THE BRIDE PRICE

The Bride Price is the first bonafide novel of Buchi Emecheta. She considers this work as her “brain child”. In this novel, she puts to ironic use the African tradition of the groom having to pay a prearranged sum to the bride’s parents or close kin in order to be eligible to marry the girl. This novel started her off as a writer.

The central focus of Emecheta’s works is women and the problems confronting them. Woman is the underdog, the pariah of society. She is discriminated against socially, politically, ethically, economically and in every way in the predominantly patriarchal social set up, be it in the East or the West. A Christian woman fares no better than her non-Christiant counterpart. Emecheta views the common lot of women through the perspective of the ‘woman’ she knows best, the woman from Africa. She has suffered and her ancestors suffered the same lot. She could, therefore, speak out with understanding, with compassion and with authority on woman and what it means to a woman, to be always treated as a second class citizen, a disposable commodity, an article of merchandise or even worse.

A Nigerian Igbo African immigrant to the West, settled in London, unconscionably ditched by a callous husband is burdened with the onerous responsibility of bringing up five children, struggling to keep her head above water, she tenaciously pursues her preferred path of independence, self-hood and autonomy. Emecheta articulates the sufferings of woman, of all women. In an unequivocal statement to an interviewer, Emecheta has stated that she writes “about Africa for the
western world and at the same time Africa for Africans." This is most evident in her The Bride Price, her first full-fledged novel. In the same interview she has further stated:

When I write, I look for a problem in a certain society and I write about that problem strictly from a woman's point of view. 

The society that Emecheta writes about in The Bride Price is Ibuza, an Igbo speaking community of Bendel state in Nigeria, which happens to be Emecheta's home. The problem she presents is that of a tortured and dehumanized woman. Another major problem is the bride price, which is a custom of the Igbos.

Bride price is the sum a Nigerian male has to pay to buy a girl from her parents. Superstition holds that if the bride price was not paid, the bride would not survive the birth of her first child. This ancient custom is dexterously used by Emecheta in the The Bride Price. This is the title of Adah's aborted novel mentioned in Second Class Citizen. In fact, Adah plans this novel as a comedy ending on a happy note of reconciliation between her and her husband but the actual novel as rewritten by Emecheta has turned out to be a tragic story.

After her father's death in Lagos the thirteen-year-old girl Aku-nna returns to live in his family village Ibuza, to be inherited by her father's brother, an ambitious would-be chief, who later inherits her mother too and makes her pregnant. Aku-nna

2. ibid. p. 131.
was followed by her brother Nna-nando and mother Ma Blackie to this village. She is allowed to continue her schooling only in the belief that it would increase her bride price for the benefit of her avaricious uncle. She falls in love with her teacher, Chike Ofulue, who is an ‘Osu’, but their marriage is forbidden by the ancient tribal taboo since his family is descended from slaves. After Aku-nna is kidnapped by the son of a leading Ibuza family, her own family is obliged, according to ancient custom, to agree to her marriage with her abductor. Chike, her lover, dramatically rescues her from her abductors before the marriage is formalized and they elope to another village where they both find jobs and a comfortable home. Their union not only defies the taboo against inter-marriages of ‘free’ and ‘slave’ families, but it also challenges an ancient belief that any woman who marries against the will and wishes of her family and whose bride price remains unpaid would die in childbirth. Chikes’ family does its best to make amends by offering the customary bride price. Bent on vengeance and spiteful, Aku-nna’s uncle, Okonkwo refuses to accept the match or the bride price. Superstitious dread takes hold of Aku-nna. The ancient curse seems to hold sway. Aku-nna dies in child birth.

One of the major customs in the Igbo tradition is bride price. Emecheta has used it in The Bride Price. Bride wealth and polygamy are the key factors for understanding the dynamics of the Igbo tradition. High bride wealth in the form of money and cattle was given to the bride’s people, and in exchange, the woman’s sexual and reproductive powers were surrendered to the man and his lineage. Divorce was rare but separations were not uncommon. A widow was inherited by the brother of her husband. Bride wealth varied with economic circumstances, rising in times of
prosperity and falling in times of drought, famine and cattle epidemics. It also depended upon the economic status of the groom and his people. People believed that the custom of giving bride wealth was the cornerstone of marriage, which, if tampered with, would weaken the whole institution. Even in cases where the man eloped with a girl, the bride wealth was eventually paid through the insistence of the woman. Flora Nwapa's 'Efuru' stands as a good example of this. A girl of stern resolve, she walks up to her lover's hut and becomes his wife instead of waiting for Adizua to call on her father to negotiate the marriage proposal and pay the customary bride-price. Here Efuru's love for Adizua gives her that defiant courage to take up her stand against the native customs. In her view bride-price is only of secondary importance and living with the man of her choice is of primary importance. She is conscious of having put her father and kinsmen to some kind of social discomfiture and loss of prestige. She takes steps to restore the family's slighted honour. She earns and saves money and sets in motion the due processes of matrimonial negotiations and payment of the customary bride-price. Later Adizua's men visit Efuru's father, pay the bride-price and obtain his approval for the marriage, albeit post facto.

Chinua Achebe dwells upon this custom of bride-price in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in a very effective way. It is on the occasion of Obierika's daughter's marriage, where we find the detailed description of this custom.

It was only after the pot had been emptied that the suitor's father cleared his voice and announced the object of their visit. Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them. 'They are thirty?' he asked. Obierika nodded in agreement. 'We are at last getting some where,' Ukegbu said, and then turning to his brother
and his son he said. 'Let us go out and whisper together'. The three rose and went outside. When they returned, Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted them; instead of thirty, there were now only fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said: ‘We had not thought to go below thirty’. But as the dog said, ‘If I fall down for you and you fall down for me it is play. Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again’. He then added ten sticks to the fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu.3

In this way, Akueke’s bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries.

Later in their conversation, we find some other interesting things, when they comment sarcastically on other tribes about this custom. Talking about Abame and Animta people Obierika says:

All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market. ‘That is very bad’, said Obierika’s eldest brother. But what is good in one place is bad in another place. In Urumunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom, because it always leads to a quarrel.4

Many popular writers like Ekwensi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mongo Beti and Nuruddin Farah have clinically analysed this custom in their works and conclusively declared that this custom is a ruthless and calculated exploitation on the part of the girl’s people.

4. ibid. p.67.
A girl is valued only for her bride price. An African girl is meant to be married and to fulfill her social obligation in becoming a mother of a number of children preferably a number of bouncing baby boys, but tradition forbids her from taking the first steps in choosing a husband all on her own without the involvement of her immediate family and kith and kin. To dare to defy this tribal norm is to invite the displeasure if not the wrath of the entire community.

The Bride Price explores the enslavement of women by traditional society and its rules and taboos. These customs and mores are actually institutionalized forms of the oppressive male chauvinism. The inheritance of widows by their brothers-in-law, the custom that a man may make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her or cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendent of slaves, and numerous other inhibiting manifestations of traditional culture in The Bride Price are all determined and enforced by men. The story of The Bride Price is a dramatization of the relationship between the collective traditions of the communal will and Aku-nna’s own strength of will. This is the central theme on which Emecheta focuses her attention. It is blunt and to some extent satirical in its depiction of a traditional society in Africa, especially in the Ibuza community. Emecheta uses the fortunes of the young Aku-nna to castigate traditions and to point to the shortcomings of forced marriages and their devastating consequences on adolescent girls.

Emecheta has an eye for isolating and dramatizing the significant details of the village life, which contributes directly to the progress of her tale. The Ibuza locale exercises its unobtrusive influence on the people that inhabit the village and
shapes and guides their destinies. The urban scene and rural setting of Emecheta’s novels are significant. She offers graphic and vivid description of the life of the Urban people in the beginning of the novel and of the rural folk later — the work on the farms, the constant gossip, the rituals connected with funerals and fertility, the visits of mourners who come in throngs to sympathize with and console the bereaved, the rural pastimes of song, dance, moonlight plays and tale telling, the social visits these people undertake to share their joys and sorrows, their strict adherence to a code of conduct that is enjoined — for example, the way the young greet the elders etc. As in the case of Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa, Emecheta’s portrayal of village life is always done through events happening to particular individuals and not in general terms.

In the Urban World of Lagos, we find the Ibos sharing their joys and sorrows with others. What happens to an individual is always talked about. As individuals, they may have their own personal predilections and prejudices but in times of crisis and need, the community acts as one. What is evidenced is a close-knit tribal community. When Aku-nna’s father goes to the hospital for a checkup, the other tenants volunteer to look after the girl and her brother. Aku-nna says:

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. 5

Generally, this type of conduct is never treated as unwanted interference in other people's affairs or as an intrusion into personal matters. In the village world, especially in an Ibuza village, the elders are revered and due respect is paid and when necessary even demanded. Persons not observing the etiquette prescribed by custom invariably are severely admonished. If a young girl is over eager and asks more questions, she would be branded a pert and her conduct is severely reprimanded as it is considered bad manners. Aku-nna says:

She wanted to ask why Auntie Uzo was not holding her baby, why her eyes were red, why she had been so keen that Aku-nna make the evening meal. Aku-nna was prevented from asking, because in her culture it would have been bad manners, and if so many questions had come from a young girl like herself it would have been considered even worse than bad manners.\(^6\)

It is strictly enforced by one and all and whenever there is a deficiency it is immediately corrected.

The rich repertory of folk tales and proverbs constitutes one of the primal sources of African literature. The beast story and the bush tale play a very significant role in providing a primitive symbolism, which establishes the supremacy and ultimate triumph of good over evil. Their purpose is to thrill, amuse and instruct the young in the adventure and mystery of growth, mutation and self-differentiation. The folk tales are a part of education, teaching as they do the religious rituals, and the social norms and also providing a psychological relaxation from the restrictive practices of

the African society. They are patently didactic and aim at inculcating in the young a sense of pride in being an Igbo. The primary purpose of these folk tales is to develop a social awareness in the younger generation; and their technical excellence as an artistic aim is only secondary. A good many of these tales are woven into the very fabric of the African novel of the modern times. Generally, an elderly person tells these wise stories to men, women and children who sit in a circle, tongue-tied, waiting in breathless suspense, till the end of the tale, which is always instructive. Emecheta has used this technique in this novel. She explains:

Aku-nna liked listening to Auntie Uzo's stories, for she was a born storyteller. Aku-nna, like most of her friends, had been born in Lagos, but her parents and relatives were fond of telling nostalgic stories about their town Ibuza. Most of the stories were like fairytales but with the difference that nearly all used the typical African call-and-response songs. The storyteller would call and all the listeners would respond. Auntie Uzo was particularly gifted in the art of these songs. Sometimes her voice would rise, clean and clear, singing like the sound of a thousand tiny bells. And when the story was a sad one, her call would be low, still clear but sounding like an angry stream rushing down a fall. This type of song was often so moving that tears would well up in the eyes of her audience. Invariably Uzo would ask the listeners to make rhythmic heavy groans, in imitation of the sounds produced by the master drummers in the remote villages around Ibuza — and the listeners would be awestruck to silence, their terrified minds imagining many things.  

These stories were so intensely charged with philosophical lessons about one thing or another that Aku-nna and her friends were able to learn a good deal from them. Igbo society and its customs are rendered with familiarity and a certain clearly
discernible sense of inwardness by Emecheta. Greeting the elders with due reverence, offering hospitality to visitors, the ceremonial breaking of kola nut, participation in songs and dances, all these minutiae of custom and usage present an ethos which is distinctively communal and tradition-directed. Igbos give importance to traditional marriage customs. Titles are given and the recipients enjoy them by celebrating their new-won status and prestige. This custom of title taking was used by Emecheta effectively. Aku-nna’s uncle, her father’s brother, is a vicious man. He wants to take a bigger title for which he greedily expects a big windfall bride-price for an educated girl like Aku-nna. He is a male chauvinist. He says to his sons:

"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; in times past, a slave would have been killed to mark the lavish celebrations. 8

A girl then is but a dispensable piece of property that men could barter away to satisfy their personal ambitions and self-aggrandisement. The girl, as an individual, sentient being with a will of her own, does not count; she is valued only for the bride price she could fetch.

The rituals are landmarks in African etiquette and they comprise a way of life in which ritual restores the bonds that tie the individuals both to nature and society.

8. ibid. p.75.
The force of tradition is operative in the way the birth of a girl is viewed in the family. It reminds us of Adah’s statement in *The Second Class Citizen* that “she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family and to her tribe”. Even NnuEgo of *The Joys of Motherhood* cries when the twin girls are born. Aku-nna’s predicament is similar. In Emecheta’s words,

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 little girl for a daughter.

African fiction reflects how a girl is unwelcome in the family and explores the reasons behind the traditional view. But the only solace and advantage to the fathers is the bride price the girl would fetch. Aku-nna’s father named her as Aku-nna literally meaning “father’s wealth”. He thinks that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. The woman who knew that as a female child she was an unwanted creature would try to efface herself or accept a shadowy existence or face suffering stoically. Ideas and taboos instilled in her mind from childhood resulted in the woman’s acceptance of an inferior position.

Families exert a great deal of pressure upon young people in order to uphold traditional taboos, customs and privileges in relation to marriage. Families and the elders have considerable say as to whom their young might marry. These adults recite proverbs and stories to the young that warn them of the disasters that would ensue if

they break the long-established customs and procedures that are designed to govern behaviour. The Bride Price could itself be used as a story that warns young people of what happens to disobedient girls, if they go against the wishes of their elders. Emecheta closes the novel in her characteristically ironic fashion:

Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-enna's death was told her story to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children’s children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernisation, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, any body’s guess.  

This novel holds up, as it were, a mirror to image the numerous indigenous African customs and superstitions, which oppress and degrade the female and the horrendous consequences thereof. People adhere to the belief that a female is worthless to a family except for the bride price she would fetch to it. A woman, even as a mother, could never be the head of a family. She is only a woman. Custom insists upon the dissolution of a family when a father dies, because a family is simply not a family without the male in it. Aku-enna consoles her brother Nna-nado:

It is not that we have no father any more; we have no parents any more. Did not our father rightly call you Nna-nndo, meaning “Father is the shelter”? So not only have we lost a father, we have lost our life, our shelter.  

This belief enhances male privilege for the mother is inherited by her husband’s brother without any regard for how his wife or wives may feel about that. A widowed

10. ibid. p.168.
11. ibid. p.28.
woman was not allowed to live alone. Emecheta says:

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 a shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much.¹²

The daughter may be dispensed with by making her a servant in a relative’s home as it happens in The Slave Girl. Aku-nna’s aunt Uzo tells her that the death of her father makes her “an orphan”. Her mother does not count. Customs dictate that the uncle’s family should marry off Aku-nna quickly to get enough money to pay her brother Nna-nndo’s school fees.

Aku-nna has to go through the painful process of growth to learn about her culture’s restrictive institutions and lopsided values. The appropriate rituals initiate her into the significance of life and death for the individual and for the community’s particular traditions. Like her young brother Nna-nndo she has no real awareness of death until her father dies, and their involvement in the ceremonies of burial and mourning shock her into the acceptance of death as an inescapable part of life itself. In a similar vein, the fertility dances for which her age group prepares coincide with the arrival of her own menstrual cycle to impress upon her those physical and emotional patterns of individual growth which are integrated with universal cycles of life, death and birth. Her rapid maturity is measured by her growing awareness of those points at which her culture’s traditions determine the fate of women in her society. Thus, the ceremonies of burial and mourning not only mark her father’s death as such, but they

¹² ibid. p.28.
are also a prelude to the established custom of transferring the widow and her children to the care of her uncle, her father's brother, in exercise of his right of inheritance. It is a practice which emerges in the novel as one of several symptoms of the woman's status as a possession rather than a person. The arrival of her menstrual cycle not only signals Aku-nna's physical maturity into womanhood, it also coincides with the growing rebelliousness with which she views the significance of a woman's physical maturity in her culture. She is now ripe for marriage to anyone whom her uncle chooses for his mercenary advantage. Aku-nna is always reminded of the customs of the Ibuza, which have a strong influence on the people. Custom tells Aku-nna she is 'unclean' when menstruating. She thinks:

And when a woman was unclean she must not go to the stream, she must not enter a household where the man of the family has either the 'Eze' or 'Alo' title — her uncle Okonkwo had the latter; if she went into such a house, the head of the family would die and the oracle would discover who the culprit was. She might not be killed in broad daylight, but Ibuza people had ways, psychological measures, to eliminate those who committed the abominable 'alu'. 13

And this same custom allows boys to "play at squeezing a girl's breasts until they hurt .... so long as it was done inside the hut where an adult was near."14 Custom allows an Ibuzan make a girl his by sneaking up and cutting her hair. Hence, many girls cropped their hair very close; those who wanted long hair wore a headscarf most of the time." 15 When Aku-nna was kidnapped by Okoboshi to prevent her marriage to Chike, she must give herself to him sexually. Aku-nna was told by

Okoboshi's sister that

13. ibid. p.93.
14. ibid. p.120.
15. ibid. p.103.
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 and also because Okoboshi had a bad foot. 16

When Aku-nna succeeds in escaping from Okoboshi and runs off with Chike, her stepfather Okonkwo feels that he had been degraded, and retaliates, vicariously, by taking it on her mother exposing his backside to her following another Ibuza custom.

In Ibuza, if a man divorced or no longer wanted his wife, he would expose his backside to her in public; and Okonkwo did just that .... 17

A woman is helpless. Aku-nna’s mother, Ma Blackie is discarded and is utterly bereft of power to make a move to help her daughter. A woman in Ibuza society is not allowed even to help her own children. Lloyd Brown says:

In keeping with Emecheta’s pattern of protest by analogy, the novel invites parallels between the situation of the Ibo women and the traditional patterns of discrimination against those individuals whose ancestors served as slaves in Ibo house holds. 18

When Aku-nna marries Chike, the descendent of slaves, Emecheta’s narrative analogy between women and slaves is underscored by the sexual union. Both groups are denied full equality with the males of “free” families and both are subjected to restrictive taboos. As a result, Aku-nna’s marriage is not only the symbolic celebration of her physical growth but it is the ceremonial climax of her rebellion against

17. ibid. p.155.
entrenched sexual roles and other social customs which she perceives as limiting and demeaning.

The nature of Aku-nna's development and the implications of her death reflect the novelist's frankness about the ambiguities and contradictions of her rebel protagonist. Aku-nna does indeed die in childbirth, unable to survive her pregnancy after years of malnutrition, but her people believe that she had died because her bride price was not paid due to her disobedience. No one criticizes her stepfather Okonkwo for his stubborn refusal to accept the bride price or for his rituals to invoke her death as punishment for her rebellion. People in the community condemn her and not Okonkwo, because he is conforming to customs and she is a rebel.

A unique feature of The Bride Price is that it is a romantic love story in the 'Romeo and Juliet' pattern of star-crossed lovers. This type of romantic love is a rare thing in African fiction and it demands a larger canvas to portray. However, Emecheta forsakes this larger context and reduces her fictional world to Aku-nna and Chike, their families, and their village effectively, and at the same time, she exposes the crushing force of a traditional society that extends far beyond the limits of Ibuza. A similar theme was taken by Achebe in No Longer at Ease where the heroine Clara is an Osu. However, it was a tragedy. Though educated and modern in his thinking Obi fails to oppose his parents. As a result, he loses Clara and becomes a failure in his life. He appears to us as a lost child rather than as a tragic figure. The past and the present are fated to do battle in Obi's life. He finds that the girl he wanted to marry is an Osu. The 'Osu' were at some time in the past religious slaves dedicated to the
service of God. They were outcasts and were not allowed to marry the freeborn Ibo, who regarded them as 'holy and horrifying.' The caste has been abolished now, but the emotional antagonism towards the Osu cannot be obliterated so quickly. In No Langer at Ease, the fact that Clara like Chike in The Bride Price, is a well-educated girl and a nurse makes no difference. Obi knows he can expect nothing but opposition from his parents. Obi's father is shocked and grieved at the thought of his son marrying Clara, even though he knows that the concept of Osu goes against Christianity and all he has spent his life for. Obi's mother tells her son quite plainly that she would kill herself if he marries an Osu girl. Aku-nna's mother Ma Blacke curses her daughter for her friendship with an Osu. She laments,

Had they ever seen a girl like this daughter of hers who was wanted by so many good families but who preferred to choose a common ....\(^9\)

It is interesting to note that Chike's grandmother was a princess, who was captured from Ubulu-Ukwu by warriors. She was very beautiful and her master Obi Ofulue had decided not to sell her off but to buy a man slave to keep her company. Later she had four sons and two daughters who were well educated under the guidance of the missionaries. Chike was handsome and well educated too. The question of slave versus freeborn gets a rather special twist in this novel as Aku-nna falls in love with her teacher Chike who is an Osu. Like other categories of outcasts, the descendants from slaves tended to rise to important positions in public life more frequently and quickly than the freeborn during the colonial administration. They

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stood to gain through the modern education introduced by the Whites and through untraditional careers more than their highborn African brothers.

For the freeborn, to have normal everyday relations with the descendants of slaves was quite usual and acceptable. But when it came to vital matters like marriage, owning land, and religious offices, there was an unbridgeable gap between the two groups in the traditional society. So, when Chike and Aku-nna elope, it is an open defiance of Ibo marriage traditions and it is regarded as an abomination. This is so even though Aku-nna was abducted in the first place by members of the family of one of her suitors, whom she was determined she would never accept as a husband. It is a form of marriage in which the bride is kidnapped or physically over powered by the bridegroom in order to make her yield to his passion. This type of marriage is accepted in the African society where the husband used to get a bride by paying a reasonable price for her. But Aku-nna’s abductor Okoboshi kidnapped her vengefully. Chike rescued her from the unwanted match after the two families involved had agreed on the bride price. It is like a business deal. The act of defiance is ‘tempting providence’ as the last chapter of the novel is called. Later they were married in a mode where love alone mattered. But the heroine Aku-nna dies in childbirth. Tradition’s hold on the tribal African’s psyche is supreme. One who breaks it pays the penalty, often times with one’s own life. Aku-nna’s death is in several ways a contrast to Okonkwo’s death in Achebe’s novel Things Fall Apart. Rolf Solberg says:
His downfall is primarily a consequence of flaws in his own nature — his inordinate pride and his fear of being thought weak and effeminate. Aku-nna is killed by forces entirely outside her control, and not because of inherent moral shortcomings. And whereas Okonkwo is the traditional male hero who dies, in a sense, in defence of the old way of life. Aku-nna is a feeble woman defying tradition.20

Aku-nna is educated enough to know that the traditional practices of witch-craft and voodoo are ineffective and can not influence her fate. She is so enfeebled in mind as to be obsessed by the thought that she might suffer the ill effects of her uncle’s wicked recourse to witchery. She is a victim of her weak mind. Because she often hears voices in the air and feels that her uncle is calling her back. She tells her father-in-law Ofulue in agony:

I hope I shall see you again, Father. You see, I know my uncle does not want ever to accept the bride price. He calls me back in the wind, when I am alone. But I shall never answer. I don’t want to die, Father.21

After reading the novel The Bride Price one feels less prepared for the tragic outcome than one does for Okonkwo’s death in Achebe’s novel, despite the anticipations accumulating especially in the last chapter of The Bride Price. But the author comments on the psychological hold that the traditional taboos have on the young girls. She says, “Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody’s guess.”22

We have seen before that Emecheta expresses herself ambiguously when it comes to the question of traditional values. In Second Class Citizen Adah gets away

22. ibid. p.168.
with her revolt against tradition. Aku-nna refuses to be a slave to tradition in her love life. When her mother tells her that Chike can be no match for her, she turns the whole matter over in her mind. She laments:

Oh, what kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and make so many people unhappy? 

And she is determined to kill herself rather than marry and sleep with Okoboshi whose relatives had kidnapped her. But by obeying her heart and choosing as her partner the slave Chike she takes on more than she could cope with. She is ill-equipped to stand up to such strain and like the fish caught in the net she is ‘trapped fast’, once Ibuza has made up its collective mind.

In a larger context, one could see Aku-nna’s death as one of redemption --- redeeming the woman’s lot. Before her death, Chike promises her that the baby girl would be called Joy. Aku-nna is herself unable to enjoy her love union, the modern marriage, beyond the brief spell of one pregnancy. But the fruit of her married bliss, Joy, points forward to the new order. In an interview with Rolf Salberg Emecheta expressed her view of the man-woman relationship as well as reflections on the general development on the West African scene. Her traditionalist leanings come out very clearly where she comments on the ending of The Bride Price:

...... you know towards the end of that book Aku-nna died because I felt that she went against her parents - you know that part of tradition ....The traditional values have been tried and approved. There are certain parts of you that are so tied to them that if you don’t adhere to traditions, you just die ... What I am really saying is that what is good in the old

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23. ibid. p.122.
values - let us keep it. I wish not to look down on every thing we have as bad or backward just because it is not modern. And community life for example, I think we should keep that, - you know, just like that. 24

The Bride Price is singular among Emecheta's novels for several reasons. Most noticeably, the setting takes place entirely within a traditional society. Chike is the only really sympathetic and attractive male - an exception to the rule - in Emecheta's fiction. Eustace Palmer has pointed out:

Her male characters tend to fall into one of three classes, all of which wield power over women: authoritarian patriarchs, libertines, and sadistic villains. 25

Chike is cast in the mould of a man who is not merely different from others but is superior to all these men; but he belongs to the despised Osu, the descendants of slaves. Chike, in fact, has a doubly significant status vis-à-vis Aku-nna; not only is he from a slave family, he is also her school teacher. He is intimately involved in her education and thus to some extent responsible for her growth as a student and her successful completion of her secondary school examinations, which in turn enables her to become a teacher in her own right. Chike, in encouraging and supporting Aku-nna's education, actually encourages and supports her development as an independent, self-determining human being. Thus after they elope and move to Ugheli they come close to establishing a true marriage of equality as both work outside their home and share domestic chores within it. This highly unusual marriage also owes its mutuality

or equality to Chike’s revealed background. Chike’s status as a slave serves to ‘feminize’ him, by making him sensitive to the oppression and exploitation of women. He too is of an inferior class, and thus he is able to love and live with Aku-nna on a plane of equality and mutual respect. The great irony of their union is that Aku-nna and Chike have their traditional society to thank for its reciprocity. Because it has oppressed them both they are able to enjoy the perfect oneness and happiness together at least for some time. Despite her education and bravery in defying her family and village, and despite the sustaining power of her love for Chike, Aku-nna is ultimately destroyed by traditional society. Her tragic fate is appropriated by the very power she sought to overcome, and is perverted into a threatening exemplary tale to coerce and intimidate women into obedience to traditional society and the men who rule it.

Aku-nna’s rebellion is real enough but the traditions against which she rebels persist to the end of the novel. If both the name and actual birth of her daughter Joy celebrate the vitality and creative self-consciousness that are inherent in Aku-nna’s rebellion, then her death marks the extent to which that rebellion is incomplete. The traditions against which she rebels are too strongly entrenched in her society and their attendant sanctions are still too dominant in her own psyche, and she cannot be completely emancipated from and be immune to them. Her death is itself a demonstration of the degree to which her will is still dominated despite her conscious acts of revolt.

In this, her first try at creative fiction in the novel format, Emecheta has given us an authentic picture of the old Ibo culture lingering in the midst of tradition and
westernization and also admittedly of man’s inhumanity to woman in modern Africa. Much information is given on the anthropological background. The contrast of the city and the village is here as well as the persistence of the old ideas in the midst of modernization. Aku-nna’s fate and the effectiveness of the curse are not altogether what they seem on the surface, particularly in view of Emecheta’s frank and unambiguously stated contempt for all religious or native superstitions. In the woman’s experience fate is the collective will of the community and her role is that prescribed by the community. The New Yorker, a journal has commented that

Emecheta manages to convey all the lushness, poverty, superstition and casual cruelty of a still-exotic culture while keeping her tale as sharp as a folk ballad.  

The Bride Price is a kind of anachronism, a throwback to African novels written a generation ago. It is praised in the Library Journal as “a fast moving story with characters the readers can care about.”

Buchi Emecheta has successfully revealed the less positive and beneficent face of tenacity of Ibo traditions in her novel. The heroine Aku-nna dies at the end of the novel giving birth to a daughter who seems to represent the new, free female self that Aku-nna has aspired to be. There is no escape, no sheltering environment in which the union of Aku-nna and Chike can subsist. This novel is singular among Emecheta’s other novels because of its richness in characters, plot, structure, style and various other things.

27. ibid. ‘the blurb’.