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Death by Curse: Bride Price, Myth and Polygyny in Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price

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Abstract: *Bride price, or bride wealth, refers to “the payment made by the bridegroom, or more usually by his kin acting for him, to the kin of the bride...It is not a sale; the woman is not handed over in exchange for a fixed price once and all...The essence of bride wealth is that it is a continuing relationship between the groups” (Mair 6-8). The bride price is not considered a commercial purchase of the woman, but a socially sanctioned mechanism that is used to compensate the bride’s family for the loss of her productive and reproductive capacities, while forging lasting inter-kin alliances. Although, it remains the predominant form of marriage payment across the patrilineal and virilocal sub-Saharan Africa societies, its amalgamation with polygyny and demand for male heirs has repeatedly reinforced women’s structural subordination.*

In Igbo society, one of the West African patrilineal communities, bride price is not only obligatory but also exorbitant; and frequently operates as a mechanism to curtail women’s autonomy, inheritance rights, and exit options from abusive or polygynous marriages. Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017), a well known Nigerian-Igbo novelist, through her novel The Bride Price (1976) vividly illustrates the paradox of how even when a young woman acquires modern education and aspires to individual choice in marriage, the weight of bride price obligation, patriarchal ideology, customs and traditions ultimately triumphs. This paper, therefore, explores how the practice of bride price becomes a powerful instrument to reinforce the economic and reproductive exploitation of women, ensuring the curtailment of female ambition and desire for autonomy through customs and traditions.

Key words: *Bride price polygyny patriarchy, tradition and modernity, myth and superstition, female, autonomy.*

The bride price system in Igbo society treats “women as commodities...where the payment is seen as an investment that must yield returns in the form of children, particularly sons to perpetuate the patrilineage” (Sankar and Rajeshkannan 195-196). Moreover, a woman’s perceived fertility and reproductive potential, particularly her capacity to bear sons who continues the husband’s lineage, directly inflates the amount of price demanded. Ezekiel Odia laments his double payment for Ma Blackie, as he says, “I paid double the normal bride price for you...But what have you given me – just one son!” (Emecheta 9), expecting ‘bountiful rewards in male children, on the contrary, he receives only one son. In such cases, the obligation of providing sons to the family is thrust upon females, and this desperation for heirs underpins the valuation of women’s fertility and makes fertile women as desirable commodities. Similarly, in The Joys of Motherhood (1979), through the character of Nnu Ego, Emecheta illustrates how she fulfills her duty as a productive wife by bearing eight children, mostly sons; thereby, justifying her bride price.

This demand for multiple male heirs for the continuation of the lineage leads to the practice of polygamy, which is prevalent in the Igbo community as polygyny. One of the main reasons behind the practice of polygyny is to solve the problem of childlessness, because the desperation for children is ‘the primary determinant of polygamy’ (Uchem 15). This need for a male heir in the family connects very well with the levirate marriage, “where the brother of the deceased is expected to marry his brother’s widow to ensure her well-being and continued integration within the family structure” (Baloyi and Manala 6). However, such structures often create rivalry among co-wives over affection and resources, which leads to profound insecurity and jealousy within the family. This dynamic is clearly portrayed in the tension between Ngbeke, Okonkwo’s first wife, and Ma Blackie. Ngbeke is jealous of Ma Blackie for being handsome, intelligent and proud; and her daughter, Aku-nna for being allowed to attend school. This highlights how such systems worsen women’s subordination and undermine their ability to unite against oppression.

Moreover, S. Ademiluka argues that “the payment of bride price is the most important factor that legalizes marriage...without bride price, the woman is not regarded as a lawful wife, and children born in such a union are not considered legitimate” (3-5). This customary rule further curtails women’s autonomy in choosing their partners, as the father’s refusal to accept the bride price renders their relationship illegal, thus constraining women’s choice to their father’s approval.

Despite these oppressive structures of bride price, polygyny, and levirate obligations that limit women to their reproductive role and intra-household rivalry, they have persistently carved out spaces of resistance and autonomy. One of the most powerful tools that encouraged young women, like Aku-nna, to consciously choose her partner and escape the fate of being sold for bride price is modern education. As



Ruzbeh Babaee notes, “the fusion of cultural influences through Aku-nna’s education, leads her to question traditional norms and seek possibilities of self-expression...this modern education delays the imposition of bride price and arranged marriages, offering a brief window of autonomy where she can envision a life beyond reproductive obligations” (152). Aku-nna falls in love with her teacher, Chike Ofulue, who belongs to a slave family, which marks her rejection of the rigid customs of her community that expects women to marry within socially approved lineages and serve their families’ economic interests through bride price.

Besides education, women turned to independent trading and market activities as a means of asserting their agency. As LaRay Denzer observes, women of the Yoruba community “controlled their own earnings from trade, they were able to accumulate capital, lend money, and even finance the education of their children...In many cases they refused to marry or delayed marriage until they built up sufficient capital” (15). Alongside trading, women from Igbo and Nuer communities adopt female husbandry and woman-to-woman marriages as mechanisms to reject patriarchal and traditional norms.

However, education and modernity offer hopes for female autonomy and agency, but ultimately, it gets defeated by deeply ingrained customs and traditions of the community. Despite the fact that education is widely perceived as the primary route to women’s empowerment and autonomy, the persistence of bride price customs transforms educated women into more valuable commodities rather than autonomous individuals. This phenomenon is exemplified in the case of Aku-nna, education for her is both an opportunity to attain autonomy and agency, and a trap that makes her more valuable in the traditional marital structure. She is caught in a web of expectations; on one hand, she wants her bride price to be used for her brother’s further studies, while on the other hand, her father wants her bride price to achieve the position of Obi, the chief of the village. Nevertheless, Aku-nna’s bride price is going to be used by the men of her family and not by herself, highlighting how women’s lives revolve around the betterment of men in society; they are not valued as autonomous individuals but as a property or assets to their families and society. To make matters worse, inflated bride prices results in coercive practices such as abduction or forced marriage, as seen in Aku-nna’s experience. One of her suitors kidnapped and forced her to marry him. This incident exposes how the practice of bride price leads to violent acts against women, reducing them to commodities.

Moreover, even when Igbo women strive to exercise agency through acquiring education, modern values, falling in love, or eloping, the ingrained beliefs and customs curb their attempts to achieve autonomy and agency. One such belief is the bride price curse, as Emecheta notes, in Iboza everyone believes that “if [bride price] is not paid, the bride will die at childbirth” (154). This curse of unpaid bride price is used as a mechanism of patriarchal social control to enforce women’s compliance with tradition. As Richa Jha notes, that “this curse of unpaid bride price is not presented as mere superstition but as a socially sanctioned weapon that binds women to patriarchal dictates...it acts as an invisible chain on the psyche of Igbo women, compelling those who seek autonomy through love or education to return to the fold or face existential terror” (184-185).

Aku-nna, after eloping with Chike Ofulue, starts a life full of love and hope, but it remains overshadowed by the fear of the traditional curse tied to the unpaid bride price. Despite her attempts to escape the past, she is trapped in the psychological grip of her community’s myth. The superstitions of her community continues to haunt her, “there was a shadow of sadness on her face” (Emecheta 157); she is incessantly troubled by the thought that her father’s refusal to accept her bride price will seal her fate, making her dreadful at the thought of dying in childbirth.

Alongside the curse of the unpaid bride price, Emecheta portrays several other superstitions that are used to induce fear and anxiety in the Igbo community. In Iboza, it is believed that “if you wished to get rid of someone who lived far away, you made a little doll exactly like that person. Then you pushed a sharp needle into the doll’s heart...the enemy died slowly and painfully” (Emecheta 156), and Aku-nna’s father is practicing this superstition as a punishment for her defiance. Such practices influence personal choices and enforce social conformity by highlighting the power that myth, fear, and rituals hold over the daily lives of individuals.

Ultimately, Aku-nna’s death during childbirth becomes the tragic fulfillment of the curse around unpaid bride price. By invoking the bride price curse, Emecheta exposes how African myths are used as tools to control women, turning potential liberation into tragedy and reinforcing the notion that deviation from custom invites divine retribution, thus ensuring generational obedience. Although the myth lacks links to Aku-nna’s death, as she dies due to the complications from being too young to give birth, her story is turned into a cautionary tale to discipline and control other young girls from aspiring and attempting to assert agency.



Thus, this paper delves into how entrenched customs and traditions, particularly bride price and polygyny, operate as mechanisms to curb women's autonomy within the Igbo community. These practices allow men to assert dominance over women's lives through the power to choose marriage partners, control over female reproductive capacity, and the tendency to treat daughters as assets rather than autonomous individuals. Even when women, like Aku-nna, attempt to exercise free will through education, love, or modern values, rigid traditional structures reduce them to commodities and pull them back into lives of dependence and constraint. Ultimately, these stringent practices and traditions ensure that any female desire for autonomy or agency is subdued by communal expectations and cultural enforcement.

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