66).

Thus, Emecheta's *The Bride Price* shows that a woman is badly oppressed in the gender politics of African culture that finally she had no choice but to confront her death. By bringing these implications, Emecheta wants to bring a drastic change in her traditional society that the women may be treated on the ground of human values. This change will lead to the nation building free from gender-bias.

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