



Intricate Web Of African Culture, Myths And Rituals In Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price

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Abstract

Rituals and Myths primarily contribute to the progress of the story or plot. They are the dynamic forces of the human being. Myths deal with historical events, supernatural elements, and heroic deeds and deeply embodies teaching moral lessons and values, belief about god and the creation of human beings, and the existing form of culture. Myths predominantly focus on the unexplainable part of the world, the view of the people and the customs of an ideal society. Myths constitute cultural heritage. They have become a foundation for a lot of religious practices. Myths include rituals focused on respecting ancestors. Rituals are the upholders and preservers of our culture and tradition. Buchi Emecheta uses myths and rituals to focus on Africa's traditional world and show us a glance at the metaphysical truth that holds onto them. She depicts myths and rituals focusing on a feministic point of view by portraying how the cultural practices subordinated women in traditional Igbo societies and the Post Colonial Nigeria. Myths and Rituals are like an art. Both are reparations for the deficiency of life and are the archives of African culture and tradition.

Keywords: Ritual, Myth, Custom, Cultural practice, Tradition, Subordinated Women.

1. Introduction

Myths and Rituals act as a bridge between the African people, their culture and tradition. Buchi Emecheta is a most successful Nigerian Writer. Her novel *The Bride Price* (1976) illustrates many aspects of Nigerian society, such as culture and rituals, polygamy marriage practices, female suppression, oppression, male chauvinism, sexism, social status and superstitious belief. Buchi Emecheta is the one who uses utter plain, engaging and straightforward style to portray the complicated African myths and rituals. Emecheta copiously uses myths and rituals in novels like *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Slave Girl*, and her play *A Kind of Marriage*. This article about Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* thoroughly examines how she profusely uses myths and rituals in this novel and the importance of myths and rituals as an archetype of literature.

2. Review of Literature

Many works have been published on Buchi Emecheta and her contributions to literature. I chose only a few of them related to *The Bride Price*. Richa Jha's article titled *Marriage and Myth* on Buchi Emecheta's "*The Bride Price*" discusses the clash of cultures. She indicates how marriage and myth get tied together in this novel. She exhibits the protagonist Aku-nna as a medium through whom she ensnares the African culture, myth and marriage, which affects her psychologically. In S. Suchithra's work on the *Myths and Rituals in Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price*, she applies the concept of African myths and rituals as an effective medium. She talks about Rituals and Myths as negligence of women through cultural dominance. She points out Emecheta's rash attack on traditional Africa and indicates how women are subjected to mental, emotional, psychological and physical suffering. In their work titled *Female Militancy and Cultural Orthodoxy*, A.A. Khan & Sukanya Ghosh talk about how *Buchi Emecheta* concentrates upon the African origin, social structure, religious and social life of outward static tribal societies, deep-rooted beliefs and values of the Igbo society. The work mentioned above analyzes variegated aspects of Emecheta's novels. M. Farida Begum's book *Feminism in West African Novel* critically examines the leading West African novelists such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ato Aidoo and others. This book deals with feminism and looks at everything from a feminist point of view. It talks about women's liberation from all kinds of internal, external, psychological, socio-economic and political tortures and atrocities, philosophical discriminations and inequalities based on race, class and culture, that is eventually viewed not as a simple reform but as a revolution. Rose Ure Mezu's article *Buchi Emecheta's "The Bride Price" and "The Slave Girl": A Schizoanalytic Perspective* talks about Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's anti-oedipal theory of Schizoanalysis, that precisely paints the dominant symbols used in the culture. In Emecheta's cosmology, Oedipus acts as a metaphor representing the belongings of cultural myths and superstitions. While the rebellious non-conformists are struggling with sentimental and socio-philosophical problems, they are also trapped within a system of alienation that ends up in neurotics. My attempt at analyzing the intricate web of African culture, myths and rituals in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* demonstrates how the woman protagonist of the novel, Aku-nna, is entrapped into the African culture, myths and tradition. This novel depicts the psychological turmoil that Aku-nna undergoes resulting in her death. According to this myth, the novel routes its way to the terrible state of African custom, where traditions are valued more than human life. The novel depicts the psychological hold that myth has on the minds of African people and the consequent adherence to the old ways based upon tradition.

The Bride Price paints the socio-cultural practices experienced by a young black woman Aku-nna. The novel depicts the growing up of a thirteen-year-old young Igbo girl named Aku-nna. The author uses this novel as a tool to bring forth the varied ritualistic side of Africa.

The novel, *The Bride Price*, begins with the protagonist Aku-nna and her brother Nna-nndo. They live in Lagos along with her father Ezekiel Odia. In Igbo language, Aku-nna means 'father's wealth'. Per their custom, every father dreams of demanding a reasonable bride price while giving away their daughter in marriage. Similarly, Aku-nna's father wants her to marry a wealthy person. This is because it is an ample opportunity for Aku-nna's father to get a ransom as the bride price. She is an educated girl. That is why Aku-nna is a special one to her father. Fate plays a more vital game that very soon Aku-nna's happiness disappears as things turn topsy-turvy. Once Ezekiel Odia hurts his leg, he plans to get treated at a hospital. Unfortunately, he does not return home, Aku-nna becomes worried and is consoled by her family members. The sad news is what they hear. Aku-nna and Nna-nndo are shell-shocked by the sudden demise of their father. Ma Blackie is a mother of two children. She goes to Ibuza for treatment to reconsider her fertility. After she hears the news of her husband's sudden demise, she returns to Lagos to bring her children back to Ibuza because "A family without a father / husband is like a body without head". As per the African culture, a widow and her children should be inherited by her brother-in-law. Since it is a custom Ma Blackie is inherited by Okonkwo Odia as his fourth wife.

Aku-nna's beauty attracts the young men in Ibuza, especially the village school teacher Chike, a descendant slave. Okonkwo is such a greedy person. He allows Aku-nna to continue her education because his greed-filled heart expects more bride price for an educated girl. Okonkwo wants to be an Obi and receive the revered Eze title, so he should offer a significant and lavish sacrifice to the Gods. That is why Okonkwo expects more bride price.

In the meantime, Okonkwo arranges for Aku-nna's Marriage. The family members chose Okoboshi. He is ready to offer a hefty bride price for Aku-nna, but she does not wish to marry him. Forcefully, Aku-nna is married to Okoboshi, who is not only a tepid character but also a limp. The forceful marriage happens because Okoboshi kidnaps her and cuts her locks. According to their custom, if any man cuts a woman's locks, he becomes her husband. After marriage, she lies to Okoboshi that she is not a virgin. Okoboshi becomes furious on knowing this that he beats her black and blue and treats her as his slave, besides being rude to her. The next day Aku-nna elopes with Chike. Aku-nna brings a huge shame to her family. All the members, on learning this, become mentally shattered. Chike is ready to pay the traditional bride price to Okonkwo for Aku-nna. Soon she delivers a child and names it 'Joy'. Ironically that joy was once practically denied to Aku-nna, which she brings for herself but later vanishes. Thus the novel portrays Aku-nna's entrapment in the complicated web of African culture, rituals and myths.

As Buchi Emecheta belongs to the Igbo clan, she sketches her novel with Igbo myths and rituals. Ma Blackie is the wife of Ezekiel Odia and the mother of two children. She reconsiders her fertility after having two children. As per their custom, a woman with more children gets to be respected by the community and is only considered a true mother. So she goes to Ibuza to get a consultation with its native doctors. At the same time, she joins the Cherubin and seraphim sect, in which people frantically blather their requiem for not getting any good results. Frustrated, she decides to go to her Ibuza town to pacify their Oboshi River Goddess by giving her some babies because "It is the right of all Ibuza's sons and daughters to have themselves cleansed by the river whenever they find themselves in difficulties in distant places of work" (46).

As reparation for her longing to have more children and as a part of the ritual, every morning, she has to meet the medicine man in Ibuza - without washing her face, without eating anything, without talking to anyone. The only action she is supposed to do is to walk rapidly and swallow the fermented roots mixture, besides washing her face with it. Then she should enter the hut to give a special greeting, 'Igwe' which means 'the heaven'. After she gets ready to return home, he would reply, 'Amu-apa', which means 'she who rocks the baby'. Such rituals enrich and endow the confidence level of an individual and act as a psychological therapy. People blindly believe these as they do not mind the result of performing a ritual - whether true or false or good or evil. Here in Ma Blackie's case, this ritual proves to be accurate, as she carries the child of Okonkwo in the middle of the novel.

According to the African context and customs, funeral ceremonies are considered essential. The Native people believe that only the funeral ceremonies would make the soul immortal, only after which it can reach heaven. Mourning also takes a pivotal role, customarily. The mourning ritual enriches the expression and controls the intense emotions of the nearest and dearest of the dead person. Even today, funeral ceremonies are considered very important, and the habitats concern them so, in Nigeria. A child losing its father denotes losing both parents, as the mother is only a woman and is considered boneless.

Ezekiel Odia's funeral ceremony is shown to be mixed of old African traditional customs and new urbanized customs belonging to modern Europe. They announce Ezekiel Odia's death in Lagos. They bring professional cries based on their custom and commence their traditional crying about the good deeds or benevolence performed by the dead Odia during his lifetime and utter the victories of his ancestors, his heroic past, lineage etc. Similarly, in Indian culture, there is a custom to lament and moan for the dead. Following the moaning cries, they start their traditional dance as a part of the funeral ritual by joining their hands to form a huge circle, stamping their feet and moving around. Then the women there begin to sing Ezekiel Odia's death to make his journey smooth without any obstacles. On the other hand, modern European Christians commence their rituals by singing Christian songs and funeral hymns. Ezekiel Odia is a typical by-product of blended African and European cultures.

Unlike Indian culture, in the Igbo clan, the daughter has more rituals to do at her father's funeral than the son. During Ezekiel Odia's burial, the Igbo people anticipate Aku-nna's participation than his son Nna- nndo's. The native people did not expect Aku-nna's long lamentation in a way, "on and on went Aku-nna, repeating her father's attributes. She did not stop not even when the other mourners became more subdued. Nobody could stop her, for this was what was expected of a daughter" (27).

Following this, another practice is contained in the Igbo tradition. The daughter's responsibility is to give a gift to her dead father as a symbol of filial duty. To her father, Aku-nna offers her dress as a gift. Even Nna-nndo offers his shirt to his beloved father.

After completing the burial, the ritual process continues, with Ma Blackie performing some rites. They describe specific rules and regulations during the mourning period to be followed by her. They believe the wife should mourn for nine months if her husband dies. As per such an inveterate custom, Aku-nna's mother, Ma Blackie remains alone in a special hut and mourns for nine months. She wears old clothes, sits on the cemented floor and moans for her dead husband. At the same time, she should not see people, should not take a bath, and should not use scissors or comb to touch or braid her hair. Mourners are strictly restricted to involve in social activities for a while. All these are made as practices because it is seen as a testing period for a widow. If in case the wife herself dies during this period of mourning, eventually, they consider that she is responsible for her husband's death. These types of rituals give some self-healing to the grief-stricken members. Sometimes repetition of these rituals makes the family's mourners feel anxious and mentally chaotic. Also, at times, mourning rituals allow publicly displaying the practices of grief funerals and bereavement rituals which help in the purification of the mourners who are believed to be polluted due to their contact with the dead.

The polygamy system is a highly flourished practice in Igbo society. The primitive ritual is the inheritance of a widow. Even Okonkwo is shown to have four wives, including Ma Blackie. So in the following funeral ritual, Okonkwo inherits Ma Blackie and her two children. This is revealed in Ogugua words to Aku-nna, "Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for" (63).

In the Igbo custom, people believe that if any of the family members commits any sin or does any wrong, it is the responsibility of the oldest woman in that family or community to let the whole village or the entire habitat of people to know of the wrongdoings or sin. It so happened in Aku-nna's case when she gets kidnapped by Okoboshi. This practice is to alert the natives and to seek help for the victim or who is in need of help. It is mentioned in this novel, "Nothing was hidden in Ibuza. It was the duty of every member of the town to find out and know his neighbour's business" (68).

Okoboshi kidnaps Aku-nna to cut her locks doubtlessly to make her his wife and to assert his rights as a husband. A woman has no choice but to choose her suitor, but such rules are not meant for men. At the same time, men have all rights to choose their bride, but women are prohibited and are given no choice. The male chauvinistic culture and tradition are described in the novel as "Igbo woman could be married away, she could be kidnapped, a lock could be cut by any man to make her his wife forever" (94).

Another part of the narrative portrays African practices by depicting the responsibilities and duties of a girl as a daughter-in-law. Soon after Okoboshi marriage to Aku-nna, she reaches the home of Okoboshi where the senior wife Obidi pours chalk on her breasts as the symbol of fertility and prays to their ancestors for Aku-nna to use it for feeding Okoboshi's children.

Towards the novel's climax, Aku-nna and Chike execute their plan; they elope as a descendant slave. Okonkwo's family is unable to bear the public ignominy. This incident makes Okonkwo enraged as a result he divorces Ma Blackie. He does so after exposing his back in public, shouting and calling his ancestors to be his witness; people around them cover their faces in shame. They see that rituals can be vengeful, as evident as it is in Okonkwo's action.

Rituals can be for some good purpose as well, but sometimes, they turn evil to the extent of taking revenge. Like a coin, rituals also have two sides - they have advantages and disadvantages. Still, the result or impact of the rituals depends upon how far people understand, follow, make use of and execute them. In this tale, it is the ritual that makes an unexpected turn of events that also ends up in Aku-nna, spoiling the reputation of Okonkwo's clan. Aku-nna's disgraceful action makes Okonkwo behave indifferently as he makes a small doll in an exact image of Aku-nna, pierces its heart with a needle and

allows it to burn gradually, depicting to torture her. Through this practice, in Ibuza, one can get rid of someone living far away from the one who makes the small doll. Ma Blackie and Aku-nna hear this news. As a mother Ma Blackie prays to her chi for saving Aku-nna's life. After that Aku-nna gets frightened because Okonkwo calls her back through the wind, but she does not respond. When Aku-nna is alone and mood off, she tells her father-in-law Ofulue, "He calls me back in the wind, when I am alone. But I shall never answer. I don't want to die, father" (171). These lines reveal the pathetic condition of Aku-nna.

The novel narrates that the victim dies slowly and painfully because of witchcraft. Aku-nna gets psychologically affected due to her stepfather's actions; as a result, she gets affected deeply and becomes an insomniac. Towards the end of the novel, this statement is proved true as far as Aku-nna's death is concerned as it proves that the rituals can turn evil even towards the one who performs it.

Okonkwo refuses to accept the bride price offered by Chike's father as revenge. Okonkwo's intentional refusal wounds Aku-nna's heart. Aku-nna's heart knows the longing and expectation of Okonkwo as he wants to get the bride price according to custom and tradition. Aku-nna gets affected physically and mentally. Her pregnancy is troubled leading to malnutrition and imputing her physical failure. All these ultimately result in her death. In short, Igbo people spread the rumour that since Aku-nna was married without the bride price, it led to the death of Aku-nna during her first childbirth. Also, the people firmly fixed it in their minds that if a girl belongs to the Igbo society, she has to live long and see her children and their generations, for which she should accept the man chosen by her family for her in marriage.

Chike and Aku-nna corroborate the traditional superstition they ignorantly set to wipe out. However, Buchi Emecheta proposes her refusal of this superstitious belief through the voice of Chike's brother, a gynaecologist, in this novel. As per his investigation, Aku-nna's death is due to her malnutrition and bad health.

Ritual is the symbol of culture and tradition. Ritual is a way of action or series of events and cultural practices followed by the native people to obtain certain things for their peaceful livelihood, to acquire confidence and to prognosticate things as it is their custom to do so.

Myth is a traditional, archetypal ancient story. It is a popularly accepted idea, but it lacks proper evidence. In classical Greek, 'Mythos' means any invented story that is purely imaginative and has no connection with reality but is purely imaginary; it constitutes supernatural tales resulting from human imagination.

According to the Ibuza custom, the man of the family who has either of the titles 'Eze' or 'Alo' takes an elite or superior position in the family. The members of that family, especially the unclean women, should not go the stream nor do the household work, which becomes taboo for women. The people firmly believe that if she does one of these jobs, the head of the family will die, "When a woman was unclean, she must not go to the stream, she must enter a household, where the man of the family had either the 'Eze' or 'Alo' title" (95).

Buchi Emecheta gives details of rural Nigeria, depicts the rituals and myths that might be considered more practical, and associates those myths with the conditions of women. As a prolific writer, she uses traditional images as tools to dissipate various myths and rituals created by the native people. Buchi Emecheta is one of the writers who focus on the values of African tribal culture, especially the Igbo myth and rituals that clash against modernizing world. In this novel, the rural life of traditional Africa juxtaposes with novel urban cultural beliefs.

Africa is a continent with a male-dominated society. The male chauvinistic society suppresses and oppresses women in all the ways possible. Even rituals and myths marginalize women through cultural hegemony, making them stereotypically stand out from everything, treating them passive, giving them a secondary role and prohibiting them from opening their mouths or asking questions about basic needs

and necessities considered bad manners, if done so. Myths and rituals are the foundation and necessary part of women's life and existence in Africa. Women's life is 'bound' and depends on the practices of myths and rituals. Buchi Emecheta shows her disapproval of African custom through the novel's protagonist, Aku-nna. In the novel, we might witness Aku-nna saying this by herself: "Oh, what kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and make so many people unhappy" (126).

This novel, *The Bride Price*, focuses on the various rituals and mythical practices of the native community. Myths and rituals are the heroes of this novel. The role of myths and rituals in literature symbolizes and communicates the incommunicable essence of existence.

3. Conclusion

In her novel, Buchi Emecheta uses orthodoxical rituals, myths, cultures, and customs to reveal various hidden facts about places like Nigeria and communities like Igbo. Through this, the writer incites to preserve the old customs but inevitably and at times unconsciously resists these practices of customs, cultures, traditions and rituals that lead to death, no matter if the reason is scientific or ritualistic, but that can be seen apparently. Myths and rituals, like art, are the reparation for life's shortcomings and the archives of African culture and tradition.

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