



A Gender-Based Assessment of Socio- cultural Violence in Buchi Emecheta's Novel - LA Dot.

AHMED TITILADE M.O. PhD

Department of French,
Adeyemi Federal University of Education,
Ondo.

Abstract

There is no gainsaying that African women have suffered and continue to suffer from societal subjugation, barbaric cultures and patriarchal hegemony. In this modern-day period, women still encounter systemic barriers like gender-based violence, sexism, and marginalisation in the area of politics and education. Thus, cultural practices deprived women the opportunities to achieve self-confidence and autonomy. Buchi Emecheta, through her novel, *La dot*, the translated version of (*The Bride Price*) defies and critiques the existing cultural norms and oppressive tradition that covertly or overtly jeopardise women's lives. This paper is an investigation of concepts like widowhood, bride price, forced marriage, gender, osu caste, cultural traditions and sexist tendencies in the novel of Buchi Emecheta's *La dot*. Various scholars have produced copious writings on Emecheta's "The bride price" using feminist theories but this article draws from cultural violence theory to elucidate gender-based violence in *La dot*. The methodology adopted is close reading approach, which tends to explore power intricacies expanding beyond fictional level. Therefore, *La dot* has been purposively chosen to portray the dynamic forces that turned against the protagonist from achieving her authentic self, which made her to pay the tragic price of love. Thus, our analysis has shown the emancipatory strategies through which women and girls can achieve autonomy and overcome oppressive cultural structures. Education is identified as one of the priorities and a pathway to independence as this will provide young girls and women with the intellectual tools to recognize their inherent values beyond being a financial asset but a chance to make them economically buoyant.

Keywords: Widowhood, Bride Price, Osu Caste, Sexism, Violence Theory



Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a prolific Nigerian novelist who has always been in the fore front of women struggle. She authored over twenty books precisely on African societies. Buchi Emecheta's writing has been celebrated for her honest portrayal of complex social issues, inspiring many through her advocacy for women's rights and social justice. One of the preoccupations of any committed female writer is to speak for, and, to speak to others. Thus, a writer is considered a voice for the voiceless, a witness to the silenced, and someone who nurtures a community of the like-minded. Thus, Buchi Emecheta's writings deconstruct, expose, question, and argue against all unruly intersection of cultural taboos faced by women and marginalized group.

Buchi Emecheta, a prolific feminist writer uses her writing dexterity to defend women and girls, subvert barbaric cultures and disrupt hegemonic powers in her community. Despite Emecheta's feminist temperament and her commitment to women issues, she declined to be addressed as a feminist. This pronouncement is queried and affirmed in Oriaku's article (1996) "Buchi Emecheta: If not a feminist, then what?" Emecheta's response shocks some critics when she said: "I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know, I did not know by doing so I was going to be called a feminist, but if I am a feminist, then I am an African feminist with a small 'f'. In spite of her objection to the feminist tag, her writings continue to elicit and reflect feminist traits and values. Despite this declaration, people still viewed Buchi Emecheta as a feminist.

Adebayo, (1996), asserts that Emecheta, through her fictional writings "tear the veil of invisibility" (page 37). This is because she uses writing as the only liberating force against some issues that cannot be unveiled or divulged. Therefore, Emecheta leans on what D'Almeida says as cited in Ahmed (2019): Writing makes it possible to '*dire l'interdit*.' (speak the forbidden). Nawal El Sadawi (1994) is another writer who charged women to write. She declared "writing is like killing": because it takes a lot of courage. She posits further that: when you kill, you are killing injustices, killing a system that oppresses you, and sometimes, "it is better to kill the outside world than to kill yourself". (Ahmed, 2019). To buttress Nawal's assertion, a writer can reveal what someone thought to be a private phantasm as a collective thought. In so doing, literature grants sanity. Emecheta takes writing as a weapon to sanitise and deconstruct some of the dreadful and horrifying cultural norms that subdue women in their community.

The Conceptual Framework

Violence generally is defined by the World Health Organization (2002) as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”. Fisher (2011:4) conceptualizes violence to consist of all the attitudes, words, actions, structures and system which impede people from attaining their full possible human potential. Three types of violence are being identified in line of Fisher’s definition: physical violence, structural violence and psychological violence. Galtung (1969:171), categorised violence into direct and structural violence and later in 1990, she brings cultural violence to fore. The theory of cultural violence is originated from structural theory and as research evolved, the idea that a culture can condone violent acts advanced into culture of violence theory in this modern era.

The culture of violence theory revolves around the specific violent forms within a societal perspective. According to Galtung, (1990, 1996) cultural violence could be triggered by any aspect of culture: religion, value systems, norms, attitude or ideology. All these strengthen direct or indirect violence, personal violence and social injustice. Cultural violence can render them or justify them as normal in the society. In Buchi Emecheta's *La dot*, the culture of violence is obviously laid bare through the societal and personal experiences of the protagonist, Aku-nna, and other female characters. The novel explores how cultural norms and patriarchal structures perpetuate violence against women, and how it is justified and legitimized. Swan et al (2016) declared that “There are many factors which determine the persistence of violence among individuals and on a societal level. According to them, gender is the pertinent issue to understanding the culture of violence theory. This is because violence often has gendered dimensions and impacts. Thus, many forms of violence revolve around gender roles, gender norms and relations.

Summary of Buchi Emecheta’s *La dot*

Emecheta’s *La dot* is the translated version of *the bride price* (1976), other novels of Emecheta translated to French are: *The joy of motherhood* (*Les enfants sont une benediction*), *Second class citizen* (*Citoyen de seconde zone*). *La dot* is a compelling story based on the clash of tradition versus modernity. Women’s subjugation in a male dominated society is a persistent topic that

female writers attempt to placate in the traditional African setting. Themes of gender inequality, widowhood practice, tradition, and social change are also examined. The story recounts the life of Aku-nna, a young protagonist who navigates the pressures of her cultural community that placed importance on the bride price or bride wealth (a sum of money or quantity of goods given to a bride's family by that of the groom in some tribal societies). Buchi Emecheta uses *La dot* metaphorically and literally to depict women's submission to men. The text critiques and also condemns casteism (Oshu) and marriage in *La dot*, advocates for greater awareness or total eradication of some of the horrible cultures and traditions that impede the growth and development of women.

Manifestation of violence in the novel of Buchi Emecheta's *La dot*

As stated above, the preoccupation of most women authors is to satirise the cultural norms or tradition that hinders women's progress. Buchi Emecheta's *La dot* explores the dynamic forces of gender inequality within Igbo society. *La dot* critically examines how obnoxious traditional practices especially those related to widowhood practice and marriage support expectations that often marginalize women. The bride price which is deeply rooted in tradition marks the status and legitimacy for women within marriage. This cultural norm perpetuates gender inequality where, women are objectified or viewed as commodities to be sold.

Widowhood practice

Widowhood practices are deeply rooted in tradition and can deprive women from various rights such as: property rights, social participation and economic autonomy. Widowhood practices precisely in Igbo land often revolve around social seclusion, forced mourning rituals, and human rights violation. Copious scholars reveal that being a widow in some African communities is like a source of joy to the members of the husband's family. The belief is that the husband's family members will be enriched through the assets the deceased leaves behind. Family members always plan to ostracize the widow and if she proves adamant, the in-laws may kill her.

Remi Akujobi, (2009:2) in her article titled "Yesterday you were divorced, today I am a widow": An appraisal of widowhood practices and effects on the psyche of widows in Africa" writes on the act of dehumanization and oppressive conditions widows pass through in Africa.

Human greed which exists in African societies very much like others makes it possible for the easy exploitation of widows, the

urge to acquire material wealth, particularly what is considered “free” wealth controls the treatment of widows in society, all other activities, including levirate, may serve the same purpose. So, any mystification and rituals, superstitious practices are all geared toward the oppression of the widow more importantly for economic gains. In the same light, the dehumanization and humiliation the widow passes through in society is all a ploy to make her economically weak and voiceless.

The remarks of Umeh (2005) corroborates the observation of Akujobi when she declares that “Widows in parts of West Africa are often forced to go through traditional rites and rituals that deprive women of their dignity, health, and wealth.” For example, widows in Igbo land as observed by Umeh (2005) are isolated and confined to the family compound from two weeks to six months immediately after the death of a spouse. She describes their plight thus;

She is forced to dress in old, ragged clothes and is seated on the floor. The widow does not move out of the compound for the necessary Economic activities to sustain her and the children. During the mourning period, the widow is seen as unclean and sympathizers cannot shake hands with her. Instead, they leave gifts of money on the floor for her. After the official burial and funeral ceremonies are completed, the widow spends from three to twelve months at home, mourning for her husband. She depends on family and friends to help her during these difficult times and for economic survival.

The description of Umeh (2005) is not far-fetched from how Aku-nna describes the ordeal of her mother when her father Ézechiel Odia passes away.

Ma Blackie devait rester seule dans la case spéciale ; ce ne serait qu’après l’achèvement des mois de deuil qu’elle pourrait rendre visite aux gens chez eux. Elle ne devait jamais prendre de bain. Ni peigne ni ciseaux ne devaient toucher ses cheveux. Il lui fallait continuellement garder les mêmes vieilles loques couleur de

fumée. (La dot, p.105) [Ma Blackie was to remain alone in this special hut; not until the months of mourning were over could she visit people in their homes. She must never have a bath. No pair of scissors nor comb must touch her hair. She must wear continually the same old smoked rags.]

From this statement, it is noted that the condition of widows is so deplorable generally in Africa. Widows experience a lot of anguish from the society, the husband's family and from traditional beliefs. Should the husband die, the wife is labeled a witch, a fetishist or an adulterer.

Another cultural turbulence that manifests in the text is inheritance of the deceased wife. It is permissible in some African societies for a man to inherit his brother's wife. This is revealed in the conversation of Ogugua to Aku-nna:

-Nous serons comme des sœurs, surtout si ta mère choisit de venir avec mon père.

-Pourquoi est-ce que ma mère choisirait ton père ?

-tu as bientôt quatorze ans et tu ne connais pas encore les coutumes de notre peuple d'Ibuza ? mon père hérite ta mère, [...] comme il héritera de tout ce pour quoi ton père a travaillé. (La dot p.93-94) (We'll be like sisters – especially if your mother comes to live with my father'. 'Why should my mother live with your father?' [...] 'You're almost fourteen and you still don't know our customs! Your mother will become my father's wife. My father has inherited everything your father owned, and he has 'inherited' your mother too")

In view of this, it is deducible that a widow becomes a *béni oui-oui* (Yes-man) in the hands of the inheritor.

The Bride Price

The payment of bride price is actually a certain amount of money paid to his bride. This is a symbol of respect and appreciation for the bride's family but it could also suggest possession or commodification of women. Thus, Ibuza, a typical male-dominated society where the autonomy of the girl-child is limited, becomes a war to achieve authentic-self. Emecheta in her text, *La dot*

puts the message across that, young girls had to be on guard in Ibuza. This is because the patriarchal hegemony permits the young men to cut a piece of hair from a girl's head if he is unable to pay the bride price. Consequently, the girl automatically becomes the bride. This citation testifies to it.

À Ibuza, [...] un jeune sans argent pour payer une dot pouvait sortir en douce de la brousse et venir coupe une boucle sur la tête d'une fille de sorte qu'elle lui appartiendrait pour la vie et ne pourrait retourner chez ses parents [...]et aucun autre homme ne la toucherait jamais (La dot p.152). [In Ibuza, a man with no money to pay a bride price could hide behind the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from girl's head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and could never go back to her parents' house, and no other man could have her.]

This tradition is considered a gender-based violence.

In Emecheta's *La dot*, Aku-nna is not even ripe for marriage before the father, Ezechiel starts anticipating a large sum of the bride price he will collect on Aku-nna when she gets married. Literally, Aku-nna symbolises wealth. "La richesse de son père". (*La dot* :13) [Her father's wealth] « [...] La seule consolation qu'il pouvait attendre de sa part, ce serait sa dot. » (*La dot*: 13) [the only compensation he could get is the bride price]. This citation affirms his thoughts "Elle allait faire un beau mariage, elle épouserait un homme riche...qui pourrait payer un dot élevée ». (*La dot*: 13) [She would have a good marriage, she would marry a rich man, who could pay a high bride price]. Ezechiel never thought of the drama of slavery, bondage and muteness of her daughter after the collection of the bride price.

After the death of Aku-nna's father, Ezechiel, the step father, Okonkwo Odia sees himself as the beneficiary of the bride price. This is manifested in the novel:

Aku-nna et Ogugua se marieront à peu près en même temps. Leurs dots me reviendront. Tu vois bien la tendance aujourd'hui : les filles instruites rapportent plus d'argent (La dot p. 110). [Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at the same time. Their bride price

will come to me. You see the trend nowadays: educated girls bring much money]

Okonkwo's expectation of benefitting immensely from the marriages of educated girls accentuating the commodification of women in *La dot*. This hegemonic tendency could trigger emotional violence.

Forced Marriage

The psychological impact of being forced into a marriage against one's will is a form of violence. Aku-nna's emotional distress and attempts to escape from the trap, reveals the psychological toll of such practices. An arranged or forced marriage or marriage by abduction is a poignant issue that suppresses and oppresses women. Aku-nna is kidnapped the day the Christians, precisely the fifteen-year-old girls did a special dance. The scenario is described thus :

Dès pas lourds pénétrèrent dans la case et on entendit des voix inconnues, des voix d'hommes, [...] La voilà ! entendit-elle annoncer par une voix, allons-nous-en ! Elle ne pouvait pas hurler car elle avait la bouche couverte par une main brutale de fermier. Ses pensées étaient toutes agitées. Ça ne servait à rien de se débattre. Ils devaient être au moins douze, ces hommes qui couraient, et les hommes qui la portaient [...] qu'une espèce de vertige envahit Aku-nna. Quand elle arriva dans son nouveau foyer à Umueze, Aku-nna était une mariée une chiffé molle. (La dot, P. 185-186). [Then suddenly the oil lamps in the dancing hut all went off; there was sound of heavy feet. Strange voices, men's voices, were heard... 'Here she is!' cried a voice. 'Let's go!' Aku-nna tried to scream. But a rough hand covered her mouth and she was unable to make a sound. Suddenly Aku-nna realized what was happening. 'This is the end of all my dreams' she thought. 'They are kidnapping me.'

She could not get away. There were at least twelve men, running, carrying her along. She lost consciousness, and she was still unconscious when she arrived at her home. Thus, the aftermath

of forced marriage and kidnapping which includes: emotional trauma, loss of autonomy, physical abuse among the rest is apparent in the life of Aku-nna. Aku-nna is helpless and emotionally devastated. Aku-nna's mother could not help her because the tradition undermined her. The assertion of Obokoshi's mother towards Aku-nna showed that the kidnapping of a bride is just and not a taboo in Ibuza.

Ne te fais pas de souci. Nous allons envoyer un message à ta mère. Tu es en bonnes mains. Mon mari a décidé de t'obtenir pour notre garçon de cette façon-là, parce que nous avons appris et nous avons vu le rôle ce fils d'esclave voulait jouer dans ta vie. Aucune fille d'une famille aussi bonne que la tienne n'irait rêver d'épouser une esclave. Oh, non ! étonnèrent en chœur les autres femmes, ça ne fait pas jamais. (La dot p.197) [Okoboshi's mother greeted her warmly don't worry. We'll send a message to your mother. You're in good hands. My husband decided to kidnap you for our boy because of that slave, Chike. No girl from a good family like yours could possibility marry a slave. 'Oh no', repeated the other women. Never!]

Okoboshi's mother seems to forget that she too has a daughter that may be in Aku-nna's shoes one day. It is expected of her to shun the idea of kidnapping in order to prepare a better future for her daughter.

It is apparent in the text that Akunna at a tender age is denied direct experience of love to her heartthrob, Chike Ofulue. Chike is from the descendant of slave. Okoboshi is unsuited to her but if she proves stubborn, she could be sexually molested not only by Okoboshi, his friends will also join hands with him. This citation exemplifies this : « Sa nouvelle belle-sœur [...] l'averti qu'il ne fallait pas qu'elle essaie de faire des difficultés, parce qu'il suffisait qu'Okoboshi appelle à l'aide et tous ces hommes ivres entreraient et l'aideraient à lui tenir les jambes écartées de façon qu'il puisse la pénétrer sans problème. » (La dot, p.199) [Her sister-in-law warned her that Okoboshi could force her to sleep with him, and if she was unwilling his friends could hold her down].

The emotional impact of being forced into a marriage against one's will is a form of violence. Emecheta's depiction of girls' kidnapping in *La dot*, underscores the need to challenge and question societal norms. In view of this, Emecheta authorized her protagonist, Akunna to lie when Okoboshi wants to rape her. The act of lying takes Akunna to heroic-selfhood. This lie is considered a subversive strategy. Akunna outwits Okoboshi that she has lost her virginity to Chike. This citation exemplifies :

Oui, il (Chike) a couché avec moi souvent, bien souvent. » (La dot, P.203) [He slept with me often, very often]. This disclosure gets Okoboshi infuriated, slapped her with all his strength and she was bleeding in the mouth]. Having accepted the defeat, Okoboshi pretends as if he was not interested in her. “Je n’étais emballé pour toi de tout façon. [...] Ainsi tu n’es pas vierge. [...] tu vas rester ma femme de nom, mais dans quelques mois, j’épouserai la fille de mon choix et devras être à ses ordres et aux ordres de toutes mes épouses à venir. Sors de mon lit, chienne publique » (La dot, p. 205) [Thus, you are not a virgin. You will remain my wife by name, soon, I shall marry a girl of my choice, and you will fetch and carry for her. Now get out of my bed, public dog] [He hit her once more. She fell onto the floor and lost consciousness.]

Emecheta's *La dot* highlights the societal structures that give men control over women's lives and bodies. This control is exercised through arranged marriages, expectations of obedience, and the threat of violence if women defy these norms. Akunna is a victim of physical, emotional and verbal violence. The derogatory expression “chienne publique, “la maitresse d’esclave,” “putaine” (*La dot* p.205-206 [public dog, the slave's concubine, prostitute] used to describe Akunna suggests sexism. These languages can be demeaning and dehumanizing not only to Akunna but toward women in general. Akunna's attempts to resist the forced marriage and pursue education are acts of resistance against the violence she experienced.

The only solution to Akunna's plight is escape. Despite the pleas to Okonwo Odia to accept the new bride price offered to him by Chike's father, he refused to give her daughter to the son of a slave. « La dot fut de nouveau offerte à Okonkwo, mais il refusa de nouveau de donner sa fille

a un esclave ». In view of this, Aku-nna elopes with Chike Ofolue to Ughelli. This is a disgrace on the part of Okonkwo Odia. He is bent on taking revenge against Aku-nna. Okwonko makes a small doll in the exact image of Aku-nna in a bid to make her die a slow and painful death. Aku-nna eventually died during childbirth. A relationship that supposes to be a happy ever after becomes a thorn after ever.

The story of Aku-nna is a warning to all Ibuza's daughters. From the authorial voice,

Toutes les filles qui naquirent à Ibuza après la mort d'Aku-nna s'entendirent raconter son histoire, pour renforcer les anciens tabous du pays. Si une fille voulait vivre longtemps et voir les enfants de ses enfants, elle devait accepter le mari choisi pour elle par sa famille., et il fallait payer la dot. Si la dot n'était pas payée, elle ne survivrait jamais à la naissance de son premier enfant. (La dot: 246-7) [Every girl born in Ibuza after Akunna's death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wants to live long and see her children's children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she will not live to see her first child.]

Oshu Caste

Another manifestation of cultural turmoil in *La dot* is the depiction of Oshu caste in the Eastern community of Nigeria. Literature mirrors reality and in so doing, grants readers sanity or rationality. Buchi Emecheta, through the protagonists, Aku-nna and Chike Ofolue in *La dot*, create a new reality. Traditionally, oshus are described as the descendants of slave in Igboland and they are being relegated to the level of mediocre by diala class (Nwaubani, (2019). Nwaubani also asserts "oshu castes are considered pariahs". This is because they are regarded as outcasts who cannot socialize or blend with "normal people". They are restricted to living in shrines or marketplaces and face rejections when seeking relationships, be they romantic, marital, or friendship, outside their caste." This assertion is also corroborated by Tony Uchenna, (2010) in his article "Oshu caste in Igboland", with reference to Chinua Achebe's *No*

longer at ease says “*Oshus* are designated separate seats in churches.” Emeka Asinugo (2014) also confirmed this cruel behaviour “the *oshus*, seen as impure, are barred from breaking kolanut or offering prayers on behalf of individuals outside their caste due to the belief that they may bring calamity upon the society.” This social stratification which, some people considered “freeborn” and other as outcasts or slaves, couple with ill-treatment, abuse and neglect, has forced many *oshus* to relocate to other countries. Despite the *oshus*’ education and professional roles, they are never welcomed into Igbo’s culture.

The *oshu* caste plays a significant role in *La dot* particularly in the context of Aku-nna’s relationship with Chike Ofolue, who is from the descendants of slaves. Their love is forbidden due to their different social status, reflecting the societal norms that prohibit the inter-caste relationships. Emecheta uses *La dot* to critique the *Oshu* caste system, denouncing the discriminatory tendencies. Ogugua’s words act as words of caution to Aku-nna when she insisted on marry Chike. [...] « Qu’une fille de bonne famille épouse le descendant d’un esclave, ce serait une abomination. » (*La dot*: 163 [No nice girl from a good family will marry the descendant of a slave. This will be an abomination] Chike and Aku-nna are victims of patriarchal supremacy. This is because they could not control the tradition that dominates them.

Another cultural stigma that emanates from the text is when Akunna’s step brothers, Iloba and Osenekwu, heard the rumor that Chike is going out with Aku-nna, the trio feel insulted.

Le fils d’Ofolue? Tu veux dire Chike, le professeur ? Mais c’est un fils d’esclave, maman, il sait se tenir. [...] Elle ne s’intéressait pas à lui à ce point-là. S’écria Iloba, un gout de sel dans la bouche. Si s’était vrai, c’était la plus grande injure qui puisse frapper une famille comme la leur, qui n’avait jamais été souillée du sang d’un étranger, sans parler de celui de descendants d’esclaves. (La dot: 117) [The son of Ofole? You mean Chike, the school teacher? But he is the son of slaves, Mother, and he knows his place. She couldn’t be interested in him to that extent! Iloba cried, his mouth tasting salty. If this was true, it was the greatest insult that could befall a family like theirs which has never been tainted with the

blood of a foreigner to say nothing of that of the descendants of slaves]

This citation is an indicator of the animosity they have for oshu caste represented by Chike. From the authorial voice, no human should be considered a slave. As noted in the text, under the white man's law, nobody could own a person as a slave.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis, *La dot* emerges as a powerful narrative of cultural subjugation, exposing the tension between inherited traditions and the evolving consciousness of women within Igbo society. Emecheta's narrative problematises the rigid enforcement of this custom, revealing how its misuse becomes a mechanism of patriarchal control that undermines women's freedom and self-realization.

Similarly, the Oshu caste system, though deeply rooted in Igbo cultural history, is portrayed as a dehumanizing tradition whose continued practice fuels social exclusion, gendered suffering, and psychological violence. Through Aku-nna's tragic fate, Emecheta critiques the inflexibility of cultural norms that refuse reform in the face of modern realities.

Within this context of cultural subjugation, women's bodies and lives become the primary sites of conflict, where tradition and change collide most violently. Emecheta exposes how women are subjected to multiple forms of violence-verbal, physical, emotional, and psychological under the guise of cultural preservation. Ultimately, *La dot* advances a humanistic vision in which culture is not static but dynamic.

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