



Threads of Tradition: Navigating Superstition and Autonomy in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*

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Abstract

Superstitious beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping the lives of the characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, creating a web of expectations and consequences. It is a novel that intricately delves into the multifaceted dynamics of traditional customs, and the pervasive influence of superstitions in post-colonial Nigeria. The concept of bride price, a cultural norm wherein a suitor must pay a certain amount to the family of the bride, serves as a central theme. Aku-nna, the protagonist, becomes a focal point for examining the clash between deeply ingrained cultural practices and the pursuit of personal autonomy. Emecheta skillfully paints a vivid portrait of a society in transition, caught between the weight of tradition and the aspirations of a new generation. Aku-nna's struggle embodies the tension between adhering to societal expectations and the desire to forge an independent path. The narrative unfolds against a backdrop of cultural richness and social intricacies, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of the characters' motivations and the broader societal forces at play. Emecheta's pen captures the essence of Nigerian life, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the vibrant medley of the setting. This novel not only serves as a compelling story of personal growth and resilience but also as a profound exploration of the impact of superstitious beliefs on the lives of individuals within a cultural context.

Key Words: Traditional customs, Superstitious beliefs, tradition, autonomy

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The Bride Price stands as a literary masterpiece that not only captures the nuances of a specific time and culture of Nigerian society, but also resonates with readers globally, prompting contemplation on the delicate balance between tradition and personal autonomy. Aku-nna's world is shaped by traditional norms, where the
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concept of bride price plays a central role in marriages. Her journey becomes a microcosm of the broader societal changes occurring in post-colonial Nigeria, highlighting the tension between tradition and the desire for personal freedom. Akunna navigates the challenges of her adolescence, contending with the
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formidable expectations imposed by her family and community. As she matures, Aku-nna finds herself entangled in a web of cultural practices, superstitions, and the complexities of interpersonal relationships. The novel poignantly portrays the evolving dynamics of Nigerian society during this period, capturing the struggles of individuals caught between the weight of tradition and the yearning for autonomy.

The cultural norm of bride price stands out as a central theme, symbolizing the commodification of women and societal expectations. 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(502).

This literary work delves into the impact of mythology on the existence of Aku-nna, a youthful bride haunted by the persistent dread of premature death during childbirth due to the non-payment of her bride price. The emotional turmoil she experiences, coupled with her eventual demise in fulfillment of this myth, highlights the distressing prevalence of Nigerian customs that prioritize traditions over human life. The narrative showcases the profound psychological influence of myth on the consciousness of Nigerian individuals and the resultant adherence to age-old practices. It is perplexing, yet undeniable, how this phenomenon persists even in the era of modernization. Aku-nna's experience becomes emblematic of the broader societal changes in post-colonial Nigeria. The negotiations surrounding her bride price exemplify the societal pressures tied to this tradition, highlighting the economic and social implications for women within the community.

In this novel, Emecheta intricately explores the impact of age-old customs on the lives of Akunna and Chike, a young couple determined to challenge tradition but ultimately

succumbing to the forces of fate. Each girl from Ibuza, whether native-born or from distant origins, grew up under the influence of the longstanding taboos embedded in the land's culture. Aku-nna, born in the bustling city of Lagos, not only found herself obligated to conform to her community's customs but also carried a name that ceaselessly reminded her of the debt 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(10)

Aku-nna's plans take an unexpected twist following the untimely demise of her father, Ezekiel Ochia. Ma Blackie, followed the tradition by becoming Okonkwo Ochia's fourth wife, the brother of her late husband. As her mother becomes entangled in the complexities of Okonkwo's household politics, and her younger brother Nna-nndo pursues his own rebellious path, Aku-nna seeks solace and empathy in Chike, her young mentor at school. Their connection evolves into a deep bond, prompting them to conceal their affection until Aku-nna completes her education. The fear arises from the concern that divulging their relationship could lead to the termination of her schooling. However, love, much like an uncontrollable flame, proves difficult to keep hidden, and soon rumors start circulating. The very idea of such a union is adamantly rejected by the Ochia family, to the point that they would rather inflict harm upon Aku-nna than allow her to wed Chike. This fierce opposition stems from Chike's osu status, a lineage traced back to slaves.

While Chike's father has earned admiration and wealth, their lineage remains a delicate issue for the Ibuza community. "Although he was a member of the Native Administration, the people had never allowed him to become a

chief... His children taught in their schools, and his children treated their old people free in the hospitals. Yet they were still slaves, oshu " (85). Despite the community's historical disdain for slaves and their descendants, the economic strides made through personal endeavors and European support leave them powerless to diminish the standing of families like Chike's. Simultaneously, Okonkwo fixates on the bride price Aku-nna could bring, expressing anger upon discovering 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"(87). This tumultuous scenario highlights the clash between entrenched traditions and the pursuit of personal relationships in the face of societal expectations.

The novel's thematic richness extends beyond its cultural specificity, inviting readers to reflect on the universal struggle for autonomy amidst deeply rooted traditions. Aku-nna's experience becomes emblematic of the broader societal changes in post-colonial Nigeria. The negotiations surrounding her bride price exemplify the societal pressures tied to this tradition, offering a nuanced exploration of the economic and social implications for women within the community. As she navigates the challenges of adolescence, her encounter with the tradition of bride price becomes a focal point for examining the clash between tradition and the desire for personal freedom. The negotiation scenes provide concrete examples of how cultural norms, in this case, the practice of bride price, shape individual destinies and influence the power dynamics within relationships. Her personal journey becomes a poignant expression of the universal struggle for autonomy amidst deeply rooted traditions. The tension between adhering to societal expectations and the innate desire to forge an independent path is vividly portrayed as Aku-nna matures. Her challenges extend beyond the economic transactions associated with the bride price, encompassing her aspirations for education and love. Akunna tries to come out of

the web of tradition by marrying Chike. In Margaret Green's analysis,

In considering the question of social stability one must recognize, in the first place, that there is a general acceptance of the existing form of society. There are many personal dissatisfactions and criticisms, but they do not lead to general criticism of the status quo or demands for a revolution or a new order(37).

Aku-nna, while challenging certain social conventions and advocating for change, finds herself isolated in her rebellion, as the broader society remains deeply entrenched in traditional values and resistant to transformation. Caught amidst these opposing forces, Aku-nna grapples with internal conflict, torn between her ingrained tribal upbringing and her recognition of the injustices inherent in tradition. Despite her aspirations for societal change, she struggles to fully emancipate herself from her cultural heritage, resulting in a profound sense of inner turmoil. Even though she tries to come out of the web of tradition she succumbs to the superstitious belief in the society.

Aku-nna's life in post-colonial Nigeria is profoundly influenced by the pervasive superstitious beliefs ingrained in the culture, particularly regarding the concept of "Chi," akin to a personal deity, which influences both positive and negative occurrences in an individual's life. In Nigerian society particularly in Ibuza, people perform a ritual:

If someone wished to get rid of someone who lived faraway, 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 to scientific investigation that the victim usually died, very slowly and very painfully. (156)

These lines illustrate the intricate intersection of superstition with personal relationships and societal norms. In a poignant scene from the novel, Okonkwo creates an image of Aku-nna



and presents it to his personal god, Chi. However, upon Ma Blackie's realization of this act, she reacts with anxiety, promptly removing her daughter's image from its place before the god. Ma Blackie interprets Okonkwo's action as meddling with Aku-nna's fate through spiritual means, leading to her decisive removal of the image to assert control over her daughter's destiny. This scene highlights the complex interplay of cultural beliefs, spirituality, and personal relationships in shaping the characters' lives. It exemplifies Buchi Emecheta's adept exploration of the nuances surrounding identity, tradition, and change within the narrative.

Aku-nna's unwavering adherence to cultural superstitions becomes evident during her pregnancy, as she insists on Chike fulfilling the traditional bride price payment to her stepfather, fearing severe consequences if it remains unpaid. Despite her prior defiance of societal norms by marrying a slave, Aku-nna remains deeply entrenched in the belief that failure to pay the bride price will lead to her death. Her pregnancy exacerbates her sense of social isolation and invites harsh judgment from her community, intensifying her emotional distress and exacerbating feelings of exclusion. Aku-nna's internal struggle is evident as she grapples with the fear instilled by superstition, worsened by societal stigmatization and rejection by Okonkwo. Despite efforts to provide comfort, Aku-nna's steadfast beliefs persistently trouble her, ultimately impacting her mental and physical well-being. As noted by Lloyd Brown, each woman's fate is ultimately determined by her compliance or defiance of communal expectations. Thus, Aku-nna's journey highlights the pivotal role played by societal norms and cultural traditions in shaping individual autonomy and outcomes.

As Aku-nna contends with the formidable expectations imposed by her family and community, readers witness her entanglement in a web of cultural practices and interpersonal relationships. Her evolving sense of self becomes a compelling narrative thread, offering readers a textured understanding of the complexities individuals face when attempting to break free from societal constraints. *The Bride Price* transcends its cultural specificity to resonate with readers globally, prompting contemplation on the delicate balance between tradition and personal autonomy. The thematic richness of the novel invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of the characters' struggles. Aku-nna's life is a reflection through which readers explore not only the intricacies of Nigerian society but also the universal themes of personal growth, resilience, and the human quest for autonomy within the constraints of cultural traditions.

In conclusion, the novel's exploration of superstitious beliefs and autonomy extends far beyond a mere cultural narrative. It serves as a profound reflection on the human experience, prompting readers to navigate the intricate threads of tradition while yearning for autonomy in a changing world.

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