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## THE BRIDE PRICE AND THE POWER OF MONEY IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE BRIDE PRICE*

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**Abstract :** *The Price Bride* is one of Buchi Emecheta's most influential modern novels, which expresses the plight of African women from childhood to womanhood. The story is set in an industrialized urban center, and will later contrast with the traditional, society. Aku-nna wants to make her father proud of her and she is determined to marry well so as to bring her father a good bride price. In Iboza, Marriage arrangement involves the whole community and the bride must accept the husband chosen for her by her people. The bride price must also be paid otherwise the bride will die during childbirth. Relegated to the background by both the colonial powers and the patriarchal society, African women have become aware of their own marginalization and they have decided not to suffer the excesses of tradition but rather to resist some traditional beliefs that alienate their lives. From a feminist approach, this article tries to explore the girl children's trauma and experiences in a male-dominated society and the African women's role in the bride price negotiation. It also invites women to get rid of the traditional customs that inhibit and devastate lives.

**Keys words :** bride price, gender, womanhood, tradition, modernism, violence

**Résumé :** *The Price Bride* est l'un des romans modernes les plus influents de Buchi Emecheta, qui exprime le sort des femmes africaines de la naissance à l'âge adulte. L'histoire se déroule dans un centre urbain industrialisé, et contraste ensuite avec la société traditionnelle. Aku-nna veut rendre son père heureux, elle est résolue à faire un bon mariage en vue de lui ramener assez d'argent. À Iboza, les démarches du mariage impliquent toute la communauté et la mariée doit accepter le mari choisi pour elle par son peuple. La dot doit également être payée, sinon la mariée mourra pendant l'accouchement. Reléguées au second plan par les puissances coloniales et la société patriarcale, les femmes ont pris conscience de leur propre marginalisation et ont décidé de ne plus subir les excès de la tradition mais plutôt de résister à certaines croyances traditionnelles qui aliènent leur vie. Cet article tente d'explorer à partir d'une approche féministe les traumatismes et les expériences des filles dans un environnement dominé par les hommes et le rôle des femmes africaines dans la négociation de la dot. Il invite également les femmes à se débarrasser des coutumes traditionnelles qui inhibent et dévastent leurs vies.

**Mots clés :** dot, genre, féminité, tradition, modernisme, violence

## Introduction

Bride price payment is one of the most widespread and popular practices not only in Nigeria but also in many African countries. The purpose of the bride price is to make the marriage official and traditionally valid. According to Thiara and Hague (2011, pp. 550–561) "the bride price is used as basis to validate customary marriages in African countries. It is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family and it acts as a contract between the two families." The bride price is solemn and sacred; it is a covenant between two families and their witnesses. During the ceremony, both family exchange and make promises for a good cohesion among members. The customary marriage is made official if the bride price is paid. In couples, where the bride price is not paid, the couple goes through troubles, and the children from such a couple are illegitimate. It is a dishonour and disrespect to the woman's family. The children from such union are the property of the woman's family and the husband has no right on them.

In the online Oxford dictionary the bride price is defined as "*the money or goods given by the kin of the groom to the kin of the bride on marriage. Although it is sometimes seen as compensatory payment to the natal family for the upbringing of the daughter, it varies in form and meaning across cultures. In some culture, the 'bride-price' may become the property of the bride, and is treated as an insurance against divorce.*"<sup>1</sup> In other words, people pay the bride price according to their belief, knowledge and the ruling system, it depends on a particular society. In the past it was a sign of a man's commitment to take care of his wife and is seen as a symbolic act and a necessary part of upholding culture, rather than a purchase. It was a way of thanking the bride's family for bringing her up.

In economic literature, the bride price is interpreted as a mean of a wealth transaction or property transaction at a time of marriage. It involves exchange of material gifts like livestock, money, cow, sheep depending on cultures. In recent time, gifts depends on the social position of the groom, the bride's family can received items such as furniture, cars, house, electronic devices from the groom's family. Moore<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095526954>  
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<sup>2</sup> Moore, M. (2013, January 4). Chinese Brides for Gold: Parents are Lavishing Bigger and Bigger Dowries on their Daughters. The daily Telegraph. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9780786/Chinas-brides-go-forgold-as-their-dowries-get-bigger-and-bigger.html>

states : " the 'modern' way of paying bride price has in some cases led to bride price being a showy class affair that has resulted into payment of 'astronomical' amounts." These amounts are sometimes very exorbitant and some suitors are dismissed because they are unable to afford.

But, recently, getting married in Africa, has become a huge business. The wedding industry is making every single day millions of dollars. For most of african families, what matter most is the payment of the bride price because that is the only condition to be officially married. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) is the first authentic novel after her two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1975). The novel shows how the culture of paying bride price has become an important part of the lives of Ibuza people. As the novel opens, the family of Aku-nna, an adolescent girl, moves from Lagos, where she and her brother Nna-Ndo spent their childhood, to the village of Ibuza, in Nigeria. The novel highlights the gender politics in African society in which women and girls are the victims of African customs like arranged marriages, polygamy and perpetual pregnancy. The *Bride Price*, the case of Aku-nna, the heroine of the novel is victimized of these African customs. Emecheta motivates the reader to feel that the bride price and other systematic instances of misogyny are unacceptable.

Africans criticize this practice, they see it as dehumanizing and depressive because it seems to commodify women. Among these critical voices, an Award-winning Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie opined at a public event that the bride price is "disgusting" because of the way it has been commercialized in recent times, noting that she feels conflicted about the practice<sup>3</sup>. With this framework in mind, this study investigates the issue of the bride price and its implication for women in Ibuza. The paper attempts to answer in the light of feminist perspective the following questions: How is the process of bride price oppressive for the child girl? What are the roles of women in the bride price negotiation? What are the impacts of modernization in the bride price process?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://lifestyle.thecable.ng/chimamanda-adichie-bride-price/> September, 23<sup>rd</sup>. 2018

## 1. The patriarchal oppressive practice

Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* takes us back to Nigeria. The work, denounces the abuses of the patriarchal system, in other words she evokes the different ways girls are oppressed and unsafe in a dominated male society. In Ibusa, the oppression of the little girl begins from the cradle. Nkereuwem (1997, p.3) defines oppression as "states that any burdensome exercise of power or authority over somebody with continual injustice and cruelty that makes the person being oppressed feel worried, uncomfortable or unhappy."

Aku-nna's name, the central character of *The Bride Price*, translates as "father's wealth." Naming is a very important tool used among various African cultures to convey certain messages, either to an individual, family members or a community. A name can shape a person's character, mold their social identity, and even influence their destiny. The meaning attached to a name will determine much about the present and the future of a child. By calling a baby girl Aku-nna, Ezechiel already imposes his will which is that of marrying a rich man so that the bride price returns to him. This means that a child is born to do the will of the father or of a whole family in other words, the child who is born comes on a mission to enrich the family or to pay a debt. Akunna's father did not have a high social position. He was poor and could not assert himself as his fellows. He purposely names his daughter to fulfil a goal. This is illustrated in the statement: " he 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." (Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, p:4).<sup>4</sup> It becomes difficult for Aku-nna to have a say over her own life other than the one held by her family.

Akunna suffers another oppression in terms of bride price. She finds herself frequently estranged by the tradition. The patriarchal context in which she finds herself disadvantages her. Unfortunately in Ibusian's culture the brother always inherits the wife of his deceased brother, which resulted in her mother being married as the 7<sup>th</sup> wife of her uncle. Okonkwo, her uncle who wanted to get titles at all costs, declared that the price would be his. When his sons raise a question about Aku-nna's education,

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<sup>4</sup> Buchi Emecheta. *The Bride Price*. (London: Busby, 1976) p. 4. The subsequent quotations from this edition will be marked (TBP) followed by the page number.

he says: "Don't you know that I hope to become a chief, an Obi?" (*TBP*, p .28) In Ibuza, to become an Obi means "to offer a large, expensive gifts to the gods. Then he received the red hat which was the mark of a chief" (*TBP*, pp.28-29). Aku-nna feels oppressed, imprisoned because she is an object, a nobody who is sold without her consent. This is illustrated in the following statement:

Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time; their bride price will come to me. You see the trend today, that educated girls fetch more money. (*TBP*, p.75)

Ibuza is a worse place for a girl to be born because of insecurity. In Ibuza, there is no law guaranteeing the safety of the girl child, which brings girls to defend themselves from aggressors and sometimes to become violent. When a girl reaches puberty, she is eligible for marriage after her first period. At this time she is exposed to all kinds of violence such as physical, verbal and moral. The suitors harass her and try to cut her hair. In the traditional practice a man who cuts a lock of any marriageable girl becomes her husband without paying her bride price. Consequently, in Ibuza the tension of insecurity is always hanged upon the head of young girl. Emecheta narrates: "A man with no money to pay a bride price could hide the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from a girl's head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and no other man could have her " (*TBP*, p.48).

In the process of the bride price, kidnapping is an accepted village custom. One night when Aku-nna was dancing with her age group, she has been kidnapped by Okoboshi. She sadly said: "This is the end of all my dreams" (*TBP*, p.56). Okoshi is a young man with a limp who fights with Chike (Aku-nna's future husband) over Aku-nna. After kidnapping her, Okoboshi tries to devirgin her. He was a very good wrestler, but Akunna does not love him, he even forced her on to the bed, still holding on to her arm, which she felt going numb. Then she kicked him on the leg, he slapped her very hard. She knows she could not overpower him. This is illustrated in the statement: "You dirty animal! he shouted. Do you think I want to touch you now? Slave-girl! He hit her again. I never really wanted you anyway! ... Soon I shall marry the girl of my choice (*TBP*, p.64). It is cristal clear that girls are abused in the bride price process. The novel tells us that after the kidnapping, Akunna arrived unconscious at

her future parents-in-law, after waking up she did not hesitate to let her suitor know that she does not love him but the custom validates the union. Emecheta describes misadventures and frustration in a male dominated society. In this sense Katherine Frank (1982) says:

Such customs and mores, in fact, are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression: inheritance of widows by their brothers in law, the custom that a man could make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendants of slaves, and numerous other inhibiting manifestations of traditional culture in *The Bride Price* are all determined and enforced by men. (Frank, *Death of the Slave Girl*, p.483)

Emecheta has always lamented the plight of African women, she decried the oppression of women in the family and in her community. According to Baluku et al (2012, p.2) "the bride price, a historic custom has not been well documented, and is one of the most crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared to men." Aku-nna, after the first night, her suppose husband's mother knew that she was disvirgin "she spat at her and pointed without words at the water gourd", bending down to pick up a gourd, she felt the eyes of the other women on her back (*TBP*, p.146). Aku-nna has been subjected to excessive oppression, mockery, physical and psychological abuse just for committing a heinous act. Her mouth burned with pain as she rinsed it out with cold water.

She knew that both her eyes must be swollen for she found it difficult to lift her eyelids upwards. Her head was still reeling like that of someone half-drunk. She allowed herself to shed a few tears into the silent stream. (*TBP*, p.147)

The question is why the woman who is supposed to protect her daughter, despises and humiliates her? It is pitiful to see women as the main source of their their own suffering. In order to satisfy the gloomy needs of her son, Okoboshi's mother inflicts Aku-nna a hideous and shapeless treatment, she even condones her son's violence.

## **2. Women's role in the bride price negotiation**

In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta presents the experiences of women and girls In Ibuza. In this part of the study, we will analyse the role of the african woman; the relation between mothers and daughter. In Ibuza, women's role is to execute their husbands'

decision and follow the patriarchal system rules. Regarding the future of their daughters, African women are passive and force their daughters into forced marriages as is the custom. Aku-nna was sure that her uncle would surely kill her on sight and she could not rely on her mother who would not be permitted to make any decision. The mother and daughter relationships are conflicting since the girl sometimes rebels and wants to speak her mind. Ma blackie akun-na's mother only threatens her with her words. After the death of her father, Aku-nna should take care of herself, in other words, only marriage will get her out of trouble. For Ma Blackie, the fate of her daughter depends on the man who will marry her. This is said in the following statement:

Nobody is going to buy you any more, until you marry then your husband will take care of you... this is the fate of us women. There is nothing we can do about it, we just have to learn to accept it. (*TBP*, pp. 36-37)

The mother informs her daughter that the destiny is already sealed for girls; there is no choice but to undergo what is already programmed. To hear her speak, one clearly understands that this mother has lost all hope, she no longer hopes to win battles, she has simply been presented with a *fait accompli*. And this defeat, she surely transmits it to her daughter who must accept it against her will.

In general, before the bride price is set, there is a complex process of negotiations between the two families. These are headed by the uncles and sometimes the aunties of both families until there is a mutual agreement on the price the groom has to pay in order to marry the bride. However, in Ibuza things are done differently so that a man can kidnapp a girl and then his family will settle the price process afterwards. What interests us more is the role that the African woman plays in the negotiation of her daughter's bride price. Emecheta shows us that women's opinion does not matter, in other words women are in the second, subsidiary position. The woman does not even benefit from all the gifts given for her daughter's price. For example, it is Okonkwo who decides the amount of the bride price and when he received the wine from Okoshi's parents, he shares the wine with the elders and Ma blackie and her son drank only the rest of the wine (*TBP*, p.232).

Aku-nna as for her, she is disappointed about her mother's passiveness; her inability to resist the patriarchal forms of oppression causes frustration in Aku-nna. She began to react against not only her mother but also against the society and community pressures and restrictions. This is illustrated in the statement: "she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all " (*TBP*, p.120). The statement expresses the younger generation's eagerness with the exploitation of woman and with confined, limiting roles. Emecheta portrays her female characters as mute and men followers. In this sense, Cary Joyce, (1989, p.41) in *Mister Johnson*, portrays Bamu, Johnson's wife as a model ignoramus. She knows nothing and can say nothing because she can think about nothing.

When we go through the novel, mothers and daughters relation is conflictual. In the process of the bride price, mothers' role is to transmit their husband message to their daughter and to make sure that it will be implemented. In the novel, Ma Blackie tries to convince her daughter to submit to Okonkwo's final decision about her marriage. As Aku-nna is rebelling, she threatens her with death and compels her to accept the man chosen for her by her uncle. This is illustrated in the statement: "I will kill you if you bring shame and dishonour on us...Ma Blackie cried and cursed her fortune in being saddled with such a daughter " (*TBP*, p.125). Her mother faults Aku-nna, even when it was clear she is faultless. Nowhere, we see Ma Blackie supporting her daughter as a caring mother. She fails to secure her children, she becomes so involved with her new husband that she forgets about Aku-nna and her brother.

In the last chapter of the novel, Aku-nna is totally depressed and separated from her mother, she finally realises she has lost both father and mother. She escapes with Chike and unfortunately she dies when delivering. African mothers stay at their daughters side when they deliver because daughters need their mother support and love at that precise time. The burden of the system is so heavy that Aku-nna feels oppressed and dehumanized, she then gives up.

In this sense, Gloria C. Chukurere (1995, p.206) states: "the author's belief that the failure or success of a character depends not only upon extraneous factors but also upon the character's individual strength of will." As Okonkwo refuses to accept the



price brought by Chike's father, Aku-nna falls apart, she loses her confidence and tragically dies. Joya Uraizee (2000, p.66) opines upon the tragic end of Aku-nna: "Aku-nna is subaltern not because of her social class but because of her gender. She is static and homogenized, silenced and sexually violated." Her marriage against social customs brings, on herself and her family, social disgrace, exile, and death. In Ibuza, every girl is told the sad story of Aku-nna and Chike.

'If you want to live long time', they were told, 'you must accept the husband that your people choose for you, and your bride price must be paid. If it is not paid, you will never survive the birth of your first child.' (TBP, p.85)

### **3. The impacts of modernization and the bride price deconstruction**

Modernization has opened up new options for African girls. In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta points out the clashes between the new and the old. African girls can make several choices with the upcoming of European education, there is no more barriers that can hold them back. Aku-nna refuses to conform to the traditional Ibuza model and follow her own way. Her intellectual education made her realise that she deserves more than what the tradition offers her. She keeps on her studies, and finds out a new hope for her life. In school, she wants to pursue her study as have an open mind. Education brought her freedom, she realises her dream of returning to the city and working as an intellectual woman.

"What she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her. She would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman." (TBP, p.51)

Through the character of Aku-nna, Emecheta is bringing hope to all African girls life. Education can set every human free from the excessive traditional belief. Our culture must not destroy our lives, it should be rooted in equality, respect and free from all forms of exploitation and above all, a culture rooted in the true traditions of the people. Emecheta gives voice to the African woman and condemns the abusive bias of the patriarchal system.

Emecheta purposely introduces the modern medicine in her work which disproves the superstition about the bride price. In Ibuza, everyone is convinced that Aku-nna died in childbirth because she disobeyed the customs, which say that a woman dies in childbirth when her bride price is not paid. However medicine science which is made on modern technologies and knowledge associates her death to malnutrition. Aku-nna's parents were unhappy about her refusal to conform to tradition, they even cursed her. In Africa, it is believed that parental curse can impact negatively a child's life. The diagnostic of the doctor is also relevant because if Aku-nna did not suffer from anemia she could have been saved. A pregnant woman who is undernourished is bound to have vitamin deficiencies, and she is exposed to high levels of malnutrition which damages the immune system. In short, Aku-nna was carrying a risky pregnancy. In this vein, doctor says to Chike months before:

Mr. Ofulue, your wife is so young, and small. She has been undernourishment for a long while, so you should have given her time to recuperate after you married before deciding on a baby... you must both be very careful. She has hardly enough blood for herself, let alone for a baby, but we shall do our best. (*TBP*, p.168)

Modernity has brought a great change in children valorisation. In Ibuza, boys are welcomed than girls since they will perpetuate the family's name. Men folk want a successor by all means and the women because they have the desire to satisfy their husbands and keep their marriages intact crave for male children. Regarding girls, parents are interested in the money they will bring through their bride price. In contrast to other parents, Western education has changed Chike's view of these cultural concepts. He has come to understand that all are equal and that a girl has the same value as a boy. The most important thing for Chike is the health of the child that will be born no matter the sex. So, when his wife delivers, he welcomes the arrival of his daughter "Joy" with enthusiasm. His answer is surprising when Aku-nna asks him if he is disappointed that his child is a girl, he replies:

I won't mind a girl. The only thing is that people would think I make love to you night and day, because girls are love babies. I want our love to be private." (*TBP*, p. 167-168)

Chike does not believe that a girl is only valuable for her bride price, he wants to love his wife and daughter and give them a bright future. He believes in the equality of sex, and thinks that each human being is unique and precious. Emecheta's work shows us through the character of Chike, the separation of the traditional world from the modern world. Chike and Aku-nna have been able to detach themselves from superstitions to reach another level of understanding where every human being has a chance to be accepted and free to decide for one's own life.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the payment of the bride price encourages gender inequality. After the bride price setting, the husband becomes automatically the owner of the wife since he bought her from her parents. And the wife on her side is indebted to him and can only submit to his obligations. That creates male dominance and strengthens their hegemonic masculinities.

However with modernity, the bride price has become a spectacular business for rich people so that poor suitors feel embarrassed. In *the Bride Price*, the heroine finally collapsed since nobody in Ibuza supports her in the fight against patriarchal system oppression. From her feminist view, Emecheta is surely bringing about a change of mentality in African society. The bride price should not be a tool to enslave a girl child. She then promotes girl education and encourage women fold to solidarity and unity. Through the survival of Aku-nna's daughter (Joy), Emecheta is symbolizing hope for every single African woman, that is to say from now, women are free to be educated and to choose their own husband in a modern society. Aku-nna is died but Joy continues the battle of freedom.

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