
**Tradition's Tie and Silent Cry:
Subaltern's Life in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price***

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Abstract: Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* deals with the themes of arranged marriage and social customs. The paper explores how social customs often take away a woman's freedom to choose. It also highlights how education can help young girls think for themselves. The story is set in Nigeria and follows the life of a young girl named Aku-nna. After her father's death, she is taken to live with her uncle, who plans to arrange her marriage in order to receive a high bride price. In many African societies, bride price is a traditional payment given by the groom's family to the bride's family before marriage. It is seen as a way to honour the bride's family, but in this novel, it becomes a source of control and suffering. Aku-nna falls in love with her schoolteacher, Chike, who comes from a lower social group. Her family refuses their relationship because of old beliefs about class and slavery. The paper critically examines the pervasive influence of socio-cultural conventions in perpetuating the subjugation and marginalization of women within traditional societal frameworks.

Keywords: Traditional marriage, social problems, culture

Introduction: Buchi Emecheta is one of the most influential Nigerian writers whose literary voice powerfully articulated the struggles and silent sufferings of women in patriarchal African societies. She gave visibility to the complex intersections of gender, tradition, and social hierarchy that often curtailed women's rights and freedoms. Her important works include *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Second Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *In the Ditch*, and *The Slave Girl*. These narratives delve deeply into the lived experiences of women who must navigate a world steeped in outdated customs, colonial legacies, and deeply rooted gender bias. Among her notable contributions, *The Bride Price* holds a significant place in the canon of postcolonial feminist literature. This novel is symbolic of Emecheta's broader thematic concerns female autonomy, cultural conflict, and the socio-economic entrapment of women. She firmly believed that the issues of poverty, gender oppression, and marginalization transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Emecheta's work challenges us to examine how deeply embedded patriarchal norms perpetuate inequality. Her female characters often fight for education, personal freedom, self-respect, and identity in societies that see them as subordinate to male authority. Emecheta herself once asserted that "the authentic feminist"

is not only one who questions male dominance, but one who seeks intellectual and emotional liberation through self-definition.

Set in colonial Nigeria, where strict tribal traditions were followed, the novel explores the story of Aku-nna after her father dies. She is taken in by her strict uncle, who becomes her new guardian and takes control of her future, especially her marriage. The bride price, a payment from the groom's family to the bride's family, is an important part of the story. While this custom is usually seen as a sign of respect and family connection, Emecheta shows how it can also turn women into objects to be bought and sold in society.

What makes the story powerful is how it shows the bride price not just as a tradition, but as a way to control women. Aku-nna is more than just a girl in the story, she stands for many girls who lose their freedom because of old customs. She falls in love with Chike, a teacher from a lower caste, which goes against what her society expects. Because of this, people see her as a danger to the rules made by men. Even though she is smart and has big dreams, her life ends sadly because of the same tradition that says it protects the society. Buchi Emecheta, shows that some traditions can be unfair and need to change. She says that customs are not fixed forever, they should be questioned if they hurt people. The novel teaches us that blindly following tradition can lead to sadness, and it asks readers to think about how gender, culture, and fighting for one's rights are connected.

The novel *The Bride Price* shows that in many traditional societies, arranged marriages are not about love or personal choice. They are mostly about family duty, money, and respect. In the story, the main character Aku-nna's marriage is planned by her uncle. He does not care about her feelings. He wants to use her marriage to become richer and more respected. He chooses a rich man for her, not because it will make her happy, but because he is greedy and wants control.

Aku-nna's wishes go against old traditions. She falls in love with her school teacher, Chike, who believes that marriage should be based on equality and respect. But Chike comes from a family of former slaves, and in their society, this makes him look low and unfit to marry her. Aku-nna's family does not accept him because of his background. This shows that unfair treatment based on family history still exists in their society. Buchi Emecheta, shows how some traditions like the bride price and judging people by their family history can hurt others. These customs, though called "culture," often stop women from making their own choices and finding love. The belief that marrying someone from a slave family brings bad luck shows how people still follow old, harmful ideas, even when the world is changing.

When Aku-nna and Chike run away and get married without her family's permission or paying the bride price, their love becomes an act of protest against the strict rules of their society. But they have to pay a heavy price for going against tradition. There is a strong belief in their community that if a woman gets married without her bride price being accepted, she will die while giving birth. Sadly, this is what happens to Aku-nna. Buchi Emecheta, shows that Aku-nna's death is not just due to nature or God. It is a result of the pressure and fear

created by strict cultural beliefs. Because everyone, including Aku-nna herself, believes in this superstition, it comes true. Her death shows how powerful and dangerous blind belief in old customs can be. It teaches us that such beliefs can control people's lives and lead to sadness and loss.

Buchi Emecheta assesses critically the practice of arranged marriage, exposing it as a mechanism of control rather than a sacred cultural ritual. Far from being a mere union between two families, arranged marriage in *The Bride Price* functions as a tool to reinforce patriarchal authority and commodify women. Young girls like Aku-nna are denied autonomy, their desires silenced under the weight of custom. Their dreams, aspirations, and emotional well-being are overlooked, as the negotiation of bride price takes precedence over their humanity. In this system, the girl is reduced to a bargaining chip her worth measured in money or goods, rather than love, intellect, or individuality. Emecheta deftly reveals how such practices turn marriage into a commercial contract devoid of emotional reciprocity or respect.

One of the central themes Emecheta highlights is the transformative power of education. Aku-nna's exposure to schooling gives her the intellectual tools and emotional courage to question the customs that bind her. Her schooling introduces her to Chike, and more significantly, to the possibility of a life shaped by personal choice rather than inherited obligation. Education becomes a metaphor for awakening an entryway into critical thinking and emotional independence. In a world governed by tradition, Aku-nna's education sets her apart, offering her a vision of freedom and equality that stands in stark contrast to the oppressive expectations of her community. Emecheta does not romanticize education as a magical solution. Despite her intelligence and awareness, Aku-nna is still ensnared by the deep-rooted beliefs of her society. Her tragic death during childbirth, blamed on the unpaid bride price, underscores the grim reality that individual resistance alone cannot dismantle systemic oppression. Change, the novel insists, must be collective. Society itself must evolve if true liberation is to be achieved. Emecheta interrogates the deep-seated customs that govern women's lives chief among them, the practice of the bride price. This tradition, wherein the groom's family offers material compensation to the bride's family, is presented not merely as a cultural formality, but as a mechanism that directly impacts a woman's autonomy and self-worth. Emecheta uses the life of Aku-nna to highlight how such customs can restrict women's choices and reduce them to economic commodities. The payment of bride price, rather than being a gesture of honour or respect, often signifies ownership marking the woman as property to be transferred from her family to her husband's. In doing so, the practice becomes a symbol of patriarchal control, reinforcing the idea that a woman's value lies in her marriageability rather than her individuality or aspirations. African traditions have been used to make women obey. Culture is often seen as something that never changes, including customs and identity.

After Aku-nna's father dies, she, her brother, and her mother are forced to live with their uncle. This move marks the beginning of a new and difficult chapter in Aku-nna's life. The uncle they stay with has three wives, and according to the local tradition, when a

woman's husband dies, she must marry his brother. Aku-nna's mother doesn't find this strange. She understands and accepts the customs of her community and believes it is her duty to follow them. In other words, she accepts her fate without complaint. When we look at the story from the angle of modern thinking versus tradition, we can see a conflict between generations especially around the issue of polygamy. Aku-nna, who is younger and has a more modern way of thinking, cannot understand why her mother agrees to marry again, especially when she is financially independent. Her mother earns more money than the uncle's other wives through her trade activities.

Ma earned a little money by clever buying and selling. With Ezekiel's savings she bought oil. She sold it to the white man, who took it back to England and made it into soap. Then she bought the white man's soap and sold it to her people. (27)

As a social writer, Emecheta tries to bring home the message that breaking the law of the society is always tragic: Afterwards every girl in Ibuza was told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike. 'If you want to live a long time,' they were told, 'you must accept the husband that your people choose you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child. (85)

Ma Blackie, Aku-nna's mother, represents a link between old traditions and new ways of thinking. More clearly, she stands between those who have power and those who are being controlled. At this point, it's helpful to explain that the clash between old and new ways is part of what we call "post-colonial hybridity." This means that after colonization, people began to live with a mix of their traditional customs and the foreign ideas brought by colonial rulers.

Emecheta shows how some people strongly follow old customs, while others mix their traditions with modern values they have learned from colonial influences. Some characters in the story accept both tradition and modern ideas equally, as seen in certain parts of the novel. Anthony Barthelemy explains this old-new conflict in the novel as follows: "Emecheta's invocation of ritual time allows her to contrast the Igbo past with the modern Nigerian present. The contrast is more starkly drawn because the ancestral tradition and the modern ways vie for dominance in a struggle to claim the body of the deceased" (562). This situation provides us with a good example of the irreparable damage that colonialists cause in the cultural world of the societies they exploit.

In all her books, Emecheta speaks out against the way African women especially Nigerian women are pushed to the side and treated unfairly in a male-dominated society. More clearly, she protests how women are treated like objects that can be bought and sold. *The Bride Price* elucidates the enduring presence of deleterious customs and entrenched taboos that persist within the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary Nigeria. The idea of paying a bride price makes it feel like women are being traded, much like what happened during slavery.

Chike, the schoolteacher whom Aku-nna loves, is educated and financially stable. But Aku-nna's family refuses to accept him because his father was once a slave. Even though Chike's father offers a large bride price something Emecheta uses to show that African women are still being treated like property Aku-nna's uncle refuses the marriage proposal. This leads us to an important question: Why would Aku-nna's uncle reject Chike, especially when his family is wealthy and willing to pay well? One reason has to do with how some Nigerians adopted the ideas and customs brought by the colonial rulers. Chike's family is part of this group, and that makes them "different" in the eyes of traditionalists like Aku-nna's uncle. His rejection of Chike is not just about the money, but about status, tradition, and lingering prejudices—even among people who were once victims themselves.

We can also look at the earlier issue from another angle. In traditional Nigerian society, boys and girls in the same family are not treated equally. For instance, families usually spend money on their sons' education, but girls are only allowed to study if they can get a scholarship. Some people even think that spending money on a girl's education is a waste. The male child is seen as the one who will carry on the father's name and legacy. At a funeral in the story, Ezekiel Odia's brother, Uche, tells everyone that his brother is not really gone because he has left behind a son. He says, "Our brother is lying here now, but he is not dead. He has left a son behind him. One day we shall all be proud of the Nna-nndo" (18).

Even though Aku-nna is older and does better in school than her brother, her achievements are ignored simply because she is a girl. In this society, women have no real voice or power. Through this story, Buchi Emecheta shows how hard women have to fight just to be seen and heard. She also challenges the belief that women should not be educated or that they are less capable than men.

Traditions were unfair to both men and women, but women suffered more. For example, a man could become a village chief if he had many wives. But if a girl had any romantic experiences before marriage, people no longer respected her. This is clearly shown in the novel when Okoboshi mistreats Aku-nna. She pretended to be someone with a bad reputation so that he would leave her. Even though she was actually innocent and pure, she was treated badly and rejected. In the story, he says, "This is going to be an extremely busy day for you, my educated bride. Get out and find a gourd to take to the stream. The older women will ask you what happened and you will have to tell them your story yourself" (140).

In Aku-nna's society, a woman's value was measured by the bride price she could bring to her family. Sadly, Aku-nna fell in love with her teacher, who came from a family of former slaves. This ruined her stepfather Okonkwo's hopes of receiving a big bride price for her. Her new stepbrothers were even willing to kill her if she married someone from a slave background. After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, many former slaves became educated under colonial rule and rose to powerful positions. Ma Blackie, Aku-nna's mother, was also educated and wanted her children to be more knowledgeable than she was. But the

men and women in Okonkwo's family didn't like this. There was a clear social divide in their society. Aku-nna, being educated, was seen as arrogant by her new family. At that time, people thought educating girls was a waste. But Aku-nna's education gave her the courage to stand up for herself when she tried to escape from Okoboshi's abuse. This kind of bravery was not expected from women in Nigeria. Men like Okoboshi believed they could treat women badly, just as he treated Aku-nna.

The Bride Price is a work of fiction, but it carries strong autobiographical elements, drawing deeply from Buchi Emecheta's own experiences growing up in Nigeria. This novel, her third publication, marks a significant shift in her storytelling, it is the first to introduce a sense of hope that challenges the rigid cultural norms imprisoning African women and the descendants of slaves. Through the marriage of Aku-nna and Chike, Emecheta presents a subtle but powerful symbol of change, suggesting that the entrenched issues of fixed gender roles and class divisions might one day be overcome. This hopeful narrative does not ignore the harsh realities of tradition; instead, it carefully navigates the tension between cultural heritage and personal freedom. The union between Aku-nna, a young woman bound by customs, and Chike, a man stigmatized by his slave ancestry, represents more than a simple love story. It challenges the hierarchical social structures and questions the validity of inherited prejudices. Emecheta uses this marriage to highlight the possibility of transcending oppressive social boundaries, yet she does not pretend that this change is easy or universally accepted.

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