



MARRIAGE AND MYTH IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S "THE BRIDE PRICE"

RICHA JHA

Research Scholar, Department of English, Ranchi University, Ranchi.
richajha0408@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

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* 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. 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. 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. Interconnecting myth, marriage and literature of Africa, this paper makes an attempt to point out the gripping effect of myth in the African mindset through the fate of Aku-nna and the tradition of marriage in Africa.

Keywords : Africa, myth, marriage, tradition

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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 in literature has been presented in a variety of forms. In many of the novels of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, marriage was the marriage was the goal toward which the story tended and would serve as the perfect ending to redeem the hero or heroine if they

needed to be redeemed or rewarded for their virtue. Marriage in fiction reflects the position of marriage in society. As Simone de Beauvoir stated:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution.

Marriage has always been a very different thing for a man as compared to what it means for a woman. Marriage was considered the ultimate social aim of a woman, and thus, most novels ended at the altar, with a hope of happily-ever-after. However, a shift in this patriarchal notion began to be visible towards the end of the Victorian era. The unequal treatment of a man and a woman in marriage had long meant a certain imbalance as well as a degree of hypocrisy in this institution. The so-called two halves were never equal. The woman was forced to take up the secondary role while the man played the superior one—the bread-earner, the decision maker, the owner of the house—the head of the family. The final two decades of the Victorian era witnessed the beginning of a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations, which was marked by a steady move away from the pattern of patriarchal male supremacy and female dependence towards the modern pattern of gender equality. Spread of education among the women, the revised laws of inheritance and universal suffrage etc gave a new identity to the women. One wherein they could be something without dependence on their spouse. The writers now wanted to focus on this newfound liberty, and took this opportunity to write about the falsity and hypocrisy in the institution of marriage. The Woman Question, raised by Mary Wollstonecraft in her pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), influenced the mid- and late-Victorian feminists. The upper-class women were urged to obtain a proper education and profession in order to make themselves financially independent. Writers growingly criticised the marginalization of women in marriage. Charlotte Bronte, George Elliot, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens are just some of the notable writers who based their plot on the theme of marriage. Jane Austen, in fact, has woven all her novels around the theme of marriage. The pressure to marry (and to marry well) forms the focal point of her plots. Love vs. duty/responsibility, love vs. money etc are the major conflicts we get to see in her in the build up to the marriages in her novels. Some characters married for love, some for convenience, some under family pressure but what continues to be the central focus, is marriage.

Novels now not only focused on the attainment of a match but rather began to deal with the practical problems dealt to the woman after the marriage. The subordination of woman in marriage came to be a central theme. Virginia Woolf's characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe showed the sacrifices women made in order to keep their marriage sailing, how they have to give up their autonomy and deny their wholeness in order to keep the marital bond strong. Thomas Hardy showcased how badly it could end if the woman refused to bow down to the norms of society, like Arabella, and continued to live life on her terms.

Myth, on the other hand, is also an integral part of human civilization. So how can one ignore its evidence in literature? According to M.H.Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

Myths provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals- set forms and sacred ceremonies — but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals.

Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. In *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate, Philip Wheelwright explains:

Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living. Moreover, like Melville's famous white whale, myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations).

Myth in literature has found its place right from the works of Homer, believed by the ancient Greeks to have been the first and greatest of the epic poets to Amish Tripathi, a contemporary Indian writer, known for his ShivaTrilogy. Buchi Emecheta, in her novel, *The Bride Price*, picks up on one such

prevalent myth of her African society, and bases her plot beautifully on it. She deals with the tribal tradition and superstition and spins an engaging tale about a young bride Aku-nna whose fear that she will die in childbirth if her bride price is not paid—the fate according to tribal folklore, awaiting every young girl whose bride price is not paid, ultimately proves true.

Apart from the traditional myths of folklore, like the myth of bride price, or doll-curse or 'ogbanje', which we shall discuss later, the novel also delves into the modern myth, one similar to the Great American Dream; the belief that if one can get away from one's backward native place, to a bigger and comparatively more developed city, one could make a successful life of one's own. Away from the constraints of the people one knew, away from the chains of the life one was forced to suffer through, the new land promised endless opportunities. The young couple, that is, Aku-nna and Chike move away from Ibuza to the town of Ughelli, where they dream of setting up a world of their own, without the interference of discriminatory culture or clash of religions.

But before we begin with the analysis of the novel, it is essential to know a bit about the author. Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Buchi Emecheta as an Ibo writer whose novels deal largely with the difficult and unequal role of women in both immigrant and African societies. Subjugation of women by men is a recurring topic that Buchi Emecheta confronts in her writing. It is a topic that she has experienced firsthand not only in a general, cultural context but also in the realm of her personal life at home. At one point in her budding career, Emecheta's husband burned the manuscript of her novel *The Bride Price* in an attempt to stifle her desire for independence. We find the effects of her difficult life in the major themes of her novels: the quests for equal treatment, self-confidence and dignity as a woman.

The road to independence was a long, torturous journey for Emecheta. She was born on July 21, 1944, to Ibo parents in the small village of Yaba near Lagos, Nigeria. Her parents both died when Emecheta was very young. Her adopted parents permitted her to attend the Methodist Girls'

High School until she was sixteen years old. At this point in her life, Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi, the man to whom she had been engaged since the age of eleven. A year later, Emecheta gave birth to her first child. Shortly after, Emecheta gave birth to her second child and then departed for London to join her husband, who had gone there to study. Six years and five children from the day she was married, Emecheta found herself a divorced woman and a single mother who scrubbed floors to support herself, her children, and her drive to become a writer.

Emecheta had always wanted to be a writer. With this in mind, she used the story of her struggles, her failed marriage, and subsequent hardships of raising a family on her own to write her first book, *In the Ditch* (1972). The story was serialized in the *New Statesman* and was responsible for launching her writing career. Most of Emecheta's other novels – including *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982) etc are set in Africa and explore her favourite themes. Emecheta has also written an autobiography, *Head Above Water* (1986) and several works of children's fiction.

Emecheta's accomplishments (she has written eleven novels, five children's books, several plays, and an autobiography) have made her one of the most important female writers from Africa. Her books, which are published in several countries, have helped to enlighten readers about the role of women in Nigerian culture. In, *The Bride Price*, Emecheta deals not only with the subordinate role that the female is forced to acquire in the society but also the hypocrisy of the whole set up where on the one hand, a daughter is claimed to be the father's wealth and the most prized possession and on the other hand, she is just an asset waiting to be liquidated in the name of bride price.

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* 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. 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.

African literature has most commonly been viewed as a literature of identity. In the post-colonial light especially, literary critics as well as readers have long been preoccupied with the native tradition versus the colonists' idea of civilization. What, however, has remained a constant motif in the African literature is the stronghold of myth. The critics, though accepting myth as a common topic have continuously viewed it as a remnant of the past rather than a force that moves the present. Wole Soyinka, a seminal writer in African literature discussed the absurdity of viewing all African writings as a culture clash. In the 'Author's Note' prefacing the text of *Death and the King's Horseman*, Wole Soyinka inserts a very important message for his readers:

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures', a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality in every given situation of an alien culture and the indigenous, on the soil of the latter.

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.

These plans however fall haywire with the untimely death of Ezekiel Ochia, Aku-nna's father. Ma Blackie. Her mother follows the custom and agrees to be the fourth wife of Okonkwo Ochia, 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 Ochia 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 alongwith 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:

Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nna's death was told her story to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished 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.

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, a port city in Nigeria, Africa. The opening scenes move quickly through the events that are about to drastically alter the lives of the Odia family: Ezekiel, the father; Ma Blackie, the mother; Nna-nndo, the son; and Aku-nna, the daughter and protagonist of this story. The setting of the story, a somewhat industrialized urban center, presents a sharp contrast with the family's move back to the traditional, agrarian society of their ancestral village.

Unknown to the mother and children of the Odia family, Ezekiel, the father, is dying. It is his farewell to his children (the mother, at this time, is visiting the country village of Ibuza) that sets the rest of the events in motion. In their culture, a woman without a husband is unable, we are told, to take care of herself or her children. The translation of Aku-nna's brother's name reminds Aku-nna of this fact. His name means, "*father is the shelter*." In Nigerian culture, "the mother is only a woman ... boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head ... a non-existing family."

It is in the first three chapters of the novel that Emecheta covers the transition from Ezekiel's death and funeral to the eventual departure of his widow and children from the city. In the course of presenting this transition, Emecheta informs us of some of the major conflicts that she will explore in the remaining chapters of the book. She brings up the concept of 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 colonization.

The name of the protagonist, Aku-nna, literally means "*father's wealth*." Her name refers to the bride price that her father will receive upon her marriage. "*To him*," the narrator says, "*this was something to look forward to*." Aku-nna, at the age of thirteen, is well aware of the meaning of her name as well as her role in her society. She would not let her father down. She would marry well to a man who could afford an expensive bride price. This is Aku-nna's role, as it is the role of every woman 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 Aku-nna's father, although he tells her that he needs only to visit the hospital for a short time, is overcome by an infirmity and dies. Aku-nna senses that something dreadful has happened to her father, but she neither is told directly by her relatives, who suddenly appear at her doorstep, nor does she ask direct questions. "Good children don't ask too many questions." Instead, she follows the dictates of her uncles and aunts as they come together to prepare for the funeral rites. She is eventually told about the death of her father through the traditional art of storytelling.

It is through Ezekiel's funeral and burial that Emecheta first exposes some of the clashes between traditional society and the influences of British colonization. She tells the reader that Ezekiel was buried as he had lived "in a conflict of two cultures." She then relates the burial practices and beliefs of the traditional culture, which have been infiltrated by the belief in heaven and hell as preached by the Anglican ministers. Fearful of offending any of the gods, the Ibo people follow the ceremonial dictates of both cultures.

Ma Blackie, Ezekiel's widow and Aku-nna's mother, returns to Lagos to discover that her husband has died. She had left Lagos to visit her homeland in hopes of regaining her fertility and giving Ezekiel another child. She knows that since she is without a husband, she cannot afford to remain in Lagos and prepares her children for their return to Ibuza.

Ibuza is an agrarian village of Ibo people who "have a reputation for not minding what job they take on, so long as it brings money—a race who are particularly businessmad." It is in Ibuza that Ezekiel's older brother, Okonkwo, lives. In that society, a man's status was measured by the number of wives he could keep. Okonkwo already has several wives, but he, by virtue of his brother's death, inherits and eventually marries Ma Blackie. Okonkwo does this while looking forward to the bride price that Aku-nna will bring him. He is an ambitious man who covets the title of *Obi*, which he can claim if he has sufficient money.

It is in Ibuza, as she is walking toward the village on arrival, that Aku-nna meets Chike Ofulue, her future school teacher as well as her future husband. Chike is also a descendent of slaves, and, as such, friendship between Aku-nna and Chike, according to tribal custom, is strictly forbidden. Through a conversation between one of Okonkwo's wives and one of his children, the narrator states the serious nature of such a friendship if it is true, as some of the villagers begin to suspect, that Aku-nna and Chike are developing a relationship:

... it was the greatest insult that could befall a family ... which had never been tainted with the blood of a foreigner, to say nothing of that of the descendants of slaves.

By this point in the story, we know that the rumors concerning the relationship between Aku-nna and Chike are definitely true:

"Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna," the narrator states, "and maybe she would come 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 eventually learns to disregard their admonitions, relegating them to a substandard of "everyday trivia." Having lost her father to death and her mother to a complete immersion into the Ibo culture, Aku-nna feels isolated, alone. Chike is the only one she can turn to. Chike, for his part, is almost willing to forget about Aku-nna. However, he finds himself drawn to her, and when he witnesses the signs of her first menstruation, he is compelled to protect her. When a young woman experiences her first menstruation, it is the signal that she is available for marriage. Chike knows that young men will begin to gather in Aku-nna's house and their fathers will offer her father their bids on Aku-nna's bride price.

When Aku-nna fails to hide her second menstruation cycle from her cousins, it becomes publicly known that she is of marriageable age. Chike becomes aggressive in his protection of Aku-nna from other suitors and assaults Okoboshi, a boy from a neighboring village. Shortly afterward,

Okoboshi's family steals into Aku-nna's village and kidnaps her. It is considered fair play for a man to kidnap a woman, thus forcing her to become his wife.

Using her wits, Aku-nna insults Okoboshi when he tries to rape her on their so-called wedding night. She tells him that she has already been "*disvirgined*" by Chike. Aku-nna is lying, but Okoboshi is so infuriated that he fails to test her story. Then, with the help of her brother and Chike, Aku-nna escapes from Okoboshi's family.

The last two chapters of the book find Aku-nna and Chike living outside of the village. They have a house, which they furnish, and then both of them secure rewarding jobs. In a short time, they are expecting a baby. This should signal a happy ending, but there is something wrong. Despite several generous attempts by Chike's father, Aku-nna's stepfather refuses to accept a bride price. Aku-nna is well aware of the tribal curse on young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price: the expectant mother will die in childbirth. In the end, Aku-nna cannot completely step away from the traditions of her people. 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.

Aku-nna, the protagonist in this novel, is thirteen years old and living in the Nigerian city Lagos when the story opens. She is an intelligent young woman who knows, without being told directly, that she is "too insignificant" in the eyes of her parents. She is, after all, only a girl. She is also thin and at times very susceptible to disease. Her parents refer to her as an "ogbanje"—a living dead. Her mother often chides her by asking Aku-nna to make up her mind if she is going to live or die. It often appears that the only thing her parents look forward to, in respect to Aku-nna, is the bride price, the price her future husband will pay for her.

By the time Aku-nna turns fifteen, she has grown accustomed to things in the Ibo village. She learns about the European ways at school and goes home and faces the "unchanging traditions of [her] own people." Yet she is never able to make herself

feel comfortable in either culture. Both Aku-nna and her brother are like "helpless fishes caught in a net: they could not ... go back into the sea, for they were trapped ... yet they were still alive because the fisherman was busy debating within himself whether it was worth killing them." In the end, it is Aku-nna's inability to free herself from the tangled net of her culture that, at least on a symbolic level, causes her death.

Aku-nna, right from the beginning of the story, has many questions about her family, her culture, and her role in society. She thinks about these questions, but she never voices them because in her culture it is considered worse than bad manners to ask them, especially coming from a girl. But it is these questions that drive Aku-nna throughout this story. She is on a quest for answers. Questions that she seemed to be finally getting some answers to, when she found Chike. With Chike, Aku-nna feels the most comfortable in asking those questions that have haunted her. She identifies with Chike's role, which is both part of the Ibo culture and yet strangely removed from it at the same time. Chike was at the same time her friend, teacher and lover. But it is her relationship to him that proves to be her undoing, and her fear of the myth takes away her happiness, and ultimately her life too.

The Bride Price, apart from the myth related to marriage, also deals with several other folklores, delving in superstition. As discussed earlier, Aku-nna was considered to be an '*ogbanje*'. The myth of *ogbanje* states that it is a child that is born to die.....a wicked child; a child who repeatedly dies and returns to its mother to be reborn so as to bring grief to the family. It is almost impossible to bring up an *ogbanje* child without it dying, unless its *iyi-uwa* (a special kind of stone which forms the link between an *ogbanje* and the spirit of the world). Only if the *iyi-uwa* were discovered and destroyed would the child not die. We find the mention of this myth in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as well. The favorite daughter of Okonkwo, Ezinma was considered to be one such because she was the first of ten children born to her mother that did not die in infancy. It was only when the medicine man was

able to find her *iyi-uwa* and destroy it that the family believe that she'll live.

The novel also shows the use of voodoo wherein Okonkwo, the stepfather practices dark magic to wish bad luck on Aku-nna:

It was known in Ibuza that if you wished to get rid of someone who lived far away, you made a small doll in the exact image of the person and pierced the heart of the doll with a needle, or alternatively set it alight and allowed it to burn gradually. It was evident that it worked, though nobody was sure how because those who knew the art would not submit it to scientific investigation; the victim usually died, very slowly and very painfully.

When Ma Blackie sees the image of her daughter one morning in front of her husband's *chi*, she's scared and disturbed. However, Chike's father, when informed about it tries to alleviate her fears by saying that these are psychological games and would not harm if Aku-nna was not told about it. However, fate had destined otherwise.

Thus, we see that in the treatment of the whole novel marriage and myth form an integral part. But the myth of the bride price is what sets the action in motion and finally, draws the sad conclusion. The myth of the bride price, a fee that is traditionally paid by the prospective husband's family for the prospective wife, is a theme that weaves its way throughout the novel. Emecheta uses this practice of bride price to literally, as well as symbolically, represent women's submission to men in marriage in African culture. *The Bride Price*, although fictional, is somewhat autobiographical. The book draws on the events that Emecheta witnessed growing up in Nigeria. It is the third book that Emecheta has published, but it is the first one in which she offers a hint of hope that both the African woman as well as the descendents of slaves might overcome the potentially debilitating restrictions of their culture. The marriage between Aku-nna and Chike heralds this new hope that the issue of fixed gender roles and class divides might actually come to a resolution.

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