



POLYGAMY, PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE EXCLUSION IN THE BRIDE PRICE

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Abstract

Marriage occupies a central position in many traditional African societies, functioning as a social, economic, and cultural institution that regulates gender relations. In *The Bride Price*, **Buchi Emecheta** interrogates this institution by exposing how polygamy and patriarchal customs systematically marginalize women. This paper examines how polygamous marriage and the practice of bride price operate as instruments of female exclusion, denying women autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and social security. Through the tragic life of Aku-nna, Emecheta demonstrates how women are reduced to commodities exchanged between men, while their desires and consent are rendered insignificant. Employing feminist and womanist perspectives, the study analyses how patriarchy legitimizes female suffering under the guise of tradition. Drawing upon textual evidence from the novel and critical insights by scholars such as Florence Stratton and Lloyd W. Brown, the paper argues that *The Bride Price* critiques polygamy not merely as a marital arrangement but as a broader ideological system that sustains gender inequality and social exclusion.

Keywords: Polygamy, Patriarchy, Female Exclusion, Marriage, African Woman, Buchi Emecheta, Gender Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

In many traditional African societies, marriage is not a private contract between two individuals but a communal arrangement governed by custom, lineage, and economic exchange. Within this framework, polygamy and the bride price system function as socially sanctioned practices that reinforce male authority and female subordination. While these institutions are often justified as cultural necessities, African women writers have persistently questioned their impact on women's lives.

Buchi Emecheta occupies a central position in African and diasporic women's writing for her unflinching exploration of women's lives shaped by patriarchy, colonial history, and socio-economic marginalization. Writing from her lived experience as a Nigerian woman who migrated to Britain, Emecheta developed a literary voice that is grounded, direct, and ethically committed to representing women who are often silenced within both traditional and modern social structures. Her fiction consistently foregrounds ordinary women—mothers, daughters, wives—whose struggles reveal the hidden costs of cultural norms such as marriage, motherhood, and obedience. Rather than idealizing African tradition, Emecheta subjects it to critical scrutiny, exposing

how customs like bride price, polygamy, and rigid gender roles restrict female autonomy and emotional fulfillment. At the same time, she resists simplistic Western feminist frameworks by adopting a perspective that recognizes community, motherhood, and cultural continuity as meaningful, even while critiquing their oppressive manifestations.

Emecheta's narrative style is marked by clarity and emotional restraint, allowing the weight of social injustice to emerge through lived detail rather than rhetorical excess. Her protagonists often endure loss, displacement, and betrayal, yet they are never portrayed as passive victims; instead, their endurance and moral insight constitute a quiet form of resistance. By situating women's suffering within broader economic and historical forces, Emecheta reveals how gender oppression is sustained by intersecting systems of power rather than individual cruelty alone. Her work also makes visible the psychological dimensions of oppression, showing how women internalize cultural expectations that ultimately harm them. Through this sustained engagement with women's realities, Buchi Emecheta reshaped African literature by insisting that women's experiences are not marginal themes but central to understanding society itself. Her writing



continues to resonate because it challenges readers to confront injustice while affirming the dignity and humanity of women across cultures.

In *The Bride Price* (1976), Buchi Emecheta presents a powerful critique of these practices by foregrounding the lived experience of women trapped within patriarchal structures. The novel narrates the story of Aku-nna, a young girl whose life becomes increasingly constrained following her mother's remarriage into a polygamous household. Through Aku-nna's gradual exclusion—from education, emotional security, and ultimately life itself—Emecheta exposes the destructive consequences of polygamy and bride price on female subjectivity.

This paper argues that Emecheta portrays polygamy as a mechanism that normalizes female exclusion while reinforcing male dominance. The novel reveals how patriarchy operates not only through overt control but also through internalized cultural beliefs that compel women to accept suffering as destiny.

POLYGAMY AS A STRUCTURE OF PATRIARCHAL POWER

Polygamy in *The Bride Price* is depicted as an institution that privileges male desire while marginalizing women's emotional and psychological needs. After the death of her father, Aku-nna's mother, Ma Blackie, is compelled to marry Okonkwo, a man who already has several wives. This marriage is presented not as a choice but as a social obligation, illustrating how widowed women are denied autonomy.

Within the polygamous household, women exist in a hierarchy determined by seniority and reproductive success. Love and companionship are absent; instead, rivalry and insecurity dominate female relationships. Emecheta reveals that polygamy fractures female solidarity, making women complicit in sustaining the system that oppresses them.

Lloyd W. Brown observes that Emecheta's fiction "exposes marriage as an institution that secures male authority at the expense of female fulfillment" (Brown 92). In *The Bride Price*, polygamy becomes a visible manifestation of this imbalance, legitimizing male control over multiple female bodies and lives.

BRIDE PRICE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN

Closely linked to polygamy is the practice of bride price, which reduces women to economic assets exchanged between male families. Aku-nna's value is repeatedly measured in terms of the bride price she can command, rather than her aspirations or intellect. Education, which might empower her, is tolerated only because it increases her market value.

Emecheta starkly captures this commodification when Aku-nna realizes that "her life was worth so many bags of cowries and goats" (Emecheta 58). The bride price system transforms marriage into a transaction in which women's bodies become sites of profit and control. Florence Stratton argues that African patriarchal systems often "mask economic exploitation behind the rhetoric of tradition" (Stratton 112). In *The Bride Price*, tradition functions as a moral shield that legitimizes the buying and selling of women, while silencing dissent.

FEMALE EXCLUSION AND THE DENIAL OF CHOICE

Aku-nna's exclusion becomes most evident in her lack of choice regarding marriage. Although she falls in love with Chike, a man from a stigmatized lineage, her desires are dismissed as irrelevant. The community's refusal to accept her choice underscores how women's voices are systematically excluded from decisions that determine their futures.

Emecheta writes that Aku-nna "knew that no one would ask her what she wanted" (Emecheta 121). This realization marks a turning point in her consciousness, revealing how deeply patriarchal norms have erased female agency. The social exclusion Aku-nna faces is not limited to marriage; it extends to education, inheritance, and mobility. Once she defies tradition, she becomes an outcast, demonstrating how patriarchal societies punish women who resist prescribed roles.

POLYGAMY, TRADITION, AND FEMALE SUFFERING

One of the most striking aspects of *The Bride Price* is the way female suffering is normalized. Women are taught to endure pain silently, believing that obedience ensures survival. Aku-nna's tragic death following childbirth becomes a symbolic culmination of this ideology.

According to cultural belief, a woman whose bride price is unpaid is destined to die in



childbirth. Although Emecheta presents this belief critically, its psychological power proves fatal. Aku-nna internalizes the fear so deeply that tradition itself becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Molar Ogundipe notes that African women often experience “double oppression—by gender and by culture” (Ogundipe 49). Aku-nna’s death illustrates how cultural myths operate as instruments of control, reinforcing female exclusion even in moments of apparent resistance.

EMECHETA FEMINIST INTERVENTION

Unlike idealized representations of tradition, Emecheta adopts a critical, reformist stance. She does not romanticize African culture; instead, she exposes its gendered injustices while remaining sensitive to its complexities. Her critique aligns closely with womanist thought, which challenges patriarchy without dismissing cultural identity. By portraying Aku-nna as intelligent, loving, and aspirational, Emecheta asserts the humanity of women often reduced to social roles. The tragedy of Aku-nna’s life is not personal failure but structural violence. Alice Walker’s concept of womanism emphasizes survival and wholeness rather than abstract equality. In this sense, Emecheta’s work calls for a transformation of cultural practices so that women may live, choose, and belong.

CONCLUSION

The Bride Price offers a powerful critique of polygamy and patriarchy as systems that institutionalize female exclusion. Through the life and death of Aku-nna, Buchi Emecheta exposes how marriage practices rooted in tradition deny women autonomy, reduce them to commodities, and punish resistance with social ostracism and death. Polygamy, rather than fostering communal harmony, emerges as a structure that perpetuates inequality and silences female voices.

Emecheta’s novel remains profoundly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender and culture. By interrogating tradition from a feminist perspective, *The Bride Price* challenges readers to reconsider the cost of preserving customs that sustain injustice. Ultimately, the novel affirms that cultural continuity must not come at the expense of women’s lives and dignity.

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