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## **Gender Imbalance, Romantic Inclinations and the Supremacy of Patriarchal Traditions in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price***

**ABSTRACT.** The paper investigates the notion of the female as an agency in the reaffirmation of gender and patriarchal cultural supremacy. It draws upon the different experiences of Emecheta's characters in the narrative, *The Bride Price*. Applying the gender theory, the paper notes that female individuals are the active agents of socializing gender imbalances in patriarchal African societies. African female authors like Emecheta unwittingly participate in socializing women to accept gender imbalances and female oppression. The aim of the paper is to examine the impact of cultural and economic orientations on female identity in *The Bride Price*. In effect, the paper shows the implications of gender resistance in the text. It argues that the narrative affirms conformity with culture and tradition. An obvious observation is that the narrative shows that the female is an active recipient of socialization and gender leanings in African culture. The major finding is that through the experiences of the major female characters as agents, Emecheta rejects revolutionary feminism and accepts masculinity and patriarchy as supreme. In the end, the paper reveals the implications of reading the narrative from the perspective of agency gender with a view to understanding how romantic inclinations can spur total gender balance in Africa and show how women have participated in the cultural oppression of women. What is remarkable is that this agency perspective to gender theory in African women writing has rarely been discussed. Finally, the idea behind this approach is to open up the various modes of feminist consciousness in African literature and contribute to the on-going debate on gender imbalances in African literature and cultural philosophy.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, patriarchy, agency, Emecheta, feminist consciousness, imbalance

### **Introduction**

Since the turn of the twentieth century, African female writers have used their writings to portray and liberate women consciousness and free women from the limitations imposed on them by patriarchal traditions. Women using their art as a form of expression against the injustices of the patriarchal tradition started with Flora Nwapa 1966 publication of her debut narrative, *Efuru*. Nwapa followed up with her most conscious femi-

nist expression; *One Is Enough* in 1981, which crystallized her vision of the new African women and her identity as fully emancipated, economically, socially independent and conscious of the woman's new identity in her desire to question, reconstruct and negate patriarchal male assumptions that seek to limit the woman in African societies. Since Flora Nwapa's entry into the African literary scene, other African female writers have consciously continued to use their arts as a form of expression against the patriarchal limitation of women and for the empowerment of the female gender through consciousness-raising and the recognition of the female identity. These female writers who have used their writings to express female consciousness in Africa include Mariama Bā, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta in *The Second Class Citizens*. One of the major contentions in this paper is that Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is a reversal of female consciousness which other female narratives have thus far achieved in Africa.

This paper examines the attempt by the Nigerian female writer, Buchi Emecheta to construct women's oppression in patriarchal Igbo culture through her narrative with particular focus on her novel, *The Bride Price*. It will be pertinent to take a cursory look at the gender assumptions which have penetrated the narrative structure of the novel in order to appropriately contextualize how the writer has depicted the female gender as the agency in the reaffirmation of patriarchal male culture, as well as the impact of this agency on the woman's emancipation on the woman trapped in traditional Igbo society. The study in particular examines how men and women negotiate and renegotiate changes within gender relations in patriarchal Nigerian cultures.

The paper further discusses the dynamic nature of the female individual and its implications as an agency in social interaction in the traditional culture. It reveals the actions of women in advancing Igbo patriarchal social institutions. In discussing the theory of gender, the embodiment of women as an agency is important in the interpretation of Emecheta's *The Bride Price*; this idea of agency is important if we must seek to understand gender in broader perspectives in the contextualization of female writing in Africa.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for articulating my position in this paper is based on the combination of gender and agency theories. Gender agen-

cy explains how women consciously prepare themselves for 'virtues' and 'ideals' of womanhood. Agency in female writing also means making self and group ready to meet up with the standard values set up by patriarchy. Therefore, Emecheta's narrative explores the way women are socialized into the cultural and social space of marriage through the prism of the 'bride price.' By agency in this work, I want to argue that women's acquiescence to patriarchal norms and culture are the grounds that subject them to capricious gender relations—in which case Emecheta's female characters consciously limit the consciousness and identity of the female gender. The paper explores the implications of the idea of agency theory of gender identity in African women writing and its relation with feminist consciousness as postulated by African feminist theorists like Helen Chukwuma, Omolera Ogunipe and Chioma Opara. The work assesses the theory of gender relations against the backdrop of the social relations between men and women in patriarchal tradition.

With the emergence of feminism in African literature and the increasing rise of the female voice in creative writing in Africa, the rise of gender as a category and mode of literary analysis and interpretation has increased. This is not surprising, judging by the increasing number of female writers in African since the 1960s. The application of gender as a literary analysis tool has also provoked vigorous debate within African feminist aesthetics. Feminist theorists have argued that "Gender in Africa is not a biological but a social/cultural construct..." (Ekpa, 2000, p. 33). The Nigerian feminist theorist Anthonia Ekpa is here alluding to the connection between gender and the socio-cultural economy of the cultural commodity. This view is in line with the postulation that "Gender is a category constructed through cultural and social systems" (Scott, 1990, p. 2).

To further interrogate the concept of gender in literary scholarship, it is necessary to consider the views of the American theorist Robert Stoller who posits that the term gender has a "psychological or cultural rather than biological connotation" (qt. in Millet, 1969, p. 30). Therefore, the concept of gender changes according to individual perception. For some scholars gender can be defined as a "set of ideas and expectations about femininity and masculinity" (Pennington, 2009, p. 366). However, as Connell has argued that the term refers to the "way in which social practice is ordered" (2005, p. 71). By social practice, Connell suggests the interference of the socio-cultural space distributing roles and duties to men and women in society. This socio-cultural meaning of gender takes its roots from Simone de Beauvoir's declaration that "one is not born a woman,

one becomes a woman” (qt. in Robinson, 1991, p. 1). The rooting of this concept in the socio-cultural tradition makes Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, p. 31) to affirm that “Gender is not an individual matter at all, but a collaborative affair that connects the individual to the social order.” In addition, they further argued that “Gender ideology is the set of beliefs that govern people’s participation in the gender order by which they explain and justify that participation” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 35). As the paper has argued, these beliefs are a set of norms rooted in patriarchal assumptions, and women have become its most active proponents, hence the idea of agency. In Emecheta’s narrative, the female characters including the heroine have come to anchor their belief on the authority of the bride price in the institution of marriage. In other words, the idea of participation in gender ideology implicates the idea of women as an agency—which in the process imposes the ideology of the inferiority of the female gender in the institution of marriage. Based on this Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, p. 17) defines gender as “...a system of meanings within cultures used to categorize male and female sexuality in hierarchical terms... and that as a result, women are trapped by their reproductive anatomy...”. In other words socio-cultural beliefs totalize the woman as inferior in relation to the man whose values dictate the social norm and its relation to sexuality. As Teresa de Lauretis has argued in her essay “The Technology of Gender” gender is both a “representation and self-representation” (qt. in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 14). In her attempt to elucidate the meaning of gender, Rosemarie Putnam Tong cites the authority of Nel Noddings who argued that women and “men speak different languages and that our cultures favour masculine ethics of justice over a feminine ethics of care” (Tong, 1998, p. 158).

### **Gender Imbalances, Agency in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price***

The narrative starts in the middle and gradually works its way back to the beginning. When the novel opens, its author, Buchi Emecheta informs the reader of the gender imbalances that exist in the text—Ma Blackie, Ezekiel Odia’s wife despite already having two children, a boy and a girl, Aku-nna and Nna-nndo is considered to have problems. This problem the narrative voice reveals is that “She was very slow in getting herself pregnant again” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 2). The gender attitude here is that

the value of a woman's sexuality is tied to her proclivity in childbirth. The narrative voice seems to support and socialize this view among women themselves. Moreover, for this reason of slow proclivity, her husband, Ezekiel Odia "had sent her to all the native doctors he could afford in Lagos" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 2). Ezekiel Odia's attitude stems from the patriarchal assumptions of his society as he begins to worry about his wife's fertility status: "In despair she [Ma Blackie] decided to go home to their town, Ibuza, to placate their Oboshi river goddess into giving her some babies" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 2).

Ma Blackie's decision to travel from Lagos to Ibuza to placate "their Oboshi river goddess" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 2) shows that she has thoroughly socialized and internalized the gender bias of her patriarchal culture as a failed woman for having only two children for her husband, Ezekiel Odia and in the process becomes an agency for the perpetuation of gender attitudes as the aim of her trip to Ibuza was intended to "recharging her fertility" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 2).

Therefore, Emecheta here uses a female character Ma Blackie as the agency for the enthronement of patriarchal supremacy even when her husband, Ezekiel Odia was perfectly happy with her wifely duties and her two children. Ma Blackie is the one who is psychologically traumatized about her failure as a wife and mother. This proves that women by themselves are the agents of patriarchal oppression against the emergence of the new woman in this narrative. To show this, almost all the Igbo women living at Akinwumi Street, Yaba where Ma Blackie and her family lived all believed that she was childless simply because she had only a girl and a boy for her husband. This is relayed through Aku-nna's consciousness: "Many a time she had heard other women living in the compound make songs of her Ma Blackie's childlessness. She had heard over and over again her Ma Blackie and her Nna quarrelling over this great issue of childlessness" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 3).

In other words, just as Ma Blackie had accepted the patriarchal designation of being childless with two children, Aku-nna, as a female individual, is being socialized into accepting this patriarchal ideology of the woman being valuable based on giving her husband many children, especially male children. To show that the inability of the female to have many children is considered a kind of impotence and a tool of cultural oppression, it begins to dominate Aku-nna's consciousness: "Nna would go on and on...telling Ma...that he had had to pay double the normal bride price...before he was to take Ma as his wife...he would remind Ma Blackie that having paid this

heavy bride price he had had their marriage sanctified by Anglicanism. And what had he to show for it all—an only son!” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 3).

From this passage, we can see that Ezekiel Odia has conformed to the patriarchal ideology of his society. He expects to reap bountiful rewards in male children for the heavy bride price he paid on Ma Blackie, and not being able to give him these rewards in male children makes her a failure. Interestingly, despite his love for his daughter and the expected rewards in the bride, this passage is crafted to socialize Aku-nna into her gender conformity in line with patriarchal norms. In another respect the bride price payment seems to constitute a cultural tool of enslavement which the narrative structure endorses.

Ezekiel Odia’s premium on his daughter hinges on the bride price she would fetch him when she marries: “...but Ezekiel knew that except for the fact... that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to” (Emecheta, 1976, p.4). In fact, it was for this reason of expected bride price that “...he had named her Aku-nna, meaning.... ‘father’s wealth’” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 4). In other words, the value of the girl child in the traditional Nigerian society is tied to the wealth she would eventually fetch her father or step-father as Okonkwo would become to Aku-nna after Ezekiel Odia’s death. And this made Ezekiel Odia willing to allow his daughter to attend western education because girls who went to school fetched higher bride prices. More disturbing in this narrative is that women have been taught or socialized into internalizing these cultural values as we see Aku-nna reflecting: “She was going to marry well, a rich man of who her father would approve and *who would be able to afford an expensive bride price*” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 4, emphasis mine). Therefore, Aku-nna has come to internalize the values of the patriarchal culture very early in her life and see the payment of the bride price as a condition before: “...she would leave her father’s house” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 4). By aligning her consciousness to the patriarchal culture, Aku-nna without knowing has necessarily become an agency of the supremacy of cultural values. In all her life, Aku-nna has been socialized not to do anything: “against the dictates of culture” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 6). She has willingly come to submit herself to this requirement.

In the Igbo culture of the narrative, it is expected that children should not interrogate their elders and that was why Aku-nna could not bring herself to question her Nna on the day her father unexpectedly returned early from work to prepare to go to the hospital for a check-up in Lagos

Island. Ezekiel Odia had hidden his health from his children and Aku-nna felt betrayed: "Why, oh, why did he tell uncle Uche the truth and lied to her?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 11). As if she was beginning to understand the requirements of her tradition Aku-nna's dual voice begins to justify her father's actions:

... for was she not only a girl? A girl belongs to you today as your daughter, and tomorrow, before your very eyes, would go to another man in marriage. To such creatures, one should be wary of showing too much love and care, otherwise people would ask, 'Look, man, are you going to be your daughter's husband as well?' (Emecheta, 1976, p. 12).

There are a number of implications arising from Aku-nna's consciousness that suggests gender inequality. First, marriage is a social institution that denies the African woman the possibility of social inequality. Another implication is that the possibility of marriage gives the woman the social status of minus knowledge, people who are not worthy to be trusted with sensitive information. And finally, women are a people whose values are tied to the bride price that would accrue to their family of birth: "Despite all that Aku-nna knew she held a special place in her father's heart" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 12). Interestingly this knowledge is a product of a deep understanding of the patriarchal norms of her society.

The circumstances of Ezekiel Odia's illness and the method of its revelation to his children surprised Aku-nna as she reflects: "It still surprised her, though, that Nna had arranged it so that Uche, who he said was lazy and as sluggish as a woman expecting twins, was to be trusted with his children" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 12). However, in the context of the patriarchal tradition, uncle Uche, despite his supposed "sluggishness" is still a man. Therefore, his gender has earned him Nna's trust and Aku-nna in spite of being Ezekiel Odia's biological daughter cannot earn his trust because he is only a girl child and in the eyes of the culture cannot be trusted. To show the reality of gender imbalance when Ma Blackie sent a telegram to Ezekiel Odia's relatives in Lagos asking them "to confirm that her husband was ill" because Nna's family considered her a failed woman they "decided against telling her the truth" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 14). She is further told through Nne Beaty, a friend of Ma Blackie who was travelling back to the village at that time "not to worry.... She was strongly advised to direct her attention to the important work she had been sent home to do—to placate the goddess of the river Oboshi *into giving her more sons*" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 14,



emphasis mine). Here again, Emecheta uses the woman as agency in the reaffirmation of the supremacy of patriarchal conspiracy. Nne Beauty who knew the truth is willing to lie to satisfy the men-folk. Therefore, rather than encouraging female bonding the narrative uses women as agency in the re-affirmation of patriarchal gender ideology. Gender also assigns roles to the sexes. While it is the duty of the male to do manual labour to feed the family, the woman is expected to cook and gossip. Young Aku-nna begins to reflect on this reality: "It was time they finished off their gossiping because their men-folk would soon be home, hungry, tired... so the women would rush to their kitchen to prepare the evening meal" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 15). Therefore, the behaviour of the sexes is structured according to cultural gender beliefs—and this would be the reason Aku-nna would not marry early. There are ways of teaching and socializing the female gender into performing her gender roles and Aku-nna is being gradually indoctrinated: "... because Nna was not coming home at four; she could not hurry to cook for a husband because, though she was nearing fourteen, her father would not hear of marrying early" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 16). In her subconscious mind Aku-nna has accepted the custom and traditional roles of the two genders in her society: "It is one of the unwritten norms which are here to stay" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 17).

In the traditional Igbo society, women have no right of choice of spouse. They must accept the choice of life partners made for them by the men in their families. This is the case of Auntie Uzor, as Aku-nna narrates: "She was probably between the ages of sixteen and eighteen or nineteen. She had been brought to Lagos from Ibuza to be married to her husband, Dogo" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 18). It was Aku-nna's father, Ezekiel Odia who arranged the marriage. He had told Dogo, "who had been a driver in the army during the war against Hitler..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 18). The marriage deal was finalized when Ezekiel Odia informed Dogo: "My cousin's daughter is grown now. She comes from a very tall family too, so why don't you pay for her? She will give you tall sons" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 18). The consideration in marriage is the proclivity of male children. The fact that Uzo herself agreed to marry Dogo without seeing him for the first time shows that Emecheta's women in this narrative are agents of promoting gender imbalances in the narrative. Besides, there are clearly defined roles that every sex must imbibe. For example, while Aku-nna is busy preparing meals for herself and her brother: "Nna-nndo, however, like all boys of his age was busy playing in the unthinkable places" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 22). In every respect, the girl child is in a disadvantaged position in society.



Aku-nna is expected to learn according to the norms of patriarchal culture. Aku-nna expresses her readiness to live by those standards when she realized that Auntie Uzo was not holding her baby and her eyes like somebody who had been crying but could not ask her why because it would be considered bad manners: "Aku-nna was prevented from asking, because in her culture it would have been bad manners and if so many questions had come from a young girl like herself it would have been considered worse than bad manners" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 23). The insight we can glean from this is that Auntie Uzo and Aku-nna have internalized and accepted the limitations patriarchy has imposed on the female gender and affirm the supremacy of patriarchy. Even though it is now a reality that her father Ezekiel Odia has died, its realization hit the children differently according to gendered expectations. Nna-nndo wept about their loss: "We have no father any more. There is no longer any schooling for me. This is the end" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 24). It is curious to note that Aku-nna's moment of distress epitomizes her socialization into cultural norms. Even as Ma Blackie, their mother was still alive and doing well in the village, the young girl laments:

But Nna-nndo, you have got it all wrong Aku-nna said to herself. It is not that we have no father any more, we have no parents any more. Did not our father rightly call you Nna-nndo... So not only have we lost a father, we have lost our life, our shelter. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family (Emecheta, 1976, p. 24-25).

Aku-nna's lamentation goes to confirm that Emecheta infuses gender imbalances into the narrative. In fact the extract above illustrates and depicts the huge gender imbalance in African culture which the women have been fully socialized into. It is important to comment that the acceptance of patriarchal gender ideology is relayed through Aku-nna's dual voice, which at this stage remains unquestioning and uncritical in contrast to most dual voices in narrative fiction. The reflections in Aku-nna's consciousness reinforces the importance of fatherhood in the Nigerian tradition and seems to suggest that it was better if Ma Blackie had died instead of Ezekiel Odia, Nna, and the narrative voice seems to support this engender disparity.

Buchi Emecheta, too, uses Ezekiel Odia's funeral to affirm the supremacy of patriarchal Igbo tradition. Ezekiel Odia's life epitomizes the

ambivalence that enveloped African culture at the turn of the twentieth century with the advent of Christianity and its western civilization: "... he would sing praises to the European Living God, he would force his children to pray every morning... but all this did not prevent him calling in a native medicine-man when the occasion arose" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 26). In line with the tradition of Ibuza people, Aku-nna and her brother Nna-ndo were expected to mourn their father loudly and she gladly did just that, as she mourned: "My father was a good Christian. He was a good husband to my mother Ma Blackie. He bought me many dresses. He spoilt me. He sent me to school" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 27). The last sentence implied that Aku-nna was not supposed to go to school because of her gender. In conformity with the traditional belief she, went on with her father's praises mainly because it was expected of her to do so: "Nobody could stop her, for this was what was expected of a daughter" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 27). In contrast Nna-ndo was required to weep privately because he was now the man of the house: "Nna-ndo did not use many words...". He soon finished crying but Aku-nna was encouraged to continue: "girls were supposed to exhibit more emotion" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 28).

It is to be noted that gender attitudes greatly inform the behaviour of members of the society. While the mourners began to disperse "Aku-nna persisted in her cries" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 28). This was what was expected of a good daughter. Her performance earned her praise in the eyes of the older women: "People later remarked that for a girl not born in Ibuza she did not do badly" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 27). The most unfortunate thing about Ezekiel Odi's death at this time was that he died "before he had time to enjoy the bride price his daughter would fetch" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 28-29). This underscores the fact that the girl child is valued in Igbo culture simply for the bride price she would accrue to the family and at the end of the narrative, the author, Buchi Emecheta agrees with this patriarchal philosophy when Aku-nna dies because Okonkwo, Aku-nna's stepfather refuses to accept her bride price from Chike's father Mr Ofulue.

To again show that the society is structured according to patriarchal gender attitudes, while women are encouraged to wail the death of their loved ones openly, men mourned in silence because "...theirs were like the sight of men who though defeated, have never let go of their dignity" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 29). In contrast, good women mourners were supposed to throw themselves to the ground. To show how women have

become an agency of affirming the supremacy of patriarchal tradition the women-folk urge Aku-nna: "You must cry a farewell for your father. You are his only daughter from his lions" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 34). This proves that women in Emecheta's *The Bride Price* are the agency of patriarchal gender supremacy of African culture. Because of her feminine gender, Aku-nna felt her father's death even more: "... the realization came to her again, now with even greater pain that they would never see their father alive again, and *she faced the shocking reality that his death would change her whole life*" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 35, emphasis mine).

Aku-nna's articulation of these feelings in her subconscious mind arises from the fact that she has been socialized into the gender expectations of her Ibuza society which would require her to marry early so that the bride price could be used to further the education of her brother, Nna-nndo. Auntie Uzo warns her:

...Then leave your blouse alone. Do you want to tear it? Can't you see that you have no father anymore? You are an orphan now, and you have to learn to take care of whatever clothes you have. Nobody is going to buy you anymore, until you marry. Then your husband will take care of you (Emecheta, 1976, p. 36).

The implication of Auntie Uzo's warning is that a fatherless girl's only option of existence is marriage, the only way of redemption and for Aku-nna, it would be sooner than later. This is what can be clearly gleaned from Auntie Matilda's speech when she expressed her concern for little Aku-nna: "The pity of it all... is that they will marry her off very quickly in order to get enough more to pay Nna-nndo's school fees" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 36). These pronouncements by Uzo and Matilda, both older women are geared towards preparing Aku-nna to accept the reality of the gender inequality in their tradition, and the fact that Aku-nna has already reviewed and accepted such an outcome in her life makes her an agency of perpetuating the supremacy of patriarchal gender ideology.

The women-folk generally believes that Aku-nna would marry a rich man because she has lived and schooled in Lagos. Auntie Uzo said this when she reminded Auntie Matilda: "...Most girls from Lagos are very quickly married away to rich and educated men because of their smooth bodies and their schooling" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 36). Here, there is a hint of the feminine body as an object of pleasure. The agency consciousness reaches its height when Auntie Matilda declares for the benefit of Aku-nna: "This is the fate of us women. There is nothing we can do about it. We just

have to learn to accept it" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 37). This goes to show that Emecheta's *The Bride Price* rather than promoting female consciousness and aspirations, has been insidiously used to limit female consciousness while promoting acceptance of patriarchal culture and Aku-nna now realizes that her two aunts were saying these in other "to prepare her for what was coming... intensified her fear of the unknown" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 37). In other words, they have succeeded in reversing the gains of feminist consciousness and female ideology.

Even though Aku-nna is older than Nna-nndo, it is he rather than she whom their uncles consult to decide on how they wish their father to be buried. Uncle Richard consults Nna-nndo and tells him:

...our brother lying down there is dead, but he is not dead. He has left a man behind him. He may be a very young man now, a little boy, but in a few years' time we shall forget the first Ezekiel Odia; we shall remember and speak of his son Nna-nndo because he will grow to do great things (Emecheta, 1976, p. 39).

There is a clear indication of gender bias here as Nna-nndo's sex gives him a very clear advantage and recognition over Aku-nna. It is his gender that confers on him the right to choose "...which group of mourners do you wish to stay by your dead father?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 39). Even though uncle Richard would have preferred traditional Ibuza mourners to stay with the body of Ezekiel Odia, they respected and accepted Nna-nndo's choice of a Christian funeral for Ezekiel Odia since Nna-nndo was the only heir according to the tradition and custom of Ibuza people. By implication even if Aku-nna had felt otherwise, she would have to accept his choice as sacrosanct because he is a male child and heir to Ezekiel Odia and her an insignificant girl who would be married off.

Ma Blackie's readiness "to go home to Ibuza to have her fertility recharged" smacks of gender agency (Emecheta, 1976, p. 40). It means that women in Emecheta's narrative are the agency for the affirmation of the supremacy of patriarchal tradition. The burial of Ezekiel Odia at the cemetery at Igbobi in Lagos was interesting; it was a mixture of the Christian and the traditional "... all became a confusion" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 42). Ozubu, Okonkwo's second wife's discussion with Ma Blackie is instructive after Ma Blackie returned from the dibia, native doctor where she went to recharge her fertility. Ozubu complained that her husband Okonkwo cares little about her since he married Ezebona:

I know that Ezebona is young and still new as his wife, but they don't seem to care what other people seem to think. When I was new, he had not had me all that long before I was pregnant with his son. I don't know where that dry stick Ezebona is going to get children from (Emecheta, 1976, p. 45).

There are several deductions from this discussion. The first is that pregnancy or the birth of a son soon after marriage defines the woman's identity. Another is that Ezebona should not be enjoying her wifely privileges for not getting pregnant quickly for Okonkwo. All these reflections coming from Ozuba, another woman implies that women in this narrative are an agency of patriarchal traditions. In other words, there is no active resistance from the female consciousness that resists patriarchal culture. In the face of male supremacy women are subdued as Ma Blackie in the presence of Okonkwo, Ezekiel's elder brother:

Ma Blackie, he affirmed, was to stay in Ibuza and have her system purified by the clear and unpolluted water from the Oboshi river; the river and the goddess of the river were gifts to all Ibuza people from the greater gods (Emecheta, 1976, p. 46).

It is instructive to note that men decide, and women can only affirm and obey. In this instance, Emecheta adopts the narrative technique of mysticism and spiritualism to comment on the authority of patriarchal culture in the subjection of women. This is one technique which African writers have exploited in imaginative literature, the use of mythology, magic and the fetish. The use of this narrative tool gives reality to the African world. As Elechi Amadi asserts: "Mysticism and spiritualism are integral and inseparable parts of the African epistemology; and treatment of African ideas in creative works must bear this fundamental fact in mind" (qt. in Ezeigbo, 2019, p. 12). This narrative technique of the mystic has its full expression in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Through this narrative tool of mysticism and spiritualism Emecheta comments on the supremacy of patriarchal gender order, which has also been affirmed by the female goddess Oboshi; because the authority is sustained by male gods who are "the greater gods" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 46). This makes women agency to the propagation of patriarchal culture. The shaving of the woman's hair that has lost her husband is one aspect of the culture of Ibuza people which women themselves endorse. For example, Ma Blackie returned to Lagos from Ibuza to see what has become

of her husband and children “Busy hands unthreaded her hair. She was stripped of her clothes and given older, torn sets to put on” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 50). Here, the unthreading of hair and the wearing of old clothes is a metaphor for mourning which the writer uses to comment on Ma Blackie’s change in marital status.

The fact that women themselves are the engineers of adherence to this patriarchal culture shows Emecheta’s women are the agency of the supremacy of patriarchal ideals. Even young Aku-nna, the heroine of the narrative, at this time is willing to subject herself to the tradition of Ibuza people because “She knew she would have to marry, and that the bride price she would fetch would help to pay the school fees for her brother Nna-nndo... What she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 51). In this instance, Emecheta adopts the narrative tool of stream of consciousness technique to reveal what is going on in Aku-nna’s mind and how she thinks her father’s untimely death will alter her entire life and choices because of her gender. From this type of consciousness coming from the heroine, one can conclude that rather than empowering her women to resist patriarchal oppression and the traditional suppression of women’s right to make choices in marriage, the narrative becomes a tool through which women are socialized into the acceptance of the supremacy of patriarchal tradition.

In most African cultural societies, the feminine flesh is always used as an object of pleasure for men and then mocked: Aku-nna wondered why girls along this road never bothered to cover the tops of their bodies, and mostly wore nothing except some coloured loin cloth. Of course, the traders composed lyrics about girls with mosquito legs, girls with breast like pumpkins, girls with hair on their chests:

...songs about this town, her wine and her young girls with breasts as big as calabashes (Emecheta, 1976, p. 59).

The narrative tools adopted in the above passage include figurative expressions mainly the use of figurative words like simile and metaphor. With these narrative tools Emecheta highlights the beauty of the female body as an object of adoration in Ibuza patriarchal society. As Aku-nna would observe Asaba and Ibuza women were out of touch with modern fashion because “... they wore their headscarves tied at what seemed to Aku-nna funny angles. They were out of touch with Lagos fashions...” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 60).

As if Emecheta intends to use her narrative to socialize the female-folk into accepting patriarchal tradition, the male characters in the narrative use female consciousness to affirm male actions. As they approached Asaba in the early hours of the morning, the passengers saw some men on the road returning to their houses, Aku-nna noticed that all the men traders were all returning into the town. As if to school herself properly into the culture of male supremacy “Ma Blackie explained to her that most rich traders kept mistresses there, and when they arrived so early, they went to the houses of their girlfriends to spend the rest of the night” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 60). There was no condemnation in Ma Blackie’s voice, little wonder “This revelation shocked Aku-nna a little...” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 60).

Again, in furtherance of the role of women as agency in the narrative, the fourteen year old cousin of Aku-nna, Ogugua tells Aku-nna on arrival to Ibuza that: “...We shall be like sisters, especially if your mother chooses to be with my father” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 63). This shows that little Aku-nna has been well indoctrinated into the culture of her people. When Aku-nna expresses reservation at the turn of events following her father’s death, Ogugua boldly tells her: “You’re almost fourteen years old now and you still don’t know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father...just as he will inherit everything your father worked for” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 63). Note that Ogugua’s personal narrative is told using the first person narrative style like one who has gained personal experience of the requirements of culture. The implications of Ogugua’s perceptive assertion is that she and other women in the village have been schooled and indoctrinated into traditional Ibuza culture, and that Ma Blackie like any other item possessed by Ezekiel Odia before his death will now be inherited by his brother, Okonkwo. This outcome shocked little Aku-nna whose consciousness queried: “How can my mother fit into that type of life?” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 63). The fact that Ma Blackie perfectly fitted into this arrangement without protest shows that women are agency in this narrative for lack of resisting consciousness. Ogugua even tells Aku-nna about a particular woman in their entourage who had only a daughter after eleven years of marriage before her husband’s death. That woman has now been inherited “...by her husband’s brother... she has everything she wants now, even a son” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 65).

The above sentiments from a fourteen-year-old female child confirm that the narrative sets out to socialize the girl child into the traditional culture. Here Ogugua’s aim is to educate Aku-nna about their traditional Ibuza culture and to rely on that culture to tell her why they would be “...



like sisters..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 63). Again Ougua uses this particular moment of self-awakening to educate her cousin who has never been to Ibuza about the importance of the male child in their society. Therefore, any marriage without a male child is failed marriage and the woman will not be "very happy" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 65). In other words, the girl child is socialized into accepting and conforming to the reality of gender imbalance in Emecheta's narrative.

Then returning to Ibuza after Ezekial Odia's death marked a romantic encounter in the life of the heroine Aku-nna. Buchi Emecheta has used the narrative structure to thwart to her romantic aspirations in order to confirm the supremacy of patriarchal tradition. Coming in contact with Chike Ofulue made her to begin to express her filial romantic feelings: "Aku-nna looked at the man. He had called them children, but he was not so old himself. Maybe eighteen or nineteen" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 66). Again, to justify that the female body is an object of pleasure, Ougua tells Aku-nna when she refuses to bath at the Atakpo stream because the traders who offered to give them a ride that "...The teacher has seen scores of naked women having baths. Why should your particular body be more interesting... he has had lots of mistresses and girlfriends" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 70). From this perspective one can argue that Emecheta's narrative seeks to socialize the female gender into fulfilling the roles of satisfying male pleasure and therefore the narrative is an agency of patriarchal gender expectations.

In Ibuza culture, there are procedures to ensure the perpetual subjugation of women which women themselves willingly submitted to such as the cutting of a lock of hair from the woman to ensure ownership forever and Ezekiel Odia, despite his Christian upbringing ensured this about Ma Blackie:

... Ezekiel Odia, to ensure that his wife would always be his, had taken the precaution of cutting a lock of hair from Ma Blackie's head and keeping it as evidence. Once a man had taken this step, his wife could never leave him, for to do so would be to commit an abomination... if the husband died must mourn for nine moons (Emecheta, 1976, p. 71).

To show that women are an agency, it is the women who insist on maintaining the culture as they are the ones who quarrel over how Ma Blackie is to dress in her period of mourning: "She must never have a bathe... she must wear continually the same old smoked rags" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 72). The women in Emecheta's narrative are the enforcers of these traditions,

to properly place women in tradition. In other words, women participate in their own cultural oppression. Okonkwo is set on capitalizing on the role of women as agency to achieve his aims: "...the Eze title which could be his as soon as he had sufficient money. His sights were already set on his brother's wife, his brother's property and the bride price his brother's daughter would fetch..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 72). In essence, Okonkwo is already beginning to assess both Ma Blackie and Aku-nna in terms of their economic values to his chieftaincy ambitions and for this reason: "he decided that Ma Blackie should be allowed to have her way" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 72). And because of this compromise, nine months after Ezekiel's death: "she was visited at night by Okonkwo. She became his fourth wife" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 73). This is the scenario that Emecheta has been preparing his readers for and Ma Blackie herself accepted her new role, as a property to be inherited by Okonkwo. Okonkwo's other wives were active agents of female marginalization because they were not angry at their husband's behaviour. They were only angry because Aku-nna is going to school as they reasoned in their consciousness:

Ma Blackie... belonged to the elite, for her children attended school, and this was a bone of contention between Okonkwo and his other wives and children. They could stomach Nna-nndo's going to school for he was a boy, and also his father had left over one hundred pounds in savings and had joined a progressive Ibuza group called the Pioneer Association... (Emecheta, 1976, p. 74).

Therefore, as it seems the major worry of the other women in Okonkwo's household is that a girl child has been given the benefit of education. They only relented when they realized that it fitted Okonkwo's 'Eze' ambition because she would fetch a higher bride price to help Okonkwo realize his 'Eze' aspirations. In other words, the narrative rather than raising the consciousness of Nigerian women ended up preparing them for the social roles Nigerian society has assigned to women. To press home her opposition, Iloba, one of Okonkwo's wives had told her husband: "Yes, I know you can do nothing thing about the boy. But what of that thing... Aku-nna! Why waste money on her? (Emecheta, 1976, p. 74). In reaction one of his wife's protests, Okonkwo tried to pacify his wife's anger by telling her: "Her mother pays for her. And she surely won't be going on to any college" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 75).

Therefore, in Emecheta's narrative, it is women who are the obstacles to women advancement and liberation from cultural oppression. To fur-

ther convince his wife Iloba, Okonkwo tells her of how the strategy fits into his kingship plans: "Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me. You see the trend today, that the educated girls fetch more money" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 75). Therefore, allowing Aku-nna to attend school is only utilitarian aimed to promoting male ego: "His sons were pacified and wondered to themselves at the cleverness and experience their father had just displayed" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 75). So Aku-nna would continue to attend school: "...Aku-nna had had to be allowed to stay in school so that she could be married to a rich man..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 75). There is the use of the device of irony here. Ironically, it is women who attach economic value to women's education, as Iloba, reminds Ngbeke, Okonkwo's senior wife:

Did you not hear that the first doctor we have in this town is going to marry a girl from Ogwashi-Ukwu? And her parents are asking the doctor to pay nearly two hundred pounds for her bride price... She is a nurse and works in hospital looking after women who give birth to children... People who have seen her say she is not particularly beautiful... (Emecheta, 1976, p. 76).

From Iloba's tone of voice, there is a satisfaction from the women when the girl child fetches a higher bride price for the family as Ngbeke's contribution shows: "Ummm... but it is a great deal of money to pay for an ordinary woman... I won't mind if Aku-nna fetches such large sum. I could do with some money" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 76). It is Ogugua who informed her mother that Aku-nna is now her father's daughter and while doing so invoked the authority of tradition: "But, mother, Aku-nna is like a daughter to him now. In fact according to native law and custom, she is his daughter. Has our father not slept with her mother?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 77). According to this thinking, the fact that Okonkwo has inherited Ma Blackie transfers the right of the fatherhood of the children and so gives him unquestioning right to make decisions concerning their lives, especially the right to decide what to do with Aku-nna's bride price. That Emecheta's women have been socialized into this cultural code means that they are an agency of affirming patriarchal traditions.

For daring to think and look different from other girls of her age Aku-nna is being accused of being an "obanje" child by the womenfolk. Iloba verbalized this feeling when she asked Ngbeke: "mother do you think that girl might be an obanje?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 79). Aku-nna's crime at this moment is that she appears to be independent and assertive, a difference

from the docility of Emecheta's women in this narrative. That makes other women in Okonkwo's household to congregate and label her an obanje. Ngebeke was emphatic about her discovery when she stated: "YES, I am sure she is one... She is different..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 79). To be an 'obanje' in Ibuza is to be like living death, waiting for when they will pleasurably cause their mother pain and sorrow with their deaths. All these accusations coming from fellow women in this narrative classify women as an agency of patriarchal tradition that limits female aspiration. These limitations are meant to thwart Aku-nna's romantic and filial aspirations with Chike Ofulue, who is rejected in Ibuza tradition as a potential suitor because he is considered as *oshu* by tradition, but for Aku-nna Chike has captured her romantic dreams: "Chike Ofulue told her that she was valued, treasured and loved" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 83).

Surprisingly, from this moment Emecheta manipulates the narrative structure not only to defeat but also to destroy and kill Aku-nna's romantic spirit because it challenges the traditional belief that rejects any form of filial union between the daughter of a free born and the son of a slave (an *oshu*) and in the end, the narrative affirms this, thereby affirming the supremacy of traditional culture, despite the fact that: "We are all equal in the sight of the Lord" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 84).

The origin of Chike was abominable in the eyes of Ibuza people because his grandmother was captured from Ubulu-ukwu in the ages past into the household of the Ofulues: "By the time her master died and she had to be buried alive with him, she had already borne four sons and two daughters. The girls were sold, but the rightful son of Ofulue retained all the boys" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 84). By the consequences of this traditional wickedness, all the descendants of these boys and daughters became *oshu* or abomination in the eyes of the society. Not even the social advancement of the individuals involved can repair the social stigma: "Most of the slaves whom the missionaries took in were to become the first teachers, headmasters, and later their children became the first doctors and lawyers in many Igbo towns" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 84). It is for this reason that Chike is disqualified from marrying Aku-nna, despite being in love with her, and Emecheta uses the narrative structure of the text to affirm the supremacy of this cultural practice. For Chike, ordinarily his lineage from the "ashu" slave family did not worry him too much, for as he reasoned: "Had not his family produced many professional men? Did not his half brothers and sisters own the biggest and longest cars the town of Ibuza had ever seen?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 84).

Yet despite these achievements and more, the senior Ofulue, Chike's father understands the restrictions tradition has placed on his family because in the eyes of tradition: "...they were still slaves, *ashu*" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 86). Because he understands the intricacies of the tradition on the position of his ancestors, he fears for his son's romantic relationships with Aku-nna and seeks to discourage him because he knew that Ibuza culture would thwart their aspirations:

Now he cautioned Chike. "I went to school with Ezekiel Odia. I was a senior when he was still learning his ABC. I would not like a son of mine to bring shame on his only daughter. I saw the way you were looking at her in church—everybody noticed it. But I beg you not to spoil the girl!" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 86).

In other words, the senior Ofulue's concern about his son's romantic feelings towards Aku-nna is due mainly to the acceptance of the infallibility of the custom and tradition of Ibuza people. However, Chike and Aku-nna are willing to let their romantic spirit challenge this oppressive and obnoxious tradition. Try they did, but in the end, they are defeated because Emecheta insists on the supremacy of patriarchal tradition.

The pattern of events with his father worried Chike, and he angrily demanded of his father: "Is she not a girl to be married some day?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 88). Chike's reaction to his father's caution underscores his determination to reject and challenge the obnoxious designation of his person as '*ashu*' and the whole caste system contrary to his father's acceptance of his classification by the tradition of Ibuza people. Interestingly, Chike pins his romantic aspirations of success on the Western culture: "This was the age of the white man's law...if you did not want trouble for yourself or your family, you abided by the laws of the white man" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 89). Chike's love for Aku-nna was built on genuine trust, on helping her advance her educational career so that she could be socially and economically empowered in the society, and Aku-nna comes to appreciate this and so responded to his romantic feelings which were like a shield to her. Chike encouraged Aku-nna to work hard at her studies and pass her final examination so that she could become a teacher because if she failed, he told her: "...you know as well as I do that your people would never let you sit it again" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 91). Here, Chike's perception is due mainly to his understanding of the gender imbalance in the society where the male child is given more opportunities of education than the girl child. Chike's deep love and romantic

attachment made him resolve: "... to marry this girl, even if it meant breaking all the Laws of Ibuza" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 94).

As if nature was preparing Chike for Aku-nna, it was Chike who first noticed Aku-nna's first menstrual circle and nursed her: "You wait here, he said, letting her go gently. 'I'll get you something from the first-aid kit. Sit down where you were before. I shall not be long" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 94). In Ibuza culture, a woman's menstrual circle is an abomination: "And when a woman was unclean, she must not go to the stream, she must not enter a household where the man of the family had either the 'Eze' or 'Ala' title—her uncle Okonkwo had the latter" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 95). It is an abomination for the female child not to comply to these traditional rules because there are very severe consequences—the offending female individual might not be killed immediately: "... but Ibuza people had ways, psychological measures to eliminate those who committed the abominable alu" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 95). By implications Emecheta seems to be justifying the feminine body as a sports or object of pleasure for the male gender. The girl child is expected to accept this as part of her growing up and socialization:

...boys who came to their hut for night games would begin trooping in—their customs allowed this. Boys would into your mother's hut and play at squeezing a girl's breast until they hurt; the girl was supposed to try as much as possible to ward them off and not be bad-tempered about it (Emecheta, 1976, p. 99).

For Aku-nna, her romantic feeling for Chike was deep: "All she wanted was to make him happy, to make him realise that his being an outcast did not matter to her" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 100). But the narrative structure seeks to obstruct this romantic ideal and to affirm traditional values as supreme. For instance, Aku-nna and her age grade understand that:

Some youth who had no money to pay for a bride might sneak out of the bush to cut a curl from a girl's head so that she would belong to him for life and never be able to return to her parents; because he had given her the everlasting haircut, he would be able to treat her as he liked, and no other man would ever touch her (Emecheta, 1976, p. 106).

The conscious reality of this culture for the first time makes the young girls to band together to protect themselves against predatory males. Their bonding is not due to a conscious desire to resist this culture. In their consciousness, they have accepted this cultural value as supreme.

Interestingly, Chike's vision of love for Aku-nna is immersed in elemental romantic ideals. For this vision empowers him to challenge his father's alternative plans. He makes it known to him that: "... he was not about to leave for any university without Aku-nna". He had politely told his father "... to keep his money. He and Aku-nna would manage somehow. What was the point of getting a degree anyway... it would not necessarily make him a happier person" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 107). Therefore, Chike's vision for Aku-nna is steeped in elemental and romantic affiliations. For this reason, his father had begged his mother to convince him to give up Aku-nna because as he reasoned: "there were many fishes in water..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 108). When Aku-nna eventually became a full-grown woman, it was a thing of joy friends and family alike, especially to her cousin, Ogugua because "...Aku-nna would fetch a big sum because she had attended school so long" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 113). But Aku-nna pulled by Chike's elemental love knew that there would be no other man in her life: "She felt like boasting that... it was Chike and nobody else—they must all know about the friendship between her and Chike" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 113). And on the basis of this romantic love she is prepared to commit *ife ala* or abomination against patriarchal tradition if marrying Chike was what it meant, and she will stick with her choice of spouse: "She thought of Chike... of his gentle caresses and low sad voices, of his eyes which mirrored all the worries in her mind" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 114).

In the above extract, Aku-nna is responding to Chike's elemental feelings which she believes will dare and defeat Ibuza culture and usher in the era of modern liberal spirit. As the girls crossed the river on their way home, their attention was drawn to the scene where an old man was telling his audience the story of his life's misery: "My first wife ran away... because I beat her up. My second wife died when she was having a child. My third one had to go, because I fed her for seven entire years and she bore me no child" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 114).

The man's narrative typifies the agony of women in marriage in patriarchal Nigerian societies such as the Igbo tradition. In addition, there are important gender implications in the old man's story. The first is that the man has the right, conferred by tradition to beat his wife. The second is that a woman's value is tied to her proclivity in marriage. This is very clear when one of the female listeners told the old man he should not have sent his third wife away because she was a good cook. In reply to this comment, the old man affirmed: "Yes, she does cook well, but I also want a child.



*A male child as fat as a plum yam to inherit all my properties*" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 115, emphasis mine). There is clear stress on gender imbalance in the old man's discourse. The fact that Emecheta makes Aku-nna and other young female characters congregate to listen to the old man's narrative means that she probably uses the story to socialize the female sex into the supremacy of male values and to instil these cultural values into their consciousness. Therefore, the old man's narrative at the Atakpo stream smacks of gender bias and Emecheta as events would show uses it to endorse the supremacy of patriarchal culture.

Chike becomes more worried with time. Chike's source of worry or unhappiness is the possibility of Ibuza tradition thwarting his romantic inclinations for Aku-nna. And as if in equal elemental feelings Aku-nna begins to experience the same feelings of unhappiness:

Those brown eyes that had a way of reflecting everything around her now looked very frightened. She looked at him appealingly, then quickly began to stare at the cracked ground, aware that they were now being shamelessly watched as they were surrounded by human silence (Emecheta, 1976, p. 117-118).

Here, Emecheta captures Aku-nna's apprehensions using symbolic tools and the metaphoric expressions. The word "cracked ground" is a metaphor that reflects the difficulty in their journey to true love. It also symbolizes the obstacles imposed by patriarchal tradition of Ibuza society to the search for true love. As time progressed the elemental feelings of love between Chike and Aku-nna grew in regularity and intensity, dreaming of a place "... to where they would be all by themselves like savages of old, he hunting for their food, she waiting at their abode to receive his love and to give him hers" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 118). These outpouring of emotions typify the romantic spirit of elemental love which the Brontë sisters have so elegantly explored in their narratives. As if the narrative structure of the text is geared towards defeating these romantic outpouring of love: "The news of the happenings on the farm had preceded the girls home, as had the speculation that Chike Ofulue, the son of a slave, had looked at the daughter of a free-born Ibuza citizen with desirous eyes" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 118). The news of Aku-nna's maturity into womanhood pleased her step-father, Okonkwo, because he would soon have his bride price and to celebrate his good fortune, he "presented her with a hen that had been protesting violently in his clutch" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 119).

Again, the choice of hen is instructive. It is symbolic and gendered and Okonkwo exploits it as a symbol to show his symbolic power: "Now the entire bride price would come to him" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 119). This thinking is based on the culture because he has inherited Ma Blackie and has fulfilled Ma Blackie's dream of having a child again: "Had he not given Ma Blackie the child he had been craving for year?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 119). This seems to suggest that a woman's value is in relation to her proclivity and women themselves have been socialized to accepting this as normal that is why Ma Blackie seemed satisfied with herself with Okonkwo.

The only conscious female character who represents feminine gender is Aku-nna. She voices her frustration about patriarchal cultural restrictions because: "she was not allowed a say in her own life and was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all. Fancy her mother advising her to forget Chike and do as she was told..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 120). The implication of this complaint is that Ma Blackie has become an active agency of the supremacy of patriarchal institution, and this is what worries Aku-nna about her mother. Because of this lack of consciousness in the life of Ma Blackie, Aku-nna begins to loathe her and became livid about the hen given to her by Okonkwo to celebrate her maturity into womanhood. For this other women began to criticize her. For instance, Okonkwo's second wife, Ozuba was angry with Aku-nna and "began to scold and tell her in a clamorous voice how ungrateful she was" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 120).

Again, it is Emecheta's women who want to quench the ember of female consciousness in Aku-nna in support of patriarchal tradition. Even Ezebona, Okonkwo's youngest wife told "Aku-nna to mind her ways... looked at her with so much hate that she was forced to assume a serious and concerned expression" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 121). Aku-nna's total rejection of Ibuza culture and tradition is tied to her earnest wish to be Chike's wife and no others. This is a strong romantic affiliation which is relayed in her dual voice that rejects the entire Ibuza culture that seeks to thwart her romantic aspirations: "Her heart ached and tears began to well up in her eyes again, this time because it looked as if she was going to be trapped into a marriage that she was helpless to prevent. God please kill me instead... rather than let this be happening to me" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 122). This wish shows that Aku-nna's heart is romantically attached to Chikes, so does her body: "Her mind ached for Chike, and so did her body" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 122). But in Ibuza tradition Aku-nna's romantic feelings for Chike "was the result of an infatuation she would grow out of..."

For what sane person would ever consider sharing her life with a slave?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 123). It is in this area that Aku-nna seeks to transform Ibuza culture and tradition. Unfortunately, Emecheta's feminist consciousness fails her abysmally when she sides with tradition and defeats Aku-nna's romantic affiliations. And worst still, Ma Blackie gave Aku-nna no support in her determination to fight Ibuza patriarchal tradition, and this surprised Aku-nna "...that here now was this same mother of hers standing up and telling these people that Chike was not going to be the man for her daughter" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 126). At this point Aku-nna felt betrayed at her Ma Blackie's hypocrisy: "The bitterness Aku-nna was feeling had gone beyond tears. She had heard it said often that one's mother was one's best friend, but she was beginning to doubt it" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 126).

In doing so, Aku-nna's consciousness judged Ma Blackie guilty of fraud for initially encouraging her friendship with Chike that made both of them to invest their emotions, and now here was her turning against them because of patriarchal restrictions. She however, pitied her mother's helplessness, just as she rejects the entire primitive culture when she asserts: "Oh, what kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and make so many people unhappy" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 126). But, in spite of this Aku-nna's feelings belonged to Chike as her dual voice reveals: "...Chike was one of those men whom women would always feel like cherishing and protecting, whether they turned out to be murderers, smugglers, or even sons of slaves" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 129). In this context, Aku-nna moralizes her love for Chike and articulates why Ibuza culture must bend.

The kidnapping of Aku-nna for a forced marriage with Okoboshi was painful to Aku-nna upon realization: "The realization was so painful, and the men carrying her moved so rapidly... when she arrived at her new home in Umueze, Aku-nna was a limp bride in need of revival" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 131). Interestingly in this night of kidnapping, Aku-nna's and Chike's souls reunited in elemental romantic love. In another direction on his way home, the two hearts merged: "He stopped suddenly. He felt that somebody somewhere was calling out his name.... He shuddered and would have run, but the call came again. This time the voice was clear: it was Aku-nna's" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 135). And as a result of this feeling Chike wept bitterly into his father's chest as the old man understood the pain in his heart: "Every tear seemed to hit the older man like the sharp end of a hot needle" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 135).

To show that patriarchal society endorsed the shameful act of kidnapping women to be forcefully married: "... three male members of the Obidi

family came to disclose to Okonkwo that his stepdaughter Aku-nna was lying peacefully on the mud couch specially prepared for her and her husband Okoboshi" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 138). And after some kegs of palm-wine, and the promise of a reasonable sum of bride price Okonkwo was satisfied. In the end the visitors departed: "... as reasonably happy in-laws, whilst the women slept" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 138). Here as elsewhere there is a note of docility from Ma Blackie and the other women, whereas a feeling of satisfaction from the men folk. In the end, it was another woman, Okoboshi's mother who explained to Aku-nna the reason for her kidnap:

You are not to worry. We shall send a message to your mother... my husband decided to get you for our boy this way because we saw and heard of the part that slave boy wanted to play in your life. No girl from a family as good as yours would dream of marrying a slave (Emecheta, 1976, p. 139).

Moreover, to show that women are agency in this narrative, all the other women affirmed, not minding the psychological trauma they were inflicting on Aku-nna: "Oh, no, chorused the other women, shaking their heads. 'It is never done'" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 139). In other words, Aku-nna's kidnapping for Okoboshi is justified on the ground that: "... it was their custom..." (Emecheta, 1976, p. 141). Yet despite the authority of culture being deployed against her romantic aspirations, Aku-nna is determined to fight: "... she was not going to be a willing bed partner to somebody she did not love and who had never spoken a single kind word to her in her whole life" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 141). For Aku-nna her decision on a life partner hinges on love and romantic feelings.

Aku-nna's romantic feelings towards Chike can be deduced from her reaction when Chike whistled his love song from his hiding place: "Her numbed mind came alive. It was the one song which Chike always called her, it was their message and their love song" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 141). And the knowledge of this gave her strength and she resolved that "If ever she got out of this alive; there was no man for her but Chike, slave or no slave" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 142). Evidently it is her elemental love—the joining of her soul with Chike's soul that gives "her determination" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 142). It is this determination to belong exclusively to Chike that she used as a strategy to thwart Okoboshi from sleeping with her by lying to him that the supposedly slave boy, Chike had done so several times, hence Okoboshi told her, he never on his own wanted her but for his father: "My father wanted you simply to get even with his old enemy Ofulue, your slave

lover's father. So, you are not a virgin!" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 145). And for this Aku-nna became a mockery in the eyes of the people, most of them women who even predicted her death for going against the tradition of Ibuza culture, as they declared: "Nobody goes against the laws of the land and survives" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 148). Rather sadly, Emecheta in the end uses the narrative structure to affirm this stark patriarchal prophecy. Then Aku-nna's escape from hostage was due to her love attachment with Chike who had risked his life to rescue her from the Obidi hostage camp as she went to the latrine at the bush "near the *owele*... she was being held tightly by Chike—he seemed to breathe life into her, giving her exhausted body the energy, it lacked" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 151). This escape is due mainly to the elemental bond driving the lovers. They were able to elope to Ugheli, near Asaba in present Delta State to start life as husband and wife, a culmination of their romantic love. As Chike planned to leave Ibuza for good where tradition held sway, one thing was clear on his romantic mind: "he was leaving and he was taking Aku-nna with him, even if she had been married to twenty Okoboshis" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 154). This is the spirit of undying love which is the essence of classical romantic fiction. Chike's genuine love for Aku-nna is displayed in his willingness to bring Nna-nndo to live with them so as to continue his education and the desire to make Ma Blackie financially independent of Okonkwo. In appreciation, Aku-nna declared: "I shall always love and love you, in this world and in the next and the next after that until the end of time" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 156).

Aku-nna's responses and Chike's action towards her is defined by the bond of love between them. Their love shines like the sun and that makes the driver who carried them from the market to their new house to comment: "... he foresaw nothing but happiness for the two of them" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 159). This radiance of love made their host and neighbour, Adegor who came to help them to declare: "Therefore I christen this bed 'Joy'" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 159). Even in his moment of trial when Aku-nna was being kidnapped, Chike boldly tells his father "... that all he wanted was the girl's heart and happiness, and as long as he had those there was little else, he desired" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 160). During the night of their first love making as husband and wife, Chike discovered to his shock and elation that Aku-nna was still a virgin despite the stories being circulated in Ibuza, making Chike to ask: "And you suffered all that disgrace for nothing, knowing you were innocent?" (Emecheta, 1976, p. 161). Aku-nna's desire to suffer humiliation in Ibuza society was just to forestall Okoboshi and preserve her purity for her lover, Chike. In response to Chike's question Aku-nna replied: "I love

you, Chike—please teach me how to give you joy” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 161). The sincerity of her love awakened in Chike a deep sense of gratitude for the girl who endured shame to show him love. And he exclaimed to the injustice of it all: “Your people must know this... Your name must be cleared. My father must be told. This is scandalous!” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 161). In those few words Chike’s incisive mind indicts the patriarchal foundation of Ibuza tradition. In reaction to this Aku-nna wishes that Chike would just pay her bride price in line with Ibuza patriarchal tradition and tells Chike: “...Just give them their bride price in peace, because you know what they say: if the bride price is not paid, the bride will die at childbirth” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 161). Aku-nna’s reaction here is mainly due to cultural indoctrination and socialization and proves that her marriage to Chike is due to the romantic pole and stresses her agency to the affirmation of patriarchal values, which is what this narrative sets out to achieve.

However in Ibuza, it is believed that Aku-nna still belonged to Okoboshi because he had lied to them that he had slept with her and found her empty, meaning she was not a virgin and then proceeded to lie that “he had cut a lock of her hair—some stray curls were produced as evidence—and so, according to their laws and customs, she could not get away from her husband” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 162). This thinking rooted in patriarchal tradition made Okonkwo to reject Aku-nna’s bride price from the Ofulue’s family and Ibuza people sought consolation in the fact that Aku-nna had not married Chike because “... Okonkwo did not accept any bride price from the slave, the girl still belonged to Okoboshi” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 162). In their eyes and the eyes of their tradition, Aku-nna could never return to Ibuza “because she had committed an abomination” (Emecheta, 1976, p. 162). According to Ibuza custom and tradition Aku-nna would die during childbirth because Okonkwo had refused to accept Chike’s bride price. Nevertheless, her parting word to her husband on her death bed underscores the triumph of the romantic spirit over Ibuza patriarchal traditions, as she tells Chike:

... I told you that I would not keep our love a secret. Now with our little girl, everybody will know. They will all know how passionately we love each other. Our love will never die... Let us call her Joy too, the same name we gave to the bed on which she was conceived (Emecheta, 1976, p. 176).

Aku-nna’s dying word shows that romantic elemental love has in fact confronted patriarchal Ibuza culture. But that she should die during

her first childbirth because her bride price was never collected by her stepfather, Okonkwo means that Emecheta's narrative, *The Bride Price* has been used to question romantic love and affirm the supremacy of patriarchal tradition.

## Conclusion

The paper studies the role of women as an agency in the affirmation of male values in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. It is observed that agency in this narrative undermined feminist consciousness, the ideology of female liberation and the positive aspirations of the female individual.

In the novel, marriage, especially the payment of the bride price in Igbo society, the narrative setting is a symbol of limiting the woman's choice in the institution of marriage, more so in traditional societies like Nigeria.

I have argued in this paper that women are integral parts of the society, who however have had their romantic aspirations limited and repudiated by patriarchal culture and in *The Bride Price* Emecheta used women as an agency to validate obnoxious patriarchal traditions which put women in check and discomfort, through the prism of the bride price.

Finally, as we have shown, Emecheta's narrative affirms patriarchal tradition, which inhibits the growth of female consciousness and romantic inclinations in marriage through the imposition of the symbolic totem of the bride price as affirmed by patriarchy.

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