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FEMALE SUPPRESSION AND AFRICAN TRADITION IN 'THE BRIDE PRICE'

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ABSTRACT

*The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta is a poignant love story of Aku-nna, a young girl, and Chike, the son of a prosperous former slave. They are drawn together despite the obstacles standing between them and their happiness, defying even the traditions of tribal life. Aku-nna flees an unwanted marriage to join Chike, only to have her uncle refuse the required bride price from Chike's family. This leads to Aku-nna's haunting fear that she will die in childbirth—the fate (according to tribal lore) awaiting every young girl whose bride price is not paid.

Along with the problems of young educated women in post-colonial Nigeria, the novel deals with the impact of deeply embedded tradition on their young minds. Aku-nna, a young girl is educated in the western system, yet her fragile mind has the deep rooted influence of the native tradition. She is strong enough to lead an independent life with her chosen partner yet reluctant to completely step out of the shackles that bind her since childhood. *The Bride Price* deals with the African myth, superstition and casual cruelty of a still exotic (to Western readers) culture towards the innocent lovebirds.

Emecheta has woven the feminine consciousness of Aku-nna in a strangely unique blend of tradition and myth in this novel. Also, the role of women in an African marriage shall be in focus.

Keywords: Africa, Feminine, Love, Marriage, Myth, Tradition, Superstition, Women.

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*The Bride Price* is set in Nigeria, and while the year is not explicitly defined, it is likely set somewhere around 1960. This was the year that Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom and was trying to find a foothold in its newfound freedom, with dreams of education and a progressive society; before the discovery of the oil wells that tore the country in two, sending it into a series of civil wars that would finally end a decade later. Buchi Emecheta had spent her youth in Nigeria, before moving to London in 1964. The feminine oppression and poverty experienced by the main lead in the novel could well be founded in her own experiences. However, Emecheta stepped out of an abusive and unhappy marriage along with her children to pursue her career in writing. She has woven an intricate web of Nigerian culture into this small novel to show

the struggles of a young woman Aku-nna, striving to grasp her own identity in a predominantly patriarchal world.

Aku-nna, the character which the story centres around, is a pretty, young and fragile school girl prone to falling sick at the slightest of chances:

Not only was she a girl but she was much too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump little girl for a daughter....For her it was forever a story of today foot, tomorrow head, the day after neck, so much so that her mother many a time begged her to decide once and for all whether she was going to live or die. One thing Ma Blackie could not stand, she said over and over again, was "a living dead", an *ogbanje*.

Aku-nna's parents' concern cannot be seen without thinking of their hopes from her. For all that a girl's worth was measured in that society, was in terms of the bride price she would fetch her father at the time of her marriage. In fact, the very name Aku-nna literally meant "father's wealth":

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."

When the novel begins, Aku-nna is shown living with her parents and younger brother in Lagos, Nigeria. It's the 1950s and things are changing all around. People are blending both Western culture and their own traditions together. After her father's sudden death, Aku-nna's life changes completely. Following her father, Ezekiel Odia's funeral, her mother takes her and her brother Nna-nndo back to the village Ibuza as staying in Lagos without the father's income would be beyond their means now.

In the distinctly patriarchal society of Ibuza, Ma Blackie, Aku-nna's mother is forced to marry her husband's brother as it was a tradition there that the eldest brother was allowed to take his deceased brother's wife and family as his own. Also, Okonkwo wanted a share of the money his brother had left his family, thus he happily went ahead with the marriage. Another feature of the African society was the undue importance given to the number of wives a man had in his compound. The more number of wives meant more respect in the society, as if they were property to men. So, following tradition, Ma Blackie becomes the fourth wife of Okonkwo. However, she had one condition, that her children would continue their schooling. Her late husband ' had left over one hundred pounds in savings and had joined a progressive Ibuza group called the Pioneer Association, whose aim was to ensure that on the death of any member the first son of the family would be educated to grammar-school level. So there was nothing Okonkwo could have done to stop Nna-nndo's education.'

As far as the girl was concerned, Okonkwo hoped that a better educated girl would fetch a higher bride price for him at the time of her marriage:

So Aku-nna might after all really live up to her name and be a "father's wealth"; funny how without realizing it one came to fulfil one's parents' expectations. Unfortunately her own father had not lived to share the wealth Aku-nna was bound to bring, but not to worry, Okonkwo was almost a father to her now.

Bride Price is the amount that a potential groom offers to the bride's family as compensation for the loss of a worker in the bride's family as a result of marriage and the consequent shifting of the bride to her husband's place. Women are considered property in traditional villages and cannot decide their own future. They have to abide with whatever their elders decide for them. Also, the widespread superstition regarding the payment of bride price doesn't help their case. The superstition holds that a girl will die in childbirth if her bride price is not paid. And but of course, if the girl chose a life partner without the consent of her father, he would refuse to

accept the bride price and the superstition would come true. Practically though, most brides are so young and undernourished that this superstition does come true far too often, as we see in the case of Aku-nna.

Aku-nna feels lonely in the new environment of Ibuza and finds comfort in the company of her young and kind teacher, Chike. Chike cares for her and seems to understand her a great deal more than even her own mother, who gets too busy in the household politics of Okonkwo and his other wives. Soon Chike's protective manners win her heart and they fall in love. They wish to get married but Okonkwo refuses because the boy is a descendent of slaves. Such association would bring shame to his family and also mar his chances of buying the title of Obi, a village chief. Okonkwo fixes her marriage with the foul-mouthed Okoboshi, who tries to kidnap and rape her in order to establish his right over her. This being another one of those suppressive traditions of the society. If a boy could even forcefully take a girl to his bed and *disvirgin* her, she would have to marry him as no one else would. She automatically became his property.

However, with the help of her brother Nna-nndo and Chike, Aku-nna is able to rebel against her uncle's wishes and tries to break free from the tangles of the oppressive society. She elopes with Chike to Ughelli. There they try to start their life afresh but the haunting fear does not leave her ever. And ultimately, she does die upon giving birth to her child. Though there's plenty of evidence in the novel, be it the concern of the mother, Ma Blackie, about the young age and fragile body of her daughter, or the warning of the doctor who pronounces Aku-nna too young for pregnancy, yet the story in Ibuza still runs about the dangers of the non-payment of bride price. Young girls are warned against following their heart citing Aku-nna's example.

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.

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