



## The Loss of Childhood among Black Girls in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*

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### Abstract

Childhood is an essential stage in human life and forms the basis of adulthood. The experiences of early life, whether nurturing or traumatic, leave a lasting effect on the individual. Yet a secure and happy childhood remains a privilege in societies shaped by social and political divisions. A child marginalized by gender, race, and class faces neglect, exclusion, and emotional trauma. In many African societies, male children receive celebration and social acceptance, while female children face mistreatment, abuse, and abandonment within traditions structured for male advantage. Gender inequality, patriarchy, and spiritual and religious beliefs make the lives of young girls unbearable. This article examines the portrayal of the lost childhood of women characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977) within the colonial Nigerian context. It studies the physical and emotional neglect, as well as the traumatic childhood experiences, that force Black women to struggle for survival into adulthood.

**Keywords:** Childhood, Buchi Emecheta, Girl Child, Black Women, Oppression.

### Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a renowned Nigerian writer and one of the first Black women writers from Africa to articulate the collective experiences of Black women. Through her novels, she exposes the gender disparities that privilege men in the Igbo community of Nigeria. She has written more than twelve novels that represent Nigerian Black women from a female point of view. Her work addresses African womanhood, sexual discrimination, motherhood, tradition and modernity, cultural and social oppression, slavery, and patriarchy as they affect Nigerian women. In her representation of subaltern reality, Emecheta gives sustained attention to women's hardship in a male-dominated African world. She presents Black women as strong-willed, assertive, independent, and engaged in the search for the identity denied to them from childhood. In *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977), Emecheta examines the loss of innocence and the traumatic experiences of childhood alongside slavery, motherhood, marriage, and the force of African traditions in a changing world.

### Discussion

*The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl* similarly depict protagonists who lose their parents at a young age and suffer the oppressive consequences of being girl children in the Nigerian Igbo community. Helen Chukwuma (1989), in "Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta," argues that Emecheta's novels have "filled the gaping gender gap between male and female characterization and shown the other side of the coin." Chukwuma further identifies "Emecheta's feminism as seen in her portrayal of female characters from the slave girl prototype to the mother and single fulfilled woman" (2).

In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta introduces Aku-nna, a thirteen-year-old girl, as small and pale brown, “like milk chocolate.” “Her eyes were large like her father’s; they always glow when she was happy and excited and when she was sad, the glimmer disappeared” (TBP 9). Aku-nna lacks emotional support from her mother, Ma Blackie, who criticizes and body-shames her for not gaining weight. She calls her daughter an *ogbanje*, meaning “living dead” (TBP 9). Aku-nna loves her father more than her mother. Her father, Ezekiel Odi, names her Aku-nna, which means “father’s wealth,” because the only consolation he expects from her is the bride price she will one day bring. That naming reveals how the girl’s value is fixed in advance by social custom. Her life is measured not in terms of desire or freedom but in terms of family expectation and communal practice.

At the age of thirteen, Aku-nna determines not to disappoint her father. She dreams of marrying a rich man who would receive her father’s approval and offer an expensive bride price (TBP 10). After Ma Blackie leaves for treatment for childlessness, Aku-nna assumes her mother’s duties at home. She cooks three meals a day and takes care of her brother and father. Emecheta thus shows how girlhood is burdened with labour at an early age. Igbo culture, as Emecheta represents it, rests on the belief that only male children can secure a family’s future. This belief reveals the depth of patriarchal tradition. Bell Hooks (2014) describes patriarchy as: “...A political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (17).

In Igbo society, males receive more privilege and respect than females. Men dominate the structure of society, while women, from childhood onward, are taught to accept socially assigned roles without resistance. This order survives through the Igbo system of socialization in which mothers themselves participate by raising daughters according to inherited customs and traditions. Emecheta returns to this pattern in many of her novels. Since Aku-nna’s parents had wished for a boy when she was born, she grows up as an unwanted child within her own family. This cultural attitude produces a deep psychological alienation from both family and society (Coulibaly 203). Emecheta presents Aku-nna as a perceptive observer who questions the validity of the treatment given to Igbo women: “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 much too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump little girl for a daughter. Aku-nna would just not put on weight, and this made her look as if she was being starved, but she simply had not the kind of appetite that her brother Nna-nndo had. And was that not the end of the disgrace that she was showing to her family...” (TBP 3)

Ezekiel is a good provider and a kind husband to Ma Blackie. He buys dresses, shows affection to Aku-nna, and sends her to school. After his death, Aku-nna is heartbroken because the one person who cared for her is gone. She cries: “Who will be kind to me now? Who will send me to school? Who will feed me? Who will be a good husband to my mother? . . . Come back, Mother! You have lost the father of your children . . .” (TBP 13). After his death, Ma Blackie and her children are inherited by Aku-nna’s uncle in Ibuza. In Igbo society, having only a girl child is treated as bad luck and social failure. Boys, by contrast, are privileged as future masters of society, while women are pushed into positions of powerlessness. Aku-nna’s mother does not care for her in the way Ezekiel did. The narrator states: “When you have lost your father, you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless” (TBP 25). These lines express the pain of a lost child in need of parental care. Ma Blackie treats Aku-nna harshly and without sympathy.

Emecheta thus presents the oppression of the girl child through both social custom and maternal behaviour. Nkere-Uwem (1997) defines oppression as “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” (3). The home environment greatly affects girls, who may develop low self-esteem, especially when neglected by the mother (Endurance 163). Aku-nna is forgotten by Ma Blackie after the latter bears children with her new husband. At that point, Aku-nna realizes that she has neither a father nor a mother (Nalgire 11).

Emecheta also depicts the horrifying consequences of puberty for a girl child within traditional practice. Young men visit girls’ homes and sexually harass them as though it were harmless sport. In one such incident, Aku-nna is molested by Okoboshi, her intended husband. Instead of protecting her, her mother shames and abuses her verbally. This episode shows both maternal failure and the dreadful isolation of a young girl abandoned in distress. Aku-nna pleads: “Oh ... Mother, Aku-nna begged, please don’t say anything. Okoboshi was hurting me, he was., He was wicked- Oh Mother, please listen” (TBP 124). Flora Nwapa, the Black feminist critic, observes that “the oppression of the woman starts in the home” (James 113). The mother, who belongs to the same gender as the daughter, becomes the oppressor. This reveals the extent to which patriarchy elevates men and distorts the emotional life of the girl child, producing psychological torment (Endurance 164).

Kidnapping is another practice represented in Igbo culture. If a man cannot afford the bride price, he may cut the hair of the girl he wishes to marry, and she becomes his for life. Aku-nna becomes one of the victims of this custom at the age of fifteen. Okoboshi, cruel and possessive, kidnaps her because she loves Chike, the son of a former slave. Marriage into slave descent is forbidden in Ibuza. Aku-nna thinks: "So this was to be the end of her dreams. After everything, she was nothing but a common native girl kidnapped into being a bride" (TBP 126). After the kidnapping, she endures both physical and mental abuse from Okoboshi and his mother. She finally escapes through intelligence and presence of mind when she lies that she is not a virgin. Emecheta suggests that Aku-nna's bravery and determination allow her to survive the repeated violence she endures from childhood.

In *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta offers another portrait of damaged childhood through Ogbanje Ojebeta, a little girl sold into slavery by her brother. The novel is set in colonial Nigeria in the early twentieth century. Ojebeta is born after her parents have lost several daughters at childbirth, and they fear that she too will die. "Oh, dear Umeadi, what have you done again? You have a daughter, and you know daughters never stay with you" (TSG 17). She is weak and frail, and the people of Ibuza believe that she is a visitor from the land of the dead. Emecheta records the superstitious beliefs surrounding the child. Ojebeta must wear a charm with metal bells to frighten away the evil companions from the spirit world, though she is only a helpless newborn. The local doctor advises her father, Okwuekwu, to travel to the fearful kingdom of Idu to obtain this charm for his precious daughter. He does so, and "No one knew how he survived the journey" (TSG 21).

Unlike Aku-nna, Ojebeta is cherished and protected by her parents and by the people of Eke market. She receives a special tattoo for protection from evil and grows securely into girlhood (TSG 21). She needs the warmth of her mother while sleeping, and her father's love makes her feel safe. Yet this secure childhood ends suddenly when both parents die of influenza. Ojebeta is six years old when she begins the harsh path of orphanhood. After her elder brother leaves in search of work in the city, her second brother, indolent and money-minded, becomes responsible for her.

Financial hardship makes him believe that the only way to fund his coming-of-age celebration is to sell his little sister into domestic slavery. Emecheta here presents the shocking betrayal of a child by the very brother who ought to protect her. Rather than work for money, Okolie chooses to rid himself of responsibility by exchanging Ojebeta for eight pounds from Ma Palagada:

"Okolie's heart sank. Should he or should he not go ahead with his plans? But who wanted to be saddled with a little seven-year-old sister...No let her go to Ma Palagada, and he would collect some money from her. Ogbanje Ojebeta's fate was decided. She must be sold" (TSG 36).

Emecheta describes with great pathos the state of Ojebeta after this betrayal. Okolie's decision wounds her deeply and leaves lasting psychological scars. She cannot understand how her own brother could sell her. Emecheta writes of Ogbanje as "small, helpless, terrified, a little girl festooned with bells and cowrie shells, just like a slave prepared for sacrifice" (TSG 59). Ojebeta runs through the market crying to a woman she mistakes for her mother: "Save me, Mother, for now I am lost" (TSG 59). In this moment, Emecheta reveals the brutal passage from belonging to homelessness, from identity to dispossession. Both Aku-nna and Ojebeta struggle for selfhood in a world shaped by unequal power.

Ma Palagada is a wealthy woman who owns four slave girls and two male slaves who work in her cloth shop. Emecheta shows how Black women in Ibuza are degraded by a social order that allows them to be sold like objects. Domestic slavery requires them to labour without compensation and exposes them to physical punishment and exploitation. Once Ojebeta arrives in Onitsha, she begins work for the Palagadas and becomes subject to the discipline of that household. She suffers insults, verbal abuse, and punishment whenever Ma Palagada or the others are displeased. The psychological turmoil she undergoes reveals her sense of herself as outsider and marginal figure, both in her own family and in the Palagada household.

Emecheta sharply contrasts this life with Ojebeta's earlier happiness in her parents' home. Elaine Showalter states that in patriarchal societies women and female children are undervalued, whereas the sale of a son would be considered a serious violation of patriarchal culture (146). Emecheta also exposes the dehumanization and sexual exploitation of girl children in Ma Palagada's house. As a slave, Ojebeta acquires a new identity that leaves her vulnerable to exploitation, sexual harassment, physical brutality, and psychological trauma (Coulibaly 207).

Chiago, one of the slave girls, suffers sexual assault at the hands of Pa Palagada. She accepts everything in silence and never openly speaks of her experience. After Ma Palagada's death, the girls face an uncertain future. Chiago, the eldest among them, marries Pa Palagada and later bears him four sons. Despite the hardship, she accepts her fate with resignation. Another slave girl, Amanna, was born a twin and neglected because of the superstition that twins bring bad luck. Her mother secretly nurses her for some time, but eventually the child must be sold. In doing so, the mother hopes only that her daughter may survive elsewhere.

Yet Emecheta does not portray every female relation in identical terms. Ojebeta forms strong bonds with the other slave girls, and Ma Palagada at times acts as a foster mother. This stands in sharp contrast to Aku-nna's story. Aku-nna has a mother but receives little maternal care, whereas Ojebeta loses her mother yet finds a partial mother-figure in the world of slavery. Gariagan Gift states: "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). Emecheta presents Ma Palagada as a woman of authority and practical strength. She allows her slaves to learn reading and writing, gives them education, and teaches them useful skills. Though still a slave owner, she treats the girls with a degree of care and discipline that helps them survive in a patriarchal world. Among them, Ojebeta stands out as one of the most diligent members of the household.

Buchi Emecheta thus depicts with care the conditions under which Black women lose childhood in Igbo society. Her novels expose the injustice Black women suffer through cultural, racial, and gender discrimination. Their lives are shaped by gender-based violence, unequal access to education and social opportunity, and restrictions on personal freedom. Emecheta shows that the oppression of women in the name of culture and tradition pushes them into subordinate positions within society. By examining un-lived or damaged childhood, she deepens the reader's understanding of the women in her fiction.

## Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta brings out the sufferings and obstacles of Black women who lose childhood to patriarchy. They suffer neglect, abandonment, physical abuse, and psychological torment from an early age. Emecheta portrays the childhood of Black women as deeply marked by emotional deprivation and lack of freedom. These girls lack the power to define themselves, pursue desire, or claim social acceptance. *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977) both show that cultural norms and slavery begin to shape the girl child from birth in the Igbo community. Yet the hardships endured by Aku-nna and Ojebeta also produce courage and self-possession. As the male-centred Nigerian community fails to provide a secure home for its daughters, these girls struggle toward resilience and a better life. Emecheta's novels reveal both the violence that destroys childhood and the strength through which Black women continue to survive.

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