CHAPTER FIVE

TRADITION AS A TRAP

WOMEN AND THE RURAL MILIEU IN CYPRIAN
EKWENSI'S BURNING GLASS AND
BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE BRIDE PRICE

Ah, Britain! Great Britain!
Great Britain of the endless sunshine!
(...)
You gave us Truth: denied us Truth;
You gave us 'ubuntu': denied us 'ubuntu';
Benighted at noonday, we grope in the dark.

- Xhosa poet, Samuel
Edward Mqhayi
Rural life in Africa has been a recurring factor in the novels of both Ekwensi and Emecheta. All their major novels contain a significant rural-urban shift: Ekwensi’s *Jaqua Nana*, *Survive the Peace* and *People of the City* and Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* as well as *Destination Biafra* are examples wherein the authors have compared elements from rural, traditional Africa with urban life and its newly acquired cultural ethos. In *Jaqua Nana* in particular, and also in *People of the City* and *Survive the Peace* Ekwensi becomes obviously didactic as he talks of how the ways of modern culture have corrupted women who come to live in the city, leaving a traditional rural life in their villages behind them. But Emecheta’s portrayal of rural Nigeria and its customs is perhaps a little more pragmatic, especially when she relates them with the conditions of women. Her narratives celebrates their traditional institutions like market women’s solidarity, weekly meetings of women from the same tribe or belonging to the same part of the country, grassroot level organisations of women of various callings which take care of individual members at a time of misfortune (Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* gets her first loan to start a petty trade from one such organisation in Lagos), and so on. But at the same time Emecheta is
critical of the dogmatic application of certain traditional laws in changing time and culture that often makes the life of her women characters miserable.

The presentation of rural, or traditional images of Africa became a kind of necessity for modern novelists from all parts of the Black Africa as an instrument of dispelling various myths created about the indigenous people. Mineke Schipper points out that all those myths added up to generate certain "stereotypes" of African people and their culture and also sought to "justify" the "civilising process" of the Black people by European colonists:

The theme of Africa and the African has been frequently used in European exotic and colonial literature. It has inspired many European writers with all the stereotypes and exoticism it entailed. (...) More and more fascinated by the African theme, many European writers gradually considered themselves "specialists on Africana". However, these novels did not yield any "real" information about Africa.¹

As the western creation of a precolonial African paradise with exotic landscapes and heathen inhabitants was gradually being destroyed by Black writers, Africa came to achieve a socio-anthropological identity through literature. In Dan Izevbaye's words:

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The place of characterization and the social backgrounds have always been important questions in the discussion of African novels. Some early reviewers of Achebe's books used to wonder whether to judge them as fiction or as the reporting of 'native customs and idiom' or, as another reviewer asked of *Arrow of God*, a work now generally considered Achebe's best novel so far, is Achebe a 'novelist or sociologist'?²

This sociological character of African novel later came to serve another very significant purpose: as by and by African States attained independence, writers' attention was now turned to their own political rulers, administrative system, local mafia, and issues that affected marginalised sections of the contemporary society. If general benefits to the whole community from traditional life as opposed to European patterns of individualistic lifestyle was a factor that would often be highlighted in literary prose, writers during recent years also criticised certain aspects of traditional cultural outlook that could not stand the test of time and generated otherwise avoidable tension within the society. Novelists like T.M. Aluko, and many women writers of Nigeria have thus questioned the opportunistic adherence to certain customs of the yore in modern times that serve no other significant purpose than putting one section or class of the society at an advantage against the other.
A discussion of Ekwensi's *Burning Grass* and Emecheta's *The Bride Price* brings out the above contrast in the authors' points of view when one looks at the women characters in both the novels.

The fact that *Burning Grass* is about the Fulani herdsmen of northern Nigeria makes it imperative for Ekwensi to set his narrative in rural milieu. A short urban touch comes towards the end of the novel when some actions take place in the border township of Kontago. But perhaps Ekwensi cannot really shake off his bias against the city as a harbinger of evil - Kontago is where the evil spirit dwells in the beings of seductress Kantuma and the villain of the novel, Shehu.

Further, Ekwensi appears to suffer from a handicap at certain points in *Burning Grass* where the reader waits to know a little more about the traditions of the cattle Fulani, wants to have a closer look at things like Mai Sunsaye's chieftaincy of Dokan Toro, the history of his rivalry with Ardo, how Fatimeh acquires her mysterious powers and knowledge of medicines in the jungle, how Ligu becomes the legendary cattle-woman, and many such sudden appearances (or disappearances) of potential sub-plots; and Ekwensi does not
seem to have any clear answer. Being an Ibo coming from the eastern part of Nigeria, he might have chosen to compensate his lack of knowledge about the migrating Muslim cattle tribe by adopting a whirlwind technique of describing the events in the novel that at times creates the right mood to appreciate the protagonist's directionless wandering.

E. Obiechina analyses this lack of detail as a kind of biological problem of West African writers. He observes that West Africans are equally well exposed to 'urban-technologist' culture as well as their local traditional culture. Especially in Nigeria most of the people reflect a dichotomy in their real lives as they have to migrate from their traditional village life to technology dominated civilization of the cities and at times, it could be the other way round. In the previous chapter it has been discussed how a number of socio-economic reasons cause rural people to migrate to cities. And at times the harsher realities in urban centres prove too much to cope with and so there is a reverse migration to the rural areas (as happens in Emecheta's *The Bride Price*). Therefore in Nigeria and other oil-rich, industrialised West African countries, the scheme of rural-urban dichotomy is a real life phenomenon and writers also experience it. This finds
expression in their works. Obiechina observes that in novels —

The scheme allows the village to be used to define the traditional setting and the town to define the modern setting. Finally it throws some biographical light on the novelists themselves. (...) West African writers like Achebe, Nzekwu, Okara, Nwankwo and Amadi, who have lived in both the traditional and the urban environments, tend to set their novels within either or both. Their narratives flow from one to other without strain. Those who have not had both experiences, like William Conton and to some extent Aluko, are often unsuccessful in their effort to describe the social background of their novels. On the other hand, those who have grown up in the urban setting alone, as Ekwensi did, tend to avoid a sustained exploration of traditional village life. 3

_Burning Grass_, however, does not lack in what Obiechina terms as the 'local colour' of the West African novels. Elechi Amadi's _The Concubine_, Achebe's _Arrow of God_ and _Things Fall Apart_ are examples that immediately come to mind to show how the West African writer is 'preoccupied with the description of setting'. In fact, at the beginning itself, Ekwensi's description creates the sombre mood that continues till the end of the novel as it finds expression in the arid landscapes and human predicament. Mai Sunsaye, the protagonist, is brought to the reader with an almost obvious premonition of the impending gloom that would befall him very
soon:

The old man sat still, tolling his chaplet. The trees were skeletons bleached in the sun — barren, with peeling skins bruised by decades of thirst and hunger. (...) The somnolence in the air crackled. Gusts of heat rose from the earth and shimmered upwards to an intense blue sky that hurt the eyes. He could smell the smoke fumes and he knew they were burning the grass. He and his son lifted their eyes and took in the undulating hills, the rivulets and rocks. And it was lonely. But they were nomads, wandering cattlemen, and loneliness was their drink.4

Obiechina comments on Ekwensi's description of the landscape in *Burning Grass* as an example of the West African writer's treatment of time and space:

In Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*, the very opening lines set the atmosphere of aridity characteristic of the northern savannah. His realistic description of the setting is indicated by the minutely worked out topography of the action, and his close attention to the chronological sequence, so that we are able to follow the wanderings of Mai Sunsaye and Rikku from burning grass to fresh pastures and from one watering place to another. Ekwensi's description of landscapes gives pictorial reality to the story.5

What may strike a reader of *Burning Grass* is how women characters have been marginalised, though all the pivotal actions in the novel are related to them. Mai Sunsaye's wandering begins only after his family provides shelter to Fatimeh the slave girl, and her later disappearance. He is
struck with 'sokugo' or a dreaded charm used by adversaries among the cattle Fulani. But Mai's own explanation is different: he is looking for Fatimeh to bring her back home so that his dearest son Rikku will be pacified. Finally when he meets Fatimeh, it is she who cures him of the wandering disease. But from the time of her disappearance till she is discovered in the jungle as the mysterious cattlewoman, Fatimeh is blacked out from the narrative. No one knows how she was captured by Shehu's men, how she fled from them and then came to jungle to become the mysterious white-clad woman, whom people called a spirit. Her hardships and survival in the jungle among deadly animals and how she protected her herd of cattle, one knows nothing about them. Even when she reappears she does so for a very short while. Ekwensi gives more attention to the 'sharro' match in Chapter eleven, or his son Hodio's sugar mill in Chapter seven, as compared to his scanty details about a principal character like Fatimeh.

She is introduced through a very dramatic situation in the opening chapter of the novel, when she throws herself at Mai Sunsaye's feet to be saved from the clutches of Shehu. The old Fulani cattleman's instant liking for the girl comes
to her rescue. When Sunsaye makes an offer to the burly henchman of Shehu who was chasing her to leave Fatimeh with them in exchange for five cattle, Sunsaye's magnanimity offers no indication of her future prospects. Sunsaye seeks his son Hodio's approval before he makes the offer; and through the dialogue between the father and son Ekwensi describes her physically:

"You see that girl?"

Hodio looked down at the figure sprawled before his father. She was ragged and the cloth draped around her body under the arms was torn, but Hodio noted the animal eagerness in her eyes. She had a rare face. Most of the Fulani girls were light of skin with straight noses and thin lips like those of the white people; but Fatimeh seemed to be a cross between Fulani and white. Her nose was tip-tilted with large nostrils, her hair was thick and black, though matted with dirt. She had red lips. She could not be more than eighteen.

"I have seen her," Hodio said.

"What d'you think she is worth?"

"Worth, father?"

"Yes, Hodio. This man, here, claims her for his slave. I cannot let such filth tamper with so lovely a maiden. I want to make him an offer."

Hodio moved near his father. "You want to bring her into the family?"

"If Allah agrees", Sunsaye said. (pp.3-4)
But after getting her "into" his family at the cost of earning dreaded Shehu's wrath, Sunsaye does not provide her any status higher than that of a family help. The next chapter thus begins:

The girl was silent enough. She learnt a lot and quickly. In one month she could milk the cows, separate butter and cheese from the milk, ferment the milk and cooked nearly as well as Rikku's mother. At first she went with Rikku's mother to hawk the sour milk, but she was beginning now to find her way to and from town. (p.7)

But most surprisingly it is Fatimeh herself who is a spoiler of her own prospects of marrying Hodio and then looking forward to ending her life of a maid in Sunsaye's household. For when an enamoured Hodio offers to marry her and flee with her to a distant place in order to begin a new life together, she declines it. It is not because of her fear of an unknown future or her dislike of Hodio for a husband that Fatimeh refuses his proposal. Ekwensi tells us:

One evening when the grassland was cool and he could hear his own flat feet against the dusty road, Hodio stalked her down to the river and told her to make ready to run away with him because he loved her and wanted her to be his wife, but Fatimeh's refusal was quite definite. She must have known that as a slave girl she could never hope to marry a free-blooded and proud Fulani like Hodio Sunsaye. (p.8)
Her way to freedom and a life of dignity and social recognition is thus blocked by none other than she herself. But finally when she makes up her mind to run away with Hodio, her plans are nipped in the bud, as later in the novel she reveals to Mai Sunsaye how she was captured again by Shehu's men during her stay with Hodio. The next move in the novel that lines up a series of misfortune for Sunsaye and his family begins with Fatimeh's disappearance. As the old herdsman sets out on his long journey, his camp is burnt by his rival, Ardo's men. The family disintegrates and his dear ones get scattered as he himself moves further away from all of them in a strange odyssey.

If at all Sunsaye has set out to bring back Fatimeh to his household, it is not because of her own importance or his affection for the beautiful girl. His first rescue of Fatimeh was prompted by his kind spirit and chivalry. But now he wants to find her out to please the youngest of his sons, Rikku. The novelist writes about the Fulani chief's attachment to his son in the opening chapter, which makes him address his wife not by her own name but as "Rikku's mother":

It was always "Rikku's mother". She was his only wife, though under Muslim law he could have had
three others beside her. He loved his wife, but the centre of his life was his love for the boy Rikku, his youngest son. (p.5)

Shaitu, his wife is loved by him so much so that he did not go for any other woman as was permitted by his religion. But still she does not deserve to be addressed by her own name, just because Sunsaye loves his son very much! And now he wants to rescue Fatimeh again to please Rikku. Because

Soon he found that Rikku sulked, while Fatimeh had lived in the camp with them, he had noticed that Rikku had been happy. (p.9)

When Rikku becomes ill reminiscing over Fatimeh, Sunsaye makes a promise to his ailing son:

By the help of Allah, if Fatimeh is still breathing in this world of ours, I'll find her and bring her to you. (p.11)

Soon after he is struck with the wandering disease and leaves his camp.

When he finally traces Fatimeh is not before fifteen chapters of the novel are over without any trace of the girl in them. The union is quite a drama, as the reader finds in Chapter eighteen. While on his way to Kontago to rescue Rikku from Shehu's captivity, Sunsaye is distracted by the
cry of a human child. When he enters into the forest to find out, it leads to a series of mysterious and dangerous incidents. As he discovers the twins and bends down to touch them, a huge lion appears from the forest and kills his horse. And before the beast turns up to meet him, a strange woman appears on the scene who later turns out to be none other than Fatimeh. But Sunsaye mistakes her to be the strange cattlewoman spirit of the well known legend, Korinrawa. Soon his misgivings are removed:

"Allah forbid," the wild woman said. "I am not Korinrawa. Korinrawa is a spirit. I am but a mortal. My name is Fatimeh!" (p.127)

But as the initial excitement wears off, Sunsaye feels satisfied for his long hardship has not been a wasted effort. Now he can make his son Rikku happy.

Sunsaye looked at her twinkling eyes, the happiness and cheer she radiated, and he was happy. His sacrifice had not been in vain. Now, at least he could take her back with him, and Rikku would never blame him again. (pp.128-129)

The long-expected reunion of Sunsaye and Fatimeh has kindled the hope of returning to the civilisation in the latter. She has been going through a very harsh life that was spent in loneliness and impoverish conditions. Through Sunsaye's
eyes the reader comes to see it:

At dawn Mai Sunsaye saw clearly the wild state of Fatimeh's home. The grass around the hut was high and wet with dew and when it touched the skin it irritated. The hut was small and very frail, not furnished in the least. Fatimeh slept on a pile of grass. (p.129)

Sitting in front of Sunsaye, Fatimeh starts dreaming of a happy future, as the prospect of her marrying the old man's son now brightens up. The fact that she was brought to his camp as a slave is no more a hindrance, as she has become the mother of two children (one never knows for sure who their father is, Hodio or Shehu). She tells Sunsaye with a smile on her face:

"You taught me to be a herdswoman. As a slave I had no right to love a free born man like Rikku. But now I have been cleansed, for I have brought forth. (p.129)

Sunsaye might have thought the same as well. After Rikku has been rescued Sunsaye takes his son to Fatimeh's camp to reunite them. But at least for once the old man is proved wrong in his assumptions. For Ekwensi writes in Chapter twentyone:

Fatimeh was waiting for them. Ragged and unkempt, her eyes were wild and from her lips came a sad tale. The twins were dead, buried. She cried the
whole night through and Mai Sunsaye gave her words of consolation, but she was still depressed. Between her and Rikku there seemed to be a new barrier which the old man could not yet understand. He had imagined that after seeking out Fatimeh and bringing Rikku to her the boy would rush into her arms, covering her with warm embraces. But it seemed to him that Rikku was regarding her with the eyes of a stranger. (p.145)

When finally Rikku tells his father that he is no more interested in Fatimeh, the old man blames his son for being under the influence of the 'softer city life' he had recently enjoyed with Kantuma in Kontago. But Rikku tries to assure his father by showing how mature he has become over these past few days:

Father, all you say is not as it is. I want to wait a little before I take a wife, I love Fatimeh but only as a brother might do. I am only a boy now. In two more rainy seasons, I shall be ready. (p.146)

And soon the duo come to know that Fatimeh has vanished again as they do not find her at the camp. After waiting for her for some time father and son resume their journey towards Dokan Toro, from where they had all been scattered. As for Fatimeh,

Mai Sunsaye could never guess why Fatimeh had chosen to run away in that manner. Had she overheard their conversation at the riverside, or could it be that she had sensed Rikku's new change
towards her and could not remain with the family under the circumstances? Whatever it was, they never heard of Fatimeh and her lion any more. (p.147)

That the old man's search for Fatimeh to bring her back to his family would ultimately never meet with success is hinted in the fact that until Sunsaye meets Fatimeh, it is not really clear whether Mai undertakes his arduous journey because of the wandering disease or driven by his indomitable urge to find out Fatimeh to make his son happy. But when he shows every sign of the disease in Chapter eighteen, as he wants to follow the dove, Fatimeh understands that what the old man had told her the night before was not the truth. He did not leave home in search of her, as he wanted her to believe. She snaps back at him: "So, that's it! You did not set out to find me; in truth, you have been following a curse...." (p.131)

So the meaninglessness of Mai's journey has now been established, symbolically suggesting that whatever he has worked for during his long travel was bordering on something unreal - things that could never take any final shape. With Rikku's refusal to accept Fatimeh, this is proved tragically.
Fatimeh appears to the reader of *Burning Grass* as a beautiful woman with spiritual strength and quality of enviable fortitude whom Ekwensi does not provide adequate space to grow to her full potential. At times it seems that the author just avoids writing about her in the novel and almost at the end of the narrative she is made to disappear as mysteriously as she had appeared in the wilderness in the opening chapter. Her survival is given some meaning through her daily chores in the camp of Mai Sunsaye and then, in Hodio’s attraction for her. However, the duo cannot live to fulfil their planned happy life as she is again abducted by Shehu. The author seems to have thought it fit to bring her to the reader only when the protagonist discovers her in the forest. At the end, as Rikku refuses to accept her, the meaning for her survival no longer exists and thus, her unceremonious disappearance in the last chapter of the novel. Ekwensi almost ‘kills’ Fatimeh, who otherwise could grow up as one of the novelist’s interestingly complex characters.

The next woman who also receives very limited treatment in the novel is Ligu, the herdswoman. She is first mentioned in Chapter nine when Jalla instructs Rikku to move with some cattle to Ligu’s camp as the hunters start burning
the grass in northern Nigerian savannah. A praise song is sung in her name in Chapter eleven during the sharro tournament:

"Ai! ...Where shall we go.
To seek for trouble?
To the East shall we say,
Or the sunset
To Talata Mafara
Or across the border
The border where dwells Ligu,
Ligu of thousand cattle
(...) (p.83)

In Chapter fourteen, Mai Sunsaye reaches Ligu's camp near the town of Kontago, and discovers that

She was not a young woman. Her hands were large and strong, but she was fond of ornaments. Her ears, hair and wrists were heavily decorated with expensive jewellery, and she wore a brightly coloured cloth. (p.101)

Ligu is a fine example of those old world African women who were strong, courageous and would stand up to face any challenge. She proves to be a very kind and caring host/ess to Sunsaye and treats him to his favourite food and makes him feel homely. Her wealth of cattle—a Fulani's greatest pride—has made her a living legend as a champion cattle grazer. But her success and wealth has not touched her kind and humble soul within. She shares Mai Sunsaye's concerns
as both are seen discussing Rikku's troubled mind in Chapter fifteen.

In Chapter nineteen Ligu is seen preparing for the release of Rikku on her own. She rides on her horse to Kontago and challenges Kantuma to release Rikku:

"I have come to take my son away."
"your son?"
(...)
"You cannot deceive me. You kidnapper of boys!" (p.133)

A dramatic fight follows where Ligu proves her physical superiority. As Kantuma charges at Ligu, the latter overpowers her:

Ligu who had been charged by bulls in her time, stepped deftly aside and as Kantuma struggled to regain her balance, she dealt her a blow on the back of the neck, rather as she had done to many a reluctant bull. (p.134)

When Kantuma realises that Ligu would not budge an inch without taking Rikku back with her, she threatens her with legal actions in the court of the Sultan for trespassing into her house and then creating trouble for her. Here Ligu reveals her identity which makes Kantuma bow down with reverence:
Kantuma's eyes clipped open. She said, "Ligu, the champion cattle grazer, of whom they sing? I beg for mercy. (...)" (p.134)

Later both of them ride to the Prince's compound in their pursuit of Shehu. In the next chapter Jalla's wife, Fiddigo, tells Mai Sunsaye that Ligu had been followed by his wife Shaitu and daughter Leibe who had gone to Kontago to free Rikku; but

When they tried to get Rikku back and could not, Ligu hired some horsemen and they rode out to Kontago in force. (p.139)

Later on Ligu is seen directing and supervising the armed rescue operation when her men lay seige around Kontago to free Sunsaye's son from the Arabs who, in connivance with Shehu, are trying to take him across the border outside Nigeria. Ligu meets Sunsaye as he arrives near the Prince's compound and tells him that she has hidden his wife and daughter in one of her friend's house. In the night, in a short bloody battle, Rikku is freed and Shehu dies in the clash.

So Ligu is not only an expert herdswoman, she is a successful military strategist too. With the deftness of a veteran soldier she conducts the armed raid on Shehu's men.
leading them right at the site of action. At the same time she is also careful enough to think of the security of Sunsaye's wife and daughter. But above all, she takes all the trouble to save Rikku as she takes it upon herself to bring relief to Sunsaye and his son. When just before the battle Sunsaye tells her that he has been able to find Fatimeh, she feels doubly encouraged to save Rikku as she can well imagine how happy the boy would be to meet his dream girl. Sunsaye owes the debt of his dearest son's rescue to this brave Fulani woman. In Shehu's death Fatimeh's abduction is avenged too. So Ligu assumes the role of saviour for Rikku, Hodio and Mai Sunsaye.

Ligu is a replica of those heroic women of Africa who brought glory to their people through their achievements in various fields: agriculture, art, trade, politics and warfare. She is a part of the traditional African lifestyle which made no discrimination against women, a society that did not treat women as the 'weaker sex'. Her profession of cattle rearing and migrating with her herd across the country is something western women could hardly dream about as a possible job for women. But she still retains qualities which are otherwise attributed as 'feminine': she likes
ornaments and bright coloured clothes'; she is a good cook and she is capable of bestowing motherly affection for which she finally has to take up arms and challenge a hoard of dreaded anti-socals.

But Ekewensi has given her very limited space in the novel. In fact, he writes more about Kantuma than he does about Ligu. And after Rikku is safely back with his parents, she is pushed out of the scene immediately. There is no mention of even how Sunsaye's family takes leave of Ligu. In the last chapter she is mentioned in connection with Rikku's decision to work as an apprentice with her. So much for the woman who plays a pivotal role in Ekwensi's novel!

Kantuma of Kontago is the typical Ekwensian 'bad woman' of the city. In Chapter seventeen, the barber tells Sunsaye that she is Shehu's wife and takes orders from her. But she makes an appearance only in the latter half of *Burning Grass* when she lures Rikku to her parlour. Kantuma's charm and her hypnotic looks cast a spell on the young Fulani boy. Ekwensi describes the scene in Chapter sixteen:

The woman herself was beautiful in a dark way, and one glance showed that she was a Kanuri, of the same tribe as the beautiful slave girl Fatimeh. (...)

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He could not rally his thoughts. The woman had a hypnotic gaze that confused him. (....) Rikku saw now that she was dressed in Oriental fashion, with glittering bracelets on her slender wrists and something like a crown on her head. She stood up now, among her draperies and the smoke of incense was swirling all around her. (p.110)

Kantuma in turn gets very much attracted to this handsome Fulani youth, fresh and untouched by the corrupt ways of the world. And she is the supreme seductress, who is used to getting anything she wants by using her physical charm. So she would not pay any heed to Rikku’s small protests over his detention. She tells a confused Rikku:

My name is Kantuma. I have influence in this town. Not even the king would dare question all my actions. Stay here. (....) (p.111)

She reminds one of Jagua’s desparate efforts to have her way in Ekwensí’s other novel, Jagua Nana. Like her, Kantuma is also adept in the art of overpowering a man with physical charm. And within no time after their first encounter, Rikku is already a victim of the Kanuri girl’s fatal attraction:

"Let us occupy our time by playing cards," Kantuma said.
She taught him how to play cards. She also had an old Ludo set, after Rikku had played with her for a while he forgot her mission and wished he had come to her all the time. (p.112)

Like Jagua of Jagua Nana, or Beatrice in People of the City, Kantuma is the city prostitute whose clientele include the high and mighty, people from royal family, influential and rich men, traders – all who could pay lavishly to enjoy her company and share her scented bed. In fact, they were all mere victims of her whims and fancy. She entertained them whenever she liked to and no one could force anything on her. Ekwensi tells us about Kantuma’s highhandedness in Chapter sixteen:

Rikku had seen the way she treated a young and dashing Prince who called to see her the night before. One had gone down on his knees, making overtures to her, but she had shut herself up in the room, telling him she was indisposed. He had left in a rage, while Kantuma laughed. (p.112)

So when Rikku requests Kantuma not to detain him any more, after enjoying her company for two days during which he is given her exclusive attention, the woman tells him: "...Princes and Emirs would give anything to be in your place." (p.112)

Somehow the Fulani boy is able to keep his head clear
about his immediate need for coming out of Kantuma's hold. Probably he is aware that he may have to give in to her lustful abandon and remain a slave to her charm for ever unless he leaves the place soon.

He was afraid of himself. This was an artful woman, a sorceress, with a strange beauty. Sometimes he thought of her as a snake, coldly beautiful, but deadly when she struck. (p.113)

Through Rikku's reactions to Kantuma's advances Ekwensi presents an opposition that exists between the rural and the city culture, even in the matter of love and intimacy. Kantuma's approach to her relationship with Rikku is that of buying a commodity at a price. So she gives him best food, drink, dresses him up in royal attires made from costly silk and bathes him with scented water. And she gives herself physically with complete abandon to this rustic Fulani cattleboy so that he would be enslaved by her physical charm, if not anything else. She tries to acquire Rikku, to satisfy her wanton fantasies. Like Jagua who does not want to let go of Dennis Odoma in Jagua Nana as she knows that her declining physical charm may never find another man for a relationship beyond one night stance, or like Beatrice in People of the City who accompanies men who could provide her economic security, Kantuma's attraction for Rikku is not a
matter of heart, but of body and mind. So it is no wonder
when she tells Rikku that he is being detained by her

"Because you please me. You are beautiful to the
eyes and your manner in gentle. (...)") (p.112)

She also tries to lure him with wealth and comfort. She
tells him:

"I shall adorn you with all the finery fit for a
young prince." (...) "What is wrong, Rikku. Do
you not like your life here?" (p.113)

However, he answers her back:

"I am not a prince", Rikku protested. "I know
nothing about your city ways!" (p.113)

Through his verbal reactions, Ekwensi puts rural life
at a plane higher to that of city life, which is marked by
moral depravity, greed and uninhibited lust. Rikku thus
tells Kantuma:

"...I am the son of a cattleman. We live in the
pasture lands. For us town life is not the life."

"So you do not like comfort?" She looked round at
the exquisitely furnished room.

"I am used to discomfort. We live a simple life.
The floor is our bed, and nature is always a
companion. (...)"
(p.110)
In fact, this adverse reaction to city life by the characters of *Burning Grass* comes like a refrain in the novel. In Chapter seven, Sunsaye's reaction to New Chanka is an example. The new township has been built to house the villagers of Old Chanka who are shifted from their village to escape the epidemic of sleeping sickness. It is built following typical western geometric patterns and even the wild growth of natural plants and trees are controlled. Instead, the surroundings have been cleared by felling trees and some orange and mango trees have been planted in every compound. So much of human intervention is, however, not to the liking of the old Fulani.

"It is too clean," Sunsaye grumbled. He looked through the window, at houses geometrically laid out, each one standing a good distance away from the next house, each one with the same number of guava trees and orange trees. He remembered what Baba meant when he said he could not stand the antiseptic cleanliness. "There is no smell of cattledung. It is like a hospital. A town must have the smell of cattle to please a Fulani." (pp.56-57)

Similarly in Chapter nineteen, while challenging Kantuma of kidnapping young Rikku, Ligu says:

"Understand this: we Fulanis do not like your town dwellers. We love our simple life which makes men
free and brave and gives women a strong position. (... p.133)

And in the last chapter, Sunsaye's anxious conjectures about a change in Rikku's feelings about Fatimeh comes as an indication of trends to come in not so distant future, when young men and women of Nigeria would leave their villages and reject the hardship of rural life in favour of comfort and easy going city life.

The old man sighed. "Thus it is that our people are drifting more and more away from the hard life to the soft life of the city."

Through the characterization of Kantuma, Ekwensi represents symbolically the evil attraction of the city. As opposed to the relationship between Jalla and Fiddiggo, and Hodio and Fatimeh, Kantuma's effort to 'possess' Rikku points towards a whole range of contrasts that exists between the rural and the urban outlook.

The old Fulani's lament in Burning Grass over the young generation's aversion to rural life is somewhat balanced in Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price. The young girl Aku-una, the protagonist of the latter novel, is shown to have run into deep trouble as she has to cope with a number of disturbing traditional African customs. Her problems aggravate
after she shifts over to a rural setting. However, Emecheta has no intention of playing into the hands of those who believe that a woman remains chained to customs and traditions that dominate life in a village. Nor is she inclined to show that city life gives a woman greater freedom and options in modern times. Otherwise she would never have written a novel like Second-class Citizen. In fact she has highlighted in her novels like Joys of Motherhood and The Bride Price, how people belonging to different tribes retain part of their traditional lifestyle during regular gatherings or other social occasion like marriage, death, or deliberations for a new-born, even in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Lagos.

Emecheta's skillfully treated plot in The Bride Price enlists a number of problems that a modern African woman might face under traditional African law and social customs. By adopting a technique of registering a series of mutual oppositions between individual aspiration and social expectation which are controlled by forces of patriarchy, the novelist has been able to turn her work into a touching tale of woman's predicament in contemporary Africa. With all the freedom to run a trade, choose a groom, own properties,
etc., an African woman still remains a subordinate to a man under whatever remnants of traditional laws that are visible today in Africa. The Bride Price is a grim reminder of this fact.

Even in today's Nigeria, like any other part of the world, the sex of a child matters. And young Aku-Una is aware of that at her tender age of thirteen. Her mother, Ma Blackie, is thus seen consulting a native medicine man in her home town, Ibuza, when Aku-Una and her only brother, Nna-nndo, have to face their father's death in Lagos. Ma Blackie, as Emecheta tells her readers at the beginning of the novel, is a cheerful and respected woman among the Ibo community living in Akinwunmi street in Lagos. She earns the respectful title of 'Ma' from her neighbours and friends.

But Ma Blackie, though always laughing and loudly cheerful, had a family problem. She was very slow in getting herself pregnant again. Since her husband returned from Burma, when the war ended some five years before, she had not been pregnant like other wives whose husbands had gone abroad to fight Hitler. Her husband, Ezekiel Odia had sent her to all the native doctors he could afford in Lagos, but still no more children.

At an early age, Aku-nna was aware of the discontent between her parents.
She was only thirteen, but she had realised quite a while before that all was not well in her family. Many a time she had heard other women living in the same compound make songs of her Ma Blackie's childlessness. She had heard over and over again her Ma Blackie and her Nna quarrelling over this great issue of childlessness. Nna would go on and on, talking in that small, sad voice of his, telling Ma reminding her, that he had had to pay double the normal bride price before he was able to take Ma as his wife. He would work himself up, (...) he would remind Ma Blackie that having paid this heavy bride price he had had their marriage sanctified by Anglicanism. And what had he to show for it all -- an only son! (p.9)

Ma Blackie ought to have realised her failure in paying back so little for the heavy bride price her husband had paid to her people! First, a woman must prove herself by becoming a mother. Then comes the necessity of giving birth to a son, and finally, one son is not enough, rather it is a stigma. A woman must bear her husband many sons. One is reminded of the turmoil of Nnu Ego in Joys of Motherhood as long as she remains childless. The social stigma attached to a childless woman is so big that it affects even her father, the great Agbadi. Then later in the novel, Adaku, Nnaifi's second wife also suffers because she cannot produce sons. By portraying the customary subordination of a woman under the traditional African culture who cannot give birth to male children is how Emecheta strikes out at patri-
archal trends in her own Ibo community. In the *Bride Price*, Ma Blackie is psychologically tortured, even while maintaining an apparent cheerful disposition, because so far she has produced only one son.

What Emecheta intends to show is how such cultural values get transported from one generation to the next. Aku-nna is made aware of the lesser status of a woman like her mother through her surroundings: the women of Akinwunmi street would sing of Ma Blackie's childlessness even though she had given birth to two living children; and then her father would have bitter fights with her mother over the same issue. A little later in the novel, Emecheta tells us how the relatives thought it more important for Ma Blackie to be in Ibuza for consulting a native doctor to make her pregnant again, than to have rushed to attend to her husband at his death bed. In Chapter two, the novelist writes:

Ma Blackie had sent a telegram from Ibuza asking them to confirm the rumour she had heard that her husband was ill. Members of Nna's family in Lagos had decided against telling her the truth. Through Nna Beaty, Beaty's mother, a friend of Ma Blackie's who happened to be going to Ibuza at the time, they told her not to worry, that her children were being well looked after, that her husband was only in hospital for a day or two and would be out very soon. She was strongly advised to direct her attention to the important work she
had been sent home to do -- to placate the goddess of the river Oboshi into giving her more sons and daughters. (pp.18-19)

It is so important under the traditional system for a woman to become a mother of "more sons and daughters" that she may well ignore a dying husband and choose to stay away from her little children who would have to take the impact of their father's death all by themselves. Though Aku-nna was accompanied by a good number of relatives from her father's as well as mother's side in her mourning, Ma Blackie's presence could still make a difference for the grieving children.

The surrounding, that of her immediate family and outside it, has made Emecheta's young protagonist more matured compared to her age. She is capable of assessing her present circumstances and her future too. She knew that her parents' marriage had turned sour because her mother was not being able to conceive:

Aku-nna knew that she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this unfortunate marriage. Not only was she a girl but she was much too thin for the approval of her parents, who would rather have a strong and plump girl for a daughter. Aku-nna just would not put on weight, and this made her look as if she was being starved; (...) And that was not the end of the disgrace she was showering on her family. If a
child at the end of Akinwunmi Street had chickenpox, Aku-nna was bound to catch it; if someone else at the bottom of the yard had malaria, Aku-nna would have her share too. For her it was forever a story of today foot, tomorrow head, the day after neck, so much so that her mother many a time begged her to decide once and for all whether she was going to live or die. One thing Ma Blackie could not stand, she said over and over again, was a "living dead", an ogbanje. (p.9)

Because Aku-nna took after her father (Nna), Ezekiel Odia was sympathetic to his daughter. She had a sense of special attachment to her father and her young mind had already conceived an idea -- the best way for her -- how she could make him happy. And that was:

Aku-nna on her part was determined not to let her father down. She was going to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price. (p.10)

That was her idea of bringing some solace to her parents who were too much troubled by the fact that they might have to live with an 'only' son. She was also aware how her recurring illness had caused trouble to her parents. So the only way in which she could redeem herself and be 'useful' to her parents was by being able to fetch a good bride price.

All through the novel Aku-nna lives with this sense of
responsibility -- of being useful to others for whom she cared. Soon after her father dies and she is forced to leave Lagos for Ibuza along with Ma Blackie and brother Nna-nndo, she is quite apprehensive of her future in their home village. She seems to be quite clear about the shape of things to come:

Aku-nna remembered only scraps of stories about what life in Ibuza would be like. She knew she would have to marry, and that the bride price she would fetch would help to pay the school fees for her brother Nna-nndo. She did not mind that; (....) What she feared was the type of man who would be chosen for her. She would have liked to marry someone living in Lagos, so that she would not have to work on a farm and carry cassava. She had heard stories of how strenuous farm life could be for a woman. She had heard that a farmer husband did not give housekeeping money, as her father had given her mother. There were so many questions she would have liked to ask, but it was regarded as bad manners to be too inquisitive. (pp.52-53)

The unfortunate reality that surrounds Aku-nna after her father’s death has enhanced the process of turning her into a sacrificial goat for late Ezekiel Odia’s only son. What Emecheta wants her readers to perceive is that generations after generations this customary sacrifice has been so ingrained into the social fabric of Ibo people that women have come to accept it as a natural state of affairs without questioning its validity. At the end of the novel,
she shows how Aku-enna's untimely death has been interpreted by Ibuza people as a kind of providential punishment given to her for going against age old tradition: for marrying the son of a slave who never paid her bride price. So at the age of thirteen, Aku-enna learns to accept her 'fate' as a girl child! In chapter three, Aku-enna receives an early "lesson" to prepare herself for a life without a father. Auntie Matilda and Auntie Uzo try to hide nothing from the young girl when they converse about her future prospects:

"The pity of it all," put in Auntie Matilda, "is that they will marry her off very quickly in order to get enough money to pay Nna-ndo's school fees."

"Oh, that should not be difficult. She is not ugly, and not a crying beauty either, but she is soft, quiet and intelligent. She will gladden the heart of an educated man, you mark my words. Most girls from Lagos are very quickly married away to rich and educated men because of their smooth bodies and their schooling," explained Uzo. (p.38)

Here again, Emecheta makes her protagonist 'learn' from her surrounding. Through her narration of incidents that succeeded Ezekiel Odia's death Emecheta has brought to the fore the strong patriarchal trends inherent in indigenous African customs and traditions. There are many examples. The most obvious is the parting statement of Odia when he is about to move out of his house to go to hospital: 339
"Always remember that you are mine." (p.12)

After this statement is dramatically repeated in Aku-nna's mind, and its full significance is realised only after Ezekiel Odia dies, turning his two children into orphans.

At the end of Chapter two, Aku-nna's silent thoughts run thus:

It is not that we have no father any more, we have no parents any more. (p.28)

Emecheta explains in the concluding paragraph of the chapter why Aku-nna thinks so:

It is so even today in Nigeria: when you have lost your father, you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. (p.28)

Such dominant patriarchal trends within Ibo culture comes alive in the conversations Aku-nna's relatives have with her on the day of her father's burial. After losing her voice from the previous night's wailing of praises to her dead father, she is seen clutching her flimsy nylon blouse as the physical pain in her throat adds to her sorrow that lies heavy on her heart. Aunt Uzo, noticing her peculiar pos-
"Then leave your blouse alone. Do you want to tear it? Can't you see that you have no father any more? You are an orphan now, and you have to learn to take care of whatever clothes you have. Nobody is going to buy you anymore, until you marry. Then your husband will take care of you. (p.38; emphasis added)

In Chapter three, while performing the duty of the chief mourner,

Nna-nndo did not use many words. He simply howled and threw himself about. Grown-up men held him tight, so that he did not hurt himself. He soon finished crying, but Aku-nna was encouraged to continue; girls were supposed to exhibit more emotion. (p.30)

This is so probably because of the inherent implication that girls being what they are, are more indebted to a father, husband or any other near male relations. A boy can take care of himself when he grows up. But a girl has to be 'taken care of' all through her life. A boy brings glory to one's family name. A girl can only bring a good bride price, and that too if she is qualified enough to be a prized bride. So a girl should always feel more 'grateful' to her father, husband or any male 'keeper' of herself.

The Bride Price is a poignant saga of how social ethics
under traditional Ibo law demand voluntary participation from women who often conform to them without any desire to do so. At times the treatment they are subjected to under these mandatory customs borders on inhuman experience. The novel questions the age-old tradition followed by many African tribes that the wife of a dead brother is automatically inherited by the next living brother, or the senior-most among the living brothers. As long as African societies were governed by a community culture, these customs did not cause as much painful an experience as they do in modern times when the society is defined by individualistic trends. In this novel Emecheta dwells at length on the elements of indigenous culture where the reader comes to know how a child is a child of the community as a whole and as such has more 'mothers' than its biological one. Under such conditions, a child generally would not be too much attached to a particular parent or god-parent.

Aku-nna has, however, grown up within the reality of modern day Africa. Lagos in no way resembles any rural area of Nigeria and the dominant cultural trends in this capital city are too much westernised. Further, the majority of the city population is Christian who believe in the system of
one-wife and have a strong concept of incest. Odia who had married Ma Blackie in a church was a devout Christian. He had made his children pray regularly and observe discipline to be in the good books of the Lord. Having grown up in such an atmosphere it is too shocking for tender Aku-nna to know that after reaching Ibuza, her mother would become a wife to her uncle, Okonkwo, her father's elder brother.

She was more attached to her father, as Emecheta tells us, for many reasons. One of them being the fact that she resembled him in bone structure and skin colour, and had large eyes like him. As Ezekiel Odia did not have many children to have ignored this sickly daughter of his,

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. To him this was something to look forward to. (p.10)

Whatever the reasons, little Aku-nna took upon herself the responsibility of taking care of her father in Ma Blackie's absence. She performed her duties well and to the satisfaction of Odia. She prepared the special soup for him when he was to start his journey to hospital. The bond between the two is elaborately described in Chapter two:
That Aku-nna did not know was due to the fact that she was still a child, and her father suspected that she was growing into the type of young woman who would not only want to give everything to a person she loved but who would also worry over her loved ones. (...) (p.16)

The lines that immediately follow make yet another illustration of Emecheta's dig at certain traditional outlooks, where a father must restrict his love and emotion for his daughter while no such inhibitions exist for sons.

Aku-nna knew that there was a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist between her and her mother. She loved her father, and he responded as much as their custom allowed -- for was she not only a girl? A girl belonged to you today as your daughter, and tomorrow, before your very eyes, would go to another man in marriage. To such creatures, one should be wary of showing too much love and care, otherwise people would ask, "Look man, are you going to be your daughter's husband as well?" (p.17)

Her father's unexpected death could not possibly have wiped all her feelings for him. Further, Odia's children had attended in Lagos the local Sunday school that elaborated, at every single available opportunity, on all the attributes of heaven and hell. So the strong influence of a Christian morality also makes the very thought of her mother going to another man painful. It was due to this Christian influence on him, that Nna-nndo would promptly reply to a question
asked by senior relatives as to where he would like his dead father to be:

"I want my father in Heaven!" shouted the poor boy (...). His imagination, at the words "heaven" and "angels", had conjured up the beautiful and graceful pictures he had been shown in his lessons at the local Sunday school. (p.41)

Her city-bred innocence and ignorance about rural customs becomes a matter of amusement for Aku-nna's country cousin Ogugua. On their way to Ibuza the two sisters get to know each other. Aku-nna is confused and somewhat shocked at learning things she never did in Lagos, when Ogugua tells her:

"(...) We shall be like sisters, especially if your mother chooses to be with my father."

"Why should my mother choose your father? How come?" Aku-nna asked, puzzled. (...)

Ogugua burst out laughing. "You are almost fourteen years old now and you still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Aku-nna, as if in physical pain. "How can my mother fit into that type of life?" (p.64)

Her father's death ironically makes Aku-nna see the world around her in an entirely new light. She now grows out of
her cocoon of passivity and becomes observant about everything around her, questioning things. On their mammy wagon trip to Ibuza from Lagos, she is opened up to a whole new world of experience. She discovers the real Africa that lies outside the Lagos city. But she also starts re-discovering adult men, women and is now able to look beneath the layer of their official adult behaviour. The lorry driver who seemed to her at the Lagos lorry stand to be a kind-hearted, god-fearing man full of sympathy and high moral values, is the first one to leave his truck and go for his mistress in the town the moment their lorry reaches Asaba in the early hours of morning. This prompts Aku-nna to do her introspections:

Aku-nna, who had grown rapidly in mind since her father’s death, noted that despite the early hour all the male traders disappeared into the town. Ma explained to her that most rich traders kept mistresses there, and when they arrived so early they went to the houses of their girl friends to spend the rest of the night. This revelation shocked Aku-nna a little especially since their bearded driver was one of the first to take his leave, (...). Did all men behave like that? Was her father like that? (...)

The whole adult world was becoming to complicated, so Aku-nna stopped thinking about it. (p.61)

There is an awakening taking place in Aku-nna that would help her through much more difficult situations in the later
parts of the novel.

Contrary to the general assumption in Okonkwo’s household in Ibuza, Aku-nna is allowed to continue her education at the local missionary school. But her continuing of schooling becomes an issue in Okonkwo family, through which Emecheta raises the issue of how girls are discriminated against when it comes to educating the children in a family. A touching portrayal of the same issue finds a place in Emecheta’s other novel, Second Class Citizen. An young Adah is beaten up mercilessly with a koboko, a cane the Hausas use for horses, for aspiring to join school. She has to put up with physical torture and psychological humiliation to keep up her studies. On the other hand, in Joys of Motherhood, Nnu-Ego shows preferential treatment to her sons and sends them to school while she compromises on her daughters’ education. However, Adaku, her co-wife, sends her only daughters to a good school and plans for their higher studies, for she envisages a different kind of future for them where these girls would not have to suffer and be dependent on their husbands’ housekeeping money for their survival.

The politics that goes on in Okonkwo’s family over Aku-nna’s education is a provocative portrayal in The Bride
Price which shows how in Ibo community girls are not only discriminated against boys when a family provides for the children's education, but more demeaningly, they are also 'used' as a means to meet the educational expenditure of male children.

The novel is set in the early 1950s, when Nigerians were opening up to the technological culture of the west. Education, therefore, was gaining ground as something that could serve as a means to prosperity and comfortable life. The fewer number of Nigerian males who studied and came to occupy government jobs and bagged private contracts were envied by the commoners. There was a gradually rising tendency towards educating the boys in the family so that they could also have a bite at the national cake. As the cities developed rapidly as job centres, educated men always got an advantage of getting into more respectable jobs in the railways or with the bureaucracy, and so on. Even outside the government offices, the knowledge of English language helped them to acquire a better job. The overwhelming importance of one's knowledge in English in colonial Nigeria has been satirically portrayed in T.M. Aluko's novel, One Man, One Wife where a village school teacher...
Royasin, who is convicted of committing adultery, is redeemed in stature as the great letter writer Royanson just because of his half-baked knowledge of the colonial tongue. Under such circumstances, those who sent their children for schooling instead of making them get used to hard work in the farms were also regarded with a little more respect. In Ibuza therefore

Ma Blackie automatically belonged to the elite, for her children attended school, and this was a bone of contention between Okonkwo and his other wives and children. They could stomach Nna-nndó's going to school for he was a boy, and also his father had left over one hundred pounds in savings and had joined a progressive Ibuza group called the Pioneer Association, whose aim was to ensure that on the death of any member the first son of that family would be educated to grammar-school level. (p.34)

But Aku-nna's schooling causes a lot of irritation to Okonkwo's elder sons Iloba and Osenekwu and they sort it out with their father in Chapter six.

Chapter six is important for more than one reason: it reveals the higher status enjoyed by Ma Blackie and her two children in the Okonkwo household, the consequent jealousy in other members, Okonkwo's plans to utilize his daughters - Ogugua and Aku-nna - to collect money for getting his Obi title. Emecheta also hints at all the possible trouble that
Aku-nna and her lover, Chike would face in future.

Ilaba, Okonkwo's eldest son of twenty from his senior-most wife Ngbeke, is envious of his new brother Nna-nddo's schooling and the opportunity it provides him to avoid the hard farm life. But he knows that their father cannot do anything about it as he is not the provider for Nna-nddo's education. But Ilaba demands of his father to do something about preventing Aku-nna from going to school. Ilaba's jealousy was understandable as:

He was a promising farmer, working hard to get a wife, but he knew inside himself that he was nothing more than a farmer. (p.74)

Okonkwo had already decided about his future plans, as he tells his angry sons:

"You cannot see beyond your noses", said Okonkwo. "(...) Don't you know I hope to become an Obi and take the title one day?". In order to become an Obi and receive the respected Eze title, a man must make a big and expensive sacrifice to the gods. Then he was given the red cap those who achieved this rank of chieftaincy were entitled to wear, and the occasion was followed by days of heavy feasting and drinking; (...)

"Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me. You see the trend today, that the educated girls fetch more money." (p.75)
The rotten institution of chieftaincy in Nigeria during the last days of colonial rule also does not escape Emeche-
ta's notice. In Okonkwo's words to his sons the corrupt
practice of employing one's money power instead of personal
virtues to become a chief is brought under focus. A de-
tailed discussion about this significant institution in
Nigeria is available in two essays: "The chiefs" by Billy
Biti Yong and, "The Position of the Chiefs" by Najeem Ade
Lawal.7

Prior to colonial rule, political organisations of
traditional African societies were dependent on their varied
historical experience: some tribes had a centralised
authority while others had less centralised administrative
systems. Religious background of a tribe also influenced
its native authority. While the influence of Islam was
prominent among the Hausa in northern Nigeria, the Ibos,
Yorubas and other tribes in the East and the South had their
own system of administration characterised by their respec-
tive indigenous socio-cultural traditions. This was so as
apart from administrative responsibilities the chiefs also
upheld the religious and cultural identity of the tribes,
elevating them to the stature of spiritual leaders and
custodians of all the traditions of their subjects.

Under the indirect rule policy pursued by the Nigerian colonial government, the chiefs became ineffective since they were not allowed to perform their traditional administrative duties. As the chiefs lost their importance, corrupt and self-seeking persons with financial strength vied for chieftaincy titles as it lent an enhanced status symbol and access to power-mongering. Okonkwo was such an aspirant.

At a much deeper level, his bargain plans reveal a sinister outlook of the traditional society: to use girls as pawns to make financial gains so that a man can send his son to a better educational institution, or marry him paying his bride price with the money, or for any other personal gain. Aku-onna is being 'allowed' to study in a school just as a broiler chicken is fed more to fetch a higher price from the buyer. Because an 'educated' Aku-onna will be able to procure her family a bigger amount as bride price, Okonkwo would happily allow her to finish her school education. A boy's education is meant for his future prosperity while an Ibo girl may be sent to school for a higher bride price. That is what education means to a girl in Emecheta's Nige-
The chapter also draws upon elements that separate Aku-nna from other girls in Ibuza, because of her experience from having lived a part of her life in a city. Aku-nna is not like just any other Ibuza girl. At various points in the novel Emecheta reminds the reader of this difference: at times through her physical attributes, and at other times through her inner thoughts and outlook.

In Chapter five, the difference is described when Ma Blackie and her children accompanied by the market women of Ibuza are on their way home. The young school teacher Chike and Okine, one of the children's several Ibuza cousins, meet them on the way and their eyes scan Aku-nna:

The young men were staring at her, but they did not see a coward who would not dare do what other girls of her age could do. They saw a young, pretty girl of fourteen with golden-brown skin, whose small, pointed breasts were asserting their presence under the thin nylon blouse she wore. There was a kind of delicacy about her, for she had not yet been toughened by life, as had the girls born and bred in Ibuza. (p.69)

Later Aku-nna is to realise that this lack of 'toughness' in her as compared to other Ibuza girls is what makes her more attractive to the men of Ibuza. The difference between her
and other Ibuza girls again becomes the topic of discussion between the two elder sons of Okonkwo and their mother.

They realise:

Aku-nna was different. She was not allowed to play rough games in the moonlight. She was not allowed to join in the dance her age group were practising for Christmas. There was a kind of softness about her which spelled peace; she would sit and listen to you for hours and just smile all the time and not say anything. And those books the teacher was always lending her! (p.78)

In her characterization of Aku-nna, Emecheta keeps those elements alive in her protagonist that set her apart from any ordinary Ibuza girl, because Aku-nna is not Ogugua - her cousin - who would accept anything that the Ibuza tradition might demand of her. By bringing her from a city background into the traditional lifestyle of Ibuza, Emecheta not only draws a distinction between the rural and the urban, she also gives shape to all the probable effects of urban influence and education on an African girl. Aku-nna's part rejection of the traditional in the matters concerning her own life does not see her at the end of the novel as a "married and lived happily ever after" heroine. But the turmoils the rejection brings her are an assertion of herself, her will to act the way her independent mind wants her to, and finally, a source of encouragement for all those
women who would dare revolt against the oppressive elements of traditional lifestyle. So Emecheta's protagonist has to live simultaneously in two worlds: the modern and the traditional, and at the end comes out victorious even in her death. In Chapter six, the two worlds of Aku-nna are given shape in a brief paragraph by the novelist:

Aku-nna and Nna-nndo soon grew accustomed to things at Ibuza, learning in school the European ways of living and coming home to be faced with an unchanging traditions of their own people. Yet they were like helpless fishes caught in a net; they could not as it were go back into the sea, for they were trapped fast, and yet they were still alive because the fisherman was busy debating within himself whether it was worth killing them to take home, seeing as they were such small fries. (p.82)

Though the drag-net of tradition closes in on the young protagonist and pushes her to be abducted and then go through a forced marriage with Okoboshi whom she hates from the core of her heart, she emerges victorious at the end as she elopes with the man she loves. Her willing escape from Ibuza is her symbolic victory, a fulfilment of her efforts to live her own way. The 'fisherman' ultimately fails to keep the fish in his net.

But rejecting tradition has not been an easy task for
Aku-nna. She takes a great risk in hiding her first menstruation from her family members' prying eyes. Because she knows with her attaining of womanhood, suitors will start paying visit to her mother's hut for bargaining to marry her. Marriage means the end of her relationship with Chike, her teacher and her lover. She may not be able to continue her studies after she is given in marriage to some young Ibuza man. So she decides to hide her attaining the physical quality that would prove that she was not an 'ogbanje'. The painkillers Chike gives her to relieve her of physical discomfort accompanying menstruation is a symbolic adoption of western civilization by the protagonist as the tablets helps her to successfully hide her real physical conditions.

What happens when a girl menstruates for the first time in a traditional society comes as a great contrast to the hush-hush affair that takes place under the orange tree at the far end of the C.M.S. school in Chapter seven.

While collecting firewood in a deserted farm across the stream Aku-nna gets into her menstrual cycle again, and unlike the first two occasions, cannot hide it from her accompanying friends this time. Such a natural thing which happens to every normal woman on earth can spell disaster for her, and her moments of turmoil find expression in
Chapter eight:

Her thoughts were in a turmoil of indecision about what to do next. (...) She came to the conclusion that there was no alternative open to her but to let her mother know. 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. It was not that she shrank from becoming an adult, but she was afraid of what her people might force the future to hold for her. (p.104)

What could be a joyous event increasing her confidence in her womanhood turns into a sad realisation that one protective layer around her is crumbling. And so she suffers the painful stings of apprehension.

What follows in the novel in a quick series of related events proves that Aku-nna's apprehensions were not juvenile thinking. While narrating these events Emecheta again casts a critical glance at certain Ibo customs people of Ibuza followed. In fact she elaborates upon how the concept of having 'fun' always gave more 'licence' to men in Ibuza tradition. In Chapter seven, at the beginning, she describes how Chike has slept with many local girls and still warms the beds of many young women married to old chiefs. Emecheta also lays bare the hypocrisy behind all those big talk about discipline and purity in human relationship under
traditional culture when she narrates why many chiefs—individuals who are held in high esteem—are cuckolded:

...these wives were still in the flush of girlhood yet tied to ageing husbands who above all prided themselves on providing enough yam to fill their spouses' bellies. If they suspected that their wives needed more than yams to satisfy them, they were not talking. If they were aware that half the number of children being born and saddled with their name were not theirs, they knew better than to raise a scandal. In Ibuza every young man was entitled to his fun. (p.84, emphasis added)

Emecheta proves this privilege of young Ibuza men more bluntly when she describes how Aku-nna, after having her first menstruation, is ignoring pain and discomfort to look normal as she prepares to receive boys in her mother's hut whom Ibuza tradition has given licence to molest her;

She did not risk lying down again. Her mother would soon be back and then the boys who came to their hut for night games would begin trooping in. 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. (p.97)

In Chapter eight, Aku-nna's becoming a complete woman is celebrated in Okonkwo's household. Under traditional custom, it is of course a celebration. But what she goes through during this particular social event makes it appear
as if instead of being rewarded for her achievement she is being punished for some crime. It is interesting to note varying response coming from different persons to this event.

Her mother instructs her about her 'dos' and 'don'ts', the customary restrictions imposed on an Ibuza girl who is menstruating.

Okonkwo, her step father, is jubilant as he now knows that Aku-nna can be married off shortly and the bride price will help him acquire the Eze title. As he hands over a hen to Ma Blackie to kill it and make some hot soup out of it

He stood there (...) eyeing her as one would a precious statue, inwardly congratulating himself on his luck in having had the opportunity to marry her mother. Now the entire bride price would come to him. (p.115)

But his happy appearance immediately turns into that of a serious-looking patriarch, not too pleased with his ward. He warns his step-daughter about his relationship with the teacher, Chike:

"Aku-nna, Chike Ofulue is only a friend. You must remember that. Now that you have grown, that friendship must gradually die. But die it must!" (p.116)
Okonkwo's is the voice of the patriarch; he owns Aku-nna by rights granted to him by Ibuza customs. Only he has the final say in deciding whom she should marry. And only he has the right over her bride price, because he has inherited what all his dead brother had left behind. His warning comes more as an assertion of his rights over Aku-nna than his concern for the 'orphaned' girl. Emecheta shows yet another time how tradition subordinates a woman, as she describes the protagonist's reaction to Okonkwo's harsh tone:

...the way he had spoken just now was the voice of authority, that authority which was a kind of legalised power. He was telling her; not in so many words, that she could never escape. She was trapped in the intricate web of Ibuza tradition. (p.116)

Soon the tradition again takes control of her, as ignoring her pain, she gets ready to receive her visitors, one of whom could be her future husband. Aku-nna is shown as a hapless victim of her people's custom when she is molested cruelly by one of the visitors, Okoboshi. Before that he humiliates her in front of the other visitors, including Chike, her lover. Then in a cold-blooded calculation her visitor takes revenge on her for her apparent preference for
the son of a slave:

Okoboshi wanted her completely out of the hut; he knew what he was going to do. Without warning, Okoboshi walked up to Aku-nna and seized her roughly at the back of her shoulder; he grabbed at both her breasts and started to squeeze and hurt her. (p.120)

In a dramatic sequence, Chike's physical intervention saves her from Okoboshi's torturous grip. But Aku-nna is criticised for this from an unexpected quarter: her own mother Ma Blackie. She lashes out at her daughter:

"You mean you have nice breasts and don't want men to touch? Girls like you tend to end up having babies in their father's houses, because they cannot endure open play, so they go to secret places and have themselves disvirgined. Is that the type of person you turning out to be? (...) How can he hurt you with all these others watching? (p.121)

Under traditional laws in Ibuza, the fact that marriages at times could be something very different from celebrations accompanied by conventional feasting and dancing is what the reader finds in Chapter nine, when Aku-nna is abducted by Okoboshi's people. An alarm is raised and a vain search follows:

...they knew it was useless. Aku-nna had gone. All that the man responsible had to do was cut a
curl of her hair - "isi nmo" - and she would belong to him for life. Or he could force her into sleeping with him, and if she refused his people would assist him by holding her down until she was disvirgined. And when that had been done, no other person would want to take her any more.

In Okoboshi's compound, the limping bridegroom's sister-in-law warns Aku-nna before she is forced to join him in the marital bed:

...she must try not to be difficult, because Okoboshi would only have to call for help and all those drunken men would come in and help him hold her legs apart so that he could enter her with no further trouble. The men would not be blamed at all, because it was their custom.

Emecheta makes a shocking portrayal of the ugly face of Ibo tradition as prevailing among the people of Ibuza. Nothing could be more disgusting than to know how in rural Africa the tradition is at times completely tilted in favour of men, allowing a man, or a group of men, to conquer a woman physically ignoring her emotional disturbances caused by the act. The incident in all its bestiality conforms to the age-old tradition of man seeking complete control of woman's body and mind, and in this effort how he is aided by the society. The surprising fact is that while in African societies women enjoyed much greater freedom and choice
under oral culture, such oppressive customs also dwelt side by side. The ghastly details of Aku-nna's abduction and humiliation provokes one to realise the magnitude of oppression and subordination suffered by women in traditional African society.

Aku-nna's escape, therefore, is possible by breaking the boundaries of traditional control exercised upon her by the society. She revolts against tradition, Ibuza social customs and risks her life and reputation in planning her escape with Chike at the end of Chapter nine. For the materialisation of her escape to freedom, she has to voluntarily adorn the garb of a tainted woman and suffers all consequent humiliations and insults heaped on her.

Her relationship with Chike comes as a contrast to her forced marriage to Okoboshi. Her marriage with the C.M.S. school teacher of Ibuza takes place only when her 'marriage' (aptly termed as 'a kind of marriage' by Emecheta) under traditional Ibuza customs fails. This in a way is a significant pointer in the novel, where Emecheta hints at Aku-nna's consistent search for an alternative in her life through which she could come out of the clutches of oppressive tradition. In a city she might have faced little
resistance in her pursuit. Adaku in *Joys of Motherhood* meets very little protest from her husband and her community in Lagos when she willingly becomes a prostitute to avoid her sufferings at Nnaife's home. In *Double Yoke*, Nko uses her "bottom power" to manage a higher grade in the university with much lesser trouble than the protagonist in *The Bride Price*. Aku-nna's dream of escaping from the trap of Ibuza customs and marrying Chike, becomes more difficult because of the rural milieu in Ibuza, where individual action, unlike that of a city, affects the whole community. This makes the cost of Aku-nna's freedom dearer.

By choosing to develop intimacy with a son of a slave or "osu" family, Aku-nna strikes her first chord of protest against Ibo traditions. Her later elopement and marriage with Chike comes as a message to African women who are at times too tied down with customs and traditions to identify their own oppression inherent in the social system. Her marital bliss is too short-lived, still she does not give up her struggle in the face of all odds that come her way.

Ma Blackie, on the other hand is portrayed as a woman who would compromise on her own freedom and self-respect to conform to tradition. She behaves like an opportunist when
Emecheta shows her as being too engrossed with the family politics in Okonkwo's house to take notice of her daughter's needs. She is aware of Aku-nna's relationship with Chike and partly enjoys the gifts that her daughter brings home from her lover. But she does not protest when Okonkwo wants to marry her off to somebody else just to acquire the bride price. She sides with Okonkwo just because the man has made her pregnant again, conferring on her the much desired motherhood. This is how tradition plays against the women in *The Bride Price*. But it is interesting to note that Emecheta has made a slight distinction between Ma Blackie and other Ibuza women, including those in Okonkwo's household. After mourning for nine months for her dead husband, she is taken as the fourth wife of Okonkwo. But she is different from his other three wives, and she also keeps her children away from following the footsteps of other Ibuza children. She manages to send them to school regularly. For herself, she finds a much less strenuous trade than farming, or selling heavy loads of akpu - the cassava pulp - in Asaba market with other Ibuza women. As Emecheta tells us, she manages to become an 'elite' woman in Ibuza society:

As the months passed, she counted herself lucky in her children. Aku-nna, now approaching fifteen, was intelligent and a promising beauty. Nna-nndo,
was settling down nicely. The little capital Ma had managed to save from her husband's gratuity she invested in palm kernels, for she did not wish to have to carry baskets of akpu to market on her head. Her type of trading was different and less strenuous: she would go to the town of Ogwashi to buy the kernels, have them bagged and sent to Ibuza via the one and only lorry which made that trip. On Nkwo market days the bags were transported to Asaba, (...); she sold the kernels to eastern Ibo traders, (...).

(p.73)

Her different ways earn her jealousy of her co-wives. In Chapter six, Okonkwo's semiormost wife, Ngbeke, is not too pleased with what her husband is doing after Ma Blackie had come to live with them:

She resented Ma Blackie for stealing the show in the family she had helped her husband Okonkwo to build. She had not minded his taking younger women as his wives, but now he had graduated to women who were above him in every respect she felt badly affronted. And that the woman was second-hand stuff like the one they called Blackie was an added insult. (p.78)

The jealousy inherent in the nature of rural African women make them their own enemies. Ngbeke never realises what education could mean to a woman in asserting her rights and enjoying freedom from taboos and social restrictions. However, Ngbeke realises that despite her own senior-most position and privileges she enjoys among Okonkwo's wives because of this, she has been outclassed by Ma:

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After all, had not this Blackie woman received her little education in the house of a kind woman trader who had almost bought her, the way one buys a slave? Ezekiel was stupid to have married her in the first place. Just because she wore perfume and liked to line her eyes with black dye! (p.78)

A significant aspect in the novel is Ma Blackie’s relationship with her daughter. Within a short while, Ma’s enterprising approach establishes a good business for her, pushing her to an affluent status. But what makes her real elite is her children who, unlike their other Ibuza cousins, attend school. Ma is completely aware of Aku-nna’s prospect of fetching a good bride price and Okonkwo’s desire to use that money in getting his Eze title. Therefore she engages herself in a power politics within Okonkwo’s compound, forcing that extra ounce of attention from the common husband, unavailable to her co-wives. But she is lost in this power game to gain a complete control of the man and the affairs in his family so much so that she neglects her own daughter. For Aku-nna’s feelings towards her mother are conveyed at the end of Chapter six:

One or two things were certain to Aku-nna. She had not only lost a father, she had also lost a mother. Ma Blackie found herself so immersed in the Okonkwo family politics, and in making ends

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meet, that she seldom had time to ask how the world was with her daughter. (p.82)

She is badly in need of some emotional protection inside Okonkwo's household where everybody else seems to be against her relationship to Chike and in favour of marrying her to Okoboshi. She remembers that Ma once said:

"I am not allowing you out of my sight until you are seventeen, or you are bound to die of childbirth. (p.111)

But that reassuring mother of hers seems to have vanished, as Emecheta tells us:

She did not know that her mother Ma Blackie was expecting a child for Okonkwo and was at that early emotional stage of pregnancy when all she wanted was peace and to think of her unborn child, and was so deliciously happy that she would give in to anything rather than upset the man who was author of her present happiness. (p.111)

Ma Blackie enjoys the small gifts and foodstuff given to her daughter by Chike; she realises that the young school teacher would make a far better husband for her daughter than any other suitable young man in Ibuza whom custom would permit to marry Aku-nya. But she does not have the courage her daughter shows to stand up and act against customs. She surrenders before them and remains a puppet of tradition.
So Aku-nna has given up all hope of getting any support from her mother after she is badly offended by her suitors, especially Okoboshi.

The bitterness Aku-nna was feeling had gone beyond tears. She had heard it said often enough that one's mother was one's best friend, but she was beginning to doubt it. Had her mother encouraged her to accept Chike's friendship in order to use him like a convenient tool, to ferry them through a difficult period of adjustment? (p.122)

Aku-nna is in a fix now, she knows that Ma Blackie likes Chike and therefore expects her to come to her support in a critical situation like this. But her mother's tears appear 'dramatic' to her. During the pandemonium in Ma's hut, she realises that now that her mother was expecting a child, she would not stop Okonkwo from getting his step-daughter married. Because the bride price then will be used "to see her mother through her period of confine". (p.123)

After Aku-nna elopes with Chike from Okoboshi's house, Okonkwo is displeased with Ma for the misfortune her daughter has brought on the family. This is so typical of patriarchal tradition that when a daughter commits 'wrong', it is always the mother who is blamed. Okonkwo, who was too willing to inherit his dead brother's wife, now washes his hands off her by making Ma morally responsible for the deba-
cle. And later in the novel he finally divorces her by showing his backside to her in public.

But Ma's support comes from the family of Chike. The Ofulues give her financial assistance with which she starts living independently, "much more comfortably than her former mates and friends". (p.156) But her worries for her daughter linger on as she discovers that Okonkwo is planning to use powerful charms to kill Aku-nna slowly.

Ma Blackie, who may not find much appreciation from Emecheta's readers shows her strength of will about one thing in particular -- she never compromises on her daughter's schooling when everybody else in the Okonkwo family is dead against it. Though her intentions behind this steadfastness are not made very clear, she probably has been enjoying the difference between Aku-nna and her step sisters and the status this difference accorded to her. Whatever may be the reason, Ma's support, and only that, sees Aku-nna through school. This aspect of Bride Price carries autobiographical implications, for Emecheta has always voiced her opinion over the pressing need for educating African women with a view to preparing them for countering patriarchal oppression. The courage that Ma Blackie lacks.
and Aku-nna exhibits to rise up against dogmatic and counterproductive traditions in the society is a gift of education. This is highlighted in the characterization of Emecheta's protagonist.

Both *Burning Grass* and *The Bride Price* abound in examples of traditional African life and reflections of rural lifestyle. *Burning Grass* is a fine example of Ekwensi's ability to capture in his writing the habits and occupation of a little known section of the northern Nigerian society. He does it "by a clever selection of incidents, a keen attention to the details of environment and a competent recreation of dialogue". Adrian Roscoe also highlights this quality in Ekwensi:

An unappreciated fact about Ekwensi is his ability to write authoritatively about all the main regions of Nigeria. Books like *Burning Grass*, *Jagua Nana*, ...show that the semi-desert towns of the North, the dry, dusty plains of Bauchi are as familiar to him as the humid cities of the coastal fringe.

So the arduous and adventurous life of northern Nigerian cattle Fulani comes alive on Ekwensi's canvas in *Burning Grass*. Their seasonal migration from one grassland to another in the savannah, the typical way of manoeuvring
cattle during their long treks, extracting the milk products and marketing them, their traditional food, professional skill and social competitions, traditional entertainment through music and games, social institutions like marriage and family structure with its hierarchical order, religious practices and belief in the supernatural -- all combine in the novel to give it its regional identity. To lend authenticity to his narration Ekwensi includes scenes like the "sharro" match in Chapter eleven, or stampeding of Rikku's cattle by the cunning hunter Belmuna in Chapter nine, the use of charms and magic to win over adversaries in the "sharro" match or during the fight between Shehu and Hodio in Chapter eight, setting up of camps or packing off from one to move to new camping sites, and other smaller details like Mai's love for 'paturi', a Fulani traditional dish.

One important aspect of the novelist's efforts at providing local flavour in Burning Grass is the images of Islamic tradition in the book. The Fulanis embraced Islam after the Arabo-Berber influence took hold in the northern regions of Nigeria during the fourteenth century. However, they continued to indulge in indigenous religious practices as well. Burning Grass contains many examples of the co-existence of the two religions. K. W. Harrow writes:
The coexistence of Islamic and traditional religious practices among the Fulani today is the result of centuries of Islamic diffusion into West African cultures. The steady Islamic influence that resulted from the activities of traders and scholars with traditional religions who were hospitable to Muslim doctrine facilitated the mutual assimilation of the two traditions, but it may well have been the underlying compatibility of these traditions that ensured their continuing intermingling beyond the rise and fall of the savannah states, and throughout the eastward migration of the Fulani people.10

However, the intermingling of Islam with the local faith often affected women negatively, as Sonia Ghattas-Soliman observes in her analysis of Islamic influence in Sudanese literature:

The Qur'an provides the Muslim with a set of laws, values and principles that constitute a standard of conduct and a way of life. It proclaims the partnership of men and women and their equal rights. It also recognises the existence of moral, spiritual and human values of each sex. However, local customs and male ascendancy in society have put women under men's control. Although the Prophet defended the rights of women (...) in many instances, if the older male members of the community create their own set of beliefs and moral values, their given interpretations and applications of the Shar'ia will overshadow the principles and the ideals of Islam.11

Mai Sansaye, being a devout Muslim who takes the name of Allah almost every time he speaks, still believes strong-
ly in the use of charms. In fact, his wandering disease is supposed to be the result of a local charm cast on him by his suspected adversary. Hodio employs 'baduhu', a very powerful charm given to him in a cat skin by his father to drive away Shehu and his men. Jalla loses in the 'sharro' match because he fights without the help of Mai Sunaye's charms and magic. Burning Grass also highlights the community feeling among the Fulanis, so typical of African tribes. All the hosts who provide food and shelter to the protagonist during his wanderings are not only kind to him but share his sorrows and happiness. Ligu's benevolence towards Mai Sunaye's family is another example.

The strong kinship bonds among the Ibos is one of the major points to which a reader's attention is drawn in The Bride Price. The funeral rites that take place in the small compound on Akinwunmi Street after Aku-nna's father dies reminds one of the funeral dance in Amadi's novel The Concupine. The individual's sense of attachment to the larger community is conveyed by Emecheta where she describes various stages of mourning for Ezekiel Odia. At times young Aku-nna is too naive to understand this aspect of Ibuza people as her urban upbringing impedes such a perception. In Chapter two, Emecheta tells us about Aku-nna:
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 a people who think alike, whose ways are alike, so much so that it would not occur to any one of them to behave and act differently. (p.16)

In the beginning of the same chapter, Emecheta provides yet another glimpse of the community culture of the Ibos:

It would soon be getting dark and Aku-nna and her brother had never slept all alone in their room before. She was beginning to get worried, and decided that if Nna stayed any longer she was going to tell their neighbours. Their neighbours would look after them, she knew, for in that part of the world everyone is responsible for the next person. (p.14)

The occasional use of proverbs in both the novels is also a pointer towards traditional African way of expression. Roscoe writes:

African proverbs, then, represent an astonishingly versatile device. They are guides to conduct, aids to instruction, rallying cries to tribal unity, and, in a continent where the rhetorical arts are yet vigorously in bloom, the weapons of debate and the buttress of oratory. As a rule, the proverbs reflect the basic details of rural African life (...). In a manner which recalls medieval practice, the African proverb likes to render the great abstractions of life, suffering and death in familiar, work-a-day terms, (...).
It is perhaps too much to claim that a West African's life can be simply regarded as a movement from one proverb to the next: but the range of human experience covered by the proverb is certainly vast.12

In fact what happens in Aku-nna’s life after her father dies is brilliantly summed up in the proverb Emecheta aptly uses in Chapter two of The Bride Price:

The people of Ibuza have a proverb which says that quarrels between relatives are only skin deep, they never penetrate to the bones. They have another saying, that on the day of blood relatives, friends go. (p.18)

Similarly in Burning Grass young Rikku explains to Kantuma the hard life of the cattle Fulani through one such beautiful proverb which also symbolises their deep faith in the almighty:

"I am used to discomfort. We live a simple life. The floor is our bed, and nature is always a companion. But above all, Allah drives the fly for the tail-less cow." (p.110)

Another significant aspect in both the novels is the importance of myths and legends in traditional African life. To explain these phenomena, Bu-Buakei Jabbi writes:

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Myth and ritual complexes within living cultures tend, in their own right, to be intrinsic systems of ideas and general world-views, of modes of perception and sensibility. A more or less cohesive set of propositions about reality and life, about man's place in the world and in time, may often be deduced from them, though always as an act of interpretation. As Achebe puts it, they are created by man 'to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death - his attempt to make sense of the bewildering complexity of existence'.

So in *Burning Grass* as well as in *The Bride Price*, the 'real' world co-exists with the 'surreal'. In the former, Fatimeh and the lion, her all white cattle and her white dress is mistakenly identified with the mythical 'Korinra-wa', a female spirit. Similarly in *Bride Price*, Emecheta tells us about the mythical goddesses of the river Oboshi and the Atakpo stream. These myths, in retrospect, belong to a category that's defined by a 'mythical' time.

Thus myths and legends permeate into the fabric of traditional society to exercise their control over human attitudes and outlooks. In *The Bride Price*, the objection raised by Okonkwo's sons against Aku-nya's schooling is part of the myth, so typical of patriarchal societies, that an educated girl is bound to be proud of her learning and as such, would be in difficulty to find a husband for her. She would consider men with lesser educational standard as
inferior. In fact Emecheta, as a woman writer, takes up cudgels on behalf of all African girls whose parents and male family members would not consider sending them to schools and colleges for higher studies. The author's realization that only an educated woman could resist the sinister designs of oppressive patriarchal machinery finds shape in many of her novels through their protagonists' inclination towards advancement of learning: Nko in Double The Yoke, Nnu Ego in Joys of Motherhood and Aku-nna in The Pride Price carry forward this message from Emecheta. Ekwensi's Burning Grass provides a stark contrast as the novel has nothing to say on the need for spread of education, not to speak of education for women. Hodio, one of Mai Sunsaye's sons, comes partly under the influence of modern lifestyle, as in Chapter seven, he is found to be running a sugar making business in New Chanka. The newly built township is a product of western design as the colonial government built it to shift people from the village of Old Chanka to resist the spread of sleeping sickness. Hodio's shift from cattle rearing to sugar making, that involves western technology, is a symbolic transformation towards a new way of life that's far removed from traditional Fulani lifestyle. But he never feels any urge for providing himself with some
formal education in order to be successful in the changing circumstances. If at all he does, it is to learn Arabic in order to read the Islamic religious texts. In comparison to Ekwensi's indifference to such social issues of prime importance like education and superstitious outlook, Emecheta's novel takes a radical diversion that would register, often remind one shockingly, of the tyranny of tradition on women in contemporary African society.

Like Jaqua Nana and People of the City, Burning Grass also contains Ekwensi's didactic criticism of city life and elements of modernity. The symbolic opposition to European worldview is provided through the Fulani's antagonism for the tax-gatherers and the Bodejo, the veterinary doctor who would often accompany them. Sunsaye's dislike at Hodio's change of profession, as the latter works at his sugar mill in the town of New Chanka, comes as a criticism of the younger generation which is moving away from traditional way of life. The city is projected as a sanctuary for the lawless, murderers, and those who indulge in immoral activities. Shehu, Kantuma and the prince are obvious examples. The city is the place where one can break the traditional laws or take refuge after engaging in activities that...
mount to a breach of traditional code of conduct. In Chapter two, Hodio plans to run away with Fatimeh from Dokan Tono to a township for reasons:

Hodio spoke to her again. They would run away and live in a town where no one cared about tradition and custom. (p.8)

There are many such instances where the virtues of traditional life are held high and the urban vice is decried. But in doing so Ekwensi reveals his strong male bias. Kantuma, the urban seductress is described elaborately whereas the man who controls her - Shehu - hardly comes on to the scene. Though Ekwensi tells his readers that Shehu steals from the visitors who come to Kantuma's parlour. Similarly, Fatimeh who is probably the only character in the novel having the courage to come back to traditional lifestyle risking even a jungle life, is scantily described. But Mai Sunaye's meaningless encounters are narrated in great detail. Fatimeh suffers more because of being a woman. She is a slave and thus cannot marry a free man. Her dilemma lands her into further trouble when she runs away with Hodio and consequently, is captured by Shehu again. She is entered into a forced liaison and gives birth to the twins.
Ironically, the birth of the children absolves her of the stigma of slavery. But Ekwensi does not allow her to survive long enough in his narrative to enable her to utilize this new opportunity. She is thrown out of the arena unceremoniously as soon as Rikku's 'calf-love' for the Kanuri beauty vanishes into the thin air. Fatimeh could have been made into a successful character who risked everything in life, and her security, to come back to the trade of cattle rearing; but 'Ekwensi - the ardent lover of traditional life', is pushed behind by 'Ekwensi - the worshipper of male ego'. Fatimeh remains a slave of tradition and finally loses out to the changing whims of an immature young man.

As a contrast Emecheta's *The Bride Price* celebrates various aspects of traditional African life while offering a scathing criticism of oppressive customs and practices. After her father's death, Aku-nna marvels at the community feelings of the Ibuza people who gather from far and near to mourn the dead and offer words of solace to the bereaved children. Emecheta also describes in great detail the folk tradition of story-telling through Auntie Uzo's popularity as a story-teller among the children of Akinwunmi Street.
Again, Aku-nna's first encounter with the rural world as she travels to Ibuza with her family in the mammy wagon in Chapter five, is described subtly, highlighting the virtues of rural African societies. As the lorry passes through Agbor, the young protagonist is quick to perceive the change of atmosphere in a rural setting that's completely out of touch with "Lagos fashions":

There was something else different about the people here; they seemed more relaxed, more naturally beautiful than their relatives in Lagos. The women all had such long necks and carried their heads high, like ostriches, as if they had a special pride in themselves, and their gracefully thin legs but their whole appearance extra height. It was only the old people who could be seen to stoop. Every other person moved with such bearing that gave them a natural, untutored elegance. (pp. 60-61)

But later in the novel, Aku-nna becomes a helpless victim of the same rural traditions. She receives the news of her mother being 'inherited' by her uncle with utter shock and disbelief. When life seems to settle down at Ibuza, a big noise is made in Okonkwo household to stop Aku-nna's schooling. But the lure of a hefty bride price saves her education. With all her unwillingness, she has to entertain her male visitors inside her mother's hut who are empowered by the rural custom to molest her if they so wished. The
discovery of her attainment of puberty only adds to her misery. She is forbidden by Ibuza custom to cross the Atakpo stream while in menstruation. The feeling of impurity is injected in every menstruating girl by social institution that are controlled by men. So a girl cannot 'defile' the compound of the head of the family or the family oracle, since the tradition does not recognise menstruation as only a naturally occurring phenomenon. Social stigmas are attached to this physical process to ensures the subjection of young women.

But the cruellest face of tradition reveals itself in Aku-nya's abduction and consequent forced marriage with a deformed Okoboshi. Helen Chukwuma writes:

Emecheta presents a number of superstitions and beliefs of the African society and she develops her themes along these lines. Running through the rubric of The Bride Price and Slave Girl is the belief that if a man succeeded in cutting off a lock of a girl's hair she belonged to him for life. It was the surest way of forcing marriage on an unwilling girl.14

Thus the tradition allows a girl to be abducted and then forced to marry against her will. And cutting a lock of hair could be one of the most convenient techniques to acquire a girl, like buying a piece of land to own it.
There are other sinister practices like checking the blood-soaked cloth brought from the nuptial bed to ascertain that the girl is a virgin. A girl's own, and her family's reputation is at stake without this 'bloody' proof.

Then there is the restriction on 'oshu' families, or the family of the 'slaves'. Chike and many descendants of such slave families are shown to be well established in life, with good education, jobs and wealth - but they cannot marry the children of 'free' men, who are actually the 'slaves' of tradition. The whole length of Chike-Aku-nna affair in the novel is a brilliant portrayal of the meaningless of such longstanding traditions in the contemporary world. And her forced marriage and abduction is an instrument employed by the traditional Ibuza society to choke the voice of protest in the protagonist. Reflecting on the problem of how the patriarchal society 'traps' the young people, Ashish Nandy observes:

(...) younger children do not often have the option of breaking out of the social or educational 'traps' set for them. Their physical, emotional and socio-economic vulnerability does not give them much chance of escape and they have to play out the institutional games devised for them. In many societies, by the time they gain social and economic autonomy, it is already too late for psychological autonomy; (...) Even when oppression becomes obvious and, thus, some
subjective basis for a search for autonomy is created, (...) the society may turn on the young with some savagery to ensure that the search is not actualized in practice. 15

There are other pointers of the tyranny of tradition that essentially seeks to subjugate the female members of the society. Ma Blackie is guilty of not being able to produce 'more' sons for Ezekiel Odia, and has to take all the trouble to fulfil this social demand without which, she cannot buy her own peace of mind. In the funeral, Aku-nna is supposed to show more emotion as she is the 'female child'. She and her brother are 'orphaned' as their father is dead, even though their mother is still alive. The names of the two children provide a subtle glimpse of the dominant male bias of the Ibuza people. Aku-nna, means 'father's wealth' and Nna-nddo, means 'father is the shelter'. The parting statement of Ezekiel Odia to his two bewildered children, as he starts for the hospital, is a brilliant symbol of the male-centredness of the Ibuza society: "Always remember that you are mine (...)" (p.13)

The city in a way would have given her a little more freedom, at least that is what young Aku-nna feels when her affair with Chike is objected to by the members of Okonkwo family. Though the pitiable living conditions in the city
come alive in Emecheta's narration, the control of tradition on the lives of city dwellers is less severe. Aku-nya's desire for education, an antithesis to the traditional routine of a young Ibuza girl, is essentially a product of her urban upbringing in Lagos. In this light Emecheta's novel can be seen as a critique of the 'static' attitude inherent in the Ibuza custom that often hinders overall human advancement. K.R. Minogue argues that tradition should be a 'conversation', an interchange of voices old and new:

To say that we cannot escape from tradition is, then, simply another way of saying that we cannot be other than we are -- a statement which would indeed be entirely vacuous were it not that the illusions of practical life's constantly tempt us to think differently. (...) Tradition is necessarily a bundle of diverse elements; if it were not, it would be static. It develops as these elements react to new situations and interact with each other.\textsuperscript{16}

Samuel Coleman argues in a similar vein that the insistence on the maintenance of traditional feudal relationship is used as a tool to safeguard material advantages:

Almost all social roles that are regulated by tradition may express or imply power and status relationships; changes will often entail
decrements and increments of power and status. Has a tradition become something else if, when questioned and resented, it is then retained by force? Is it still a tradition if maintained by persuasion? 17

Emecheta raises these questions in her novel through the sufferings of the women characters, that she so emotionally captures. Aku-nna's resistance to the dictates of tradition is actually a symbolic appeal to induce reason and scientific inquiry into age-old customs conceived in a different socio-economic time-scape. She cuts her hair short so that no man would be able to cut a lock of her hair and force her to marry him. Her looking forward to marrying an educated, established and respectable individual like Chike, compels her to hide her first menstruation, something which she herself could be so openly proud of. But she willingly hides her puberty to resist the traditional onslaught of young Ibuza suitors, none of whom she approves as her future husband. Her taking European medicines and foodstuff is also a symbolic intervention of scientific reason in the realm of undesirable and obsolete traditions that would only enhance her suffering. Her final elopement with Chike is the culmination of her revolt against those oppressive social customs that seek to bind her to a life she could never dream of - a life of inferior status and
domination. Emecheta's positive outlook thus glorifies the protagonist even in her 'socially' objectionable behaviour.
Notes and References


4. Cyprian Ekwensi, Burning Grass [rpt. 1971, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1962], pp.1-2. All subsequent quotations from this novel used by me in this chapter are from this edition. They are marked with their respective page numbers given within bracket at the end of each quote.

5. E. Obiechina, op. cit., p.147.

6. Buchi Emecheta, The Joys of Motherhood, [London: Allison & Busley, 1976], p.8. All subsequent quotes from the novel used by me in this chapter are from this edition, with their page numbers mentioned within brackets at the end of each quotation.


