

Owned Bodies and Resistant Selves: Patriarchy, Bride Price, and Female Agency in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl* examine the lives of young Igbo women whose bodies, labour, sexuality, and futures are placed under systems of male authority, kinship control, and economic exchange. While both novels depict female suffering within traditional and colonial Nigerian society, they also reveal how women develop forms of consciousness and resistance within deeply restrictive social worlds. This paper studies the representation of female ownership and agency in the two novels. It argues that Emecheta exposes patriarchy not merely as male dominance but as a social order sustained through family, marriage, custom, inheritance, slavery, and women's own participation in oppressive structures. Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* becomes valuable to her family because of the bride price her marriage can bring, while Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl* is literally sold into domestic slavery by her brother. In both cases, the girl child is treated as transferable property. Yet Emecheta does not present her female characters as passive victims alone. Aku-nna's love for Chike and her refusal to submit inwardly to Okoboshi show a fragile but important assertion of choice. Ojebeta's survival in Ma Palagada's household reveals the complex relation between bondage, adaptation, and self-awakening. The paper further examines the role of mothers, female guardians, and other women in reproducing patriarchy. Through these two novels, Emecheta shows that female identity in Igbo society is produced through struggle: between ownership and selfhood, obedience and desire, survival and freedom.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, patriarchy, female agency, bride price, slavery, Igbo society

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta occupies an important place in African women's writing because she writes from within the intimate pressures of female life. Her fiction does not treat patriarchy as an abstract idea. It shows patriarchy inside the house, inside marriage, inside kinship, inside motherhood, inside the market, and inside the body of the girl child. Her women are not oppressed only by distant institutions. They are controlled by fathers, brothers, husbands, mothers, uncles, in-laws, customs, economic need, and social fear. This makes her novels powerful because they show how domination becomes ordinary. It is repeated as advice, ritual, family duty, marriage arrangement, religious belief, and social honour.

The Bride Price and *The Slave Girl* are especially significant because both novels place young female characters at the centre of social exchange. Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* is not merely a daughter. Her name itself links her to her father's wealth. She is imagined as a future source of bride price. Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl* is sold by her brother after the death of their parents. In one novel, the girl is turned into marriage value; in the other, she is turned into slave value. The difference between bride and slave seems large on the surface. Yet Emecheta's fiction shows that both positions are connected by a deeper logic: the female body becomes something that others can claim, negotiate, transfer, and profit from.

The present paper examines how Emecheta represents ownership and resistance in these two novels. The focus is not only on suffering, though suffering is central to both texts. The paper studies how female characters are made into property, how patriarchal customs regulate their choices, and how they develop limited but meaningful forms of agency. Emecheta's women often live inside narrow spaces, but they are not empty figures. They observe, calculate, endure, desire, and sometimes rebel. Their resistance may not always lead to freedom in a full political sense, but it reveals the presence of selfhood within structures designed to suppress it.

The paper also argues that Emecheta's critique of patriarchy is complex because she does not present oppression as the work of men alone. Women also participate in the system. Mothers train daughters to accept patriarchal rules. Female elders defend customs that injure younger women. Women with authority may reproduce the same forms of control that once wounded them. This makes the novels socially sharp. Emecheta sees patriarchy as a system, not simply as a group of cruel men. It survives because the whole community, including women, is trained to protect it.

The study is divided into six sections. The first section examines the patriarchal economy of the female body in Igbo society. The second discusses Aku-nna's position in *The Bride Price* as daughter, future bride, and object of family value. The third examines Ojebeta's sale and servitude in *The Slave Girl*. The fourth considers women's role in sustaining patriarchal authority. The fifth studies female agency in the two novels. The sixth discusses education, labour, and self-awareness as fragile routes toward identity. The conclusion brings together Emecheta's larger vision of female struggle.

The Patriarchal Economy of the Female Body

In Emecheta's fiction, the female body is surrounded by social meanings before the woman can define herself. A girl is born into a system that decides her value according to marriage, fertility, obedience, domestic labour, and male approval. Her body is watched because it will later become useful to the family and the community. She is expected to grow into a bride, wife, mother, worker, and bearer of children. Her private life is never fully private. It is claimed by custom.

This is very clear in *The Bride Price*. Aku-nna's name means "father's wealth." Her identity is tied to the expectation that her marriage will bring bride price to her father's family. The name is tender and oppressive at the same time. It suggests affection, but it also turns the daughter into value. She is loved partly because she can be exchanged. Her future is imagined through what she can bring to others. Her body becomes an investment, and marriage becomes the moment when that investment is collected.

Bride price in the novel is not presented as a simple cultural practice. Emecheta shows its emotional and psychological consequences. It affects how Aku-nna is seen by others and how she sees herself. She grows up knowing that her family expects economic and social benefit from her marriage. This creates a deep conflict. She wants love, education, and choice, but the community reads her through bride price. Her womanhood is placed inside a transaction.

In *The Slave Girl*, the logic of ownership is even more direct. Ojebeta is sold by her brother after the death of her parents. The sale transforms her from sister into commodity. Her brother does not merely abandon her; he converts her into money. This act reveals the cruelty of a society in which a girl child can be treated as a burden and then disposed of through sale. The family, which should protect her, becomes the first site of betrayal.

Yet Emecheta does not present these acts as isolated personal failures. Aku-nna's commodification and Ojebeta's sale are supported by wider beliefs about gender. Boys are linked with continuity, inheritance, authority, and family survival. Girls are linked with marriage, domestic work, and exchange. A son belongs to the family line; a daughter is often imagined as someone who will leave. This difference gives male children greater social security. Female children become more vulnerable because their value is measured through usefulness to others.

The female body in these novels is also linked to sexuality and control. A girl's puberty becomes a public matter. Her virginity, marriageability, and sexual conduct are watched by the community. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna's developing body attracts male attention and social danger. Her choice of Chike becomes unacceptable because he belongs to a slave-descended family. Thus, even love is controlled by caste-like social boundaries. The community claims the right to decide which male body may be joined to which female body.

Emecheta's achievement lies in showing how patriarchy turns culture into ownership. Customs appear respectable because they are old and collective. But beneath their social acceptance lies the repeated denial of female choice. The girl child is spoken for before she speaks for herself. She is given a name, value, role, and destination. Her struggle begins when she recognizes that these imposed meanings are not the whole of her being.

Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*: Daughter, Bride, and Object of Value

Aku-nna's life in *The Bride Price* is shaped by loss, expectation, and social control. Her father's death changes her life completely. While he is alive, she receives some affection and educational support. After his death, she becomes more exposed to the power of relatives and custom. Her mother, Ma Blackie, and her brother move to Ibuza, where traditional structures become stronger and more suffocating.

Aku-nna's position as a girl child is insecure from the beginning. She is physically delicate, and her thin body becomes a matter of criticism. Her mother's comments about her body reveal how girls are judged even inside the home. A girl's body is not left alone. It is measured against social expectations of health, beauty, fertility, and marriageability. Aku-nna's smallness is read as failure. Her body becomes a public text on which others write disappointment.

Her father's naming of her as wealth is one of the most important symbolic acts in the novel. It places affection and economy together. He loves her, but he also sees her future bride price as consolation. This does not make him a villain. Rather, it shows how deeply patriarchal thinking enters ordinary parental feeling. Even a kind father may imagine his daughter through marriage value. Emecheta's criticism works through this complexity.

Aku-nna's desire for education marks one of her first forms of selfhood. School gives her a space beyond domestic labour and marriage preparation. It opens a different future. But education does not free her from social control. The community still expects her to marry properly and bring honour and bride price. Her education makes her more aware, yet awareness increases her suffering because she can see the injustice more clearly.

Her love for Chike is central to the novel because it challenges the community's rules. Chike is educated, gentle, and personally worthy, but his family background makes him unacceptable. He is marked by slave descent. Through this love relationship, Emecheta exposes the contradictions of a society that speaks of honour while preserving inherited stigma. Aku-nna's choice is condemned not because Chike is cruel or irresponsible, but because custom classifies him as unsuitable.

The tragedy of Aku-nna lies in the conflict between personal desire and communal ownership. She wants to choose Chike, but her family and society claim authority over her marriage. Okoboshi's kidnapping of Aku-nna shows the violence behind the marriage system. Marriage is not always a sacred union in the novel. It can become capture. It can become possession. The man's claim is supported by custom, while the girl's refusal is treated as disobedience.

Aku-nna's resistance is quiet but significant. She does not possess social power, physical strength, or institutional support. Yet she thinks, feels, judges, and chooses. Her love for Chike is a form of self-assertion because it places her own desire against collective pressure. Her escape from Okoboshi also shows intelligence and courage. She uses the community's obsession with virginity to protect herself. This act reveals her ability to understand the rules and turn them, briefly, to her advantage.

Still, Emecheta does not romanticize resistance. Aku-nna's struggle is costly. The novel suggests that a woman's assertion of choice can lead to isolation, fear, and death when the surrounding society refuses to recognize her humanity. The bride price becomes more than a marriage custom. It becomes a symbol of the community's refusal to let a woman belong to herself.

Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl*: Sale, Servitude, and Survival

Ojebeta's story in *The Slave Girl* begins with parental love and protection, but this security is destroyed by death and betrayal. Unlike Aku-nna, Ojebeta is deeply cherished by her parents in her earliest years. Her birth is surrounded by fear because earlier female children have died. She is treated as an ogbanje child, connected to spiritual anxiety and repeated loss. Charms, rituals, and protective acts surround her. These practices show the mixture of love and superstition in her community.

The death of her parents leaves Ojebeta exposed. Without parental protection, her status changes rapidly. Her brother Okolie sells her to Ma Palagada. This act is one of the most painful moments in the novel because it turns kinship into commerce. A brother who should guard his sister becomes the agent of her enslavement. His decision is shaped by greed, fear of responsibility, and social indifference to the girl child.

The sale of Ojebeta shows that slavery is not only an economic institution but also a psychological wound. She loses home, family, name security, and childhood continuity. The movement from her village to Ma Palagada's household marks a passage from belonging to possession. She becomes part of another person's property. Her labour, time, and body are controlled by others.

Ma Palagada's household is complex. It is a place of bondage, but it is also a place where Ojebeta learns skills, forms relationships, and survives. Emecheta refuses a simple picture. Ma Palagada is a slave owner, yet she is also a strong woman who manages trade, commands authority, and provides a kind of structure for the girls under her control. This complexity is important because Emecheta is interested in how women can hold power within oppressive systems and still reproduce oppression.

Ojebeta's life as a slave girl reveals the connection between gender and labour. She works, serves, learns, obeys, and adapts. Her labour benefits her owners. Like many female characters in Emecheta's fiction, she is trained to be useful. Domestic slavery prepares girls for future forms of domestic and marital service. The slave girl and the wife are not identical, but the novel suggests uncomfortable continuities between them. Both may be expected to obey, serve, reproduce, and submit.

The other slave girls in Ma Palagada's household widen the novel's social vision. Their stories show different forms of female dispossession. Some are sold because of superstition, poverty, or family rejection. Some experience sexual vulnerability. Some adapt to their condition because survival requires acceptance. Through them, Emecheta presents slavery as a gendered world. The female slave is exposed not only to labour exploitation but also to sexual and emotional insecurity.

Ojebeta's survival depends on adaptation. She learns the rules of the household. She becomes useful. She develops bonds with other girls. She watches Ma Palagada's authority. She absorbs the lessons of trade and discipline. This survival should not be mistaken for freedom. But it shows that the enslaved girl is not mentally empty. She is constantly reading her world and learning how to live within it.

By the end of the novel, Ojebeta's movement toward marriage raises a difficult question. Has she gained freedom, or has she moved from one form of ownership to another? Emecheta leaves the reader with this tension. Marriage may seem to offer social legitimacy, but it can also repeat the structure of possession. The slave girl may become a wife without fully becoming self-owned. This is one of Emecheta's strongest insights: patriarchy can change its form while preserving its power.

Women as Agents and Victims of Patriarchy

One of the most striking features of Emecheta's fiction is her portrayal of women who both suffer under patriarchy and help sustain it. This does not mean that women are blamed equally for their oppression. Rather, Emecheta shows how deeply social systems train women to protect the very customs that injure them. Patriarchy survives because it becomes part of women's duties, fears, ambitions, and ideas of respectability.

Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price* is a painful example. As Aku-nna's mother, she could have been a source of emotional protection. Instead, she often criticizes and neglects her daughter. Her harshness is shaped by her own insecurity in a male-centred world. As a woman, she has limited authority. Her value is tied to marriage, fertility, and male approval. She passes these pressures down to her daughter. In doing so, she becomes both victim and enforcer.

Her treatment of Aku-nna shows how oppression can begin inside the home. The mother-daughter relationship, which could be a space of comfort, becomes a site of discipline. Aku-nna is taught to understand herself through social expectations. Her body is criticized, her desire is restricted, and her future is negotiated by others. Ma Blackie's failure is therefore personal and social at the same time.

In *The Slave Girl*, Ma Palagada is even more complicated. She is a woman of authority in a patriarchal society. She owns property, manages business, and commands male and female workers. Her strength challenges the idea that women in Emecheta's world are always powerless. Yet her power rests partly on the ownership of other vulnerable girls. She has gained authority within the system, but she does not dismantle the system. She benefits from it.

This creates a difficult moral picture. Ma Palagada may feed, train, and protect the girls in some ways, but she also owns them. Her household shows how women's power can become oppressive when it imitates patriarchal possession. Emecheta does not deny Ma Palagada's intelligence or strength. But she asks whether female power is liberating when it depends on the subordination of other women.

The other women in the novels also reveal the pressures of custom. Female elders, mothers, and community women often defend marriage rules, sexual codes, and caste boundaries. They may shame girls who disobey. They may value sons over daughters. They may accept bride price as natural. These actions show how patriarchy becomes communal. It is spoken in women's voices as well as men's.

Bell hooks defines patriarchy as a political and social system that gives males the right to dominate those considered weak. This definition helps explain Emecheta's world, but Emecheta adds another layer. Patriarchy also teaches the dominated to participate in domination. Women who have been wounded by the system may wound younger women because they believe survival depends on obedience.

Emecheta's criticism is therefore not sentimental. She does not present women as naturally pure or united. Women can love, betray, protect, exploit, comfort, and discipline one another. This complexity gives her fiction its force. The struggle for female selfhood must face not only male authority but also the internalized customs carried by women themselves.

Female Agency within Restriction

Agency in Emecheta's novels does not always appear as open rebellion. Her female characters rarely have the social freedom to reject the system completely. Instead, agency often appears in small acts: choosing whom to love, escaping danger, learning skills, forming bonds, preserving memory, or refusing inward surrender. These acts may seem limited, but they matter because they reveal the self's refusal to disappear.

Aku-nna's agency is tied to desire and moral choice. Her love for Chike is not merely romantic. It is a decision to value personal feeling over inherited prejudice. By loving Chike, she challenges the caste boundary that marks him as the descendant of slaves. She recognizes his humanity against the community's classification. This recognition is itself a form of resistance.

Her escape from Okoboshi also shows practical intelligence. She understands the social value placed on virginity and uses that knowledge to protect herself. This is not a simple victory. It arises from a cruel system that makes a girl's body the site of honour. Yet within that system, Aku-nna finds a way to act. Emecheta shows that oppressed women may use the tools of oppression to create temporary safety.

Ojebeta's agency is different. She does not rebel dramatically after being sold. Her resistance lies in survival, adaptation, memory, and gradual self-awareness. She learns to live in Ma Palagada's household without fully losing herself. She forms relationships with other girls. She becomes skilled and observant. Her selfhood grows slowly within bondage.

Some readers may ask whether adaptation is true agency. Emecheta's answer seems careful. Adaptation is not freedom, but for a powerless girl it may be the first condition of survival. Ojebeta cannot simply walk away from slavery. She must live within it, learn its rules, and preserve enough of herself to continue. This kind of agency is quiet, but it is not meaningless.

Emecheta also links agency with consciousness. Her female characters begin to understand the systems around them. Aku-nna sees the unfairness of caste and forced marriage. Ojebeta learns the relation between money, ownership, gender, and power. Their awareness does not always save them, but it changes the reader's understanding of them. They are not merely acted upon. They think within their suffering.

This is one reason Emecheta's fiction remains important. She does not offer easy liberation. Many of her women remain trapped or only partly free. But she gives them inward life. She shows their intelligence, fear, longing, judgment, and courage. In societies that treat women as property, the act of representing women's inner lives becomes politically significant.

Education, Labour, and the Search for Selfhood

Education plays an important role in both novels, though in different ways. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna's schooling opens the possibility of another life. It connects her to modernity, literacy, and personal aspiration. Her relationship with Chike also grows in relation to education. The classroom becomes a space where she can imagine herself beyond marriage exchange.

Yet education remains fragile because custom has stronger control over her body and future. Schooling may develop her mind, but it cannot fully protect her from forced marriage, kidnapping, or communal pressure. This reveals one of Emecheta's important concerns: education alone cannot liberate women if social structures remain unchanged. A girl may learn to think differently, but society may still deny her the right to live differently.

In *The Slave Girl*, education is linked to labour and training. Ma Palagada allows the girls to learn useful skills. This can be seen as empowering, but it is also practical training for service. The girls become more valuable because they are skilled. Here again, Emecheta presents a contradiction. Knowledge can increase self-confidence, but it can also be absorbed into systems of exploitation.

Labour is central to female identity in the novels. Girls cook, clean, sell, serve, carry, obey, and care. Their work is necessary, but it is undervalued. In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta's labour belongs to her owner. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna's domestic labour is treated as natural female duty. Emecheta shows that patriarchy depends on women's work while refusing to grant women full dignity.

The relation between labour and selfhood is therefore complex. Work can be a site of exploitation, but it can also become a source of competence. Ojebeta's work in Ma Palagada's household teaches her discipline, trade, and social reading. Aku-nna's education and domestic responsibilities show her intelligence and maturity. These forms of competence do not erase oppression, but they prevent the women from being reduced to victimhood alone.

Selfhood in Emecheta's novels is never given freely. It is built under pressure. Aku-nna tries to claim selfhood through love and choice. Ojebeta builds it through survival and adaptation. Both characters reveal that female identity in patriarchal society is formed through conflict. They must negotiate between what they are told to be and what they feel themselves becoming.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl* present two powerful studies of female ownership and resistance in Igbo society. Aku-nna and Ojebeta are placed within systems that treat girls as transferable value. Aku-nna becomes the object of bride price, family expectation, and marital control. Ojebeta is sold into slavery and forced to remake her life inside another household. In both novels, the female body is claimed by others before the female self can speak.

The paper has argued that Emecheta's critique of patriarchy is broad and complex. Patriarchy in these novels is not limited to male cruelty. It works through naming, marriage, bride price, caste, kinship, domestic labour, motherhood, female guardianship, slavery, and social respectability. Women themselves often become agents of patriarchal values because they have been trained to survive within them. This makes Emecheta's fiction socially honest. She shows oppression as a structure that passes through the whole community.

At the same time, Emecheta refuses to portray her female characters as passive sufferers. Aku-nna's love for Chike, her refusal of Okoboshi, and her desire for education show a fragile but real assertion of self. Ojebeta's survival, learning, and adaptation reveal another kind of agency. These women do not always achieve freedom, but they preserve consciousness. They continue to desire, judge, remember, and choose within narrow spaces.

The two novels finally reveal the painful distance between being valued and being free. Aku-nna is valuable because of bride price, but that value denies her autonomy. Ojebeta is valuable as labour, but that value begins

with sale. Emecheta exposes this contradiction with great clarity. A society may value women and still refuse to let them own themselves.

Through *Aku-nna* and *Ojebeta*, Emecheta asks a fundamental question: can a woman become herself in a world that treats her body as family property, marital property, or labour property? Her answer is neither simple despair nor easy celebration. She shows that selfhood survives, but it survives under pressure. It appears in love, memory, work, refusal, endurance, and the stubborn desire to live otherwise. This is the lasting strength of Emecheta's women. They are wounded by the systems that claim them, yet they continue to search for a life that can be called their own.

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