

## A Call for Resurgence: Feminist Plan of Actions in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price and Joys of Motherhood*

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### ABSTRACT

Feminism aims at addressing the concerns of women across the world. It offers personal, philosophic and political ideologies, theories, strategies and movements to revamp the system that ostracize and subjugate women in every sphere of human society. It attempts to disclose the male chauvinism and the cultural constructions that are embedded in social life and in the literary texts. It analyses the colonial mindset of male sex, the prejudice, and offers effective tools to obtain emancipation for women and opens up the new avenues for women to explore. It doesn't aim for a world of exclusivism rather strikes a balance to include everyone despite sex difference and calls for building a healthy human society.

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### 1. Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a prominent Nigerian writer of 20th century, of Igbo tribe, whose writings have become phenomenal in the international literary arena today. The principal focus of her writing revolves around the Black African Woman in general and Nigerian woman in particular. It echoes the dreams and aspirations of womenfolk who thrive to reiterate their identity and position in a world of patriarchal dominance. It also attempts to dismantle the myths that have been erroneously constructed on women and calls for investigating the ramifications of the onslaught of male sex over the female sex and offers techniques and plan of actions in breaking the fetters that shackle women. Her writings are profound in character since they are the outcome of her own personal life experiences and they resonate concretely the themes that are pertinent to women such as marginalization of women, racism, bride price, poverty, emancipation and social oppression etc., She has written more than 20 books and all her works render the pangs and pains that women undergo in family and society at large. She doesn't want her characters to become victims of violence, rather empowers them to rise above the occasion and become victorious.

### 2. An advocacy of action plans

*The Bride Price and Joys of Motherhood* have been considered as some of the best novels of Buchi Emecheta. They explore in breadth and width, height and depth, the mystery of the power of women and their experience in an African context. It offers an insight into the real life situation of African women, which includes the biased and prejudiced notion, the myths, struggles, violence, determination and resurgence in adverse situation.

Women have been portrayed down through the ages as feeble and weaker sex and have been subjugated by the patriarchal community in every sphere, including language, customs, culture, and other institutions. They were forced to be dependent on men, since men were presented as strong and

powerful. The Holy Scriptures and traditions of various religions were sought to offer religious sanctity to their claim and erroneously interpreted to perpetuate their supremacy. Thus, the notion of the superiority of male sex over the female sex was deliberately imposed upon the mind of the women psyche. Nakul Kundra, in his article entitled "Crisis of female identity: A literary study" expounds the notion of Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who explains that 'female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities' (70). In an Androcentric society, everything is centered around men, where they are given preference which necessitates the exclusion of another, the female (16).

In attempting to define *Patriarchy*, Chris Weedon in his article entitled "Feminist Practice and Post Structuralist Theory" says, the term "Patriarchal" refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interest of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labor and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference (3).

Buchi Emecheta, through her novels exposes the vested interest of the men and their double standard mindset that enslaves the African women and how women are made to become victims of colonialism and male chauvinism. The effects of colonial mindset embedded in African men are reflected upon the womenfolk in totality. The practice of polygamy, The bride price, and the preference for male offspring bears testimony to male dominance. Thus, the author attempts to unmask the duplicity of the men through her characters.

Elucidating the hypocrisy of the male, Eustace Palmer explains,

Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in traditional society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives,

then their main use is as vehicles for procreating children, thus immortalizing the husband's name and ensuring the continuity of his line; if they are daughters, the fathers' only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price. (22)

In an Igbo society of Nigeria, women are valued always in terms of revenue that they would fetch for the wellbeing of the family or community. Their worth is appraised based on the economic contribution that they will offer to the family of their origin. Thus, in the words of Ketu H. Katrak, the purpose of the girl-child in Igbo culture is of two-fold: " i) *the bride price* she will fetch on marriage; and ii) her ability to bear children, preferably sons" (163).

*The Bride Price* enunciates the story of Aku-nna, the daughter of Ezekiel Ochia and Ma Blackie. He named his daughter as Aku-nna, meaning literally "father's wealth" because she would fetch bride price for him and the family (10). At the outset, the author unfolds the plight of women in Igbo community. The sudden demise of her father jeopardizes her dream and unfolds several events like, Ma Blackie becoming the fourth wife of her brother-in-law Mr. Okonkwo, Aku-nna continuing education for fetching financial gain to the family in the form of bride price and the difficulties the protagonist undergoes in challenging the customs and practice of Igbo community. Auntie Metilda augurs, "they will marry her off very quickly in order to get enough money to pay Nna-ndu's school fees" (38). Therefore, her education is viewed as useful and relevant from the perspectives of the male. Women have been used as instruments to achieve the end of men in Igbo community. When Akunna refuses to marry Okoboshi, she is reprimanded by her mother and goes on saying, 'I will kill you if you bring shame and dishonor on us' (121). It is a classic example of how women have been indoctrinated with the false notion that choosing a husband by a woman is something abominable.

Amidst all the factors that subjugate women, the author through Aku-nna offers affirmative action plans to dismantle the cultural constructions of traditions and customs in order to obtain emancipation for women. Aku-nna's *academic qualification* which ensures economic independence, the power of tongue that she possesses to escape into freedom and *the physical combat* with Okoboshi (136) become paramount. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, who propounded the theory of *snail sense feminism* encourages Nigerian woman to work like snail in her dealings with men in the "tough and very difficult patriarchal society they live in" (10). She tells that an individual needs to empower herself before she can empower others and she offers three important strategies for individual success such as i) effective dialogue and negotiation ii) acquisition of good education iii) individualism. Like the snail that carries heavy burdens on its back, a woman who carries the burdens needs to enter into dialogue and negotiate with the surrounding. She needs to display wisdom, patience and resilience like snail in order to survive and succeed. Aku-nna does exactly the same for her survival.

Scholars like Patricia Yaeger, Andrea Dworkin, Anne Koedt and Betty Friedan do emphasize different techniques and schemes for women's emancipation. For Patricia Yaeger 'language games' can emancipate women from patriarchal constraints; Lisa Handler uses 'Sororities' as gender strategy, Anne Koedt employs 'Consciousness raising' as effective plan of action; Betty Friedan speaks of 'Education for women' as the most useful tool while Adrienne Rich exhorts one to be educated and be responsible toward oneself (23-25).

*Joys of Motherhood* becomes an ironic title for many since the main character of the novel Nnu Ego becomes a symbol of suffering and her children turn out to be disappointment for her. The predicament she is faced within the family offers her no consolation. The novel written in the background of Second World War offers us the colonial implications on the African natives and the torments that the womenfolk undergo unconsciously under the male dominance is abhorring. In the words of Florence Stratton, 'Recolonized woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structure of an indigenous patriarchy of a foreign masculinist colonialism' (2). The author personifies in perfection the agony of the African woman through the protagonist. She dreams and yearns for joy as she reposes her hope in children. Salome C. Nnoromele through the article entitled 'Representing the African Woman: Subjectivity and Self in *Joys of Motherhood*' calls for the appropriation and the reconstruction of African woman's presence from the female point of view (179).

The portrayal of Nnu Ego as a symbol of suffering is not universal in character to all African women. Her vulnerability and emotional instability calls us for a deeper investigation and exploration into the motivations she had. She attempts to end her life when she is agony. Is she a coward to put an end to her life or does she afraid to face the realities? When she attempts to kill herself, Nwakusor rescues her and it shows that everyone is responsible for everybody.

Nwakusor says, "What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your baby for you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood... the woman who had slapped her told her that out of six pregnancies she only had two children alive, yet she was still living. (*Joys of Motherhood* 61- 62)

The encouragement and consolation offered by her reinforces self-confidence in Nnu Ego. Her state of affair need to be reviewed from the perspectives of the conflicts she faced from the two worlds. The impact of the village life in Ibuza and the city life in Lagos puts her in turmoil. In Ibuza, women were comfortable as they supported the family with farming and experience strong bond of communion and fellowship in the community while in Lagos, life became mechanical as people were just focused on trade and business where the profit became the focal point.

Nnu Ego succumbs to the suffering while the other characters like her mother Ona, her co-wife, Adaku, and other women had foresight and self-realization to know that life is

more important than the following of traditions. In the words of Salome C. Nnoromele,

The difference between the choices that Nnu Ego and Adaku make is evident in the narrative. Both women find themselves in similar circumstances, with an inept husband and ever-present excruciating poverty. Adaku chooses to leave and forge a life for herself and her daughters. Nnu Ego stays because she assumes that that is what society expects from her. (184)

The author speaks of the solidarity that the African women render to Nnu Ego is an avenue for survival. The other women characters who come to aid her with financial assistance in the form of loan were crystal clear in their conviction that the economic power makes women powerful and therefore, they attempt to assist her with money to improvise her business and to climb up the ladder of life. The novel reiterates that an adaptation to the trends of the time is essential for survival. The age old customs which fetter the humanity needs to be broken down and the individual must take responsibility to resurrect in the adverse situations, because it is she who crafts the path she has to tread. The idea that Buchi Emecheta drives is that a

woman needs to adapt concrete, dynamic, relevant and suitable, plan of actions that would ensure freedom and rewrite her own history and destiny.

### 3. Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta, as a renowned literary scholar offers us a realistic picture of the black women's plight in Nigeria and across the world. Her tussle with the events and realities of life made her to become a woman of strong character and indomitable spirit. The agonizing moments, betrayal, challenges, deprivations that she experienced personally in her community in Nigeria and later in UK are coded in her novels with soulful presentation. The vivid presentation of her characters tears the hearts of the readers and fills their eyes with tears. Her appeal for respect, dignity and equality for women keeps resonating in her writings. She does not want women to cow down before the unjust structures and systems, rather triggers them to resurrect with passion.

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