



## Breaking Chains and Challenging Traditions: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the thematic and narrative contributions of Buchi Emecheta in her novels *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*. It examines how Emecheta addresses gender oppression, cultural traditions, and colonial impacts through her portrayal of female characters. The paper provides a comparative analysis of the two novels, highlighting common themes such as the quest for freedom and the clash between tradition and modernity. *The Bride Price* focuses on the resistance against cultural practices like the bride price, illustrating the personal and societal conflicts faced by women. In contrast, *Slave Girl* deals with the physical and psychological effects of slavery, emphasizing the resilience of women under oppressive conditions. Emecheta's narrative style, characterized by realism and symbolism, effectively brings marginalized voices to the forefront and challenges patriarchal norms. Her work is significant in African literature for its feminist perspectives and its impact on understanding women's experiences in both traditional and colonial contexts. The paper concludes by suggesting further research into Emecheta's broader oeuvre and her influence on contemporary African writers, providing a foundation for ongoing exploration of feminist themes in African literature.

**Keywords;** Buchi Emecheta, Gender Oppression, Cultural Traditions, Colonialism, Female Agency, Realism and Symbolism, African Feminism.

### Introduction

Buchi Emecheta, a prominent Nigerian author, is celebrated for her significant

contributions to African literature. Her works primarily focus on the complexities of gender roles, cultural traditions, and the experiences of women in a changing society. Emecheta's

novels, particularly *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*, provide deep insights into the challenges faced by women in both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. In these novels, Emecheta explores how societal expectations and cultural practices confine women to specific roles, often limiting their opportunities for personal growth. *The Bride Price* examines the traditional practice of bride wealth and its impact on women's autonomy, while *Slave Girl* deals with the experiences of women subjected to servitude. Through these stories, the oppression and struggles faced by Nigerian women become clear, as they navigate cultural pressures and colonial legacies. Emecheta's portrayal of women's struggles is deeply influenced by her own life experiences. As someone who grew up in Nigeria and later migrated to the United Kingdom, Emecheta encountered similar issues of cultural conflict, identity, and gender-based challenges. Her personal journey is reflected in her writing, where she consistently highlights the resilience of her female characters against patriarchal systems. When examining both novels, common themes such as oppression, gender roles, and cultural traditions emerge. Each novel also has distinct features. *The Bride Price* focuses more on the clash between tradition and modernity, while *Slave Girl* centres on the dehumanization and exploitation of women.

### Literature Review

Buchi Emecheta, a renowned Nigerian author, was born in Lagos in 1944 and moved to the United Kingdom as a young adult. Her life experiences heavily influenced her writing, particularly her focus on themes of gender roles, cultural traditions, and colonialism. Emecheta's literary career spans numerous works, with *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* among her most prominent novels. Through these works, she addresses critical issues such as the oppression of women, African customs, and the impact of colonialism on Nigerian society. Her legacy in African literature remains significant, especially in her portrayal of women's resistance to

patriarchal norms. Emecheta's novels frequently challenge traditional gender roles and question the intersections of race, class, and gender, making her a leading voice in both African and feminist literature. Research on Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* has garnered considerable attention, especially from scholars engaged in feminist literary criticism and post-colonial analysis. Feminist critics have often highlighted Emecheta's focus on the challenges faced by African women in patriarchal societies. For example, in *The Bride Price*, scholars emphasize how the protagonist, Aku-nna, battles cultural expectations tied to bride wealth and marriage, a common theme in feminist studies. The novel critiques how women's worth is often tied to traditional practices, questioning the oppressive nature of such customs. *Slave Girl* has been analyzed through the lens of post-colonial feminism. Scholars focus on the depiction of the protagonist, Ojebeta, who is sold into slavery by her brother, a clear symbol of male dominance and exploitation. In various studies, this novel has been praised for addressing the intersection of colonialism and gender oppression, illustrating how African women were doubly marginalized during colonial rule. Post-colonial scholars also examine the broader colonial structures that reinforce the subjugation of women, emphasizing how both external (colonialism) and internal (patriarchal) forces shaped the lives of African women. Emecheta's novels have been studied by a variety of researchers, with some focusing on the socio-political contexts within which the novels are set, while others explore the psychological impact of cultural expectations on women. The overlap of these analyses creates a holistic view of how Emecheta's works critique societal norms from a multi-dimensional perspective.

Post-colonial feminist theory serves as a primary lens for analyzing Emecheta's work. This theory combines post-colonial criticism, which explores the impact of colonialism on native cultures, with feminist criticism, which

focuses on the gendered dimensions of power and oppression. Post-colonial feminist scholars argue that African women face a unique form of oppression due to their race, gender, and historical context of colonialism. These scholars highlight that Western feminist theories often overlook the intersection of these factors, and African women's experiences cannot be understood without considering the colonial past. African feminist perspectives provide another important framework for studying Emecheta's novels. African feminism differs from Western feminism in its focus on communal well-being and the recognition of traditional cultural values. African feminists argue that the liberation of women must be achieved not through the complete rejection of African traditions, but through the redefinition of these traditions in ways that allow for gender equality. In *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*, Emecheta often navigates this balance, showing that while some traditions are harmful to women, they also hold cultural significance. Thus, her work critiques patriarchal aspects of African society while still valuing its cultural heritage.

### Methodology

This study uses a qualitative literary analysis to explore Buchi Emecheta's novels *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*. Qualitative analysis is particularly suitable for examining literature, as it allows for in-depth exploration of themes, character development, and cultural context within a narrative. The approach focuses on understanding the meaning behind the text, particularly in how Emecheta portrays women's struggles and societal issues in Nigeria. By analyzing the two novels, this research seeks to uncover recurring themes related to gender oppression, freedom, and cultural traditions. The study will examine how Emecheta's personal experiences and societal background inform her writing. This method is well-suited for literary studies because it allows for flexibility in interpreting complex social, cultural, and personal themes. Instead of relying

on numerical data, qualitative analysis provides a detailed understanding of how Emecheta uses her characters and settings to reflect the real-life struggles faced by African women in both colonial and post-colonial contexts. The primary source for this analysis will be the texts of *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*. These novels will be examined closely to identify patterns in character development, narrative style, and recurring themes. Thematic exploration will include a detailed look at gender roles, cultural traditions, and the broader societal structures that impact the lives of Emecheta's characters. Particular attention will be paid to how these themes intersect with issues of power, freedom, and oppression. In addition to the primary texts, secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and literary criticism will support the analysis. These secondary sources will provide broader context and insights into the feminist and post-colonial themes present in Emecheta's work. Scholarly articles on both novels will offer varying perspectives and interpretations, enriching the analysis. This secondary data will help frame the research within existing academic discourse, providing a foundation for understanding how Emecheta's work has been received and critiqued over time. For example, research articles that focus on feminist literary criticism will be used to highlight how Emecheta portrays gender inequality, while studies on post-colonialism will provide context for the societal structures present in the novels.

The analysis of *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* will be guided by specific evaluation criteria. First, the study will examine how Emecheta portrays themes of gender oppression. This includes looking at how female characters are constrained by societal norms and expectations, and how they resist or comply with these limitations. The focus will be on the roles women are expected to play within the cultural frameworks of both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Next, the research will assess the themes of freedom and autonomy. Emecheta often depicts her characters struggling for

personal freedom, whether from oppressive cultural traditions, economic hardship, or male-dominated power structures. The study will explore how these struggles are depicted and the extent to which the characters achieve any form of liberation or independence. Cultural traditions will also be a key focus of the evaluation. Emecheta's novels are rich in depictions of African customs, such as the bride price in *The Bride Price*, which serves as both a cultural practice and a source of conflict. The research will assess how these traditions both support and limit the lives of the female characters, and how Emecheta critiques these practices through her narratives. The study will look at Emecheta's narrative style, focusing on how her personal experiences as an African woman and writer shape her storytelling. The use of symbolism, dialogue, and descriptive language will be evaluated to understand how Emecheta conveys complex themes of gender, culture, and power. Her style, which often blends straightforward narration with emotional depth, will be analyzed to uncover how it contributes to the overall impact of the novels.

#### Analysis of *The Bride Price*

*The Bride Price*, a novel by Buchi Emecheta, revolves around the life of Aku-nna, a young Nigerian girl navigating the challenges of growing up in a patriarchal society. After her father's death, Aku-nna and her family return to their village, where she is expected to conform to traditional customs, particularly regarding marriage. The novel's central conflict arises from the cultural practice of the bride price, a payment made by a groom to the bride's family, which symbolizes the transfer of authority over the woman. Aku-nna falls in love with Chike, a man from a lower social class, and their relationship leads to significant tension as it defies societal expectations. The story explores how Aku-nna's pursuit of love and independence clashes with the traditional values imposed upon her by her family and society.

- **Tradition vs Modernity;** One of the novel's central themes is the tension between cultural traditions and modern views on women's autonomy. The bride price system represents a deeply rooted custom in Nigerian society, dictating that a woman's value is determined by the price her family can extract in exchange for her marriage. Aku-nna's desire to marry for love instead of following these customs highlights the clash between traditional values and the growing influence of modern ideas about personal freedom and gender equality. Emecheta portrays this conflict as a struggle not only for Aku-nna but also for Nigerian society at large, which is caught between preserving its heritage and adapting to changing views on individual rights and gender roles.
- **Gender and Oppression;** The novel also explores the theme of gender oppression, illustrating how women are subjected to the control of male-dominated institutions. Aku-nna's experiences reflect the broader realities for women in her society, where decisions about marriage and family are often made by men. The bride price custom reinforces the notion that women are commodities to be bought and sold, depriving them of agency over their own lives. Aku-nna's attempt to resist these oppressive practices comes at a great cost. Her defiance of tradition through her relationship with Chike not only results in personal tragedy but also reveals the harsh consequences faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms. Emecheta's portrayal of Aku-nna's struggle highlights the limitations imposed on women by societal expectations and the devastating

impact of defying these cultural conventions.

- **Colonial Impact;** Colonialism also plays a significant role in shaping the societal structures in *The Bride Price*. The novel reflects how colonialism has influenced Nigerian traditions, particularly in the ways women are treated. While the bride price is a longstanding custom, the impact of colonial rule adds another layer of complexity to the lives of Nigerian women. Colonialism introduces Western ideas of modernity and individual rights, but it also reinforces existing hierarchies, further complicating gender relations. Aku-nna's story is set against the backdrop of a society grappling with the dual pressures of maintaining cultural traditions and adapting to colonial influences. Emecheta's depiction of this struggle shows how colonialism both challenges and reinforces traditional gender roles, complicating women's efforts to gain autonomy.

Aku-nna, the protagonist, embodies the tension between tradition and personal independence. At the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as a dutiful daughter who is aware of her expected role in society. As the story progresses, she begins to question these expectations, particularly regarding marriage and the bride price. Aku-nna's growth as a character is defined by her struggle to balance her desire for independence with the weight of societal pressures. Her relationship with Chike is central to this development, as it represents her attempt to break free from the constraints imposed on her by tradition. Despite her efforts to gain control over her life, Aku-nna ultimately faces tragedy. Her death at the end of the novel symbolizes the harsh realities faced by women who resist societal norms. Aku-nna's fate serves as a critique of the oppressive nature of patriarchal customs, showing how deeply

ingrained traditions can destroy those who challenge them. Her story reflects the broader challenges faced by women in traditional Nigerian society, where personal freedom is often sacrificed in the name of cultural preservation.

#### **Analysis of *Slave Girl***

*Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta tells the story of Ojebeta, a young Nigerian girl who is sold into slavery by her brother after the death of their parents. Set in colonial Nigeria, the novel portrays Ojebeta's journey as she is taken from her village and sold to a wealthy family. Over the years, she serves as a domestic slave, enduring both physical labor and the emotional trauma of her situation. Despite being enslaved, Ojebeta learns to adapt to her environment, finding small ways to assert her identity. Her enslavement significantly affects her perception of herself and her future. The novel follows her experiences of survival, struggle, and eventual return to her village, raising questions about freedom, identity, and the social hierarchies in colonial Nigerian society.

- **Slavery and Freedom;** One of the novel's central themes is the exploration of slavery and its impact on both the body and the mind. Emecheta examines how physical slavery traps Ojebeta in a life of servitude, but also deals with the psychological effects of her enslavement. Throughout the novel, Ojebeta is deprived of basic freedoms, including the ability to make decisions about her own life. Even when she is freed, her years in slavery have left lasting scars on her sense of self. The novel also suggests that freedom is not simply the absence of physical chains but involves emotional and psychological liberation. By portraying the long-term consequences of slavery on Ojebeta's psyche, Emecheta highlights how deeply rooted systems

of oppression can persist even after the individual is physically free.

- **Identity and Womanhood Slave Girl;** explores the intersection of identity and womanhood, particularly in the context of enslavement. Ojebeta's identity is shaped by her status as a woman in a patriarchal society, but her experience as a slave further complicates her understanding of herself. Her enslavement robs her of her autonomy, and she is constantly reminded of her lower status, not only because she is female but also because of her enslaved position. Emecheta uses Ojebeta's character to explore how women navigate the constraints placed upon them by society. In Ojebeta's case, her womanhood is defined by her roles as a servant and as someone whose worth is determined by her ability to serve others. This portrayal offers a broader critique of how African women are often devalued and their identities shaped by external forces, particularly in the context of colonialism and patriarchy.
- **Class and Gender Dynamics;** The novel also examines the intersection of class and gender, showing how these two forces work together to oppress women in both traditional and colonial Nigerian settings. As a slave, Ojebeta occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder, both because of her gender and her class status. Her experience reflects the double burden faced by women in colonial Nigeria, where class hierarchies were reinforced by gender expectations. The wealthy, upper-class women in the household where Ojebeta works are afforded privileges because of their class, but they are still constrained by gender roles. Meanwhile, Ojebeta, as both a woman and a slave, faces more extreme forms of

exploitation and powerlessness. Emecheta highlights how these intersecting forms of oppression keep women, especially those from lower classes, in a perpetual state of subjugation.

Ojebeta's character in *Slave Girl* embodies resilience and the complexity of human survival under oppression. Though she is sold into slavery as a child, Ojebeta shows remarkable adaptability in navigating her new life. Her resilience is seen in her ability to maintain a sense of self-worth despite her circumstances. She learns to assert herself in small ways, even within the confines of her enslaved status. Throughout the novel, Ojebeta's character undergoes significant growth, moving from a naive young girl to a woman who understands the harsh realities of her world. Her journey toward self-discovery is gradual, and even after gaining her freedom, she continues to grapple with the psychological impact of her enslavement. Ojebeta's story reflects the larger societal challenges faced by women in colonial Nigeria. Her character illustrates how women, especially those from lower social classes, were often left with little control over their lives. Despite her hardships, Ojebeta's ability to survive and reclaim some sense of freedom by the end of the novel speaks to the strength and resilience of women in similar situations. Emecheta does not present Ojebeta's freedom as a simple victory; instead, it is a complicated, bittersweet outcome that underscores the lasting effects of slavery and oppression on the individual.

### **Comparative Analysis of *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl***

Both *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta explore several common themes, particularly gender oppression, cultural traditions, the quest for freedom, and the lasting impact of colonialism. Emecheta's works focus heavily on how societal structures subjugate women, especially within the framework of

traditional Nigerian customs and colonial influence. In *The Bride Price*, gender oppression is manifested through the practice of the bride price, which reduces a woman's value to a financial transaction. Aku-nna, the protagonist, is subjected to familial and societal expectations regarding marriage, with little regard for her personal desires. In *Slave Girl*, Ojebeta experiences oppression through slavery, both as a child and as a woman. In both novels, women are seen as possessions, whether through marriage customs or enslavement, reinforcing the idea that they lack agency in shaping their futures. The quest for freedom is also a major theme in both novels. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna seeks freedom from traditional practices by choosing to marry for love, which ultimately leads to her downfall. Her struggle highlights the difficulties of escaping entrenched customs. In contrast, *Slave Girl* centers around Ojebeta's literal enslavement, and her journey toward physical freedom. Her escape from slavery reflects the broader desire for personal autonomy. In both stories, freedom is not only physical but also psychological, as both characters strive to break free from societal constraints. Colonialism plays a critical role in both novels. The colonial presence in Nigeria impacts traditional practices, but also reinforces oppressive systems. In *The Bride Price*, colonial influence is present in the conflict between traditional Nigerian values and Western ideas of individuality and freedom. In *Slave Girl*, colonialism exacerbates existing hierarchies, with slavery serving as a symbol of the broader domination imposed by colonial rule. Emecheta portrays how colonialism complicates gender dynamics, further limiting women's opportunities for independence and self-empowerment.

While *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* share thematic similarities, they diverge in their portrayal of female agency. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna's agency is largely centered on her ability to resist societal expectations. Her decision to marry for love is a direct defiance of

the traditional practice of the bride price. Her resistance is met with tragic consequences, as her death signifies the power of societal norms over individual desires. The novel suggests that female agency in traditional society is severely restricted, and those who challenge these norms may face harsh repercussions. In contrast, *Slave Girl* emphasizes the literal and metaphorical enslavement of women. Ojebeta's journey is less about defying cultural traditions and more about surviving within the oppressive structures of slavery. Her path to freedom is gradual and more about reclaiming her humanity than defying specific customs. While Ojebeta's character also shows resilience, her story lacks the overt defiance seen in *The Bride Price*. Her eventual freedom is bittersweet, as it comes after years of exploitation and psychological trauma. Thus, while both characters seek autonomy, the nature of their struggles differs: Aku-nna's defiance contrasts with Ojebeta's endurance and eventual survival.

Emecheta's use of different cultural and historical contexts in *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl* allows her to present nuanced perspectives on womanhood and societal expectations. *The Bride Price* is set in a traditional Nigerian society, where cultural practices such as the bride price play a central role in determining a woman's fate. The novel examines how these customs shape women's lives and limit their agency. Aku-nna's story is deeply rooted in these traditional structures, which are portrayed as both oppressive and inescapable. The cultural context of the bride price symbolizes the broader system of control exerted over women's bodies and choices. On the other hand, *Slave Girl* is set against the backdrop of colonial Nigeria, where both indigenous traditions and colonial systems of oppression coexist. Ojebeta's enslavement represents a form of double oppression: she is subjugated by her role as a woman in Nigerian society and by the broader system of slavery reinforced by colonial rule. The historical context of *Slave Girl* allows Emecheta to explore the complex intersections

of class, race, and gender. The novel highlights how colonialism intensified existing forms of oppression, particularly for women, who were marginalized within both traditional and colonial structures.

### Emecheta's Narrative Style

Buchi Emecheta's narrative style is marked by her commitment to giving a voice to the oppressed, particularly marginalized women. Her novels often center on the experiences of women who face systemic oppression, whether through cultural traditions, gender roles, or colonialism. Emecheta writes with empathy and authenticity, allowing her characters to express their struggles in a way that feels deeply personal and relatable. Her narrative voice captures the emotional and psychological complexity of her characters, making their experiences of suffering, resistance, and resilience palpable to the reader. Emecheta's characters, like Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* and Ojebeta in *Slave Girl*, reflect the lives of countless women who endure harsh realities in traditional and colonial societies. By focusing on their perspectives, Emecheta sheds light on the hidden struggles of women, often ignored in broader societal narratives. She writes from a feminist standpoint, exposing the injustices that women face, while also celebrating their strength and resilience. The author's ability to portray her characters' inner worlds—their fears, hopes, and dreams—gives them a sense of agency and humanity, even when they are subjected to oppressive forces. This empathetic storytelling not only creates a strong connection between the reader and the characters but also underscores the importance of hearing the voices of those who are often silenced. Emecheta's use of accessible language and straightforward narrative structure further reinforces her commitment to giving a voice to the oppressed. She avoids overly complicated vocabulary or convoluted sentence structures, allowing her stories to be understood by a wide audience, including those whose experiences

may mirror those of her characters. This simplicity in style ensures that the emotional depth and social critiques in her work are not lost in literary artifice, but instead remain clear and impactful.

Emecheta is known for her use of realism to portray societal issues, particularly those related to gender, class, and colonialism. Her novels often depict the harsh realities faced by her characters in a way that is grounded in real-world experiences. Through her detailed descriptions of daily life, cultural customs, and the socio-political landscape, Emecheta creates a vivid picture of the world in which her characters live. This realistic approach allows readers to fully engage with the struggles of her protagonists, making the societal critiques embedded in her stories even more powerful. For instance, in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta's portrayal of the traditional practice of paying a bride price is grounded in the reality of Nigerian culture. She does not shy away from showing the pain and conflict that this custom can cause, particularly for women like Aku-nna, who are caught between personal desires and societal expectations. The realism in her depiction of the bride price system helps readers understand the complex dynamics of gender oppression in Nigerian society. In *Slave Girl*, Emecheta paints a realistic portrait of the horrors of slavery and its lasting impact on those who experience it. Ojebeta's journey is not romanticized, but instead shown in all its brutality and hardship, making her eventual freedom all the more meaningful. In addition to realism, Emecheta also uses symbolism to enhance the readers' understanding of key themes like freedom and oppression. In *The Bride Price*, the bride price itself becomes a symbol of the control that society exerts over women's bodies and lives. It represents the transactional nature of marriage in traditional Nigerian society, where women are seen as property to be bought and sold. Aku-nna's refusal to accept this symbol of her oppression is a powerful act of defiance, even though it ultimately leads to her tragic fate. In

*Slave Girl*, the chains of slavery serve as both a literal and metaphorical symbol of oppression. Ojebeta's enslavement represents the physical bondage that she endures, but it also symbolizes the psychological chains that bind her even after she is freed. The novel suggests that true freedom is not just the absence of physical constraints, but also the ability to reclaim one's identity and autonomy. Through this symbolic lens, Emecheta explores the long-lasting effects of both slavery and colonialism on individuals and societies.

### Conclusion

In both *The Bride Price* and *Slave Girl*, Buchi Emecheta presents powerful themes such as gender oppression, the struggle for freedom, and the impact of colonialism on Nigerian society. Through character-driven narratives, she explores the challenges women face in navigating traditional customs and colonial influences. Aku-nna's resistance to the bride price tradition in *The Bride Price* reflects the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, while Ojebeta's journey in *Slave Girl* illustrates the deep psychological and physical effects of slavery. Both characters symbolize the resilience of women in oppressive environments, offering readers insight into the complexities of female agency in Africa. Emecheta's portrayal of women's experiences in these novels challenges patriarchal norms by giving voice to marginalized women. Her works bring African feminist perspectives into the broader discourse of literature, illustrating how gender, tradition, and colonialism intersect to shape women's lives. By depicting women as complex individuals who resist or adapt to their circumstances, Emecheta questions traditional gender roles and presents alternative narratives where women are not just victims, but active participants in their own stories. Her contributions have helped elevate African women's experiences in literature, encouraging deeper consideration of feminist issues within African contexts. Future studies could further

explore Emecheta's other works to examine recurring themes, particularly regarding gender and colonialism. A comparative analysis of Emecheta's influence on contemporary African writers would offer valuable insights into how her feminist perspective has shaped modern African literature. This could also include a study of how Emecheta's narratives continue to resonate with readers today, particularly in relation to ongoing discussions about gender equality and social justice in African societies.

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