CHAPTER-III

PRICE PAID:

THE BRIDE PRICE
The Bride Price published in 1976 as the title suggests is a novel based on the notion of the subjection of women. It radically questions this custom. The narrative is set in Africa with its tensions, assertion and silences. The novel records the attitudes of the society such as rejection, local customs, resistance and women’s bondage resulting not only from traditional patriarchal ideology but also from colonial culture and politics of pre-independence Nigeria. Emecheta goes as far back as the nineteenth century in order to probe into womanhood in traditional, precolonial, colonial and urbanized Nigerian society, which might stand for Africa in general. TBP focuses on the implications of such factors like tradition, Christianity and colonialism on the lives of girls and women. It talks about a family history in the web of traditions, myths, struggles, rejection and death.

Buchi Emecheta’s writings highlight women’s issues and serve as a powerful and influential feminine voice on the African literary scene. “Through the events in her personal life, Emecheta articulates the oppression, predicament, and precariousness of the African women.” (Ernest Emenyonu 252) As a cross-cultural African woman, writing from exile, she has dedicated her fiction to the exposition of the problems faced by African black women and girls. In particular, her “novels not only challenge the hegemony of male authors but also the representation of African women in literature.” (Omar Sougou1) As an African woman writer, her focus is on questioning societal assumptions and expectations that are hostile to women. Emecheta’s novels “reflect what Kate Millet calls ‘sexual politics,’ the patriarchal principle by which males dominate females and elders dominate the
young.” (Marie Umeh 37) In *TBP*, ‘sexual politics’ indeed captures the reasons behind the tragedy of Aku-nna’s life. She, like many African females, is “sacrificed at the altar of male-oriented society, and men exploit the sex / gender system to maintain male dominance.” (Marie Umeh xxiv) In this situation Emecheta and numerous other African women writers contest. As a major voice in African women’s liberation, Emecheta “protests against the victimization of women in Ibuza society and, by extension, in all societies.” (Marie Umeh xxiv) According to several critics, Emecheta has drawn on some of her own childhood experiences of marginalization because of her gender. For example, her decision to marry the man of her choice despite parental objection is reflected in Aku-nna’s determination to marry Chike, an outcast, even after Aku-nna learns that such an union is considered to be a taboo.

The primary objective of this study is, to examine the representation of consciousness of an African girl Aku-nna. Through the analysis of this novel in the angle of feminine consciousness, it is intended to delineate the complexities of African women and the inner and the outer development within societies permeated by class, race, and religious ideologies, as well as by patriarchal, sexual, and gender oppression. This makes the writer to present issues of identity crisis and empowerment of the woman as she challenges traditional roles, socialization and cultural expectations which shows her consciousness of society and her position in an oppressive African world. The crisis resulting from the clash between the inner-self and the identity imposed by society often results in rebellion in the women. This novel presents the complexity of form the novelist adopts to represent the inter-relationships for shaping individual’s growth towards self-
Different social and religious situations are presented in the novel **TBP**. The novelist projects progressive environments of woman’s world by raising different and distinctive questions on issues of the women’s struggle for self-fulfillment. The protagonist in the novel in spite of having some formal education, still encounters various obstacles in her journey towards self consciousness that leads her to maturity. The death of the protagonist towards the end reveals the difference between the development of women when compared to the development of men.

Breaking out of gendered roles or expectations is fraught with social and psychological conflict especially for women who must transcend gender expectations on the road towards independence. (Pauline Ada Uwakweh, 9)

Buchi Emecheta’s **TBP** is an expression of the high degree patriarchal structures of the protagonist’s society which hinder her independent development and self-actualization. She is powered by patriarchal impediments which ultimately lead her to death rather than to integrate her into society. Emecheta’s narrative happens in early 1950s near the peak of British colonialism in Nigeria just before the independence in 1960.

**TBP** is considered as an important contribution to the concept of the African woman’s socialization and evolving consciousness of women. The novel throws light on the gender factor in African literature, gender identity formation,
the relationship between education and gender identity, and sexual codes. Pauline Ada Uwakweh says that “childhood for girls is dotted with silent frustrations that sometimes translate to self-defining actions, actions that may be expressed in revolt and are intended to transcend social limitations.” (10) Aku-nna’s story is one such narration where she tries to self-define herself by revolting and crossing all the social barriers.

The story of TBP starts with Ibo Aku-nna and her brother, Nna-nndo living in the city Lagos along with their father Ezekiel Odia and mother Ma Blackie. Aku-nna’s journey towards consciousness begins with the death of her father. Her uncle Okonkwo, becomes her new father and gets all the rights over her as per the customs of her Ibo society in Ibuza. It is not a smooth run for the family to shift to Ibuza as Aku-nna and Nando receive much more schooling than other children in the village, particularly the children in Okonkwo’s family. Moreover, Aku-nna though thin and passive starts attracting young men in the neighbourhood, though yet to start menstruate. Her step-father who has an ambition of being made a chief, begin to anticipate a large bride price for her. After her menstruation, she violates the customs by marrying Chike who is an outcast ‘Isu’. Chike is a descendant of slaves when colonization starts. The ‘Ibo’ often sent their slaves to the missionary schools to please the missionaries without disrupting the ‘Ibo’ life. Even though the slaves are well placed and wealthy to offer a generous bride price, Okonkwo is not willing to accept their marriage to satisfy his male ego. Aku-nna takes the decision to marry Chike in order to escape other suitors like Okoboshi. Though they begin a happy life together, the curse of the bride price ruins their happiness leaving Aku-nna dead in her child birth. This novel provides the accurate experiences of the
African woman, whose journey towards selfhood often ends in death. Moreover it presents that compromise is the only avenue for smooth integration in society.

The novelist shows two phases of Aku-nna’s character. The first, and earlier phase is the way Aku-nna secures her life. The second, and a later phase is her inability to recover sufficiently and gaining her identity in order to achieve complete healing as a subject-group. It is analysed that these two phases of her actions show that she can either follow or move away from irrational modes of living.

There is a generational conflict between the protagonist Aku-nna and her parents, as their historical experiences influence the protagonist much. Aku-nna is caught between the binds of traditional ancient ways and modern western ways of life. There is an impact of traditional and modern values on the protagonist which she could not ignore. She faces tremendous struggle within herself. She is even diverged from her family and society due to the new world view and new religious ideologies which she has gained through her western education.

The concept of the tradition is explained by Akachi Ezeigbo as “the body of principles, beliefs, practices and experiences passed down from the past to the present.”(7) It shows that a code of morals is to be followed unquestioningly by the community. He further asserts that violation of societal laws result in severe punishment. According to Uzodima Nwala, “death, selling into slavery, banishment, ostracism, or propitiatory sacrifices, to simple apology and doing some work to appease the anger and assuage the feelings of the many wronged.” (8) It is observed that individual’s life is fully controlled by the moral code of the
society. “The formulation of the moral code was done by priests, priestesses, respected members of society, and titled men.” (Akachi Ezeigbo 7) Sticking on to the moral codes is considered as the responsibility of the entire society. The violation of this moral code by one member results in the chaos of entire society. “Consequently individuals were answerable to the people and each person’s conduct was the responsibility of the entire community.” (Akachi Ezeigbo 8) It is mainly for this reason that the rebellion of Aku-nna, by choosing her own husband regardless of societal rules faces so much anger from everybody in her community. Being brought up in the city environment and having little knowledge in traditional practices which are deep rooted in her community, makes her fall in love with her school teacher, Chike. It is clear that she does not have chance to participate in the passing of oral tales that promote and instill the moral code of the younger generations of Ibuza.

By reverting to the oral tradition, Emecheta connects, the past to the present in order to show the role of the past in oppressing women community. The narrative of TBP is adapted from the traditional story of the girl who refuses all other suitors, chooses her own husband and marries him despite her father’s (stepfather) objection. Susan Arndt here communicates the superstitious belief of the Ibo society that the allegedly handsome young man the girl chooses “often will turn into an evil skull, spirit or fish, who will kill her or keep her imprisoned. This ifo more over promotes the superstition that a woman will die in childbirth if her bride price is not paid.” (46-47) Different versions of these blind beliefs are found in many African societies. Some of them believe that the husband turns into an ogre who devours his children as soon as they are born. Emecheta draws on the
basic story outline and adds many details of this *ifo* for ‘The Bride Price’ in order to suit her modern narrative.

It is pathetic to notice in the novel the way Ezekiel Odia abuses his wife because of her inability to bear more sons. “He would remind Ma Blackie that having paid this heavy ‘bride price’ he had the marriage sanctified by Anglicanism and what had he to show for it all...an only son!” (9) The implication to her is that Ezekiel Odia is unable to get a worthy product for his investment on the marriage, since his wife fails to produce the desired profit in the form of many sons. Thus Ma Blackie faces a daily problem of son-preference, a phenomenon encountered not only by Ma Blackie but also by many women all over the world. Most of the cases, scientifically it is proved that, it is the man’s sperm that determines the sex of the child. Ma Blackie because of her illiteracy and of her poor knowledge in genetics blindly accepts this blame and seeks solutions by subjecting herself to un evidental traditional remedies.

Ezekiel Odia, consoles himself with the prospect of getting a huge sum in the form of “bride price” on his daughter’s marriage. He even names her “Aku-nna” which literally means “father’s wealth.” Pauline Ada Uwakweh remarks this as:

the author shows how the process of socialization begins at birth as shown in the culture of naming, hinting at the outset that as female, her parents value her primarily for the bride prices he would fetch upon her marriage. (15)
Chike at the time of professing his love for Aku-nna also, calls her “Akum” which means my wealth. “Here the fact about women is whether she is in her parental home or at her husband’s home, she is always identified as a commodity.” (Omar Sougou 64) This commodification of women connects Ma Blackie and her daughter Aku-nna through a chain of suffering. Ma Blackie suffers because she is bought and she fails to deliver the desired goods, while Aku-nna on the other hand is valued only because of the bride price she will fetch.

Interestingly, the actual story starts with the conflict between the rebellious attitude of the protagonist and the oppressive ways of the tradition. The issue of women’s control and ownership by a father figure becomes central to the investigation of consciousness of women. When Aku-nna was still young she feels happy for belonging to her father to whom she feels bound by “a kind of closeness to which she could not give name.” (10) Before going to the hospital to die, the father reminds the daughter to “always remember that you are mine.” Although “girl children were not normally particularly prized creatures, Okwuekwu had lost so many” (11) that this daughter seems precious.

Even though Ezekiel Odia values his daughter for the money she brings at her marriage, in the form of ‘bride price’, he is not interested to marry her early. He is a man of modern thoughts that he allows Aku-nna to attend the school. She is never discriminated by him because of her gender. The reason may be that Aku-nna’s education brings him more ‘bride price’. Her education is tied to her ‘bride price’. Ezekiel Odia’s affectionate relationship with his daughter sows enough confidence in her that “though she was nearing fourteen
her father would not bear marrying her off early.” (20) Aku-nna’s relationship with her father gives her security, one of the most important elements of a girl’s healthy development. As it is mentioned by the novelist “Aku-nna knew that there was which did not exist between her and her mother, a kind of bond between her and her father.” (17)

Although she is considered in the family as a transient being, Aku-nna has accepted her position and is “determined not to let her father down. She is 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) The novelist does not disclose Ezekiel Odia’s attitude towards his daughter’s marriage if he is alive whether he will accept her marriage to Chike and receive the bride price the wealthy Ofulue family is ready to pay for Aku-nna. There is no doubt of the protection and security Ezekiel Odia would have given her daughter. Her loss of his love and affection is portrayed clearly by the novelist through her devastation at her father’s death. Aku-nna laments “we have no father anymore. We have no parents anymore. So not only lost a father, we have lost our life, our shelter! There is no longer any schooling for me. This is the end.” (28) She doubts about her future schooling. As she is deeply rooted in modern thoughts through Western education and her brought up in Lagos, Aku-nna is always against the traditional ways. It is clear to Aku-nna that in her case father means nothing but a shield between her and her people’s traditional practices, which limits a girl to certain expectations.

Compared to other members of his society, Ezekiel Odia is not very traditional; he is not controlled and governed by the traditions of his people or
community. His conversion to Christianity and the fact that he lives in Lagos are factors that have alienated him and his family from the traditional life of Ibuza village. Consequently, his family has very little exposure to the realities, positives and negatives, of the extended family and traditionally controlled life. Although there are remnants of traditional life in the city, as exemplified at Odia’s funeral, the hold of tradition is not as strong in the cities as it is in the villages.

After her father’s death Aku-nna discovers that she is not much equipped for her new life in the village, as she is brought up in the urban culture and she has no knowledge of the customs of her people. Her ignorance makes her vulnerable to violate the moral code of her people when her family is relocated. Dramatic change is seen in Aku-nna’s behaviour in the village because unlike city environment village environment is restricted and controlled by traditional rules especially in case of women. In her father’s presence Aku-nna is able to predict her future life as she is under control of her father but not society. She was under the hope that she will get a job to help herself. This vision dies with her father’s death, which throws her in chaos and insecurity.

The belief that a family should be headed by father is deeply rooted into Emecheta’s protagonist’s unconscious so powerfully. Aku-nna’s thinks that her desire for freedom ends because of her father’s death. Therefore, for Aku-nna directly to confront and repel “Traditions, Taboos, Superstitions and sayings of Ibuza were very similar to those still found at Isu. These were the same traditions that at that time, in the early fifties, guided and controlled the majority of Ibuza,” (73) turn her as an outright rebellion. Aku-nna chooses to follow her heart, for she
pitches herself in direct opposition to established societal order. She attacks the castration so forcefully that she is left with two options: either to accept her family’s wishes without questioning or breaking all the bonds with her family which is known for communal mores. She seeks self-healing to live happily by getting married. She knows that if she compromises to the structure of her traditional society, she can never fulfill her desire for freedom.

The first shock to Aku-nna in the village is her mother’s inheritance by her father’s brother, according to the traditional law of “widow inheritance.” Being a woman her mother, Ma Blackie has no option in her own affairs. She is acted upon, silenced and submissive just like her daughter. This reveals that in Ibo tradition girls and women are defenseless. The relocation makes them notice the difference between modern values and old customs, both socially and spiritually. They are two radically different worlds.

Aku-nna discovers that unlike the life in the city, she has to lead a life that is controlled by the traditions. The life which has no logic, has to be followed without questioning. Aku-nna in the beginning is left with no choice but leaves her self-agency to shape her future which is possible at the mercy of her society. Ma Blackie, on the other hand, joins Okonkwo’s collection of wives as the fourth wife and tries to earn his approval by devoting herself at the expense of her own children. Rebecca Boostrom explains the legal context for the novel:

Emecheta portrays Aku-nna’s mother as being subject to patrilineal “inheritance” rights in marriage as a background for Aku-nna coming to the age of womanhood and needing to
know that, by the dominant Ibuza customs, or customary law, women and children did not have full legal status as men did, and their rights to marry were defined in customary law and primarily controlled by decisions of the men in their patrilineal clan. (83)

Thus Aku-nna is constrained in the unfamiliar rules and regulations of the repressive village environment. She feels that her freedom and aspirations are also dead with her father: “Aku-nna remembered how her father had talked of her having a higher education, but that dream had been buried with him in Igbobi. She could only pray that her uncle –her new father as he would soon allow her to complete her standard six.” (66) The tradition of village appears odd to Aku-nna but still she is unable to question, since “it was regarded as bad manners to be too inquisitive. So Aku-nna listened, worried and prayed to God to help them all.” (53) This is an optimum illustration of the controlled village life that remains as a hurdle to the intellect of the child. Aku-nna’s vulnerability heightens to the dictates of her society and she begins to feel the burden of traditional ways of her people by realizing that all the people of Ibuza think alike:

What she still had to learn was the fact that her people, the people of Ibuza, have what psychologists would call the group mind. They all help each other when in trouble or in need, and the extended family system still applied even in a town like Lagos, hundreds of miles from Ibuza. They are people who think alike, whose ways are alike, so much so that it would not
occur to anyone of them to behave and act differently. (16)

As a result, Aku-nna chooses to act as per her own wish; she stands in direct opposition to the established societal order. She attacks the flaws of the social norms so forcefully. She is left with no option but to get a total detachment from the tyrannical communal mores if she compromises, her desire for freedom is lost.

Aku-nna feels that the Ibuza traditions are repressive. She is not aware of the penalties that are demanded from those who violated the ‘traditional ways’. She realizes the enormity of the consequences of violating ‘traditional ways’ only after marrying Chike without her Uncle’s (step-father) permission. The novelist’s emphasis on the violating the traditional ways such as marrying a man of her choice, who is an outcast against her step-father’s will is to show Aku-nna’s perspective on marriage as an individual opposed to the collective mode of her society. Her ignorance about Ibuza marriage customs is highlighted when she begins to develop a relationship with Chike, her teacher at the Christian Missionary Society school.

The concept of educating girls always generates the divergence in strong patriarchal society because it leads to female independence. Aku-nna is one of the only four girls who attended the school. It is true that, Aku-nna’s education creates a split between her and her society’s cultural grip. She looks at these customs critically, and challenges the ‘group mind’ of her people. Regarding this Uwakweh points out that “Struggling against traditional impositions, restrictions and prejudices, she ‘escapes’ the limited world of her childhood, attaining adulthood
with greater awareness of herself and society.” (Uwakweh16) Aku-nna views education as the only solution to overcome all the problems of life. This view is revealed in her ambition to finish school and train as a teacher so that she can help her family. She knows what she wants in life and will stop at nothing to ensure that she reaches her aspirations, even if it means going against societal expectations. She remains in school in spite of all the hurdles, which she faces from the male members of her patriarchal family. Especially Okonkwo, who is against her educational progression expect that she will fetch him a much larger bride price.

Describing this scenario, Saaka and Podis comment that:

Her initial involvement in schooling is ascribed to an unwise and unfortunate idiosyncrasy on the part of Nna. After Nna’s death, it is only the greed of Okonkwo that enables her to continue her studies, as he is convinced that Aku-nna’s education will translate into a much larger bride price for him.

(268)

Always the girl has to fight for her right to acquire education since the issue of the girl child’s education creates conflict and tension in the family. It is mentioned in the novel “Ma Blackie had asked her to show her another girl in the whole Ibuza who was without a father and still able to continue her schooling.” (82) In many occasions woman’s education is considered as secondary while that of her brother is given more priority. It is believed that women to get married and bear children, there is no need of education for her traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood. The woman’s socialization process is almost narrowed towards
the fulfillment of these traditional roles—a good wife and mother. As Umeh explores the concept of model woman in a patriarchal society, “chastity and sexual demure is the measure of a good woman’s moral character.” (194)

Aku-nna, at first, chooses total rebellion since she feels there is not much to lose. In this process she is severely warned by her mother, who wants to secure the domination of her new husband. “I will kill you if you bring shame and dishonour on us.” (121) She is more worried of pleasing her new husband rather than protecting her daughter from narrow traditions of the society.

Aku-nna’s grief is enhanced with her natural body changes which turn her life into a living nightmare. First of all, she is not ready to face the onset of menstruation and the taboos linked with it. The significance of this event is very important in her culture, for it is an indication that she is mature enough to be married off. Uwakweh’s describes Aku-nna’s idea of hiding menstruation “Intent on finishing school, Aku-nna maintains secrecy about her menstruation—a symbolic act of resistance against forced and early marriage.” (16) In spite of being a man Chike extends in maintaining the secret. Sharing the secret together makes them deeply involve in love with each other. The novelist confirms that the protagonist is not scared to become an adult, “but she was afraid of what her people might force the future to hold for her.” (104) The onset of menstruation exposes her to the prospects of the evil act of a forced early marriage, as the novelist reports that “She sensed what this would mean; she would no longer be regarded as a child who knew nothing, but as a young woman on the verge of parenthood.” (104)
Menstruation also ushers in new traditional restrictions. “She must not go to the stream, she must not enter her step-father’s house nor the house of any Eze chief until it was all over.” (115) The novelist “emphasizes the significance of menstruation as a rite of passage to womanhood and, more importantly, underlines the restrictive social myths surrounding this biological phenomenon of femaleness.” (Uwakweh16) In the Ibuza culture parents celebrate onset of menstruation as that is the time to receive ‘the bride price’ from the prospective suitors. Aku-nna, considers it as a time filled with anxiety, concern and even fear because of the abundant social myths that are enforced by traditions. These myths are not peculiar to Emecheta’s culture, since they are also found in cross cultural and historical boundaries. Bernice Lott tells that “next to the incestual taboo, the most potent and lasting of gynarchic taboos is connected with ‘women’s blood’.” (48)

These myths and taboos not only add confusion to Aku-nna’s life, and rob her of the joys of womanhood but also it provides courage in her to maintain the secret. Aku-nna dislikes the idea that any man can abduct her and claim her for his wife without her consent. As an educated woman she does not accept Okoboshi as her traditional husband and refuses to go against her will and aspirations. So, Emecheta concedes to her protagonist partial control over her life by giving freedom on the choice of her husband. Her choice of husband is viewed as a challenge to the ‘Law of the Father.’ This is an attempt to defy those oedipal taboos that militate against personal happiness. This attempt is supported by Brooks with the equation “the Name-of-the-Father” with “prohibition, law, morality...to be submitted to in full abnegation or else
rejected in a total revolt.” (56) Aku-nna does not meekly submit but boldly revolts against the existing taboos of her society.

After menstruation, girls in Ibuza are trained in strange role-play. Young men are allowed to fondle women’s breasts in spite of which they are not supposed to arouse sexually. Aku-nna hates this practice, but tolerates it since she does not want to disappoint her mother. It indicates the pathetic situation of a girl who does not have control even on her body, for any boy who deserves to play with her breasts is allowed to do so.

Their custom allowed this. Boys would come into your mother’s hut and play at squeezing a girl’s breasts until they hurt; the girl was supposed to try as much as possible to ward them off and not be bad-tempered about it. So long as it was done inside the hut where an adult was near, and so long as the girl did not let the boy go too far, it was not frowned on. (97)

Uwakweh explains this as the feeble condition, “shows how male privileges are endorsed by tradition”, as this is not the only privilege that men enjoy. Men are blessed with other privileges that exist in the as Ibuza tradition:

Forced marriage is sanctioned by the custom of abduction, or cutting a lock of hair from the victim. Enforced virginity and its verification at marriage appear to have been socially instituted for male ego gratification. (Uwakweh 17)
While “in buza, every young man was entitled to his fun” and “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.” Women’s chastity is always expected “A girl who had adventures before marriage was never respected in her new home,” (84) in contrast boys who are engaged in similar indulgences are not punished, but were encouraged. When Aku-nna complains of Okoboshi’s sexual overtures in the role-plays, she is condemned by her mother. It has to be noticed that if she surrenders to him, she has to face the entire disgrace.

Aku-nna rejects to function within these prescribed gender roles of her society and chooses instead to use trickery to free herself from a forced union with Okoboshi. Aku-nna, targets his male ego by telling him that she is no longer a virgin. She thus escapes from an unpleasant union with Okoboshi, who abducts her and says:

“Look at you, and shame on you, Okoboshi the son of Obidi!
You say your father is a chief -dog chief, that is what he is, if the best he can manage to steal for his son is girl who has been taught what men taste like by a slave.” (138)

She continues to confront Okoboshi very boldly by telling him that she already has chike’s child in her womb:

“Even if you do sleep with me tonight, how are you ever going to be sure that the child I might bear would be your own? I may already be expecting his child, and then you would have to
father a slave child. What a come-down for the great and mighty Obidi family! For I would never stop telling my son whose child he was.” (138)

Aku-nna’s rebellious attitude is well portrayed by the novelist as she resolves “to fight for herself, for her honour. This was going to be the deciding moment of her existence.” (136) Aku-nna though put in a horrible position, in a mad frenzy bursts out experiences freedom for the first time. According to Elaine Showalter, “madness is associated with sexual passion, with the body and with burning emotions.” (74) This aptly suits the narrator’s description of the protagonist’s attitude during the rape attempt: “Then she laughed, like a mad woman. May be she was mad, because when later she remembered all that she said to Okoboshi on that bed, she knew that the dividing line between sanity and madness in her was very thin.” Aku-nna defends her chastity, by hurting her would-be raper as: “the son of dog-chief, if the best he can manage to steal for his son is a girl who had been taught what men taste like by the son of a slave… Yes, he has slept with me many times. (138) In her society, having illegal sexual contact with an osu is the cheapest immorality and the stain on her family and friends is inerasable.

Though Aku-nna knows that her lie entails public humiliation and chastisement that will also affect her family, yet she is ready for the self-inflicted disgrace in order to escape the sacrificial alter of tradition. Her act becomes a twofold sacrifice: one made on behalf of love and the other in the name of the female members of the community.
Ultimately Aku-nna escapes from Okoboshi, by showing remarkable courage as Maurice Blanchot remarks: “Courage consists, however, in agreeing to flee rather than live tranquilly and hypocritically in false refuges such as morals, homeland, and religion.” (341) Aku-nna’s courage is remarkable for her age. She decides to live in happiness and peace and not to live a false life.

Aku-nna, not only acts against societal expectations of preventing a woman from choosing her own husband, she also elopes with one from a forbidden group of people within her society—descendants of former slaves. To take revenge against the Aku-nna’s act of eloping with a boy of her slave descendant, her uncle, who gains control of his late brother’s family, refuses to accept the generous bride price offered on her behalf by the well-off Ofulue family. This act of Aku-nna’s uncle results in Aku-nna’s ultimate death, as the ifo tale tells. The death of the Aku-nna confirms the power behind the traditional tale, which has been used for generations to instill fear in young girls who desire to rebel against their society’s moral code. As per Susan Arndt: “Aku-nna does not fall victim as a punishment for rebellious daughters. She rather dies because she is too young and weak to give birth to a child.” (47) It is observed that Emecheta remarks repeatedly on Aku-nna’s physical weakness and on her biological immaturity—factors in the novel leads to her death in childbirth. The doctor confirms this to Chike, her husband, when Aku-nna becomes pregnant.

Your wife is so young, and so small. She has been undernourished for a long while, so you should have given her time to recuperate after you married before deciding on a baby.

Is she sixteen yet?... You must both be careful. She has hardly
enough blood for herself, let alone for a baby. (160)

Emecheta “demystifies the death of her heroine, and replaces the mythical superstition with a realistic explanation and thus ‘writes back’toit.” (Susan Arndt 47) However, there is still scope for speculation and other interpretations, because most Africans drenched in tradition and superstitions often have their own spiritual interpretation of events, especially in case of death.

Aku-nna’s predicament is seen in countless girls who are quite incidentally starved in order to make sure the male children get enough food for their growth. Neera Kuckreja Sohoni says that significant gender discrimination in nutrition needs in developing countries:

The presumed superiority of males, which determines gender biases in health care, nurturing, rearing, and the overall attention given to female well-being, allows the female less than an equal chance to grow from birth to childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. (66)

Because of the degradation of woman in this culture, she is disadvantaged in nutrition as more priority is given to the male child, the preferred sex. It is no wonder that Aku-nna becomes anemic, a problem that is identified by the novelist in her upbringing. It is mentioned that her brother Nnando has the privilege of getting the greater share of food since he is a boy and Aku-nna is to be satisfied because her needs are considered as secondary. Though she is the first child of her parents, she “knew that she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing.” (9)
to them. Here Simon Debevoir concept of ‘other’ can be seen in one’s own family.

After her marriage with Chike, Aku-nna earns new connections, new growth as she is disconnected from patriarchal power. In her case, this militancy which calls for a group action is achieved through marriage with Chike. Their escape to Ughelli, where Chike is recruited in an oil company and Aku-nna employed as a teacher promises the advent of a new order.

But unfortunately it is then that the monstrous aspect of traditional superstition creeps in the terms of the taboo about her. She is an Ogbanje “a loving dead,” and such people are said to be likely to die in childbirth. Moreover, local superstition has it that failing to pay the ‘bride price’ may cause the bride’s death at childbirth.

In spite of exhibiting much courage and independence, Aku-nna “fails because she lacks the psychological and mental frame of mind to face and live upto her convictions.” (Ezeigbo 21) Her dejection and fear become weapons of the rival’s power. Aku-nna’s uncle is a destructive person, a symbol and a tool of the notorious side of tradition as Aku-nna admits to Chike’s father: “I know my uncle does not want ever to accept the bride price. He calls me back in the wind, when I am alone...I don’t want to die, Father.” (163) She pleads Chike: “Please, my husband, don’t let him take me! Please don’t, please!” Desperately, Aku-nna tries to start a happy life with her husband but centuries of taboos and superstitious legends over whelm her: “every- thing about her seemed stretched to breaking point.” (164) Although Chike is loving and sympathetic towards her he is unable to help her as he himself is miserable. Katherine Fisburn says
“doomed to social approbation and isolation because of his ancestry,” (91) is the root-cause of her problems. Thus, Aku-nna dies leaving a daughter by naming her ‘Joy.’ At the end she remains as a victim of psychological myths. Her rebellious discourse, which is almost Western in its individualism, is futile. She is left with no one to support her, not even her mother.

The novelist shows effacement of women in the portrayal of Ma Blackie, Aku-nna’s mother. Aku-nna lacks intimate relationship with her mother when compared to that of her father. After the death of her husband, ultimately Ma Blackie assumes her new role as the fourth wife of Okonkwo. Aku-nna’s needs are ignored by her mother since she prefers to win Okonkwo’s approval. As a result, she is unaware of Aku-nna’s state of bewilderment to strike a balance between her aspirations and her society’s traditional expectations.

“One or two things were certain to Aku-nna. She had not only lost a father, she had lost a mother. Ma Blackie found herself so immersed in the Okonkwo family politics, and in making ends meet, that she seldom had time to ask how the world was with her daughter.” (82)

The character of Ma Blackie is used by the novelist to represent “womanhood as defined by the gender ideology at work in traditional society. Her physical absence symbolizes her erasure.” (Sougou 65) Ma Blackie is present in the novel but absent in her daughter’s life. She is too preoccupied with her involvement in the economy of her new household to be aware of her daughter’s growing-up problems. Her absence is explained by Sougou, “denotes lack of
proximity and effective relationship, and is due to Ma’s flight into patriarchy.” (65) As a result, Aku-nna misses a close friendship with her mother at the time of need, and she resents the loss. “The bitterness Aku-nna was feeling had gone beyond tears. She had heard its aid often enough that one’s mother was one’s best friend, but she was beginning to doubt it.” (122) Her bond with her mother is obviously not as strong as that which she had with her father. This lack of connection with her mother affected Aku-nna adversely. Her reaction is an embodiment of the trauma many girls’ trauma due to the absence of meaningful relationships with their parents. In explaining this embodiment, Sougou states:

Alienation from the mother occurring after the death of the father and consequential upon the mother’s second marriage is a fairly common theme in literature, and psychoanalysis has thrived on how it affects children regardless of gender. The narrative designates Okonkwo and tradition as obstacles barring Aku-nna from her mother’s love. Tradition is instrumental in Aku-nna’s doom, and kindles anger in the character. (66)

Indeed, Aku-nna is distributed by the savage custom of her mother marrying her uncle. “Oh, what a kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and to make many people unhappy?” (122) The novelist reveals Aku-nna’s utter frustration with her people’s traditions, which not only alienate her from a close relationship with her mother, but also place her under the cruel rule of her stepfather. As a step-father Okonkwo differs drastically from Odia in his
relationship with Aku-nna. Sougou describes him as “the vehicle through which the narrative represents the worst part of tradition, such as his exposing his backside to seal his repudiation of Ma Blackie and his employment of occult means to retaliate against Aku-nna.” (69) Instead of offering the extended security, Okonkwo acts as a destructive force. Aku-nna notices the intention of her uncle Okonkwo “His sights were already set on his brother’s wife, his brother’s property, and the bride price his brother’s daughter would fetch.” (72) He could not tolerate Aku-nna’s victorious rebellion.

Okonkwo finally determines to kill this girl who brought disgrace to his household. He not only divorces her mother, but also makes a fetish of Aku-nna’s, and it’s purpose is to pull her back home. Aku-nna, now miserable, is either unable or unwilling to escape the guilt she feels for having disobeyed her family.

The aspiration which she earns through urban life and Western education clash directly with her traditions, by turning Ibuza, “a battle field between tradition and change” (Sougou 66). The Central aspect of the battle field is her relationship with Chike. The novelist interweaves two major issues in her society, through this relationship, one is ‘domestic slavery’ and the other is ‘bride price’. Sougou explains.

“Emecheta visits slavery by figuratively connecting Aku-nna’s plight to it within the background of romantic love. Casting romance as the site of a traditional strong hold, and creating a situation of impossible love, the narrative lays bare the repressive sides of the culture.” (Sougou 67)
The slaves’ descendants, just like the women in the novel, are limited to a silenced space by the “unwritten laws/ways,” (46) but, unlike the women, they seem to have more freedom, symbolized by their victory over traditional institutions. The novelist makes Chike to live to tell the story of Aku-nna how she suffers as a girl due to the much opposition from her community people. Though both are oppressed by the traditions of their society, Aku-nna faces a different and more challenging array of problems from those that Chike encounters. Though an outcast, he is also part of the patriarchy because of his gender. The novelist informs that the male members of Aku-nna’s family are more willing to see her dead rather than tolerate her relationship to Chike. They prefer commitment to the tradition rather than the life of a human being. The romance between Aku-nna and Chike, therefore, goes against the conventions of the community and works as destructive force for Aku-nna. The tragic end of Aku-nna’s quest for fulfillment is the chief characteristic of the novel. Being framed in the patriarchal society, and written from gender perspective, the author portrays the death as the solution to the problems of her protagonist. There are doubts regarding the novelist’s choice of death as a solution to the struggles of the protagonist. It can be clarified by saying that the novelist has disclosed the harsh reality of women development in a patriarchal society. So, there is no other option to the girl who challenges the conventional orders in their personal quest. The lack of understanding between the girl’s inner yearnings and the culture’s expectations reach breaking point that make Aku-nna’s survival difficult and impossible. “Faced with the break between psychological needs and social imperatives, literary convention finds only one possible resolution: the heroine’s death.” (Marianne
The protagonist’s failure and her tragic death signifies the fate of rebellion. Aku-nna is a victim of her own rebellion. Fanco Moretti contends that:

their lives will be a sequence of battles, a sort of personal campaign. Here youth does not find its meaning in creating countless “connections” with the existing order, but in breaking them. It is not appeased by the happiness of synthesis, but lives and dies, in the harshness of conflict. (65)

The existing order of life is not so easy to break free from. It is a mesh in which Aku-nna is caught and unable to free herself. Though the narrative provides no definite answer, the narrator concludes the story with these words:

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. (168)
Ibuza’s oppressive customs, which Aku-nna denounces throughout the novel, is sometimes inconsistent and ambivalent. In her consciousness, she is “hostile to and severely critical of customs and at the same time appreciative of those aspects which do not interfere with women’s freedom and their self-fulfillment.” (Sougou71) The ending of the narrative, eventually asserts the immense “psychological hold” of tradition. Indeed TBP is constructed so as to accentuate Emecheta’s own ambivalence:

Though she appears to be determined, like Aku-nna, to break free of “superstition,” the novel itself gives considerable credence to the potency of a controversial aspect of traditional Ibo spirituality: Okonkwo’s “juju.” (SaakaandPodis 268)

Although the narrator creates wonder with the information that these “things do little harm if the intended victim is not aware of them” (157), the magic is effective. Again Okonkwo sends a second more potent and expensive doll whose “aim was to call Aku-nna back from Ughelli through the wind,” (162) Aku-nna senses its pull and dies shortly afterwards. In leaving open the possibility that the protagonist is destroyed by Okonkwo’s magic, the story itself “effectively makes the point that Aku-nna’s creator, no less than Aku-nna, finds that the traditional ways remain extremely potent and resistant to ‘modern’ challenges.” (Saaka and Podis 269)

TBP is the first novel of Emecheta, but is published as the third since the manuscript is destroyed by her husband. Umeh explains that it was “primarily because of her husband’s disregard for her artistic development, culminating in the
burning of her manuscript” (xxvii) that her marriage ended. The present version, was recreated and published in 1986. with considerable Emecheta herself explains that:

The original story ended with a husband and wife going home and living happily ever after, disregarding their people. But I have grown wiser since that first manuscript. I had realized that what makes all of us human is belonging to group. And if one belongs to a group, one should try to abide by the group’s law. If one could not abide by the group’s law, then one was an outsider, a radical, someone different who found a way of living and being happy outside the group. Aku-nya was too young to do all that. She had to die. (166)

This statement emphasizes the writer’s perspective on the communal sense of belonging and support of certain local customs. Sougou explicates the importance of the conclusion:

In rewriting The Bride Price, Emecheta with holds the escapist function it initially possessed…Aku-nya and Chike would bestow on the novel the hope expected from works showing the feminist ideological concerns found in this text. The new version yields to pessimism, the sort of which is encountered in The Slave Girl with regard to customs and the development of the female protagonist. (71)
At the time when Emecheta started rewriting her novel, her marriage had ended and through this she learns that life does not have a positive note. The tragic ending of the book emphasizes the realistic problems of woman’s survival in extremely patriarchal societies like Ibuza. The progression of girl is always vulnerable in a gender-based society. Uwakweh explains this phenomenon “creates a plethora of feelings in the female child ranging from ambivalence to equivocation or rebellion against social tenets.” (18) Aku-nna aspires for creating a haven in order to escape the realities of her femaleness, but her age, gender, and singleness work as hurdles to achieve her goal. Being isolated with these thoughts, she is unable to sustain her struggle against the dictates of the ‘group mind’ in her society.

The narrator’s ambiguous comment that Aku-nna and Chike’s story becomes a warning to any budding rebel who hence forth “must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid,” (168) seems to support the conventionality that is tied with traditional mores. Thus, the tragic end of the Chike’s and Akurma’s story sustains the superstition that Aku-nna’s personal rebellion leads to their destruction. To rebel in a community one needs the kind of courage which Emecheta shows in the character of Aku-nna when she defies tradition and marries a man of her choice. The novelist also sustains the same kind of courage when she breaks out tradition to divorce her irresponsible husband in London, as she herself admits this in her autobiography:
And of course nothing would satisfy our tradition better than to stir up the mud of an ambiguous past. But I have had time to think and that, thanks be to God, has made me stronger emotionally and spiritually than whose that girl in The Bride Price whose immaturity allowed her to be destroyed allowed her to by such heavy guilt. (4)

Yet Emecheta declares that the vague ending of TBP is structured because of her own guilt for a failed marriage, for disobeying the Law of the father, and for divorcing her husband. Emecheta fills her fictitious protagonist with the burden of these guilts.

Unfortunately Aku-nna is not bestowed with an equal measure of strength. Her death, like the failure of the writer’s marriage, seems inevitable, at the end. TBP becomes an anti climax of the writer’s struggle for women’s liberation, as it projects no clear sense of option for the woman in the patriarchal society. “Emecheta killing her heroine because she is too young to confront society appears to be acceptance of the idea that tradition is a giant which no single individual can challenge unharmed.” (Sougou 71)

However, Emecheta succeeds in highlighting the injustice and oppression forced on a female child that turns Aku-nna a commodity in the novel. Thus the novelist fulfills her feminist mission. The impact of destructive nature and dreadful traditional beliefs on women is realistically picturized through the character of Aku-nna. Emecheta is obvious in showing that women’s resistance to patriarchal oppression, is not successful all the time, it even results in death, as it
becomes a sin in Aku-nna’s case. Aku-nna story offers a pathetic situation that depicts the real picture of women’s struggle in achieving their selfhood. Thus, Emecheta exposes the immaturity of Aku-nna and her lack of courage to work effectively through acquiring her freedom by using rebellion. Emecheta denies Aku-nna to get success in her rebellion since she believes that an individual should not be isolated but must belong to a social unit, be it a family, a village or a tribe. Thus, at the end of the novel, repentance occurs in the form of fear since the protagonist is unable to shake off that interior colonization represented by the cultural taboos and curses of her communal group.

Aku-nna’s peculiar experiences also contribute to her tragic end. She does not have the opportunity to establish strong bonds with the other women in her folk. A fact that makes them more vulnerable to the negative forces operating in their lives. She becomes desperate easily due to the lack of support, being detached from family and community. Aku-nna’s death is viewed as liberation in the sense, since it brings an end to the sufferings of the protagonist. The liberation is shown not alone in the form of the death by the novelist, it is also shown as a ray of hope through the new infant, Joy, Aku-nna’s young daughter. Aku-nna’s daughter is taken as the promise of a new generation that can success fully overcome the psychological domination of women to fulfill their deserved dreams that promotes female transcendence.

As Labovitz explains that the girl begins life with “a search for a self lost with childhood. The road from ‘nothingness’ to selfhood is traversed in the quest. Often the quest for an authentic self is carried out in loneliness, alone or with other
women, safe from the eyes of the male world.” (248) Susan J. Rosowsk adds to this point as she explains that the female protagonist’s growth results typically not with ‘an art of living’ as in her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman, such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations. (49)

After obtaining this realization, the woman must start negotiating her journey towards self-fulfillment by surpassing these limitations early in life.

Developing early male relationships is viewed as hurdles to gain significance and to attain self-development by most feminists. They feel that such a close relationship with men works against the attainment of individuality and autonomy. Women who accomplish self-discovery are those who are against the cherished male relationships. Through the relationships with women, they achieve selfhood, from the provided role models, what they aspire to become or not to become. Aku-nna, fails in developing strong relationships with other women, but has intimate ones with men, that causes her failure in her search for self. The novelist exemplifies it, in the outcome of Aku-nna, who views her self-worth in terms of her relationship with men.

A woman like, Aku-nna during her journey in her quest for selfhood, is in need of support to lead a balanced negotiation between her personal needs and community expectation as well as the differences between modern and traditional ways of life. Thiam confines the importance of activism in the following quote:
In diverse countries, men have denounced repression and abuse of power. But, curiously enough, when these are applied to women-second-class citizens—a modest veil is cast over reality. It is as if injustices suffered by women had nothing to do with oppression in general, but merely expressed the way every race has of putting women “in their place” in society. Now justice never drops from heaven. Never have the privileged, the powerful—be they so as the result of fortune, birth, sex or color of their skin—spontaneously shared their privileges. Every liberty, every right, has had to be fought for. (1)

African cultures with patriarchal structures are depicted as inhibitors of the independent character formation of the woman. They also open new avenues to those women imbued with determination and potency to challenge societal expectations. In reality also they confirm this possibility. The women have to go beyond her victimhood and work as the agents of their own emancipation. With this alone she will be able to enjoy the freedom, rights, and aspirations available to the privileged sex.

It is understood that Emecheta has used Akunna’s story as a representation of socio-cultural traditions, taboos, myths, emotional and class distinctions in an inherently patriarchal structure to produce “women in the shackles of bonds”. It is predictable that Emecheta shows the battle of women against these patriarchal issues through the character of Aku-nna. She has become one of the Africa’s best known women writers and her
books continue to investigate the themes of gender discrimination and the effects of caste system and slavery in Nigerian culture.

The next novel **ITH** is a shift from African culture to Indian culture, its discriminations and empowerment of women.