

## Customs in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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### Abstract

The African literature is woven through myth and superstition that hold not just the past but also determine the way of future. *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta explores the role of myth in the life of Aku-nna, a young bride who is constantly haunted by the fear of an early death during childbirth as her bride price was not paid. She undergoes a psychological turmoil with this constant apprehension, and her ultimate death fulfilling this myth points to the very sad state of African custom where traditions are valued more than human life. The novel underlines the psychological hold that myth has on the minds of African people and the consequent adherence to the old ways. Also, Emecheta's novels provide an insight into the weaknesses and misconceptions in the women themselves which tend to perpetuate their humiliation and state of subjugation. The study explores different themes underlying the novel in the scenario of African literature.

**Keywords:** Africa, myth, Ibo culture, superstition.

Nigerian English literature is at the forefront of gaining more readers' attention and thus getting greater national and international influence. Almost every recognized genre of literature, including prose, poetry, drama, travelogue, biography and autobiography, has been developed by Nigerians. Nonetheless, the focus here is on prose fiction, in which they have made a great deal of achievements .of Nigerian prose fiction,

novels by women writers also form a distinct group. Flora Nwapa, Alkali, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab and Adaora Ulasi are the most successful novelists.

Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian novelist, was born in Lagos in 1944. She was a prolific writer with sixteen novels, three children's stories, numerous articles and television plays published in her thirty years of career. She was also an academic, well-known for her strong and sometimes idiosyncratic views on feminism and womanhood on Europe and America's lecture circuits.

Buchi Emecheta is one among the leading Nigerian women writers who not only idolize her culture and ancestry but also forefront the sides of Africans that were ignored or subverted by surplus of non-African literature. Like Achebe, Emecheta portrayed her native village in her writings. She focuses on the cultural role of women in a society and how they remain as the chief economic force in realizing the dreams of their family and society. Emecheta's portrayal of the Ibo culture holds a significant position in all her novels. The theme of marriage and myth in literature is perhaps as old as literature itself. "Pamela or Virtue Rewarded" touted as one of the earliest novels in English literature deals with the protagonist's difficulties in life and how her high moral stand is ultimately rewarded with a good marriage. 'Marriage' has been presented in a variety of forms. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century novels pose marriage as a goal. The stories serve as the perfect ending to redeem the hero or heroine and recompensed for their virtue. In fiction, situation of marriage in society is reflected. As Simone de Beauvoir stated "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society."

The Bride Price interconnects the myth, marriage and literature of Africa. The clash of cultures remains the most widely studied theme in African literature. The white man's prejudice and discrimination, the native's struggle to uphold his identity these seem to

have a centre hold on most of the studies. What is often ignored is the fact that this genre also deals extensively with myth and superstition, which find a very prominent role in oral tradition as well as written texts. The African literature is woven through myth and superstition that hold not just the past but also determine the way of future. *The Bride Price* explores the role of myth in the life of Aku-nna, a young bride who is constantly haunted by the fear of an early death during childbirth as her bride price was not paid. The psychological turmoil she undergoes with this constant apprehension, and her ultimate death fulfilling this myth points to the very sad state of African custom where traditions are valued more than human life. Buchi Emecheta, in her novel *The Bride Price*, traces the traditional superstition through the lives of Aku-nna and Chike, the young lovers who try to defy the age-old customs only to be defeated by fate. Every girl belonging to Ibuza, whether born there or elsewhere was brought up with the old taboos of the land. Aku-nna, born in far away Lagos was not only expected to follow the customs of her community but even her name was a constant reminder of what she owed to her father:

“He (her father) had named her Aku-nna, meaning literally “father’s wealth”, knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to. Aku-nna on her part was determined not to let her father down. She was going to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price”- *The Bride Price*

These plans however fall haywire with the untimely death of Ezekiel Odia, Aku-nna’s father. Ma Blackie. Her mother follows the custom and agrees to be the fourth wife of Okonkwo Odia, her late husband’s brother. With her own mother getting too busy in Okonkwo’s house politics and her younger brother Nna-nndo engaged in his own wild ways, Aku-nna finds a friend and sympathizer in Chike, her young teacher at school. The two fall in

love and decide to hide it till she completes her school, fearing that her family would stop her education if they got to know of her affair. But love, like fire, cannot be hidden for long and people get talking. Even the thought of such relation is unacceptable to Odi family. They would sooner kill Aku-nna with their own hands than have her marry that boy. For Chike was an osu, descendant of slaves. Though his father had earned good reputation along with ample money, their parentage was always a sore spot for the Ibuza people, who had been used to look down upon slaves and their children but could do nothing to take away the economic status they had achieved through their own efforts and European assistance. Okonkwo meanwhile has his heart set on the bride price Aku-nna would fetch and is very angry when he hears of her association with Chike: "If it was true, it was the greatest insult that could befall a family like theirs, which had never been tainted with the blood of a foreigner, to say nothing of that of the descendants of slaves".

Marriage in Ibuza society is intertwined with myth. Various customs have been made to ensure that wife remains exclusive property of the husband and no other man should ever touch her. For example if a man cut and kept a lock of a girl's hair, she would forever belong to him; or if a man were able to carry a woman to his bed with force even, she would be sentenced to a life of marriage to him as no other man would touch a girl unvirgined by another. According to another superstition, if a bride failed to have her price paid by her husband to her father/guardian, she would die in childbirth. Unfortunately, Aku-nna's love for Chike is not hidden long enough, and Okoboshi, a suitor of Aku-nna, driven by jealousy kidnaps her and marries her. The young girl, barely fifteen is shocked and horrified at the turn of events and in a desperate attempt to save herself lies to Okobashi that she had already been taken by her lover. She was not a virgin. Her new husband, stunned at this revelation refuses to touch her, humiliates and beats her. Chike and Nna-nndo, together conspire to free Aku-nna from this forced marriage and the very next day she is able to flee.

She goes with Chike to another town, Ughelli, where she gets a job as a teacher and Chike also gets into an oil-company. They get married and would have lived blissfully, but for the nagging fear at the back of her mind regarding her bride price. Her stepfather, in his false pride continues to refuse the bride price from Chike's father and also constantly wishes evil on her. Aku-nna dies while giving birth to her first child, a beautiful girl named Joy on her insistence and in memory of the happy married life she had with Chike. Whether it was her malnourishment or ripe age as the doctors suggested, or the myth coming true, it cannot be ascertained but what is true is that the traditional superstition was substantiated by the fate of Aku-nna and Chike, the superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate.

The novel underlines the psychological hold that myth has on the minds of African people and the consequent adherence to the old ways. How this remains possible even in the age of modernization is strange but undeniable. *The Bride Price* begins in Lagos, and the opening scenes move events that drastically alter the lives of the Odia family. Aku-nna, the protagonist of this story is living with her parents Ezekiel and Ma Blackie. She also has a brother Nna-nndo meaning "Father is the shelter." Who is in dead bed. In Nigerian culture, "the mother is only a woman "...boneless". So a fatherless family is considered as a "family without head ... a non-existing family." In first three chapters covers changes happen since Ezekiel's death and funeral to the departure of his widow and children from the city. Novel explores the concepts like the bride price, the woman's role in Nigerian society, the influence of the Ibo customs upon its members, and the clash between these customs and the effects of British colonisation.

Protagonist Akuna, her names literal meaning is "father's wealth." This refers the bride price to be received by her father at time of her marriage. Aku-nna, since thirteen knew the meaning of her names in parallel her role in her society. She would bring in wealth to her family in the form of a good bride price. Then she would bring wealth to her husband's

family in the form of children, preferably all males. Unfortunately her father dies. Akuna senses but cannot ask direct questions. “Good children don't ask too many questions.” She her uncles and aunts and eventually told about the death of her father through the traditional art of storytelling.

“Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna,” thenarrator states, “and maybe she wouldcome to regard anything there might be between them as mere childish infatuation, if the adults had just left them alone.” But the adults do not leave them alone. They tell their children what they can and cannot do without giving them much explanation. Aku-nna learns to disregard things. She was hiding her First mensuration but her cousin finds her second mensuration, it becomes publicly known that she is of marriageable age.

In defending Aku-nna from other suitors, Chike is violent and assaults Okoboshi, a boy from a neighboring village. Soon thereafter the family of Okoboshi breaks into the village of Aku-nna and kidnaps her. Kidnapping a woman is considered to be fair play for a man, forcing her to become his wife. As he attempts to rape her on their so-called wedding night, Aku-nna insults Okoboshi using her wits. She informs him that Chike has “dis-virginised” her already. Aku-nna is lying, but Okoboshi is so angry that his story is not tested. Then Aku-nna escapes from the family of Okoboshi with the aid of her brother and Chike.

The novel's final chapters have Aku-nna and Chike residing beyond the village. They have a home that they renovate and secure satisfying jobs for both of them. They are going to have a baby relatively in a short period of time. It sounds like a signal for happy ending, but something is still wrong. While Chike's father has made many generous attempts, Aku-nna's stepfather refuses to accept a bride price. Aku-nna is well aware of the tribal cause on young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price: “the expectant mother will die in childbirth”.

Finally, Aku-nna can't step away completely from her people's beliefs. One of her last statements is that only in death will she win her freedom. Thus the myth of the bride price takes the life of the young girl, who could not stop worrying about it even for a moment after her eventful marriage to Chike. She was unable to free herself from the tangled web of her culture symbolically causes her death. From the beginning, Aku-nna has a lot of questions about her family, her culture, and her role in society. She thinks about these questions, but never voices them because a girl posing questions is considered worse manners in her culture especially. But throughout this story, it is these questions that push Aku-nna. She is comfortable with Chike in asking those questions. She describes the position of Chike, which is both part of the culture of Ibo and at the same time oddly separated from it. Chike was her friend, instructor and lover at the same time. But her friendship proves her downfall and her fear myth takes away her joy and eventually her future. *The Bride Price* is half autobiographical and half fictional. The book draws on Emecheta's growing events in Nigeria. The marriage between Aku-nna and Chike heralds new hope. A solution is finally found to the problem of defined gender roles and class divisions.

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