

# Oppression of The Girl- Child In Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

Anegebe Endurance

Faculty Modern Language And Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

E-mail: anegbee@yahoo.com

Abdulhameed A.Majeed

Faculty Modern Language And Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Gariagan Gift

Girne American University, Girne, North Cyprus

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## Abstract

Emecheta's writing gives an impression to readers that specifically, Nigerian culture is passive and patriarchal and that she does not see a suitable position for women in such a depressing male dominated society. The pivotal issues in the novel are slavery, motherhood, marriage and African traditions over its influence of the modern world. According to the popular saying, "The home is the foundation of the society", meaning, destroy the home, the society collapse. However, the unwitting behavior of "The Girl-Child" in the society could be traced to the home front, perpetuated by Mothers, knowingly or unknowingly. Therefore, this paper explore the role of mothers to an age long suffering and untold horrors oppression of the Girl-Child in the home This is wholly due to intimate closeness to the mother figure which tend to reflect, the kind of up-bringing that she dishes out to her girl-child or female children under her care. It is therefore on this ground, this paper is anchored to unravel the oppression of the Girl Child in the homes.

**Keywords:** Oppression, research in English literature, The Bride Price

## 1. Introduction

*The Bride Price* is set in Iboza, revolves around Aku-nna the heroine of the novel who faces many problems from her abusive society and the clash between her wish and the wish of the society. Nevertheless, Emecheta denotes these and more issues in her novels and leaves it up to the reader to decide on whether or not there are solutions. As life goes on in Iboza, Aku-nna falls in love with a teacher, Chike. After facing some serious problems, the couple gets married in the end. Albeit, the story ends unhappily with the death of Aku-nna after she gives birth to her child

One major theme of this novel that kept reoccurring as depicted by Emecheta is the theme of oppression unleashed on the girl child; vividly showed in the life of Ma Blackie to her only daughter. Although oppression has been given different definition over the years by different critics and scholar, but the one well suited for this study will be drawn from the definition offered by Nkereuwem (1997) which states that "any burdensome exercise of power or authority over somebody with continual injustice and cruelty that makes the person being oppressed feel worried, uncomfortable or unhappy" expresses the realistic working mechanism of the word oppression (P.3). Girls who often time turns out with low self-esteem had their bearing from the home front, most especially if they are render insignificant by their mother.

According to Gariagan Gift, during one of her interview session did assert that "Until women stop dissenting each other, rather focus on the unique feature of femininity, low self- esteem is inevitable, which she said begins from the home front-mother's been the major instigator, player, and executor to their girl child" (2014). This idea has often time resulted in the girl child feeling unsecured to confide in their mother. This trend I guess has been in existence for some years; with the male child more attached to their mothers while the girl child to their fathers. This was depicted in the life of Akunna, the protagonist of this novel, closeness to her father, who in turn named her "fathers wealth"

"Aku-nna knew that she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this unfortunate marriage. Not only was she a girl but she was too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump little girl for a daughter. Aku-nna just would not put on weight, and this made her look as if she being starved; but she simply had not be the kind of healthy appetite her brother Nna-nndo had. And that was not the end of the disgrace she was showering on her family. If a child at the other end of Akinwunmi street had chicken-pox, Aku-nna was bound to catch it; if someone at the bottom of the yard had malaria, Aku-nna would have her share too. for her it was forever a story of today foot, tomorrow head, the day after neck, so much so that her mother many a time begged her to decide once and for all whether she was going to live or die. One thing Ma Blackie could not stand, she said over and over again, was a living dead, an Ogbanje"(3-4).

This attitude of her mother did impaired her psychological disposition, repressed for so long a time, which further heighten her insignificant in the family; rather only her monetary return to her family was of better interest. Little wonder, she became so depressed at the death of her father, to him she owns so much bond and affection. The place of father in an Africa setting is everything for the family, a trusted head who can take care of the family "*It is even today in Nigeria*": *when you have lost your father you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to (be) boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much.*" (25) Now, the burden to take care of the family and her brother approaches. "*My father was a good provider. My Father was a good Christian. He was a good husband to my mother Ma Blackie. He bought me many dresses. He sent me to school.*" (27) .

"Aku-nna, meaning father's wealth, knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. To him, this was something to look forward to."(4).this was asserted by her father, making it really difficult for the girl child to have a say over their own life other than the one held by her family or tradition or custom of the people.

However, this trend in homes has often time made some feminists critic like Nwapa who states that "the oppression of the woman starts in the home" (James 1990, 113) and by Paulina Palmer who sees the role of the woman, especially the mother, as that of a tool of patriarchy (Palmer 1989, 102). One of the recurrent themes that expose mothers as oppressors of their own sex is that of male preference and subjugation of the girl child to psychological torture. This could as well be seen in the life and times of Emecheta, growing up was not a bed of roses as other children had , rather unlike the male; she did went through untold horror at the death of her father a railway worker at a tender age, which further exposes her to mistreatment in the hands of her mother who was now in a hurry to marry her away.

On this end, she was deprived the privilege of education, while her younger brother was send to school. She was made to believe that the woman place was in the kitchen, to help out with house shores. This was mirror in "Second class citizen", hurriedly married away at a tender age of sixteen, subjected to domestic violence from her husband, had five children in six years, this once again portray the value-less view of women, regarded as a baby manufacturing machine, with no intention of putting her wellbeing into consideration.

This perception has often broken the will of some of these women to fight for their freedom, knowing fully well, the society from which they evolve will not in any way support because it has been structured to see them as "second class" citizen and at such should remain silence. According to Gloria C. Chukurere in "Buchi Emecheta: The yoke of womanhood" where she states that the author's "belief that the failure or success of a character depends not only upon extraneous factors but also upon the character's individual strength of will" (1995, P.206). This is because whereas the extraneous factors stand on Aku-nna's path, it is actually her broken will, which destroys her: "her revolt against entrenched notions of female subjugation through limiting social norms has not been wholly successful" (Ibid).

The lack of connection between Ma Blackie and Aku-nna did denied her the essential protection she needed from her mother even when it was needed most, even her mother helping in fanning her ordeal for the tradition to have a safe passage of her. This kind of surprised Aku-nna ..... "she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all (120).

Aku-nna understands from her terrifying tradition and society that women must be submissive and obedient to the rules and regulations set by males. Relief is out of the subject for African women as their responsibility becomes clear—taking care of children and husband, in addition to working hard to survive. It is a desperate and boring way African women want to live their life, just like machines , they do exactly what they are told. One can see this from the conversation between Aku-nna and Matilda, when they talk about women and hasty marriage for the sake of money and their own safety as Matilda ends the conversation with a sad voice saying, "*This is the fate of us women. There is nothing we can do about it. We just have to learn to accept it.*" (37)

In another instance, during the moon light visitation to commemorate Aku-nna translation into womanhood; in the process she was being molested by Okoboshi her supposed husband, but for timely intervention, rescued by Chike, with a punch, which send him fuming on the ground, only for her mother to attacked Chike with verbal assault, "If you want to prove yourself a strong man, why don't you do it outside and pick a man who does not have a limp?"(124).Ma Blackie outright rebuke of Chike shows her hatred and exposure of her girl child to any dick and harry, even without asking from Chike side of the story. But when Aku-nna tried to narrate her ordeal to her mother, " Oh ... Mother, Aku-nna begged, please don't say anything. Okoboshi was hurting me, he was.....,He was wicked-oh Mother, please listen."(124), this consequently display the oppression often fuel by mothers in the home. Instead, she stood to rebuke her daughter, "You mean you have a nice breast and don't want men to touch? Girls like you tend to end up having babies in their father's house, because they cannot endure open play, so they go to secret places and have themselves disvirgined . Is that the type of person you are turning out to be? i will kill you if you bring shame and dishonour on us. How can he hurt you with all these others watching?. And yet you allow a common....."(125).This statement again heighten the slackness in mothers, especially when she fails in her role as a mother to her girl child, abuse, molestation rough-handling becomes inevitable because she sees nonthing wrong in open breast massaga of the girl during moonlight play. This has in most cases led to teenage rape, consequently led to long term psychological trauma or scar, like in the case of Virginia Woolf who could not recover from the sexual abuse from her step brother, later affected her marriage, making her to feel nothing for her husband ,rather satisfy her sexual urge through her sister.

Aku-nna, was faulted by her mother even when it was crystal clear she was faultless. .Although, she sees her mother as a supporter of the tradition and custom of Ibuze but, at the detriment of her girl child happiness which she has put

behind, only to uphold the tenet of the society. This proves to be a problem in itself as Ma Blackie later becomes so involved with her second family that she forgets about her daughter and son day by day making Aku-nna quite sad. By now, Aku-nna begins to realize that she has lost both her father and mother.

However, she was again torn between two opinion, when her mother could not call Chike, "A slave", This consequently made her concluded even though "Her mother was mad, there was a little of saneness in her madness", further alluding her mother knowledge of what is expected of her, knows the pain her daughter was going through, but could not just defend her openly, as this could mal her stand in her newly found home and the husband she now found in okonkwo, who has given her her long craving for a child, which she really wouldn,t want to jeopardize by her daughter inadequacy who could not escape now, trapped in the intricate web of the tradition and custom of Ibuze, which thus carry a staunch warning though not written but pass on by words of mouth "...either you obey or bring shame and destruction on her family"(120)

This act of hers went beyond what she could bear; the reverse of mother's love,"...she had heard it said often enough that one's mother was one's best friend,"(126),but hers was the reverse, this has caused so much pain, a pain she just could not contain having lost her mother to the okonkwo's.

The oppression of the girl child is so encompassing, even Aku-nna, knew from the outset that she was non thing but money venture for all concern. Like the Biblical injection, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53 v 7). This image could be view in the light of the girl child in Ibuze community; Right from her birth, her bride priced was prized even before she was weaned from her mother, okonkwo intention to take one of the highest title (Eze title) in Ibuze land was connected to her bride price her prospective suitor will pay; her younger brother education was tied to her bride price, since the education of the boy child was something which was held to a high esteem and finally her knowledge of her mother's pregnancy, which surprise her, finally got done on her that her dreams of becoming a teacher will sure be aborted, because her bride price will be needed to attend to her mother. "Her bride price would be needed very quickly to see her mother through her period of confinement."(127).

## 2. Early Marriage and Bride Price

Culture is the bedrock of development, since it determines the entire spectrum of relations and activities in any given society. Cham (1987) affirms "any movement in society must have its feet firmly rooted in healthy cultural grounds if it is to be of any lasting and meaningful value to the welfare of individuals and society at large. A healthy culture is one that is often referred to as a culture of equality, a culture free from all forms of exploitation and above all, a culture rooted in the true traditions of the people"(100).

However, it is surprising to know that most cultural practices are against female folks. As Africans, we cannot do without obeying the culture and tradition of our land because, they have become something passed on from one generation to the other. However, some of these practices affect women and the society takes it lightly. According to Lewis (1995)"African cultural practices have been weapons for enforcing women's obedience.... Culture has been seen as an edifice of unchanging institution, traditions and identities...." Also, Osayimwense Osa in "The Bride price: A masterpiece of African Youth literature," traces Aku-nna's development from late childhood to early adolescence by highlighting the different growth stages and experiences that she passes through. Osa rightly observes that "her development is plagued early by two traumatic experiences- the death of her father, and her subsequent relocation from cosmopolitan Lagos into a conservative, traditional Ibuza. "... Aku-nna's plight in Okonkwo's home, the antagonisms of Okonkwo's wives..." (1995, PP. 28-29).

The antagonism of Okonkwo's wives will be shown as being oppressive to Aku-nna rather than just rivalry as seen by Osa and of significance will be her own mother's betrayal of all her trusts by siding with Okonkwo's house hold against Aku-nna. On the preference of the male child over the female, Osa recognizes the fact that both Adah, the heroine of Second-Class Citizen like Aku-nna of The Bride Price, suffer a "psychological feeling of inadequacy at home because she is a girl" (P.33). Rather than be seen as self-imposed psychological torture, the activities of other women have been examined as the root causes of such mental pains. "Ozubu, Okonkwo second wife scold {ed} her, tell her in a clamorous voice how ungrateful she was. She was remained of the fact that many other girls became women and their families had no money to buy even a pigeon to mark it, and now here she had been given a whole big fowl and she was behaving as if she owned the world. (120). To the lay man this might sound like scolding from a mother to a daughter, but beyond the words, lies the real meaning, of oppression, insignificance of the girl child, which was reaffirmed by Okonkwo second wife if peradventure, Aku-nna had forgotten her true place in the house as a girl, who is not allowed to reject, oppose anything but rather accept with no further question. This forced her to liken the life of the chicken to the life of the woman....."They chattered together like monkeys as they plucked the feathers from the poor chicken that had to die so mercilessly, just because she was a woman"(120). The death of the chicken signifies the death of every girl child even before their time, because of the tradition which has been used to entrenched them to a particular system which has not always favour the girl child to make choices of their own, but rather one made for them with strict adherence.

African society overall is a patriarchal one where men have all the power to decide what should be done. In the ceremony of her father Ezekial's death, they ask his son Nna-nndo to say the prayer and be near his grave as he is "the heir of the father." It is even up to the husband to choose the work of his wife without any discussion. This is observed on page 51. "*Aku-nna remembered only scraps about what life in Ibuza would be like. She knew she would have to marry, and the bride price she would fetch would help to pay the school fees for her brother Nna-nndo. She didn't mind*

that; at least it would mean that she would be well fed. What she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her. She would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman." This links in as well to the title where Emecheta precisely gives literal meaning in reference to the traditional practice of payment in return for a wife, a disgusting trade. Second of all, the symbolic meaning of it denotes women's submission and obedience to their husbands.

In addition, Emecheta concentrates on the lack of bond between mother and daughter and systematically, she makes the girl child realize the lack of bond between her and her mother thus "Aku-nna knew that there was a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist between her and her mother" (P.12). This lack of bond between mother and daughter is the consequent result of all the oppressions that the girl child suffers at the hands of her mother in the home. Similarly, this lack of bond between mother and daughter graduates into a situation of betrayal. Aku-nna's father having died, she, her brother and their mother move from Lagos to Ibuza where the mother is quickly inherited by their father's elder brother, Okonkwo. Okonkwo handsome and strong even in old age, easily gets Aku-nna's mother, Ma Blackie pregnant, a child that Ma Blackie has looked for, for several years after the birth of her last son. For the fact that her own personal interest has been fulfilled, Ma Blackie betrays Aku-nna who falls in love with an Osu lineage called Chike. She sides with the entire household to reject Chike as an outcast even though she knows that her daughter's happiness depends on her marrying Chike. The girl is disappointed in the mother because she, her brother and her mother used Chike's little presents of beverages and cans of milk and other sanitary gifts. So it surprises her that her mother could suddenly join in the condemnation of Chike to the extent that "Ma Blackie cried and cursed her fortune in being saddled with such a daughter" (P.125) to all present to hear. This outcry truly devastated Aku-nna and she doubts that one's mother could ever be one's best friend. In addition, she wonders if her mother has "encouraged her to accept Chike's friendship in order to just use him like a convenient tool, to ferry them through a difficult period of adjustment?" (P.126).

In the course of discussion, Emecheta has raised significant notion of shame in women if they make a mistake before marriage. *"The blame usually went to the girls. A girl who had had adventures before marriage was never respected in her new home, everybody in the village would know about her past, especially if she was unfortunate enough to be married to an egocentric man."* (85)

The place of virginity in the African culture is held to a high esteem. The only thing that can survive Aku-nna at the end of the novel is her lies to Okoboshi stating that she has already lost virginity to someone else. It is clear that in the African society, only virgin women is preferable and as a result (of her lie), Okoboshi leaves Aku-nna because this would bring shame and would never be acceptable by any of his family members bearing terrible consequences once people hear about it. It is as if devirginising a woman would be an honour for the whole family as they celebrate it as a real virtue. The knowledge of disvirginity after the first night with her suppose husband was receive with a great scoff from her mother in-law, who instantly "spat at her and pointed without words at the water gourd" (146), she became the talk of the village, pushed outside, with eager eyes of her fellow girls to see her, some to mock her, others to pity her or to repeat the accusing description of her as an empty shell, "why did you do it? One or two daring girls asked, It will kill your mother; another said" (147). Aku-nna was subjected to an extreme oppression, outside the jeering, mocking, even physical beating, just to humiliate her to have committed an heinous act, only when she got to the stream it got done on her the amount of beating she has receive from her new people "Her mouth burned with pain as she rinsed it out with cold water. She knew that both her eyes must be swollen for she found it difficult to lift her eyelids upwards. Her head was still reeling like that of someone half-drunk. She allowed herself to shed a few tears into the silent stream"(147) Although, Chike and Aku-nna continue their serious and strong relations that eventually leads to their marriage. *"Oh, will you do all that for me? I shall serve you till I die. I shall be a good wife to you. I shall always love you and love you in this world and the next and the next one after that until the end of time."* (156) Nevertheless, Aku-nna endured pains, humiliation, just to live with the man of her choice, only for death to have her even before her life even started

### 3. Conclusion

Emecheta has successfully created a pitiful picture of Nigerian women and their role in the society from her autobiographical novel. Whatever happens in the novel is a mirror of her real life. Though some critics, her feministic point of view is much too strong giving rise to arguments amongst other African writers such as Eustace Palmer who states that, *"scarcely any other African novelist has succeeded in probing the female mind and displaying the female personality with such precision."*

Nevertheless, she is able to capture real moments about women oppression of their girl child and inequality that existed even within the female folk. However, She ends her story in a cliff hanging, with bride price becomes a psycho admonition to all women, especially to those wanting their first child to live longer. To see her generation, it is compulsory to pay for the bride price.

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