

# IDEOLOGICAL CLASHES BETWEEN FEMINISM AND BRIDE PRICE WITHIN AFRICAN ETHICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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**Abstract.** Traditional African marriage practices reflect a cultural uniqueness that contrasts sharply with Western approaches. Central to these practices are rites and rituals deeply rooted in custom, many of which appear to challenge contemporary feminist ideals that advocate for gender equality and women's rights across Africa. Within traditional African beliefs, a woman is often expected to be submissive and devoted to her husband: an expectation that conflicts with feminist principles. This tension raises critical questions about whether to uphold traditional customs or to reassess them in the light of evolving gender norms. The crux of this paper is to explore the foundational principles of feminism and to critically examine the extent to which feminist advocacy has influenced or hindered its objectives within the African context. In particular, the paper interrogates the cultural practice of the bride price, an essential component of many African traditional marriages, to determine whether it undermines or aligns with feminist ideals.

**Keywords:** *marriage, African tradition, feminism, bride price, ideology, rites*

## Introduction

One of the major events in the life of an African is the ascendancy to the social ladder of marriage. It is an institution that serves as the springboard for every individual to start a family. This accounts for why the rites of marriage in African traditional settings are performed with a great sense of sacredness and dignity. Before postmodernism, every parent desires that the female child fulfils all the marital rites, which culminates in the virginity test, without denting the name of the family. The marriage is completed with the virginity test, where the man is expected to display to the family of the bride a small bark cloth used in cleaning the blood when the virginity is finally broken. The family of the bride celebrates the daughter for not bringing shame to the family, and the husband in turn feels very proud of his wife. Virginity is seen as a social value and a mark of respect in African societies. In the Zulu community, for instance, a bride's virginity is considered a matter of economic importance as the virginity increases the bride price of the bride by one cow (Addison, 2010). Having cleared the air about the practice that has almost gone obsolete, there is no gain-saying the fact that African traditional marriage is laden with many practices that are still very relevant. This work does not intend to explore all the intricacies involved in African traditional marriage but to focus on the rite of bride price as it is deemed appropriate. In achieving this, we shall examine some of the procedures that are very relevant to our discussion by adopting a rigorous argumentative and analytical method. The paper would examine some of the traditional marriage rites within the Nigerian socio-cultural system in relation to the feminist ideals.

## *The meaning and nature of marriage in African culture*

It is becoming almost impossible to think of any culture that does not imbibe the practice of marriage. Marriage as an institution is as old as man has ever lived. The Christians often lay claims to the fact that the institution of marriage was commissioned by God when God created Eve as the helpmate for Adam and kept them in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2). We may not be far from the truth to see the possibilities in other religions of the world where marriage is seen as the means through which man actualizes himself. The marriage in these religions, which was without elaborate ceremony and rites, has metamorphosed into a contractual agreement between a man and a woman with enormous celebrations. The validations of marriage are based on certain rites and practices, and these vary from one culture to another. There is no gain-saying the fact that the term marriage is not a universal concept but we cannot claim to be oblivious of the fact that the practice of marriage is found in different cultures. Delineating it may not necessarily share in the universality of the idea itself. Having a holistic understanding of marriage might be somewhat difficult. The definitions vary according to different cultures. This paper does not intend to touch all the possible definitions from the philosophical, sociological and even anthropological perspectives, but we shall settle for a working definition that will guide our flow of thought. We can consider marriage as “a socially or ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws, as well as society in general” (Asia, 2021). This definition is a pointer to the African understanding of marriage, where the union does not only take place between the bride and the bridegroom alone but with the whole family being involved. A connecting factor in the different definitions of marriage one may come across is that it is a union between a man and a woman. As plausible as this definition may seem, it fails to state exactly the kind of rights that are established between the spouses and the other spouses. It must be noted that this definition has been called to question with the practice of same-sex marriage.

Many African societies allowed men to marry as many women as they could cater for. In the time past, marriage was not an affair between two individuals but a contract between members of extended families. The words of the family members were taken with utmost importance when final decisions were to be made by the man who intended to get married. For instance, when a young man saw a girl whom he wanted to have as his wife, according to traditions, he informed his parents or relatives, whose duty was to investigate the background of the prospective in-law’s family. The investigation was done to ensure that the girl in question was from a reputable family and that the family did not have any history of communicable or hereditary diseases. The illustration of the importance of the role of the family was better captured in the novel *Toads for Supper* (set in Nigeria), where the hero’s father beautifully synthesized it in the following words:

*“She is a girl everybody likes. I have not heard of her passing any elderly person on the road without saying a word of salutation. She has been brought up very well, and under our eyes. As you know, she has lived with us many years of her life and your mother has taken every trouble to train her into respectful and obedient wife for her son. We know the history of her ancestors which is as good as ours; there has been no trace of madness, white skin or any other evil disease in their family. Her father and I have been friends from our youth. Her mother and your mother are very good friends. We believe that our children will live happily together”*

(Ike, 1965).

With the above, it becomes obvious that the input of the family members in the choice of a woman cannot be overemphasized. In marriage, the phenomenon of knowing the bride and her family very well cannot be taken for granted. This is brilliantly captured in a Yoruba proverb that says “*iyawo buruku se e fe, sugbon ana burku ni o se fe*” (one can marry a bad wife, but one cannot marry a bad in-law). This is a pointer to the fact that in Yoruba land, the man is married not only to his bride, but also to the family of the bride and vice versa. This accounts for the reason the family needs to be investigated to ensure that one is not marrying into a disreputable family. The completion of the investigation signals the beginning of formal courtship.

### ***The impact of colonialism on African traditional marriage***

Colonialism on the shores of Africa came under two major factors: Christianity and Western education. These two factors have spread imposing influence on African traditional beliefs and values. We cannot deny the fact that Christianity and Western education have imposed themselves on some of the African traditional values. Our foods, clothing, culture, music, religion etc. have either been adulterated with Western influences or completely replaced. It could be argued that colonialism is responsible for many of the changes that the African writers account for in their fictional works. Some of those changes are due to the propagation of Western systems of education and Christianity which spread during the conquest of the African continent by Europe (Ainamon et al., 2023). The thoughts and the customs taught in the African schools by the European masters and missionaries are often contradictory to the traditional African values, beliefs, and habits. These changes were most noticeable in religious, moral, socio-cultural, economic, and political arenas. One of the most daunting impacts of colonialization on the African traditional system is the introduction of Christian marriage. In the words of Chinua Achebe in his book, *Things fall Apart*, the white man did not only bring a lunatic religion, he brought also other European institutions like commerce (trading store) and a government (Achebe, 1958). This description of western religion by Achebe though appears denigrating, speaks volumes. We cannot deny the fact the Western religion succeeded in altering the foundation that the African morals would have been built. Regardless of the introduction of Christian marriage, Africans have not completely swept under the carpet the use of some relevant rites that are in African traditional marriage. Even the church allows for the enculturation of some traditional rites in the celebration of Christian marriage. That is why in Nigeria, the three types of marriages constitutionally recognized are the Christian, Islamic and traditional.

### ***The ideology of feminism***

The term ‘feminism’ has its etymology from the Latin word *femina*, meaning ‘woman.’ The Webster’s Dictionary (7th edition) defines it as the principle that women should have political rights equal to those of men. For Britannica Online Encyclopedia, “feminism is the belief in social, economic and political equality of the sexes.” The definition of feminism differs from person to person, depending on their perspectives. The understanding of feminism by Chaman Nahal caught the fancy of this paper. For him, feminism is “a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence

syndrome”. There is a dependence syndrome, whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. He believes that women need to free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life. This understanding of Nahal appears controvertible and attention shall be drawn to it as the work progresses. The central belief behind feminist model is that from the beginning of human civilization, women have been subjected to a subordinate status by patriarchal social treatise and western philosophical tradition. The history of every civilization reveals that women have always been subjected to a position where they have no means to rescue their exceptional identity unless they revisit it. An instance of these can be found in the *Jahiliyyah* period or the age of ignorance, where women were considered objects of sales, and their primary roles was to produce children. It could be interpreted to mean that the attempts to reclaim a new position for the women in our patriarchal society birthed feminism. In order to explore their own unique identity, women have to redefine themselves against the male informed ideals and beliefs that are passed down from generation to generation. To put it more simply, the historical insignificance of women force them to rely and derive existence in relation to men. As Raina would say, “the epistemic and philosophical system has largely regarded women as non-entity, second mistake, nonexistent creature or a sexual object that oscillates between libido and envy” (Raina, 2017). Feminist literary theory therefore can be seen as the philosophical framework to analyze the causes behind women’s inferior status and to explore the literary tradition of women.

Feminism as a movement has undergone many waves since its inception. It is commonly believed that Simone de Beauvoir laid the actual theoretical foundation of feminist criticism. In the book, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir claims that femininity is not inherent but a social construct developed through the long process of socialization. In her words, the inferiority of women was mainly due to three factors. First, she argues that women were always taught to help men and thus derive their existence in relation to them. Secondly, women were encouraged to externalize the aspects of femininity such as docility, selflessness and beauty to validate themselves in the society. Thirdly, women have enjoyed lesser rights than men. Therefore, she argues that it was not women’s inferiority that rendered women as historically insignificant, rather, it is the historical insignificance that doomed women to an inferior state. According to her, women are not born but made into women through the process of socialization which is predominately male-centric and that has reduced women to second sex and to the inferior and subordinate state (Marcus, 2020). Simone de Beauvoir avers that:

*“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”*

The position of Beauvoir above is a clear indication that the biological makeup is not responsible for the denigrated social status that feminism is battling to redress. He hinged the disparity in the male and female gender on the imposition of civilization. If civilization is a human doing, it would then follow that it is the human exploration, that caused the consciousness which eventually resulted in seeing women as the subordinate gender. The physiological conditioning does not in any way make them inferior. If this position is anything to go by, then we might be confronted with raising questions on the

supposed assumption that women are the weaker and fragile sex. The arguments of Beauvoir would push us to jettison the notion that women are the fragile and weaker sex since the physiological makeup does not condition them to that state. We often see women reminding the men of the need to be treated with subtlety especially in the face of strenuous jobs or in an attempt to saddle the male gender with hard tasks. Does this not amount to outright contradiction in the feministic argument?

### ***Bride price in marriage***

The practice of bride price goes back as far as 3000 BCE. The ancient civilizations of Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Hebrews were involved in the use of bride price. A valid marriage contract in Islamic law required a form of bride price as part of the rituals that must be satisfied. Such transactions are associated with the Maghreb of the early Middle Ages, Bedouin tribes of the Middle East, and countries previously under the Ottoman Empire such as Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Albania, and Afghanistan. The negotiation of a bride price is required in classical China for the validity of marriage, and these transfers continue to be the norm in many rural areas today. Countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Burma, seem to only transfer bride prices. Bride prices are most prevalent in Africa; more than 90 percent of sub-Saharan societies traditionally made such marriage payments (Asia, 2021). As mentioned above, bride price is a system that is practiced in many cultures of the world. It has been tagged with different names such as purchase money, wife-purchase, bride wealth, marriage gift and bride token (Bonye et al., 2020). We cannot deny the fact that some of the names captured here are derogatory, with the tendency of bringing the practice to disrepute. Purchase money, bride wealth and wife purchase appear to be demeaning with financial connotations, condemning the bride to a life of servitude. It makes the man have the feeling that he has an absolute control over the woman in as much as the bride price has been paid. The adoption of the name 'bride price' for the practice does not seem to salvage the situation. To tag the practice as bride price would make us think that marriage is a market where women could be bought and probably sold. As Emmanuel Ndoma would say:

*“The whole system of bride price is patriarchal, in that men are always the beneficiaries and if women will benefit at all it is very minimal. Studies have found that bride price payment has some socio-economic importance to include legalizing marriages, creating social alliance among families or lineages, providing financial security for brides’ families, granting men exclusive sexual rights and providing inheritance certificate for husbands to inherit or claim ownership of their wives’ property such as land.”*

(Besong, 2018).

Regardless of the pejorative connotation that may attach to the payment of bride price, the climax of a marriage ceremony in African milieu is hinged on this practice. The importance placed on bride price almost makes the marriage null and void when it is not paid. It is a truism that some cultures in Africa and in some parts of the world would consider any marriage incomplete without the payment of the bride price. The measure of the bride price varies from one culture to another. Irrespective of the burden it may impose on the bridegroom and his family, a frantic effort is made to meet up with

the it. As previous study would say, bride symbolizes “the earnestness of the bridegroom to assume the role of the husband”.

### ***Interrogating the cultural practice of bride price with the advocacy for feminism***

Capturing feminism and bride price with an analogy could help our discussion and understanding. In the case of a charioteer, there are necessarily two horses that enable the mobility of the chariot. These two horses are controlled by the charioteer who ensures that the two horses move the cart to the desired destination. In the analogy, the charioteer is the woman, and the two horses are feminism and bride price. The charioteer would want to navigate her destination with the two horses which may be tamed or untamed. The two horses have the tendency to be at disparity and yet, the woman needs them to convey her to her desired destination. It is believed that every woman, except for those who choose the path of celibacy or otherwise, would want to identify with the social status of marriage. No sane woman would want to go into marriage with the mindset of signing off for suffering and maltreatment. Should that be the case, how do we synergize between the practice of bride price in marriage and retaining one’s absolute freedom? As long as marriage involves exchanges whether money or property like goats, tubers of yams, cattle or other items as a prerequisite, such exchange of property may be interpreted as wife-purchase, and may imply that even the rights of a wife are bought with the exchange. Where lies the freedom and equality that feminism advocates?

Attempting the above question would give us an insight into the different perceptions of scholars on the understanding of bride price. For Meekers (1992), bride-price which is common in South African marriages, symbolizes the transfer of the right of the girl’s sexual and economic services to the husband (61-78). We can conclude from this that through the payment of bride price, the man determines the sexual and economic life of the woman. She does not have a say on matters which involve her economic and social well-being. In the report of Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW) and Mifumi, bride price is paid as a sign of appreciation and also for economic value but appears to have reduced the women into “cash cows and Chattels” with men having authority over them. This report of CREAW and Mifunmi is a clear indication that bride price reduces women to mere vessels that can be easily traded in market of marriage. Henry Asiimwe views the payment of bride price from a different perspective. According to him, bride price solemnizes marriages and also serves as the “certificate” of marriage (Asiimwe, 2013). For Wendo (2004), bride price makes women become property of their husbands and limits their ability to control and defend their bodies. This assertion is commonly found among young maidens, who would jokingly say that if anything happens to their bodies or a strange man mistakenly sees their nakedness, it would reduce their bride price. The consciousness seems to be in the mind of many African young maidens and would not want anything to tamper with their bride price. The of Sylvia Tamale, a Ugandan feminist argues in line with the stance of Wendo. For Sylvia Tamale, “the transaction of bride price turns women into the property of their husbands and reinforces male dominance in marriage” (Tamale, 2004). The position of Tamale can be interpreted to mean that the payment of bride price as a cultural practice legalizes patriarchal norms.

In some African cultures, the abilities and qualities of the lady determine the bride price. In a work carried out on the implications of bride price among the Shona and Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, it was discovered that parents now demand electronic

devices from their in-laws, and the daughters' level of education play a role in determining how much suitors will pay. The high cost involved in bride price payments, therefore keeps many men and women away from marrying (Mangena and Ndlovu, 2013). If the parents now value their daughter's educational qualification to enable them determine the bride price, what moral right would the daughter have to claim equality with the husband? It is as good as quantifying every money the parents might have spent on the daughter which the intending husband and in-laws would have to pay them back. Inversely, this would mean that the husband indirectly raises, trains and makes the daughter whatever she might have become. In African culture, the payment of bride price is often captured as a negotiation between the two families. During the negotiation, the intending bridegroom will not be allowed to be present but will be represented by his family. The word negotiation appears to be a camouflage in the sense that the bride's parents have an edge in the whole negotiation process. They determine the sum of the price to be paid (Asia, 2021). It is natural for the bridegroom and his family to feel exploited in the process since they did not have a say. The perceived exploitation by the groom, if care is not taken, could make the man callous in his later dealing with the bride, except he is constantly being spoken to by the inner voice that Socrates called daimonion or the inner conscience.

A link has been established between domestic violence and bride price in a paper written by Dery Isaac. It has not been ascertained if the link is direct or indirect. Despite the escalating mark that bride-price payment could have sweeping influences on domestic violence, it remains a much neglected area and has attracted relatively little scholarly attention (Dery, 2015). If a man feels cheated by the family of the bride during the negotiation of the bride price, he may recourse to domestic violence as a way of getting back. This is better captured in the words of Bloch and Rao (2002) that:

*“Husband hurts his wife’s well-being in order to extract a payment from his in-laws where he feels the bride price was overpriced. Relying on a signaling mechanism, in which the abandonment threat is made credible by resort to violence. The bride’s family gives in to violent behaviour because it can only be committed by husbands willing to abandon their wife if their request is not satisfied. Thus, bride price was found precipitate violence which has high tendency to affect stability of marriages.”*

(Bloch and Rao, 2002).

## Conclusion

Feminist critics hold varying and often conflicting views on the true position of feminism, making it difficult to form a holistic understanding of what feminism truly represents. As an ideology, feminism remains open to exploration from different perspectives. Some argue that gender disparity is rooted in the evolution of civilizations, while others believe it stems from the systematic undermining of women's contributions, particularly in literature. The practice of bride price significantly diminishes women's power and stands in direct contradiction to the goal of achieving gender equality, especially in terms of access to economic resources, property ownership, and financial services. To address this, it has been suggested that bride price should either be redefined to prevent the commercialization of women, or it should be abolished completely, or that the advocacy for feminism itself be reconsidered. Without addressing this contradiction, the pursuit of equality in marriage and society remains

compromised. In many African societies, traditional marriage rites, such as the payment of bride price, have hindered the progress of feminist ideals. Although there are positive aspects to bride price, its impact on women's freedom deserves critical attention. The practice is evolving, particularly in urban areas, but changes remain slow in rural communities. For instance, among the Yoruba people, the bride's father may return the monetary component to emphasize that his daughter is not for sale, yet the groom is still required to fulfill other obligations. Such practices reinforce the perception that a man gains ownership over his wife after fulfilling these requirements, making the quest for equality in marriage seem contradictory. This situation raises pressing questions: Why is the payment of bride price solely a man's responsibility? Should it be discontinued or made optional to promote balance in society? Does paying bride price entitle a man to see his wife as his property? Should married feminists whose bride price was paid seek divorce to stay true to their advocacy? Ultimately, the coexistence of bride price and feminism within African culture appears difficult to reconcile. It is proposed that either bride price be discontinued to strengthen the call for feminism, or left to the discretion of women without cultural pressure, or redefined so that both men and women would contribute equally. Such an approach would shift the sense of ownership often associated with bride price and promote greater equality within marriage.

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The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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