

## Unveiling Tradition and Concomitant Gender Disparity in *The Bride Price*

**Archana Thakur, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar**

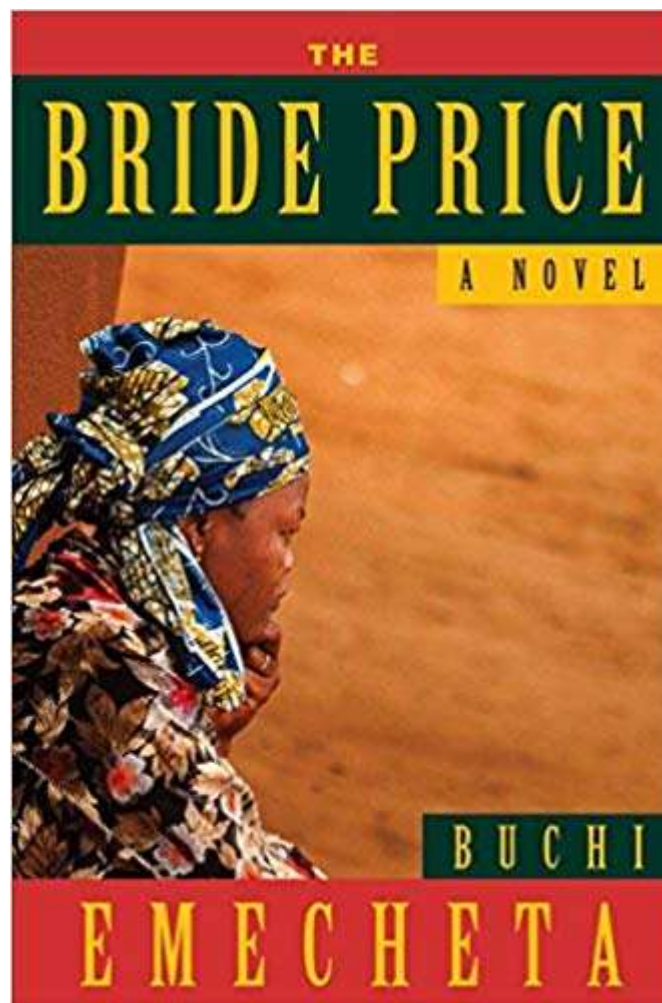
Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dhauladhar Campus Dharamshala, District-  
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh- 176206

[archana.17@hotmail.com](mailto:archana.17@hotmail.com)

Mobile No.- 9805337594

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### Abstract

Igbo people form one of the largest communities in Nigeria who have deep reverence for their culture and traditions. The same culture which is favourable to men is inimical to women's interests. Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) in her novel *The Bride Price* has presented culture from a

female point of view wherein she delineates what it is to be a female in a tradition oriented, sexist, patriarchal society. Embedded deeply in the Igbo community of Nigeria to which the novelist herself belongs, this novel provides a distinct image of African society making a female principal character whose efforts to rise above native customs end up in her tragic demise, making it clear that customs and laws have more value than an individual. The present paper aims at studying African, especially Igbo traditions; appalling and obnoxious practices vis-à-vis Igbo women and its impact on their physical and mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, tradition, African women, customs, gender, marriage.

Tradition has always been an integral and inextricable part of human life which acts like a bridge between generations thereby making us aware of the times gone by. It is a way of life and the base that guides and shapes every society. The passing on of habits, cultural beliefs and numerous other things from one generation to another is called tradition. Edward Shills in his book *Tradition* (1981) defines the term: “Tradition means many things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a *traditum*; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (13).

The term ‘tradition’ has its roots in the Latin word *tradere* which means to ‘transmit’ or to ‘hand over’. Thus, tradition means inheritance, preservation, respect for and continuity with the past. It is heterogeneous and includes everything ranging from dress code to literature to food habits. The working of society and influence of tradition are mutually intertwined since no society exists without a past. For any habit, belief or practice to be called tradition there must be an originator and the receiver too. Along with this, it must have passed from generation to generation and as Edward Shills notes: “It has to last over at least three generations — however long or short these are — to be a tradition” (15). Whether to accept or reject tradition depends totally on the wish or convenience of the recipient. Rejecting any kind of ‘essentialism’ in tradition, Mark Bevir argues “. . . because, people usually want to improve their heritage by making it more coherent, more accurate, and more relevant to contemporary issues, they often do respond selectively to it; they accept some parts of it, modify others, and reject others. Traditions change as they are transmitted from person to person” (39). Therefore, traditions can be accepted, rejected or modified according to the need or demand of situation as they are dynamic in nature.

Good and genuine traditions must always be preserved because they never cause a threat to the progress of society, rather they are beneficial to all. As for example ancient Jewish tradition of planting trees when a child is born is a good way to connect to nature as well as to

prevent biohazard. Orthodox ones should be altered or rejected because they do not only harm society but are regressive in nature too. Like the dreadful custom of *Sati* in India, where a woman was forced to immolate herself on the burning pyre of her deceased husband, claimed the lives of many women and was therefore banned in 1829.

Women constitute one half of the humanity but still they do not enjoy the privileged position like men. If traditions are to be believed, a woman has always been a man's inferior because of gender hierarchies. Gender, a social construct is a "psychological and cultural" term and it differs from sex which is a "biological term" (Oakley 158). Gender inequality too is a practice that has been taught and handed down from one generation to another, through practice, orally or in written form.

African societies are often called as the 'man's world' because Africa is deeply steeped in culture and traditions which do not allow enough space for females. Majority of women in Africa are, according to Catherine Coquery Vidrovitch. ". . . defined by three S's: silence, sacrifice and service" (18).

Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Bride Price* (1975) revolves around a young girl Aku-nna who is torn between new and old unrelenting traditional ways of living. Having more and more children and preference for son is the thought that lies at the core of African society and it is clearly evident from the desires of Aku-nna's parents. Aku-nna's father Ezekiel Odia often jeers at his wife Ma Balckie for her 'childlessness' and shows his dissatisfaction for having "an only son" (*The Bride Price* 9) even after paying a heavy bride price for her. He is close to his daughter Aku-nna but "she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing" (*BP* 9) for being born a girl. These desires are based on the belief that a son will carry forward the family traditions, name and legacy along with providing financial support to family. Writing about Nigerian society and women, Obioma Nnaemeka notes: "In Igbo, as common in all patrilineal societies, man assumed a position of superiority over women. This was best expressed in the preference for male children (as primary inheritors of the family estate) over female children. Igbo society is characterized by gender differentiation as one of the dominant markers of social relations" (108). Therefore, a woman is expected to produce sons rather than daughters because ". . . as bearers of male children, she acquires prestige and ensures the stability of her marriage and continuity of kinship and tradition" (Falola 252).

Ezekiel Odia names his daughter 'Aku-nna' which means "father's wealth" (*BP* 10) in anticipation of the wealth she will fetch as her bride price "the only consolation he could count on from her" (*BP* 10). Bride price or bride wealth is a common tradition in many parts of Africa where a prospective bride's family receives goods and money from bride groom and his family. It is a way to ". . . legalize a marriage and for the man's kinship to have legitimate claim to the

children arising from it” (Falola 259). Bride price- the price fixed for a girl reduces her to the level of a commodity or property that is given to another family in exchange of goods and money. In case the marriage does not work, it cannot be dissolved unless the bride price is paid back to the husband, and in most cases it is not ever paid back and the girl is forced to stay in unwanted marriage and labour hard since in Africa it is mandatory for every woman to work. After Ezekiel Odia’s death at Lagos, his children Aku-nna and Nna-nndo feel like they have been orphaned because “father is the shelter” (BP 28), he is the head as well as the provider and mother being a woman is insignificant. Therefore “A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter” (BP 28).

I. E. Nwosu in his article “Gender Role Perceptions and the Changing Role of Women in Nigeria” writes, “The law and customs in most part of Nigeria, in several instances, have tended to perpetuate gender discriminations in society by denying women such fundamental rights as inheritance of property, equal employment opportunities, equal access to credit facilities, rights to procure bail and even decent treatment as widows” (1242). By depriving a woman of her basic rights like equality, access to education, property, employment etc., the tradition - oriented, patriarchal society ignores a woman’s existence and renders her helpless thereby making her stand on the lower rung of the social hierarchy.

Finding it impossible to live without a breadwinner in Lagos, Odia family goes back to their native place Ibuza whereas per the Igbo customs, Ezekiel Odia’s wife Ma Blackie is soon inherited by his elder brother Okonkwo, who makes her his fourth wife. But before this she mourns for her dead husband for several months in a secluded hut and very harsh conditions. Since a woman is considered to be a husband’s property due to bride price and as property always belongs to the husband’s clan in the Igbo tribe of Nigeria, a man can inherit his dead brother’s wife / wives and her / their children. This is done to ensure that a family’s wealth does not go outside and to give protection to the widow and her children. It is usually believed that a woman cannot manage herself, her children and property in the absence of a man. Ama Ata Aidoo in her article “African Woman Today” writes: “. . . the woman was regarded as a permanent minor, first her father’s ward, then her husband’s. If she outlived her husband, then as a widow she became the ward of some male in either her husband’s home or her own home. Sometimes, a woman became a ward of her own son(s)!” (321). Aku-nna knows that life will not be same now and her dream of getting educated and marrying off well will shatter. Also, she will be married off soon so that her bride price can help in educating her younger brother Nna-nndo.

Surprisingly, Aku-nna is allowed to continue her education at a school run by Church Missionary Society. Okonkwo, despite his family’s apathy for a girl’s education, agrees for Aku-nna’s education because he is highly ambitious and “he wanted to be an Obi, so he needed more money. Aku-nna had to be allowed to stay in school so that she could be married to a rich man”

(BP 75). Deeply hurt by her mother's indifferent attitude and constant insults that she is coward and sickly, Aku-nna feels completely dejected until she finds love in Chike Ofulue, her teacher at Church Missionary Society School. Chike comes from an 'oshu' family, he is a slave descendant. His grandmother was a beautiful princess who was captured as a slave during a raid on her village. He himself is young and handsome and has few local mistresses. Emecheta remarks:

In Ibuza, every young man was entitled to his fun. The blame usually went to the girls. A girl who had had adventure before marriage was never respected in her new home; everyone in the village would know about her past . . . There were men who would go about raping young virgins of thirteen and fourteen, and still expect the women they married to be as chaste as flower buds. (BP 84)

Here Emecheta exposes the double standards of Igbo society which allows all the freedom for males and disgraces those females for the same. "Double standards of sexuality" means that "sexual behaviour deemed inappropriate in a woman, and for which she is shown social approval, may be regarded as appropriate and as praiseworthy in a man" (Jane Pilcher et al 34). Chike too falls deeply in love with his fifteen years old student Aku-nna and resolves to marry her even if it means breaking all the laws and customs of his society. As it is against the laws of Igbo society to get involved with slaves, Aku-nna is constantly warned to stay away from him. Being a slave family, the Ofulues are not considered to be equal to free human beings despite being quite affluent. When she attains puberty, i.e. begins to have menstruation, she is panic stricken and shameful but Chike helps her and asks her not to reveal this to her family as it could result in her early marriage. But she is not able to hide it for a long time and the news spreads in the whole village in no time, making her family feel overjoyed. There is little celebration and Okonkwo seems extremely pleased and amused over his piece of luck. It is on this occasion that he warns Aku-nna to stay away from Chike. Aku-nna had already realized that "For a girl from a good family to marry the descendant of a slave would be an abomination" (BP 110- 111). Along with this "she was trapped in the intricate web of Ibuza tradition. She must either obey or bring shame and destruction on her people" (BP 116). She feels thoroughly helpless and her helplessness is aggravated by her mother's passive attitude who looks quite busy in her own life. Soon she realizes that suitors have come for her and the early marriage seems inevitable. Her heartache for Chike and feeling of entrapment makes her pray to God, "God, please kill me instead . . . rather than let this be happening to me" (BP 118). Unwillingly she receives her suitors which include her classmate Okoboshi, a limp and Chike too. Okoboshi suddenly squeezes her breast because Igbo customs allowed him to do so. Emecheta writes about the custom which is absolutely outrageous and shattering to a girl's modesty. In the name of night games, young boys were allowed to visit a girl in her mother's hut and "play at squeezing a girl's breasts until they hurt" (BP 97) and the girl was expected to remain calm and just try to

ward the boys off. No one objected to it as long as it was done in the presence of an adult. By permitting such abominable customs to exist, the society tends to reduce a girl to a level of a mere thing to play with that the males can use to amuse themselves and can even violate her honour. As Chike is also present, he is not able to tolerate this misbehavior with Aku-nna and he thrashes Okoboshi thoroughly.

Soon Aku-nna is kidnapped by Okoboshi family and forced to marry Okoboshi, the limp. Although her family tries to look out for but they all know that searching is useless as Aku-nna cannot be brought back because the kidnapper could have cut a lock of her hair or could have forced her to sleep with him and “. . . if she refused his people would assist her by holding her down until she was dis-virgined. And when that had been done, no other person would want to take her anymore” (BP 132). Okonkwo receives her bride price, and all is settled between the two families. Aku-nna is firmly resolved for not sleeping with Okoboshi on the mud couch, with a white towel on it, made especially for the occasion. Emecheta here introduces another demeaning custom in which a stainless white towel is placed on the bed of a newly wedded couple and the next day the towel is presented to the bride’s mother as a present. If the towel has no blood stains on it then the bride is called characterless and the whole village or town frowns upon it. It also lowers the bride price of the girl. She knows Okoboshi will trouble her but “A kind of strength came to her, she intended to stand up for herself, to fight for herself, for her honour. This was going to be the deciding moment of her existence” (BP 136). She does not only insult Okoboshi but also makes up a story that she has already been dis-virgined by Chike and she might be carrying his child. Okoboshi, taken aback, beats her resolving to make her a maid to his future wives. The following day when the whole village seems to turn their back on her, Aku-nna manages to escape the evil clutches of her kidnappers with the help of her brother Nna-nndo and Chike. Chike and Aku-nna elope to Ughelli, a town in the mid-west region of Nigeria. The couple soon gets married and consummates their marriage on a newly bought bed that they name ‘joy.’ For some time Aku-nna lives the long cherished life, she becomes a teacher in a school, Nna-nndo too comes to live with them and she enjoys happy married life with Chike. But her happiness is short lived as Okoboshi spreads the news that Aku-nna was not a virgin and moreover he still belongs to him as he had cut a lock of her hair. Here Emecheta introduces a nasty custom which can cause lifelong suffering and pain for a girl:

Some youth who had no money to pay for a bride might sneak out of the bush to cut a curl from a girl’s head so that she would belong to him for life and never be able to return to her parents; because he had given her the everlasting haircut, he would be able to treat her as he liked, and no other man would ever touch her (BP103).

The fear of hair being cut by a man in such a manner compelled many young girls to keep very short hair and the others who had long hair would wear headscarves. The above mentioned

custom is a clear instance of how customs and traditions can denigrate a woman's life subjecting her to utmost distress. It also points to the fact that in a culture fabricated by men, only they have the right to choose their life partners whereas the same is denied to women.

Okonkwo gets extremely ill and furious too on losing his chance of getting bride price for Aku-nna and thus becoming a chief. He twice refuses to accept bride price by Chike's father, and, in his rage, he divorces Ma Blackie by exposing his backside to her in public and she can do nothing about it. Here, Marilyn Friedman's observation becomes valid according to which "Men are supposed to 'stand up like a man' for what they believe or value, including the simple assertion of their self-interests. Women instead are supposed to 'stand by your man.' The maxim 'stand up like a woman' has no serious meaning" (99). Lower status of women in the Igbo community is clearly evidenced by Ma Blackie's case. She is first inherited by Okonkwo without her permission and then divorced, that too without asking for her consent.

Okonkwo resolves to take his revenge. As suggested by the local witch – doctor, he makes a doll in the image of Aku-nna and pierces its heart with a needle in order to kill Aku-nna. She soon gets pregnant but is undernourished and is warned by the physician. She now lives constantly sick and worried for she too believes that if the bride price is not paid, the bride will die at childbirth. By now she knows the Igbo customs very well and also knows she will not survive. And her fear indeed comes true, after struggling for days of constant illness, she gives birth to a premature baby girl whom she names 'joy' and dies peacefully. Her unceasing fear and malnourishment becomes instrumental in her demise whereas her own community sees her death as a punishment for offending the Igbo laws; for not letting the society decide her fate, getting educated, getting in relationship with an outcaste, marrying a man of her own choice and above all for not fetching much awaited bride price. Later, Aku-nna's tragic story serves as a lesson for many young girls in Ibuza so that they do not meet the similar destiny. Emecheta remarks:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional 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. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization, until the present day. (BP 168)

Aku-nna's fight against societal laws takes a toll on her life. Through her, Emecheta challenges the unyielding society that "exile the body" of a woman when "tradition itself is made more important than women" (Kartak156). If women are the guardians and repositories of culture, then they have to be placed at equal pedestal with men otherwise a society can never

claim to be progressive and civilized. Blind orthodoxy and conservatism in the name of reverence for past is a big obstacle in the progress of any society. For achieving equal status for women, eradication and modification of conservative societal norms is mandatory. In the words of Simon J. Bronner, “Variability, rather than fixity, is tradition’s trademark” (2) and “Tradition, rather than being a relic set in stone, could be renewable, malleable resource for the future” (4). Therefore customs that harm anyone should be abandoned or altered for the betterment of the society. Every society should keep abreast of the times and wisely choose or alter or eliminate things to suit the present needs.

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