
The Practice of Bride Price as a Curse for Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*: A Critical Analysis

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Article Received: 12/03/2025**Article Accepted:** 12/04/2025**Published Online:** 13/04/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.389

Abstract:

This paper critically analyses the practice of bride pricing and its impact on women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*. The novel delves into a number of important subjects including personal, cultural, and societal dynamics in traditional Ibuza culture. At its core, the novel analyses the relationship between tradition, gender roles, and human agency, as well as concerns of bride price, which signify women's subjugation to African patriarchal and cultural standards. The author examines how traditional traditions, such as the custom of bride price, influence and constrain individual lives. The study examines how cultural practices such as bride price influence relationships, social status, and family dynamics, and asks if these traditions serve the best interests of those they control. The paper also provides a feminist criticism of patriarchal standards, which marginalise and oppress women. Emecheta's character, Aku-nna, exemplifies how women's status is sometimes limited to their roles in marriage and childbirth. The bride price system shows how women are commodified and denied agency over their own lives. It also exemplifies how the bride price is a significant cultural aspect that reflects gender relations, familial expectations, and societal limits in the protagonist's life. It demonstrates the practice of bride price, which is a longstanding belief that supports violations of women's human rights.

Keywords: African women, bridal price, culture, oppress, traditional and patriarchal society.

1.Introduction

Marriage is highly cherished and honoured in traditional African culture. Marriage systems differ among African societies, reflecting the continent's vast cultural, religious, and ethnic variety. The bride and groom marry to carry on the groom's family bloodline. The newlywed bride and husband are responsible for procreating and supporting their family. However, this social practice of marriage entails extra traditional customs that are extremely important in African society and without which the marriage is incomplete. The practice is a widespread African social ritual in the marriage institution in which the prospective husband pays an amount of money or property to the bride's family. Many African societies place a high value on marriage rites and the concept of bride price (also called as bridal wealth, dowry, or Lobola in different places). The notion of bride payment is central to many traditional African marriage systems. It reflects the cultural, social, and economic aspects of marriage in African societies. These traditions, while firmly ingrained in culture and history, have changed dramatically in reaction to modern influences.

African marriage rituals are diverse, although they have similarities across areas and cultures. Marriage is considered in African societies as a connection between two families or communities, rather than merely a link between two individuals. The groom or his family presents a gesture of thanks to the bride's family, demonstrating respect and solidifying the marriage arrangement. Any wedding in African society that does not include the payment of custom "looks like casual sex or prostitution" (ibid). A traditional marriage ceremony requires payment of the bride price to be valid. As Bourdillon proved, bride price payment exists in numerous non-African civilisations, although it is not required in all of them. In some situations, legitimate weddings can take place without money (op cit). Thus, paying the bride price is not a universal human practice. Dowry, which is the diametric opposite of bride price, exists in several countries, including India. In the US, there is no dowry or bridal payment, but Americans marry and establish families.

The bride price, also known as lobola, mahari, or dowry in many African cultures, is an important cultural element in African weddings. It is a traditional rite in which the groom or his family gives tangible or cash gifts to the bride's family as part of the wedding ceremony. While its shape and significance vary by community, the practice is profoundly rooted in African social and cultural traditions. In African society, it is believed that if the wedding fee is not paid, the woman would die during delivery. African men and women, regardless of how civilised their civilisation has become, are fervently convinced that they must avoid death. Furthermore, paying the bride price is considered a show of respect and thanks to the bride's family for raising her and allowing her to marry into another family. It acknowledges

the

bride's importance and commitment to her family and community. Bridal prices are a noble thing among Africans. It is the first step in the construction of any family and a cultural need for their establishment. The issue that we will address in this paper is that, despite the system's cultural and traditional relevance, there are factors that are core causes of hindrances to women's rights and freedoms. Not to claim that the practice of bride price is the root causes of all women's exploitation and subordination, but it does demonstrate that certain of the features of bride price are main causes of women's exploitation, both physically and mentally. The paper also argues that following the above wedding customs is one of the numerous ways in which the African male dominated society maintains its authority over women. Men often exert authority over women both within and outside the home. This control is an essential component of gender relations in African societies.

The novel looks into the duality of this practice, revealing how it serves not just as a cultural norm, but also as a system that maintains women's commodification and subjugation. The novel criticises the ways bride prices bind women in a cycle of reliance, cultural expectations, and emotional anguish via Aku-nna's tragic narrative. This critique concentrates on the author's characterisation of the bride price as a curse rather than a boon, emphasising how this practice undermines women's autonomy, reinforces patriarchal authority, and imposes harsh consequences on those who challenge it. The author illustrates the devastating impact of the custom on individual lives by weaving a personal and cultural critique into Aku-nna's story, as well as critiquing the value of practices that ignore women's choices and aspirations.

1. Causes of the Practice

In the traditional Ibuza community, the ritual is an essential marital rite that symbolises the merger of two families and the groom's recognition of the bride's worth. While this custom has strong roots in social identification, it frequently reduces women to economic commodities whose value is determined by their capacity to attract income through marriage. For many women, the bride price is both a familial responsibility and a cultural expectation that puts their roles as daughters, wives and mothers ahead of their individuality. While the custom is strongly founded in traditional causes such as culture, economic and social stability, respect, and prestige, patriarchal structure is one of the key reasons for the employment of bride price systems in modern African communities in general, and the Ibuza community in particular.

2.1 The cultural context and setting

The custom is strongly ingrained in cultural traditions and has substantial social, economic, and symbolic value. Elders have a critical role in establishing the value of bride price in future generations, highlighting its significance in family unity, respect, and continuity. During traditional initiation rites in certain tribes, young men and women are taught about marital traditions, particularly the significance of the bride price. It frequently involves extended family and community elders, emphasising its communal aspect and assuring the tradition's preservation. Families hold official negotiations to determine the bride price, which develops relationships between the two families and validates the marriage.

In the novel, the author critically analyses the custom, depicting its cultural relevance and capacity to subjugate women inside patriarchal system. She uses the protagonist Aku-nna's experiences to demonstrate how this ancient ceremony may be used to commodify women and perpetuate their subjugation. The author uses Aku-nna's hardship life following her father's death as a lens to criticise the traditional practice of bride price and its repercussions in a patriarchal culture. The representation of their relationship reflects societal conventions while also criticising how these norms may lead to women's commodification and exploitation.

The cultural context and setting of the custom compel and exploit the protagonist, Aku-nna, by reducing her to an instrument for economic gain and social expectations. The Ibuza bride price custom views girls as economic goods, and Aku-nna's stepfather, Okonkwo, exemplifies this viewpoint. Following her father's death, Aku-nna becomes a pawn in her stepfather's pursuit of fortune and social status. Her stepfather, Okonkwo, controls her education, the individuals she contacts with, her household tasks, and who she marries. If Aku-nna rebels and marries Chike, her life might be jeopardised since her acting father must pay the custom money. The belief that failing to pay the custom money results in misfortune or death is a powerful force in the Ibuza community. This belief is used to manipulate Aku-nna, forcing her to comply to societal norms. If the bride price is not paid and she elopes, it is thought that she would die before raising her children--an old taboo known to Ibuza:

" It is the custom, and no one dares break it. If the bride price is not paid, the girl will die in childbirth." (p. no. 45)

Aku-nna's lack of autonomy is evident in the way decisions about her future are made without her input. Aku-nna's life is largely dependent on her greedy stepfather's desire for a high bride price, since archaic norms mandate that women have little say in their future marital affairs, and superstitious beliefs appear to govern their lives. The patriarchal society

prioritises the authority of male individuals such as her stepfather over her own desires. The societal expectation that a bride price must be paid places Aku-nna's value and decisions in the hands of her male family members. As a young woman, she has little say in who she marries because her marriage is based mostly on the financial benefits that her bride price may bring for her family. Okonkwo sees her as a method to improve his rank and riches, putting the bride price ahead of her happiness and wishes.

2.2 Economic Pressure and Social Security

Economic and social security are significant factors in the practice of bride price systems in African societies. In the Ibuza community, bride price is frequently viewed as a token of appreciation to the bride's family for the time, resources, and effort they invested in raising daughters. It recognises the bride's family's financial and emotional sacrifices, which assist to balance these expenditures. The practice allows money to be redistributed from one family to another, promoting economic balance and strengthening financial ties among families. Items such as cattle or money handed as a bride price help the bride's family's economic stability by funding siblings' education, farming, or other ventures. In African patriarchal societies, males treated women as property. The head of the household can determine to whom his daughter or grandchildren get married. It costs money to raise a girl child to adulthood. If a female kid leaves the family and becomes de facto property of another family, her family loses everything they've invested in her. So, it appears appropriate to pay the young woman's family.

In the novel, economic pressure and the need for societal security are given as key driving forces for the custom. The African males dominate and leads his family, but the woman is confined to domestic duties such as child rearing and nursing. This has resulted in the concept of "Father is Supreme" or "Father is the Shelter" (12) in African patriarchal society. "Marriage for Bride Price" is one of the agencies through which traditional African males exercise their control. All marital decisions in their household are made by men, while women stay either as audience or followers. For example, the widow's inheritance was determined by her deceased husband's brother. The author chose the term "inherited" to demonstrate how African males saw women as "properties" that may be transferred. The purpose of wedding in traditional African society is to assist the husband's family expand. In the Ibuza community, the bride price is viewed as compensation for the bride's labour and contributions to her family. In the story, the custom is portrayed as an important cultural ritual that compensates the bride's family for the loss of their daughter. This custom emphasises the economic and social repercussions of marriage in the Ibuza group. The protagonist, Aku-nna, whose name translates as "father's wealth," epitomises this tradition.

Her

father, Ezekiel, names her with the expectation that her future bride price will provide financial benefit to the family:

"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" (P. no. 8).

This mirrors Ibuza community cultural norms, which regard daughters as assets whose weddings can improve the family's economic position. Okonkwo, Aku-nna's uncle, further exhibits this viewpoint. Aspiring to be a chief, he plans to use the bride prices from Aku-nna and her sister to purchase the expensive gifts necessary for such a position in his tribe. Emecheta emphasises how families rely on the bride price for economic stability and success. Aku-nna's stepfather, Okonkwo, openly views her marriage as a means to achieve his ambitions. Okonkwo marries Ma Blackie because she is a widow and is considered a desirable wife owing to her maturity, beauty, and capacity to have children. In addition, her marriage to Okonkwo provides her family with a stable masculine figure and financial assistance following the loss of her first husband. This indicates economic support and expectations. However, Ma Blackie's remarriage acts as a backdrop for Aku-nna's tale, emphasising the tensions between traditional practices (such as bride price) and the need for economic and social stability.

2.3 Patriarchal Structures

The author delves into the socio-cultural practices of black women in Africa. She criticises the bride price ritual in a patriarchal setting, investigating how it is used to oppress women and maintain male power. The author emphasises mostly on black women as victims of black patriarchy. She delves into many aspects of traditional standards, particularly patriarchy, which forces women to be victims. Gender discrimination is seen in the patriarchal Ibuza communities deeply established cultural and traditional practices, which govern the obligations, expectations, and worth of boys and girls. In the Ibuza culture, males are highly valued since they carry the family name and lineage. Sons inherit property and money, securing the family's heritage. Girls, on the other hand, are obliged to marry, while boys are free to enjoy their lives.

Patriarchy in Ibuza society promotes masculine supremacy and entitlement. Boys are socialised to view themselves as superior to girls and are frequently given more freedom, including sexually assertive behaviour. It also touches on the idea that a woman's body is not her own. After her husband's death, Aku-nna is expected to be inherited by his brother, highlighting the lack of autonomy women have over their bodies and their destinies.

"A girl was worth a lot of money these days...A girl was a business" (p. no. 14).

Okoboshi's dehumanising attitude towards Akun-nna offers a good example of patriarchal oppression of the girl-child. Patriarchy reinforces the idea that women must submit to cultural standards, such as arranged marriages set by their families. Aku-nna's desire to marry Chike, a guy of her choosing who is considered socially unsuitable inheriting to his slave-descendant ancestry, directly opposes patriarchal power. Her refusal to enter an arranged marriage leads to conflict, highlighting how the bride price is used to limit women's freedom.

Women face tremendous psychological stress as a result of the pressure to meet cultural standards. The greatest prized property of an African lady is the birth of a male kid. The impact of African society's concern with childbearing is profoundly negative, as seen by Ma Blackie's endeavour to trek "two hundred miles to her home town of Ibuza, where she asked the river goddess to send her a baby" (p.2). The birth of a female child is prohibited, and women are humiliated if they do not give birth to a son. This type of gender bias emerged in women's thinking in African patriarchal communities. Aku-nna's father anticipates more boys from Ma Blackie because he paid double the wedding price.

I paid double the normal bride price for you; he told her. 'And we were married in church. But what have you given me- just one son!' (P. no. 9)

The principal characters' stories successfully depict women's troubles after their husbands' deaths. To lament the loss of her spouse, a woman must live in a separate "mourning hut" for nine months without changing her clothes or taking a bath. Women are urged to remarry in order to secure their children's futures. They are required to marry her late husband's brother in line with levirate tradition. Her actions, however, are motivated by need rather than desires, demonstrating how widows are usually forced to conform to patriarchal cultural traditions rather than pursue their own pleasure. The custom of inheriting a widow and her family (children) from the deceased husband's brother exacerbates the dilemma because she cannot subsist alone with her children and must be controlled and dominated by another man.

Patriarchy reinforces cultural standards that give males influence over women's lives. In the story, Okonkwo, Aku-nna's stepfather, sees her wedding payment as a method to exert his authority and fulfil his financial objectives. The bride payment aims to reinforce men's dominance within familial and societal structure.

1.The Repercussions of Bridal Price

The custom of bridal price is significant thematically, symbolising the intersection of tradition, gender roles, and societal expectations in Nigerian society. The novel explores the consequences of the custom by weaving it into the fabric of the characters' lives, emphasising its influence on relationships, gender dynamics, societal structure, and personal agency. The author criticises the tradition and its broad consequences via vivid narrative and the sad path of the protagonist Aku-nna. The custom has far-reaching consequences, influencing the individuals' lives and relationships in a variety of ways.

3.1 Loss of Female Autonomy

The novel portrays the custom of bridal price as the fundamental cause of the loss of female autonomy. It functions as a cultural mechanism that reduces women to commodities and leaves their lives and decisions in the hands of males. The author criticises this custom and its negative impact on women's independence via the experiences of her protagonist, Aku-nna. The bridal price custom commodifies women by giving them a monetary worth and treating them as property to be traded rather than as persons with agency. This is evident in the negotiations surrounding Aku-nna's bridal payment, where her family is primarily concerned with securing the highest possible payment rather than her happiness or desires:

"...her uncles...were thinking of how much they would get for her"
(p. no. 87).

This is seen when Aku-nna's uncle expresses his desire to marry her off to the affluent Okoboshi because he offers the highest bridal payment. The custom confines Aku-nna's identity to her economic status, denying her the freedom to choose her own mate. African society (Ibuza community) does not want to liberate women by allowing them to live their own lives, therefore it utilises hook and crook to preserve its hold on them. Aku-nna is caught between her own goals and cultural expectations, and she's not sure which to pursue and support. Thus, the death of Aku-nna's father can be symbolic in that it liberates the family from masculine authority, but in the African Ibuza culture, the death of the father focusses on the uncle. When a father dies, the family's power and duties are transferred to the next male relative, often an uncle. Father provides leadership, financial aid, and serves as a mediator between the family and the larger community. When he dies, the power is passed on to the father's brother or the eldest male relative rather than the widow and children. This guarantees that family lineage and responsibilities are maintained within the male-dominated kinship system. The practice of a deceased husband brother using his

inheritance rights, ensuring that the lady is treated like a thing rather than a person. It highlights the shift in ownership and the potential for reduced autonomy:

"...once the bride price is paid, you belong to your husband's people. He had paid for her, hadn't he?" (p. no. 65).

In African tribal civilisation, the transfer of authority to the uncle demonstrates a profound sense of male autonomy or dominance. Women, regardless of their relationship to the deceased, are excluded from inheriting property or authority. This method emphasises the challenges that women like Aku-nna encounter as they negotiate societal expectations and personal goals. It reveals the rigidity and gendered structure of traditional African tribal societies.

3.2 Psychological and Physical Consequences

The custom of bridal price in the Ibuza tribe has major psychological and physical consequences for women. The story delves into the historical practice of the custom as a cultural institution and a method of managing women. The author explains why males are more valued than daughters. Nna-nndo, Ezekiel Odi's kid, is recognised in the family. This may be observed in Aku-nna alone:

"too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to her parent's marriage. Not only that she is a girl, but she is much too thin for the approval of her parents" (P. no. 9)

This causes emotional turmoil and trauma in women psychology. The author expertly depicts the enormous psychological and emotional toll that Africa's traditional norms impose on individuals, particularly women, as they traverse the complexity of love, marriage, and self-discovery. Auntie Matilda's warped view of Aku-nna is a stereotype of the girl-child in African society. Auntie Matilda continues to promote traditional gender stereotypes that relegate women to lower jobs. She believes that a girl's value is defined by her compliance and obedience to cultural standards, such as marrying for familial reasons rather than personal inclination. This attitude inhibits the aspirations and liberties of girl-children, particularly the protagonist, Aku-nna. The aforementioned intellectual viewpoint acknowledges the presence of patriarchal circumstances, which are psychologically repressive to Aku-nna.

The pressure to conform to traditional roles and the lack of agency in choosing their own paths lead to emotional distress and depression among women. Aku-nna's sense of helplessness and despair is evident when she reflects:

"What was the point of anything? Her life was not her own; it belonged to her family, to her future husband, to the traditions that bound her" (p. no.150).

Aku-nna's love for Chike challenges these deeply ingrained customs. She prioritises personal happiness and mutual respect over society standards, demonstrating her inner strength and increasing autonomy. She fights like a wild animal after Okoboshi, a local suitor, kidnaps and touches her. Her decision to marry Chike without her family's approval ultimately leads to Aku-nna's tragic death during delivery, highlighting the limitations imposed on women by traditional African society as shown.

The myth of the unpaid bridal price is firmly embedded in African society, especially among men and women. The tale digs into this ritual, highlighting its importance in African marriages. The author explores this concept as a significant force that shapes the lives of her characters, particularly Aku-nna and her family. The community thinks that a bride who does not pay her bridal price is cursed, with serious consequences. Aku-nna's stepfather, Okonkwo, requested a large bride price to help him become Chief. However, Okonkwo's plans were dashed when Aku-nna left with Chike, a slave descendant. Chike offered the bride price, but Okonkwo refused to take it. Aku-nna dies in delivery, fulfilling the ominous belief about the unpaid bride price. However, Emecheta uses this outcome to critique the power of cultural indoctrination rather than affirming the superstition. Aku-nna's death is presented as the result of societal pressure, ostracism, and psychological hardship, rather as a mystical curse. The author contends that the notion, fuelled by fear and inflexible commitment to tradition, becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

3.3 Conflict Between Tradition and Love

The novel delves extensively into the clash between tradition and love, constructing a story that represents the hardships of those caught between traditional standards and personal wants. The protagonist, Aku-nna, becomes a focal point for exploring the tension between deeply rooted cultural customs and the quest of personal desire. Her struggle exemplifies the conflict between conforming to society norms and pursuing an own path. Aku-nna's world is shaped by traditional standards, and the concept of bride price is important to weddings. Aku-nna's relationships depict the complications of balancing love, obligation, and personal autonomy. Her relationship with Chike exemplifies real, progressive love

that confronts repressive standards. Her love for Chike, a descendant of slaves, is immediately deemed unacceptable due to the traditional belief in social hierarchy and the prohibition of marriage between Freeborns and descendants of slaves. This is evident when Aku-nna's uncle, Okonkwo, warns her against associating with Chike:

"You know that Chike is an osu, a descendant of slaves.

You cannot marry him. It is against our custom" (p. no. 56).

Despite Chike's education, compassion, and genuine feelings for Aku-nna, his background makes their relationship inappropriate for the society. Aku-nna's choice to pursue love over duty is a blatant disobedience of traditional expectations. Her elopement with Chike is a daring display of personal agency, but it comes at a steep cost, since her community perceives her acts as betrayal. The tension between Aku-nna and her family demonstrates how people can be split between devotion to their community and a yearning for independence. Her contempt for conventional norms makes her a symbol of defiance, but it also separates her from her roots. The novel digs into the influence of mythology on the existence of the protagonist, Aku-nna, a young bride haunted by the fear of dying prematurely during childbirth as a result of not paying her bridal price. The titular myth—that a woman must pay her bridal price in order for her marriage to be legitimate and successful. According to Ibuza tradition, if the bridal price is not paid, the woman is cursed and her children will die. This belief looms over Aku-nna's choices, especially since she defied society standards by marrying Chike. Aku-nna's resistance of this tale symbolises her quest for autonomy, but the myth's hold over the community determines her fate. The societal belief in this curse contributes to her tragic death by increasing the oppressive force of mythology in her life. Despite her courageous defiance of conventional norms—most notably, her marriage to Chike, the son of a former slave—she is psychologically tethered to the cultural belief system that shaped her upbringing. The author uses Aku-nna's internal battle to emphasise the persistent effect of cultural conventions and the difficulties of breaking free from them, even when one deliberately refuses. Aku-nna's fear that failing to pay the bridal price will result in her death illustrates the deeply rooted superstitions of her society. Though she challenges the institution of slavery and patriarchy by prioritising love over societal expectations, her belief in the bridal price demonstrates how cultural indoctrination may endure even in the face of defiance. Emecheta's experience with Aku-nna highlights the complexities of cultural emancipation.

Conclusion

The paper offers a profound critique of the traditional bride price practice in the Ibuza community, highlighting its adverse impacts on women's autonomy, dignity, and

opportunity. Through the story of Aku-nna, it critically examines how the system of bride price promotes patriarchy, commodifies women, and reduces them to simple economic commodities. It reveals the psychological and physical toll of balancing cultural norms while pursuing personal independence. The paper not only depicts the oppressive nature of societal expectations, but also the enormous emotional cost of resisting them, making the novel both a personal tragedy and a forceful social satire. It calls for a rethinking of cultural practices that undermine women's well-being by showing how long-standing traditions, such as the bride price system, promote inequality and restrict individual agency. The article uses the tragic story of protagonist Aku-nna to attack patriarchal institutions and restrictive conventions that deny women autonomy and agency, demanding society to prioritise equality, respect, and personal freedom. Ultimately, the paper throughs lights on Emecheta's story, which serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to recognise how unquestioned traditions may become a curse, perpetuating cycles of inequality and suffering. Through its critical lens, the paer not only criticises the practice of bride price, but also calls for women's freedom from the constraints of archaic norms, paving the way for a more just and equal society.

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Citation:

Vishwaraju, S. B., and Dr. S. V. Narasimha Murthy. "The Practice of Bride Price as a Curse for Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*: A Critical Analysis." *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025, pp. 390–403. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.403.