

## **Gender and Education in Postcolonial Narratives: An Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli***

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### **Abstract**

Literature reflects the society in which we live. Buchi Emecheta (Nigerian) and Rama Mehta (Indian) are two postcolonial women writers who vividly portray African Igbo society and Indian Hindu society in their novels. The authors address issues and challenges faced by African and Indian women in their respective traditional patriarchal societies. Education is a significant thematic issue related to gender in their respective novels, *The Bride Price* (1976) and *Inside the Haveli* (1977). In this context, the paper aims to study the intersection of gender and education reflected in the novels, examining how gender obstructs female children from obtaining basic educational rights and how education is viewed in terms of 'bride price' and 'dowry'. The potential findings of the paper suggest that education is either denied or discouraged for female children and women; in African society, education is permitted for daughters on the condition that it will secure a good 'bride price' for their families in marriage, while in Indian society, education is discouraged among the poorer segments due to fears of high 'dowry' demands by the groom's family.

**Keywords:** bride price, dowry, education, feminism, gender

### **Introduction**

The intersection of gender and education in postcolonial narratives presents a rich area for academic inquiry, uncovering the intricate dynamics that shape the experiences of individuals in formerly colonized societies. Postcolonial literature offers a vital perspective to examine the legacies of colonialism, particularly concerning their impacts on gender roles and access to education. This introduction aims to investigate the portrayals of gender and education in postcolonial narratives, emphasizing the socio-political contexts that influence these representations and their importance in understanding identity, power, and resistance.

Following the end of colonial rule, many nations faced the remnants of imperial ideologies that continue to influence societal structures, particularly in gender and education. Stories from these contexts often illustrate the tension between traditional cultural practices and the modernization introduced during colonial rule. The colonial education system, which primarily benefited the colonizers, not only perpetuated existing social hierarchies but also gave rise to new forms of gender oppression. Women, in particular, had to navigate the complexities of their identities amidst these intersecting forces during a time of rapid change.

Postcolonial narratives often showcase women's viewpoints as they challenge the patriarchal systems reinforced by colonial and postcolonial powers. These stories illustrate the obstacles women face in attaining education, which is seen as both a source of empowerment and a

form of oppression. The educational journeys of female protagonists reflect broader societal concerns, including ongoing struggles against systemic injustices and the quest for self-determination. In numerous postcolonial texts, the quest for education becomes a defiant stance against colonial legacies and patriarchal constraints, as women claim their rights to knowledge and autonomy.

Moreover, the portrayal of male characters in postcolonial narratives adds depth to the dialogue on gender and education. While men might be depicted as beneficiaries of colonial education systems, their roles are often complicated by the pressures to adhere to traditional masculine ideals and expectations from both colonial and indigenous cultures. The connection between gender and education thus reveals a spectrum of experiences, where men and women alike grapple with the ramifications of their educational journeys in a postcolonial landscape.

As the saying goes, literature is a reflection of society. It reflects the prevailing socio-cultural, economic and political condition of the society. Buchi Emecheta (Nigerian) and Rama Mehta (Indian) vividly portray the African Igbo society and the Indian Hindu society in their novels. Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) and Rama Mehta (1923-1978) being sociologists write about the women in the existing patriarchal societies from the social perspectives. Both the writers have written novels and essays which reflected the women-centric issues of their time. The writers write of issues and problems which are faced by the African and the Indian women in their respective traditional patriarchal societies. Some of the major issues embedded in their novels are about women emancipation, tradition and modernity, gender discrimination, exploitation of women and daughters, entrapment of women by patriarchal bindings and their marginal position in the existing society. Education is one important thematic issue linked with gender in their respective novels *The Bride Price* (1976) and *Inside the Haveli* (1977). With the birth of feminism, women have started contesting the established patriarchal norms and put up a fight for their rights on par with men. The Eurocentric feminism has influenced the African and Indian women with a new consciousness of making their voices heard. It can be stated that both the writers have been exposed to western education and modern environment that their works reflect upon the importance of education and their need in every women's lives. Their novels bring home the message that education is the only tool for equipping the young girls and women to make their lives self-sufficient and independent. However, access to education by daughters and women in the African Igbo society as well as in the Indian Hindu society is not an easy task. Their gender comes as a hindrance to their basic right of education. The paper, in this context, is an attempt to study the treatment of gender and education reflected in the novels, how gender hinders in getting basic educational rights by female children and how education is perceived in terms of 'bride price' and 'dowry'.

### **Analysis of *The Bride Price* and *Inside the Haveli*:**

Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* (1976) is about a young protagonist named Aku-nna, her struggle to achieve education and survive in the African patriarchal society in Ibo. Aku-nna's early life is filled with gender discrimination and is often compared with her brother Boy since the African society is male-preferred. One of the major scenes for the existence of gender discrimination is witnessed when Aku-nna's birth is not celebrated or even recorded, and so her exact age is not known in the novel. The writer writes that she is a girl of around thirteen years of age. 'Gender' is a culturally constructed concept, while 'sex' is a biological concept. The famous line is pertinent to quote here: "One is not born, but

rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir 283). And according to H.A. Eagly (1987), a professor in psychology and management, defines 'gender' as a "meaning that societies and individuals ascribe to male and female categories" (4). Due to gender, males and females are categorized into the binaries of strong and weak, superior and inferior, etc. Even the nature of certain activities in their household is divided according to their gender. These gender roles glorify the African men, whereas the African women are looked down upon as physically inferior and are ascribed to carry out activities which require less physical strength and stamina, such as working inside the household and rearing of the children, while the men go out to work on the farms. Emecheta's novel also exposes the inadequacies of gender discrimination practiced in the Igbo society. According to the traditional African culture, a girl child is assigned with duties and roles considered appropriate for her sex. In her essay "Feminism with a Small 'f'", Emecheta stresses the social roles of a girl child in her article:

From childhood she is conditioned into thinking that being the girl she must do all the housework, she must help her mother to cook, clean, fetch water and look after her younger brothers and sisters. If she moans or shows signs of not wanting to do any of this, she will be sharply reminded by her mother. 'But you are a girl! Going to be a woman'. (173)

The happy family of Ezekiel is turned into a sad one with his sudden demise. In the traditional Igbo society, no widow is allowed to live all by and her own so she is to be inherited by her surviving dead husband's brother as per African marriage tradition. Aku-nna, her mother and her brother are inherited by her uncle Okonkwo. The problem arises in the novel when Aku-nna's continuation of her education is put to question by her stepbrothers Illoba and Osenekwu. Okonkwo's reply discloses how the girls will make him an Obi (Chief) which requires a good amount of money:

Her mother pays for her. And she surely won't be going on to any college. So she only has a few more months of school . . . (*The Bride Price* 74)

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. (*The Bride Price* 75)

It can be seen that Okonkwo's reason for allowing Aku-nna to continue her study is to only help him in making him an Obi (chief) with the money fetched from the bride price of Aku-nna. Here the writer highlights an important aspect of the African traditional marriage such as the 'bride price'. The term 'bride price' is sometimes referred to as *bride-wealth*, is a form of marriage payment in which the bride's group receives a payment of goods, money, or livestock to compensate for the loss of a woman's labor and the children she bears. These exchange relations between families may persist over many years and in some societies constitute the chief means for the circulation of wealth. In these situations, marriage is a corporate enterprise in which control over prestige valuables is exercised by an older generation of men. Marriage payments are thus a way of establishing and securing alliances and for allocating women's labor power and fertility (Fleishing). Bride price is paid mostly in the form of money but it can also be in the form of land or animals in exchange of the bride's fertility. If the groom's family is unable to pay the bride price of the bride, the bride is generally believed to die in her childbirth. It is a traditional Igbo myth which Buchi Emecheta has highlighted in the novel.

Aku-nna elopes and marries Chike an Osu (descendant of a slave). However, Aku-nna's stepfather didn't approve of the marriage as she has violated and gone against the wish of her family by marrying an outcaste. As a result, Okonkwo didn't accept the bride price offered by Chike and so Aku-nna dies in her childbirth thus fulfilling the prophecy of the traditional Igbo myth of unpaid bride price. The Igbo society also warns of such offence in order to keep the marriage a happy one. Emecheta through this novel has tried to put the dilemma of young African girls especially daughters who are denied of basic right to education so as to help her family get the bride price. Emecheta stresses the need of education for women in an interview:

(. . .) I always believe that given the big E--Education – the position of women can be very positive. (Boss 99)

Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977), on the other hand, is a novel grounded in traditional Indian patriarchal society. The novel is about a modern and educated young protagonist named Geeta who finds herself entrapped in the aristocratic haveli of Udaipur after her marriage to Ajay Singh, the son of an ex-chief minister, Sangram Singh. The novel reflects upon the lives of wives and women of aristocratic families which maintained their years of tradition. The tradition is a strict one when it comes to its women and daughters. Mehta's novel is a reflection of such women and daughters whose lives are limited within the walls of the haveli (a mansion). The novel chronicles Geeta's journey as she grapples with the internal conflict between tradition and modernity. She is in utter shock to witness the conservative world of the Oswal family. She is a modern educated young woman of nineteen years who is married to Ajay Singh, a professor of science at Udaipur University. It is pertinent to quote the age-old tradition of the family when Geeta is presented to the family members as a new bride to seek their blessings:

Geeta could hardly see through the gold embroidered sari; the tinsel tickled her nose, and she wanted to sneeze. She had never felt so nervous before. . . . As she bent down to touch the feet, she vaguely heard, 'May you have eight sons; may the gods bless you. May the haveli flourish forever.' The words barely registered in her mind; all she was aware of was the next pair of feet she must touch without losing her balance. (Mehta 34)

It can be noted here that the preference for male children by the Indian patriarchal society is highlighted by Rama Mehta. The existing gender discrimination between a female child and a male child is again brought into light by Mehta when Geeta gives birth to a daughter named Vijay Bai Sa and their housemaid Lakshmi's daughter Sita. The differentiation of class is also a major issue in the novel. It is observed that while Sita's birth is unwelcomed and looked upon as a burden by her father Gangaram for, he has to pay 'dowry' in her daughter's marriage. The birth of daughters in such family is condemned and viewed as a huge load to the family's misery. While in the case of Geeta's daughter Vijay, her birthday is celebrated with pomp and show by organizing a grand feast. One can also witness the news coming from different parts of our country the killing of newly-wed bride or married women on the issue of dowry by the groom's family. It will not be wrong to say that in the recent years; the dowry concept has become a life-threatening one in the Indian marriages.

Rama Mehta's novel displays the issue of education of daughters in the context of the conservative Hindu society. Geeta's daughter Vijay is allowed to pursue education but for the housemaid Lakshmi's daughter Sita, her family's financial condition becomes an obstacle.

When Geeta insists that Sita should also go the school like Vijay, she is objected by a senior housemaid Pari saying:

‘Binniji, Sita is a child of a servant. She cannot go to school.’

‘Binniji, you do not yet know Udaipur and its customs. Sita has to marry. Leave her to us, the servants. We know what is best for her.’

‘Binniji, a girl who has to live in the village must be sturdy. She cannot be pampered. Her limbs must be strong to pull water from the well, to plough the fields, collect the cow dung. As it is, Sita is Lazy. You send her to school and she will think she is a little lady.’ (Mehta 98-99)

Gender is a great hindrance when it comes to educating a girl child for the poor section of the Indian society. Mehta’s novel presents the existing socio-cultural taboo placed on the girl child which restricts her basic educational rights. Geeta, with the support of her in-laws starts a school inside the haveli for the haveli’s women and their children. The school aims at giving the basic knowledge of reading and writing. At first, Geeta’s plan is ridiculed by many elder women and other housemaids but later they joined with their children. It is observed that education is treated as a secondary thing for women and female children. When Vijay stands first in her class, Bhagwat Singh ji’s wife says:

Coming first is all right, Vijay, but you must also learn to cook and sew. Don’t become like your mother. (Mehta 153)

A girl is often reminded her of her roles and duties expected of her in the society. Marriage is one of her life’s important duties which she needs to carry out. Rama Mehta’s novel presents the concept of marriage of daughters at early ages. In a way, the kind of marriage portrayed in the novel is that of a ‘child marriage’. First, Sita is married early to one Shivaram who just passed tenth standard. In Rajasthan, child marriage is practiced in the society. Here, Geeta is praised for Sita’s education for it is Sita’s education that has helped her with such a good groom. On the other hand, Geeta’s own daughter Vijay is engaged to Vir Singh, a graduate and the son of a reputed Daulat Singji’s family. Earlier, Geeta objects the engagement for Vijay was just thirteen years of age but it is found that in the novel that even Geeta found the engagement suitable for her daughter only because of the groom’s education and family’s reputation and on the condition that Vijay gets to complete her education even after marriage.

### **Conclusion:**

Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Bride Price* and Rama Mehta’s novel *Inside the Haveli* portray the lives of young girls and women trapped in patriarchal ideologies and societies. Gender is treated as a hindrance towards getting basic education in the existing traditional patriarchal societies. Women and daughters are taught and trained with the household chores as their only contributions towards their societies. Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* is educated just for the ‘bride price’ which her marriage was supposed to fetch to her family. The concept of bride price and education is importantly linked in the novel which reflects the commodification of a girl child in the traditional patriarchal society of Africa. While, in the novel *Inside the Haveli*, Geeta is in constant fight against the conservative society of Udaipur. Mehta highlights the taboos associated with the education of a girl child. ‘Dowry’ is still a serious marriage concept existing in the Indian society which Mehta has portrayed with great poignancy. The birth of a girl child is associated with the burden of dowry which her immediate family has to pay in her marriage. If it is failed, the beginning of a new life would



turn drastically into a life-threatening one for the bride. Thus, education is either denied or discouraged to female children and women; in the African society, education is allowed to daughter on the condition that her education should fetch good 'bride price' to her family in her marriage; while in the Indian society, education is discouraged in the poorer section of the society for the fear of demand of high 'dowry' by the groom's family. Therefore, these two women writers Buchi Emecheta and Rama Mehta have successfully captured the real situations of their societies which have shown the suffocating lives of daughters and women represented by the female characters in their novels chained by their patriarchal societies wherein education is considered secondary to marriage concepts.

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