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Gender Politics and Black Women: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract:

Buchi Emecheta is one of the eminent African women writers. Her novels deal with subjugation, marginalization and identity crisis experienced by black women. In *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta delineates how an African woman of Igbo society reacts and responds to the collective societal pressure and patriarchal ideology. The female protagonists experience inner and outer conflict. Gender politics forces them to be at margin. The novels highlight that Igbo society manifests male domination and female subordination. Emecheta shows how men exploit gender system to maintain male dominance. They use cultural norms such as son preference, polygamy and wife inheritance to control women's status as an individual.

Keywords: Gender politics, black women, patriarchy, gender discrimination, polygamy, Igbo society.

Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – She is the other.

- *Simon de Beauvoir, The Second Sex*

No woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honour. (158)

- *Buchi Emecheta, The Slave Girl*

These lines accentuate gender politics. The term 'gender politics' indicates politics of power in family and society. The term 'gender' is not the exact synonym for 'sex'. The feminists have defined it very clearly that 'sex' is a biological terminology – an anatomical distinction between a male and female. On the other hand, gender is defined as a socially constructed difference or inequality between man and woman. Every culture creates a set of beliefs and practices for men and women. In a patriarchal society, such set of beliefs and practices is more or less drenched in gender biasness.

Gender politics promotes gender biasness, gender oppression, gender inequality. Means to say that it supports the ideology that man and women are binary opposites. It forces women to assume subaltern roles because it believes that men have power and women do not. Women are nothing but as a caretaker, cleaner, breeder and commodity.

The realistic delineation of the status of women in Nigerian society is presented by Emecheta to challenge taken for granted assumptions about the role of a woman. Buchi Emecheta, an African daughter, highlights how gender politics dehumanize women in the society. The life history of the most important Nigerian woman writer, Buchi Emecheta, is itself an example of struggle against gender politics. Marie Umeh rightly comments in the introduction of the book, *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* that novels of Buchi Emecheta reflect what Kate Millet calls 'sexual politics' – the patriarchal principal by which all males dominate females. Marie Umeh asserts:

Emecheta's women for the most part are sacrificed at the altar of a male-oriented society and men exploit the sex/gender system to maintain male dominance. (XXIV)

Buchi Emecheta denies to be called a feminist in her essay titled, "Feminism with a small 'f'". Most African women writers reject the label 'feminist' due to its rootedness in western hegemonic power structure. They assert that western feminism does not deal with issues that directly affect black women. The question of women's equality and female individuality may vary from culture to culture yet Carole Boyce Davies in the essay, 'Some notes on African Feminism' discusses "the obvious connection between African and Western feminism ... both identify gender specific issues and recognize woman's position internationally as one of the second class status and otherness and seek to correct that" (564)

The paper discusses Emecheta's novels from a particular perspective. The paper highlights that black women protagonists of novels set in Nigeria, are forced to tolerate the pressure of patriarchy, marriage, motherhood and social customs. The traditional women are victims as well as propagator of gender politics. A close study of Emecheta's works reveals that child-bearing, motherhood, bride-price, domestic violence and quest for individuality are recurring themes in her novels. *The Slave Girl*, *The Bride Price* and *The Joy of Motherhood* are known as African novels as they depict traditional Ibo society. *In the Ditch*, *Second Class Citizen Kehinde* and *New Tribe* depict life of Nigerian family mainly in London and partially in Nigeria. *The Bride Price* traces Aku-nna's growth from girlhood to womanhood. She observes her father's patriarchal psyche at the age of thirteen:

She often heard the other women talking about Ma Blackie's childlessness. She often heard her parents arguing too. Her father went on and on in his small sad voice reminding her wife how much she had cost him. 'I paid the double normal bride price for you', he told her. And we were married in church. But what have you given me – just one son' (2)

Her father does not consider her because she is a girl. It shows that girls receive peripheral treatment right from childhood. Her education at local missionary school becomes an issue in Okonkwo's family through which Emecheta raises the point of gender discrimination. It is clear that Igbo girls' education is not as important as the education of boys. Parents send girls to school to get better bride price. The bride price of an educated girl is used as a means to meet the educational expenditure of male children. Okonkwo's words indicate the real intention after Aku-nna's education when his son demands Okonkwo to do something to prevent Aku-nna to go to school. Okonkwo, the step father, explains:

Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride price will come to me. And these days, people pay more for educated girls. (30)

His plan reveals that the girls are used as pawns to make financial gain so that a man can use that money on son's education or any personal gain. Emecheta ironically illustrates that Aku-nna is allowed to complete her education as education will enhance her bride price. It is to be noted that her family wants to enhance her price rather than her value in society.

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The meaning of Aku-nna's name makes it clear that a daughter is treated as a commodity. Her father named her Aku-nna which means father's wealth. Her existence is accepted because she brings bride price to the family. Aku-nna's thinking is also shaped by patriarchal ideology to some extent that she imagines to marry a rich man who would be able to afford an expensive bride price.

Aku-nna's various roles: as a daughter, as a bride and as a wife reflect victimization, subjugation, marginalization of a woman in African society. Aku-nna's speech after the death of father highlights gender biasness and second class status of a woman in family:

It has always been like that in Nigeria. When you have lost your father, you have lost everything. Your mother is only a woman A fatherless family is a family without a head.... (12)

The novel also delineates that sons are given preference and daughters are considered second sex. The statement of Aku-nna's uncle makes it clear when he tells all mourners not to cry because "our brother is lying here now but he is not dead. He has left a son behind him. (18)

Buchi Emecheta is one of those African women writers who have exposed the inherited cultural practices that inhibit the empowerment of women. Ogugua, Aku-nna's cousin reveals one such strange custom of Ibo society:

Your mother will become my father's wife. My father has inherited everything your father owned and he has 'inherited' your mother too. (23)

The words 'inherited' and 'owned' indicate that a woman is treated as more of a commodity than a human being. The living wife of a deceased man is inherited by his relatives. A man easily inherits a woman like a part of property and he does not take pains to get approval of a widow. Ironically, a woman accepts her new role and again becomes an obedient wife because a woman has been trained since birth to be docile. To follow tradition, Aku-nna's mother along with her children leaves Lagos for Ibuza to live with new husband. It seems to be turning point in the life of Aku-nna. After moving from a big modern city to a rural village, she feels loneliness.

Emecheta presents shocking portrayals of Igbo customs in this novel. Aku-nna's becoming a complete woman is celebrated as a great event. Young boys visit her house and have fun with her body. It is not an achievement but a punishment Aku-nna. She is molested by one of the visitor, Okoboshi. He humiliates her by squeezing her breasts. It is shocking to note that her

mother scolds her for unexpected behavior. Unfortunately, Aku-nna falls in love with her school teacher and dares to choose her life-partner. But, later she realizes that tradition is not an easy enemy to fight. Aku-nna's uncle does not accept her relation with Chike, a school teacher because he is the descendant of a slave.

Emecheta illustrates the theme of forcible marriage and describes strange ways to 'own' a wife in Igbo society:

A man with no money to pay a bride price could hide behind the tree. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair ... She belonged to him for life and no other man could have her. (48)

Aku-nna is kidnapped and forced to marry a man of her uncle's choice. Aku-nna was advised about her role in marital bed by Okoboshi's sister:

Now remember, don't make it hard for Okoboshi. If you do, he will call for help, then the men will come in and hold you down. That is the custom. (62)

These lines indicate how a man is supported by society to have control on a woman's body and mind. Okoboshi forces her to be his wife but she makes a false story of her physical relation with Chike. The shocked and frustrated Okoboshi leaves her in bridal bed after beating her with all his strength, "you dirty animal!" he shouted. "Do you think I want to touch you now?" (64) Aku-nna, a prisoner in Okoboshi's hut, manages to run away with his boy friend, Chike. She marries him and pays a big price for this 'crime'. Neither her marriage nor her bride price is accepted by the family. Aku-nna feels psychological pressure. Attitudinal duality of Aku-nna gets reflected here. On the one hand, she exhibits the courage to elope with her lover but on the other hand she feels guilt and allows herself to surrender before Igbo beliefs. In Ibo, people believe that if the bride price of a girl is not paid, the girl would not survive after the birth of her first child. It shows how social norms are used to make women both physically and mentally slave. Aku-nna cannot enjoy her happy married life despite having a good husband. A defiant teenager becomes a psychological patient. She has nightmares about the evil consequences of unpaid bride price, every night, "Hold me tight!"... Hold me! My uncle is trying to take me away. Please don't let him get me" (80). Her death shows that education cannot erase the fear of social taboos from mind. Aku-nna's death in child-birth reveals a clash between societal force and individual's strength of assertion. Aku-nna gets punishment for her attempt of rebellion. Lloyd Brown comments that death of Aku-nna, "...is itself a demonstration of the

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degree to which her will is dominated despite her conscious act of revolt" (52). Gender politics works through social institutes and cultural traditions which conspire together to curtail basic human rights of women. The end of novel illustrates how a woman is forced to sacrifice her life to collective will of patriarchal community. To reinforce the traditional superstition, the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike was told to every girl:

“If you want to live a 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.’ (84)

Ironically, the death of Aku-nna is manipulated to frighten Ibo girls. They never tell that she dies because of her personal fear not entirely because of any goddess's curse. *The Slave Girl* records a personal odyssey of a slave girl. The word 'slave' seems to be a metaphor of a woman's existence in the world. It suggests that a woman (slave or free) cannot live freely in male dominated society. She is more or less a slave of family, patriarchal institutions and ideology. The novel indicates how gender politics makes black woman slave physically or mentally.

The beginning of the novel explains insensitive attitude of a husband towards his pregnant wife. Umedi is all alone at home and no one is there to help her in her labour pain as “she had had so many pregnancies – that her husband ceased paying much attention” (14). Emecheta gives details of what Ibuza women do at the time of baby's birth:

A pregnant Ibuza woman would simply always carry a cooking knife with her, just in a case she gave birth to her baby on her way to or from the market or farm. If she were lucky, she might have someone with her who could cut the cord; if not, she would cut the cord itself, rest a while, put her new baby on her back and thread her way home. (19)

The above lines indicate that a woman is used as a body and left alone to suffer. She is nothing but a breeder for her husband. After the loss of many daughters, Umedi gives birth to a daughter, Ogbanje Ojbeta. She is the first girl who survives. That is why she is a favourite child otherwise “girl children were not normally particularly prized creatures” (19). Ojbeta's mother puts safety charms around her neck to assure her survival. She also decorates Ojbeta's face with tattoos in order to save her from slavery. She perhaps forgets that woman and slavery are

interconnected. Ojbeta's parents die of 'felenza' and life gets tough for her. Her brother takes her to Onitsha market and sells her for eight pound to Ma Palagada, a rich woman. One may observe how a brother sells his own sister as an item in market. She is twice oppressed, as a slave and as a woman, in Ma Palagada's big house. Inheritance of woman by man, marriage and slavery are different channels to promote gender politics and relegate woman to peripheral role in a patriarchal society.

The description of seven years old Ojbeta's unsuccessful efforts to gain freedom touches readers deeply. She runs "like an arrow, her little legs like wings, her heart beating fast in fear and anticipation" (57) to search her brother, the only person she knows in the market full of strange people. Finally she surrenders to her pursuer. Ojbeta is directed to renounce her personal possessions which symbolize her identity. She wants to keep all safety charms, "cowries, tops of tin, red bells from metal" attached by her mother. A little girl does not know that a slave cannot have identity of individuality. Chiago, the oldest slave girl rightly says, "she did not yet know that no slave retained any identity: whatever identity they had was forfeited the day money was paid for them" (72)

Ojbeta gradually learns to accept her lot as a slave uncomplainingly. Ironically, Ma Palagada provides her food, clothing and shelter. It is all that a slave expects from a master. Emecheta explains that a slave woman works as a mechanical doll.

Life in Ma Palagada's house is really very painful for all slave girls. They are exploited and sexually harassed by Pa Palagada and his son, Clifford as Chiago explains:

You do not understand. He fiddles with me. He used to make me do things. (92)

These lines make it clear that male master used female slaves as a plaything. It was difficult for them to raise their voice against such crime. They were supposed to be mistress of their master. Pa Palagada forces Chiago to go in his bedroom and satisfy his lust. He promises her that he will make her his second wife. Will such promise improve her condition? Her marriage with Pa means permanent slavery. Chiago never rebels against her because she has nobody to listen to her. Emecheta projects powerlessness of dehumanized women in a traditional Ibuza society. Pa Palagada not only exploits Chiago sexually but also enjoy torturing little Ojbeta. She get "accustomed to physical pain and to mental anguish of being disparaged as a slave by all and sundry" (114)

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In a patriarchal society, masculinity is mostly exercised through rape and physical violence. A man is trained at every stage of life to behave like a man. *The Slave Girl* also confirms that power-politics in man-woman relationship is an omnipresent reality. It is worth nothing that all men in Ojbeta's life exploit her to satisfy their interest. Her brother sells her to get monetary help. Pa tortures her to satisfy her master ego. Big mother's husband, Eze, tries to marry her forcibly to Adim. Clifford also plays with her emotions. His intention gets revealed when he visits Ojbeta's village to get back his bride price. He thinks that if he has submitted to his feelings for Ojbeta, he would have left her. He now realizes that Ojbeta is fit for kitchen but not suitable for public presentation. After Ma Palagada's death, she seeks permission from Pa to return her home. She is allowed to go back. Her relatives welcome her not out of love. Actually they want to claim her bride price.

Ojbeta's husband, Jacob, pays eight pound as bride price to Clifford to enjoy 'permanent ownership'. She feels that she has got freedom. But one may note that it is only a process of changing masters:

The contract is completed after all these years. I feel free in belonging to new master from my very own town Ibuza. My mind is now at rest." (178)

Ironically, master has changed but situation remains unchanged. She thanks her husband by kneeling down in front of him. Cocooned in patriarchal values, she is oblivious of her subaltern status. She fails to understand that she has embraced permanent slavery. Her belief "I am free in your house" (179) is mere illusion. The word 'free' has nothing to do with freedom. Husband means permanent owner in a patriarchal society. Ojbeta's speech indicates one more fact that minds of women are conditioned to such a great extent that they do not feel any need to assert their autonomy.

The study of two novels makes it explicit clear that culture is a powerful tool of gender politics to dominate women and make them accept subaltern roles.

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