The Bride Price Study Guide

The Bride Price by Buchi Emecheta

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Introduction

Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Bride Price* (1976) tells the story of the clash between the traditional customs of a small Ibo village in Nigeria and the ever-encroaching influence of Africa's European colonizers, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. The bride price, a fee that is traditionally paid by the prospective husband's family for the prospective wife, is a theme that weaves its way throughout the novel. Emecheta uses this practice of bride price to literally, as well as symbolically, represent women's submission to men in African culture.

Male domination is not the only theme of this book. Emecheta also looks at the caste system in Nigerian culture that discriminates against descendants of slaves. Slavery in Africa consisted of one tribe kidnapping people from another tribe, then holding them captive and forcing them to work. Sometimes slaves were buried alive with their masters when their masters died. Descendants of slaves, although they were eventually freed under colonial rule, were never considered members of their adopted villages no matter how long they lived there, or how successful they became.

The Bride Price, although fictional, is somewhat autobiographical. The book draws on the events that Emecheta witnessed growing up in Nigeria. It is the third book that Emecheta has published, but it is the first one in which Emecheta offers a hint of hope that both the African woman as well as the descendants of slaves might overcome the potentially debilitating restrictions of their culture. Although Emecheta does not overtly criticize the traditional customs of her culture in *The Bride Price,* her writing has been criticized by male African writers for its negative portrayal of Nigerian customs. Despite this, Emecheta has become one of Africa's best-known women writers, and her books continue to investigate the themes of gender discrimination and the effects of caste that were initiated in *The Bride Price.*

Author Biography

Subjugation of women by men is a recurring topic that Buchi Emecheta confronts in her writing. It is a topic that she has experienced first hand not only in a general, cultural context but also in the realm of her personal life at home. At one point in her budding career, Emecheta's husband burned the manuscript of her novel *The Bride Price* in an attempt to stifle her desire for independence.

The road to independence was a long, torturous journey for Emecheta. She was born on July 21, 1944, to Ibo parents in the small village of Yaba near Lagos, Nigeria. Her parents both died when Emecheta was very young. Her adopted parents permitted her to attend the Methodist Girls' High School until she was sixteen years old. At this point in her life, Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi, the man to whom she had been engaged since the age of eleven. A year later, Emecheta gave birth to her first child. Shortly after, Emecheta gave birth to her second child and then departed for London to join her husband, who had gone there to study. Six years and five children from the day she was married, Emecheta found herself a divorced woman and a single mother who scrubbed floors to support herself, her children, and her drive to become a writer.

Emecheta had always wanted to be a writer. With this in mind, she used the story of her struggles, her failed marriage, and subsequent hardships of raising a family on her own to write her first book, *In the Ditch* (1972). The story was serialized in the *New Statesman* and was responsible for launching her writing career.

Emecheta's accomplishments (she has written eleven novels, five children's books, several plays, and an autobiography) have made her one of the most important female writers from Africa. Her books, which are published in several countries, have helped to enlighten readers about the role of women in Nigerian culture. This role had formerly been depicted only through the eyes and experience of male writers.

Although female writers are still in a minority among published African writers, traditionally, the art of storytelling was almost exclusively a female role. "In African oral tradition, women were very visible," says Obioma Nnaemeka in "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood." Women were not only performers in the art of storytelling, they were also the "producers of knowledge, especially in view of . . . moral(izing) imperatives and pedagogical foundations." Women, through storytelling, recounted tribal histories and thus taught the younger generations how to live. But when the missionary schools were established in the villages, it was only the boys who were educated. Therefore, when it came time to putting stories down in print, it was the men who were first published.

Emecheta, despite the many road blocks in her life, was determined to become a writer. According to Nnaemeka, Emecheta has said that she had to write or else she "would have to be put in an asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them." Her determination provided the stimulus to propel her through college, where she graduated with honors, and onto a career as a writer.

Plot Summary

Life and Death in Lagos

The Bride Price begins in Lagos, a port city in Nigeria, Africa. The opening scenes move quickly through the events that are about to drastically alter the lives of the Odia family: Ezekiel, the father; Ma Blackie, the mother; Nna-nndo, the son; and Aku-nna, the daughter and protagonist of this story. The setting of the story, a somewhat industrialized urban center, will later contrast with the family's move back to the traditional, agrarian society of the their ancestral village.

Unbeknownst to the mother and children of the Odia family, Ezekiel, the father, is dying. It is his farewell to his children (the mother, at this time, is visiting the country village of Ibuza) that sets the rest of the events in motion. In their culture, a woman without a husband is unable, the reader is told, to take care of herself or her children. The translation of Aku-nna's brother's name reminds Aku-nna of this fact. His name means, "father is the shelter." In Nigerian culture, "the mother is only a woman . . . boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head . . . a non-existing family."

It is in the first three chapters of the novel that Emecheta covers the transition from Ezekiel's death and funeral to the eventual departure of his widow and children from the city. In the course of presenting this transition, Emecheta informs the reader of some of the major conflicts that she will explore in the remaining chapters of the book. She brings up the concept of the bride price, the woman's role in Nigerian society, the influence of the Ibo customs upon its members, and the clash between these customs and the effects of British colonization.

The name of the protagonist, Aku-nna, literally means "father's wealth." Her name refers to the bride price that her father will receive upon her marriage. "To him," the narrator says, "this was something to look forward to." Aku-nna, at the age of thirteen, is well aware of the meaning of her name as well as her role in her society. She would not let her father down. She would marry well to a man who could afford an expensive bride price. This is Aku-nna's role, as it is the role of every woman in her society. She would bring in wealth to her family in the form of a good bride price. Then she would bring wealth to her husband's family in the form of children, preferably all males.

Unfortunately Aku-nna's father, although he tells her that he needs only to visit the hospital for a short time, is overcome by an infirmity and dies. Aku-nna senses that something dreadful has happened to her father, but she neither is told directly by her relatives, who suddenly appear at her doorstep, nor does she ask direct questions. "Good children don't ask too many questions." Instead, she follows the dictates of her uncles and aunts as they come together to prepare for the funeral rites. She will eventually be told about the death of her father through the traditional art of storytelling.

It is through Ezekiel's funeral and burial that Emecheta first exposes some of the clashes between traditional society and the influences of British colonization. She tells the reader that Ezekiel was buried as he had lived "in a conflict of two cultures." She then relates the burial practices and beliefs of the traditional culture, which have been infiltrated by the belief in heaven and hell as preached by the Anglican ministers. Fearful of offending any of the gods, the Ibo people follow the ceremonial dictates of both cultures.

Return to Ibuza

Ma Blackie, Ezekiel's widow and Aku-nna's mother, returns to Lagos to discover that her husband has died. She had left Lagos to visit her homeland in hopes of regaining her fertility and giving Ezekiel another child. She knows that since she is without a husband, she cannot remain in Lagos and prepares her children for their return to Ibuza.

Ibuza is an agrarian village of Ibo people who "have a reputation for not minding what job they take on, so long as it brings money - a race who are particularly business-mad." It is in Ibuza that Ezekiel's older brother, Okonkwo, lives. Okonkwo already has several wives, but he, by virtue of his brother's death, inherits and eventually marries Ma Blackie. Okonkwo does this while looking forward to the bride price that Aku-nna will bring him. He is an ambitious man who covets the title of Obi, which he can claim if he has sufficient money.

It is in Ibuza, as she is walking toward the village on arrival, that Aku-nna meets Chike Ofulue, her future school teacher as well as her future husband. Chike is also a descendant of slaves, and, as such, friendship between Aku-nna and Chike, according to tribal custom, is strictly forbidden. Through a conversation between one of Okonkwo's wives and one of his children, the narrator states the serious nature of such a friendship. If it is true, as some of the villagers begin to suspect, that Akunna and Chike are developing a relationship,

it was the greatest insult that could befall a family . . .
which had never been tainted with the blood of a foreigner,
to say nothing of that of the descendants of
slaves.

As the reader already knows by this point in the story, the rumors concerning the relationship between Aku-nna and Chike are definitely true.

"Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna," the narrator states, "and maybe she would come to regard anything there might be between them as mere childish infatuation, if the adults had just left them alone." But the adults do not leave them alone. They tell their children what they can and cannot do without giving them much explanation. Aku-nna eventually learns to disregard their admonitions, relegating them to a substandard of "everyday trivia." Having lost her father to death and her mother to a complete immersion into the Ibo culture, Aku-nna feels isolated, alone. Chike is the only one she

can turn to. Chike, for his part, is almost willing to forget about Aku-nna. However, he finds himself drawn to her, and when he witnesses the signs of her first menstruation, he is compelled to protect her. When a young woman experiences her first menstruation, it is the signal that she is available for marriage. Chike knows that young men will begin to gather in Aku-nna's house and their fathers will offer her father their bids on Akunna's bride price.

When Aku-nna fails to hide her second menstruation cycle from her cousins, it becomes publicly known that she is of marriageable age. Chike becomes aggressive in his protection of Aku-nna from other suitors and assaults Okoboshi, a boy from a neighboring village. Shortly afterward, Okoboshi's family steals into Aku-nna's village and kidnaps her. It is considered fair play for a man to kidnap a woman, thus forcing her to become his wife.

Escape

Using her wits, Aku-nna insults Okoboshi when he tries to rape her on their so-called wedding night. She tells him that she has already been "disvirgined" by Chike. Aku-nna is lying, but Okoboshi is so infuriated that he fails to test her story. Then, with the help of her brother and Chike, Akunna escapes from Okoboshi's family.

The last two chapters of the book find Akunna and Chike living outside of the village. They have a house, which they furnish, and then both of them secure rewarding jobs. In a short time, they are expecting a baby. This should signal a happy ending, but there is something wrong. Despite several generous attempts by Chike's father, Akunna's stepfather refuses to accept a bride price. Aku-nna is well aware of the tribal curse on young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price: the expectant mother will die in childbirth. In the end, Aku-nna cannot completely step away from the traditions of her people. One of her last statements is that only in death will she win her freedom.

Characters

Okoboshi Obidi

Okoboshi is the young man with a limp who fights with Chike (Aku-nna's future husband) over Aku-nna. Later, Okoboshi's family kidnaps Akunna, an accepted village custom, in an attempt to make her Okoboshi's wife. After kidnapping her, Okoboshi tries to "devirgin" Aku-nna. When Akunna first sees him after she has been kidnapped, she notices that his smile "had a kind of crookedness about it; instead of gracing the centre [sic] of his face, the smile was drawn lopsidedly towards one of his ears. It was the smile of an embittered young man. He hated her, that much she could see."

Okoboshi attempts to force Aku-nna into having sex with him. He is stronger than she is, but she outsmarts him. She lashes out with verbal assaults to his pride. This scene between Okoboshi and Aku-nna is a pivotal point in the story. It is the first time that Aku-nna takes a very strong position in defending herself, using everything in her power to claim the life she desires, as opposed to the life that her culture has attempted to force on her. Okoboshi, in this respect, represents everything that Aku-nna finds repugnant about her traditionally male-dominated culture.

Aku-nna Odia

Aku-nna, the protagonist in this novel, is thirteen years old and living in the Nigerian city Lagos when the story opens. She is an intelligent young woman who knows, without being told directly, that she is "too insignificant" in the eyes of her parents. She is, after all, only a girl. She is also thin and at times very susceptible to disease. Her parents refer to her as an "ogbanje" - a living dead. Her mother often chides her by asking Aku-nna to make up her mind if she is going to live or die. It often appears that the only thing her parents look forward to, in respect to Aku-nna, is the bride price, the price her future husband will pay for her.

Aku-nna, right from the beginning of the story, has many questions about her family, her culture, and her role in society. She thinks about these questions, but she never voices them because in her culture it is considered worse than bad manners to ask them, especially coming from a girl. But it is these questions that drive Aku-nna throughout this story. She is on a quest for answers.

As if life in Lagos, which was still somewhat determined by traditional Ibo culture, is not troublesome enough, upon her father's death Aku-nna is forced to face even stricter interpretations of those traditions when she is taken back to the family's ancestral village, Ibuza. There Aku-nna is often criticized because of her modesty. She does not like bathing in the nude in public. She is also criticized because she is allowed to continue her schooling. But it is her friendship with Chike, a descendant of a slave, that is her final undoing.

It is with Chike that Aku-nna feels the most comfortable in asking those questions that have haunted her. She identifies with Chike's role, which is both part of the Ibo culture and yet strangely removed from it at the same time. Chike is her teacher in more ways than just at the missionary school that Aku-nna attends, and she falls in love with him. But to say that her relationship with Chike is her final undoing may be too simple. There are more complex factors involved.

By the time Aku-nna turns fifteen, she has grown accustomed to things in the Ibuza village. She learns about the European ways at school and goes home and faces the "unchanging traditions of [her] own people." Yet she is never able to make herself feel comfortable in either culture. Both Aku-nna and her brother are like "helpless fishes caught in a net: they could not . . . go back into the sea, for they were trapped . . . yet they were still alive because the fisherman was busy debating within himself whether it was worth killing them." In the end, it is Aku-nna's inability to free herself from the tangled net of her culture that, at least on a symbolic level, causes her death.

Ma Blackie Odia

Ma Blackie is a tall, dark-skinned woman. As is typical for an African woman, she is held responsible for not having given her husband, Ezekiel, more than two children, only one of which is a son. The novel begins with Ma Blackie, the mother of Aku-nna and Nna-nndo, leaving her family. She has gone back to her native village, Ibuza, to strengthen her fertility.

After her husband's death, Ma Blackie is adopted by her deceased husband's older brother and must take her children back to Ibuza. Ma Blackie is not the only wife of this brother, but she gratefully takes her place in his family, eventually becoming pregnant with the brother's child.

With life in Ibuza grounded in traditional customs, Ma Blackie does her best to comply with what is expected of her. She also tries to discipline her children so they, too, will be accepted and not become an embarrassment. If her children do not comply, it will appear to the villagers, Ma Blackie's relatives, that she has spoiled her children. When one of her children breaks any of the norms of village life, Ma Blackie is quick to publicly humiliate them. Ma Blackie often uses a harsh tone of voice with her daughter, as Aku-nna attempts to free herself from the subjugation imposed by the Ibuza tribe.

At first, Ma Blackie considers herself lucky that her children have turned out so well. She is a clever businesswoman, and with some of the money her husband has left her, she is able to save herself from the more physical chores required of other village women. She is also considered one of the elite of the village because she can afford to send her children to school.

In the end, Ma Blackie tries her best to save her daughter. Despite the fact that her new husband divorces her because of the shame Aku-nna has brought on his family, Ma Blackie attempts to counter the curse that this husband has placed on her daughter's

life. She exits the story in a mix of cultural confusion, paying a witch doctor to counter her second husband's curse and then praying to the God of the Christians to help her through the delivery of her new child.

Ezekiel Odia

Aku-nna's father, Ezekiel Odia, is physically present only in the first few pages of the story. He has suffered from an ailing foot since serving the British troops in World War II. His death is the catalyst for all the dramatic changes in Aku-nna's life. Emecheta uses the father's funeral to introduce the culture clash between the Anglican rituals of the Christian belief system and the native rituals of the Ibo tribe.

Although Ezekiel dies, his presence is felt throughout the story as Aku-nna constantly wonders how her life would have been different had her father lived. Had he lived, she would have grown up in Lagos, a city whose culture is more modern than the traditions of her country relatives. But Ezekiel, however citified, still maintained many traditional ways. He was caught in the middle of his African traditions and the ways of the Europeans. While he had his marriage blessed in the Anglican Church and served in a local Christian organization, he still sent his wife to the traditional gods of his people in order to increase her fertility, so she could give him another son. Ezekiel, after all, had paid a high bride price for his wife, and he believed he had a right to more sons. Had he lived, Aku-nna's life may have not differed as much as she imagines.

Aku-nna accepts the knowledge that her father favored sons. She knows that "she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing to this unfortunate marriage." Ezekiel pitied Aku-nna because she was small in build and light in color. But her name, which meant "father's wealth," he gave to her, "knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price." Ezekiel's final words to his daughter are: "Always remember that you are mine." This statement is later repeated by Chike, Aku-nna's future husband, symbolizing that an African woman always belongs to a man: her father at birth, her husband upon marriage.

Nna-nndo Odia

Nna-nndo Odia is Aku-nna's younger brother. His presence in this story serves as a reference point rather than as a character. Emecheta uses Nna-nndo in several instances to illustrate the differences between the roles of male and female children in traditional Ibuza society. Once their father has died, one of Aku-nna's aunts points out that it is a pity that Aku-nna's relatives will marry her off as soon as possible in order to pay for Nnanndo's schooling. As the relatives are burying the father, they turn to Nna-nndo, the "man" whom his father (Ezekiel) has left behind, asking Nnanndo to decide if Ezekiel is to go to heaven as a Christian or go down into the earth to the Ibuza god. Nna-nndo, younger than Aku-nna, seals his father's afterlife fate. In contrast, Aku-nna's only role at the funeral is to cry longer than her brother, because women were expected

to show more emotion.

Later in the novel, Nna-nndo plays out the brief role of intermediary when Aku-nna is kidnapped. Nna-nndo brings a note to her from Chike (Akunna's future husband). Nna-nndo is the only person in the Ibuza village that understands and respects his sister's relationship with Chike. His loyalty is rewarded when Aku-nna and Chike, married and living away from the village, bring Nnanndo to their home so that he might be better nourished, both physically and intellectually, than he would have been in the Ibuza village.

Nna-nndo is at Aku-nna's bedside as she is dying. She tells him not to worry. Her death has bought both of them freedom. And then, in a somewhat ironic twist, Chike tells Aku-nna that the infant she bore is a girl, and according to Ibuza lore, girls are "love babies." Aku-nna's last words are:

'Now, with our little girl, everybody will know. They
will all know how passionately we love each other.
Our love will never die.'

In some ways, this seems to negate the preference for male children, which Nna-nndo represented, that was held over Aku-nna's head for most of her life.

Okonkwo Odia

Okonkwo is the elder brother of Ezekiel Odia. Unlike his younger brother, Okonkwo has lived his entire life in the village of Ibuza. Okonkwo represents the embodiment of male domination and tradition in Emecheta's *The Bride Price.* It is Okonkwo who adopts Ma Blackie and her children when Ezekiel dies. But before his brother's death, Okonkwo displays his authority even over Ezekiel.

'If Ezekiel blames you for going back without finishing
your treatment,' Okonkwo tells Ma Blackie,
'tell him I said you were to do so. Remind him, in
case he has forgotten, that I am the eldest and first
son of our father. It is for me to say the word, and
for Ezekiel to obey.'

In the remaining story, Okonkwo does not change. He is the lord of his house and family, and he does not bend. Tradition and power are Okonkwo's masters.

The reader is told in the beginning of the story that the people of Ibuza have a "group mind." They come together to "help each other when in trouble or in need. . . . 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." Okonkwo is the epitome of this way of thinking. Coming from this state of mind, this longheld tradition, it is very difficult for Okonkwo to adjust to Aku-nna's rebellion.

But Okonkwo is not a simple man. He is clever and ambitious. He has his eyes on the red cap, the symbol of having achieved the high position of Obi, a place of honor among the Ibo people. In order to achieve that position, Okonkwo needs money, and Aku-nna's bride price would come at just the right moment. This money, though, would have to come from one of the well-to-do men in the village that Okonkwo chooses. With the title of Obi in sight, Okonkwo does make some small concessions. He does not force Ma Blackie into wearing rags for one year, the sign of a mourning widow. He allows Aku-nna to go to school, although it is Ma Blackie who pays Aku-nna's tuition. However, he is determined not to have Aku-nna go to college. He is also determined never to allow her to marry a descendent of a slave. In the end, he could not stop it.

When Aku-nna runs away and marries Chike, Okonkwo not only will not accept a bride price from Chike's father, he also divorces Ma Blackie by exposing his bare backside to her in public, a village custom. Still enraged by the disgrace that Aku-nna has caused, he forgets about the title of Obi and decides to vent his anger directly on Akunna. Okonkwo makes a small doll in the exact image of Aku-nna in an attempt to punish her through a slow and painful death. It is Okonkwo's power, or the power of her people's traditional beliefs, that Aku-nna feels pulling her toward her death.

Chike Ofulue

Chike Ofulue is the young man whom Aku-nna eventually marries. Chike is also the descendant of a slave. His grandmother, Obi Ofulue, had been a princess in one African tribe, then was kidnapped by another tribe and turned into a slave. When missionaries appeared in the village, slavery became illegal, and most slaves were turned over to the missionaries and educated. Thus, the former slaves, as well as their descendants, became the educated people of the village, taking on the roles of doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Despite their education and professional roles, the local villagers never accepted these descendants of slaves into their culture. And so it was for Chike and his family. They were tolerated, but there were strict taboos on how far relationships with these outsiders could go.

"You must be careful," one of Aku-nna's cousins tells her, referring to Chike, "that man . . . he's not one of us. No decent girl from a good Ibuza family is allowed to associate with him. My father would rather see his daughter dead than allow such a friendship." And so Aku-nna is introduced to Chike. Chike's family does not fare much better. Chike's father warns him to stay away from Aku-nna, as his father does not want "a son of mine to bring shame on his [Aku-nna's step-father's] family."

"It is said," states the narrator, "that stolen water is sweet." This comment sums up the feelings inside Chike who defies both his father and the customs of his adopted village as he refuses to be told what to do in matters of the heart. Chike is drawn to Aku-nna's innocence and intelligence. He also is drawn to her dependence. He nurtures her through her school lessons, helps her understand her first menstruation, and protects her, as much as he can, from the traditional customs that offend her.

When Aku-nna is kidnapped, Chike realizes how much he loves her. He becomes determined to rescue her and, finally, make her his wife. Chike is a gentle man who provides Aku-nna with every comfort she needs. He is a gentle lover, who understands his wife's fears. He is an intelligent and sensitive young man who tries, in vain, to appease the customs of his former village by urging his father to pay the bride price. But he is helpless in his attempts to save his young, pregnant wife's life.

Themes

Gender Roles

One of the main themes in Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is the difference, in the Nigerian culture, between the roles of women and men. There are many incidents in this story concerning the gap between the privileges of men compared to those of women. It is taken for granted that if a boy wishes to go to school and his family can afford it, he will go. It is an exception, especially in the Ibuza village, for a girl to go to school. Even if she does attend, her education stops when she is married, usually around the age of fourteen.

The greatest difference between men and women, however, concerns the act of marriage. If a bride price, for instance, is accepted by the father of the girl, the young woman would have to go to the suitor's home and be married no matter whether she knew the suitor, liked the suitor, or had fallen in love with another man. Her father's decision is final. Also, a man who could not afford a bride price might "sneak out of the bush to cut a curl from a girl's head so that she would belong to him for life," and he would be able to "treat her as he liked, and no other man would ever touch her."

Sexuality is another area where the customs dictate different rules for both sexes. Young single men who have affairs with married women are tolerated through an intentional blindness on the part of an aging husband. If an old husband cannot satisfy the sexual needs of his many wives, "they knew better than to raise a scandal. In Ibuza, every young man was entitled to his fun." On the other hand, "A girl who had had adventures before marriage was never respected."

The most devastating inequality between men and women, however, is the lack of self-worth. "Aku-nna knew that she was too insignificant to be regarded as a blessing." She is a girl, and a marriage is not considered fortunate unless a man has sons. A woman's worth is measured only in the amount of money she might bring to her father in the form of a bride price.

Slavery and Oppression

Slavery is depicted straightforwardly in the character of Chike, who comes from an *oshu* family, a slave family. Although his grandmother had been a princess in a neighboring village, she was kidnapped and enslaved. After the Europeans came to Nigeria, slavery became illegal. The freed slaves were sent to missionary schools where they were educated. Although the freed slaves and their descendants eventually earned high professional salaries and owned big European-style homes, they were never accepted into the village. A father would rather kill his daughter than have her marry an *oshu*.

Emecheta uses the theme of slavery, however, not just in terms of the *oshu*. She also portrays women, in a sense, as slaves to men. A woman is bought and sold through the

bride price. She is looked over, by her new owners, like a slave trader might look at his new slave. Her body becomes a commodity that will bring wealth to the family in the form of many children. After being kidnapped, Okoboshi's father "poured chalk, the symbol of fertility, on her breasts and prayed to his ancestors that Aku-nna would use it to feed the many children she was going to have for his son."

Defiance and Resistance

Defiance of the rigid rules of society rises slowly in this novel through the character of Akunna. It comes to her in small steps and bolts out of her in fits of fear or embarrassment. First, out of fear she speaks her mind and very decidedly refuses to accept a ride on a bicycle. Next, out of embarrassment she refuses to take off her clothes and bathe in public. Little by little, she builds up her resistance until she finds herself involved in a relationship with Chike, the descendant of slaves, a relationship that is strictly forbidden. By encouraging this relationship, Aku-nna defies her mother and her stepfather, as well as the social laws of her entire culture. But even though she encourages the relationship, her defiance is passive, as if the relationship were growing on its own with Aku-nna tagging along behind it. She moves closer to Chike almost involuntarily. In one incidence, she wants to stop him from saying that their relationship is impossible, and she covers his mouth with her hand "not knowing where the boldness which was working inside her came from."

As the story builds to a climax, so does Akunna's courage build. Her courage, in turn, builds her defiance. After Aku-nna's menstruation has become public knowledge, she refuses "point-blank" to eat the chicken that has been slaughtered in her honor. At this point in the story, Aku-nna registers what very well might have been her first defiant thought. "She was beginning to feel that it was unjust that she was not to be allowed a say in her own life, and she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all." Her mother's passivity seems to awaken Aku-nna's defiance, and from this stage in the story, Aku-nna moves toward the climatic scene.

As she stands in front of Okoboshi, the young man who has kidnapped her as a potential bride, Aku-nna loudly and forcefully speaks out in an attempt to save herself. It is out of fear of not only being raped but also of being deprived of ever seeing Chike again that she finds her voice and creates a story so vile that Okoboshi leaves her alone. The vile story that she creates is a lie, but the lie represents the epitome of her defiance. She tells Okoboshi that she is not a virgin; and, furthermore, she lost her virginity to a descendant of a slave. In so doing, Aku-nna risks everything, possibly even her life.

> Her uncle would surely kill her on sight . . . but if she was forced to live with these people for long, she would soon die, for that was the intention behind all the taboos and customs. Anyone who contravened them was better dead . . . and when you were dead,

people would ask: Did we not say so? Nobody goes against the laws of the land and survives.

That is how much courage it takes for Akunna to be defiant.

Culture Clash

The clash of culture is first seen in the funeral scene in the opening chapters of the novel. Ezekiel, Aku-nna's father, lives somewhere between the two cultures, and, upon his death, his son must decide whether Ezekiel will go to the European (Christian) heaven or to the ancestral earth gods of the Ibo people. When his son chooses heaven, the narrator explains that the mourning women approve of the decision because "the heaven of the Christians was new, and foreign; anything imported was considered to be much better than their own old ways."

An even more significant, as well as more serious, clash in cultures is the infirmity that causes Ezekiel's death. Ezekiel was called to do his duty in the European war, during which he performed menial and dangerous tasks that the Europeans "could not bear." While standing for countless hours in the swampy fields of Burma, something happened to Ezekiel's foot. Although the cause is unknown, his foot never heals and eventually causes his death.

Europeans, at one time, encouraged slavery in Africa, but "suddenly stopped buying slaves and turned into missionaries instead." The missionaries, in turn, took in the former slaves and educated them. These slaves, much to the disdain of the traditional villagers, eventually went on to become the doctors, lawyers, and teachers in the community. They gained power, if not in the traditional hierarchy of the village, at least in the village's economy. Toward the end of the novel, Chike's father, a former slave whose wealth was based, in part, on a large plantation of cocoa beans and coconuts, wakes up one morning to find that all his plants have been cut down. With European law on his side, the courts find the guilty parties, who turn out to be the traditional villagers, retaliating against the marriage of Chike and Aku-nna. Despite the fact that "the whole of Ibuza came forward as witnesses against" Chike's father, the European law forces the village people to compensate the former slave. "The free men had to plant new cocoa for the slave." This does not improve relationships, the narrator states, and curses are "heaped on the family."

Style

Foreshadowing

Emecheta foreshadows many of the issues that she will eventually present in the body of the story. For instance, in the first chapter, Aku-nna's father, in his farewell, tells Aku-nna to "always remember that you are mine." This statement foreshadows both the claim of Aku-nna's stepfather that will be held, literally, over Aku-nna's life, as well as the more sentimental version of this statement that Chike will voice in his attempts to express his love for Aku-nna.

In the second chapter, Emecheta discusses the group mind of the Ibuza people as they come together to take care of Aku-nna and her brother upon her father's death. This group mind, in this incident, is beneficial. However, it is the group mind that will eventually push Aku-nna toward her own death, as she is forced to leave the village. The group mind would rather see her dead than see her happily married to a former slave.

Aku-nna's father lived and died in what the narrator defines as "a conflict of two cultures." In the third chapter, Ezekiel is mourned and buried while the Ibo people, his relatives, try to decide whether to rely on their traditional beliefs or to take up and lean upon the newer, European customs. In this way, Emecheta foreshadows yet another conflict that is woven throughout the story: the clash between traditional and foreign definitions of law and custom.

Aku-nna's eventual defiance of her parents' traditional ways is foreshadowed by her refusal to take off her clothes and bathe in public upon her arrival in the village of Ibuza. Later, her defiance becomes more overt when she refuses to eat the ceremonial chicken that has been sacrificed in honor of her first menstruation. These actions foreshadow her climatic escape from her kidnappers and eventual denial of her culture when she marries a former slave.

Early in the story, Aku-nna is referred to as an *ogbanje,* or living dead. She is a child who picks up diseases so easily that her mother begs her "to decide once and for all whether she is going to live or die." Later in the story, Aku-nna's relatives also refer to her as an *ogbanje,* foreshadowing her untimely death.

Myths

The Bride Price is colored with stories of African mythology. The first is presented in the opening pages, as the reader is told that Ma Blackie, Aku-nna's mother, has returned to her ancestral village to "placate their Oboshi river goddess into giving her some babies." The river and goddess were a gift "to all Ibuza people from the greater gods. It was the right of all Ibuza's sons and daughters to come to have themselves cleansed by the river whenever they found themselves in difficulties." There is another story about the

river goddess who had claimed the lives of hundreds of young Ibuza girls as they were crossing the swollen river on their way back from the market. The myth resolves the tragedy by conveying the thought that the young women "had been chosen to serve at the court of the beautiful goddess of the river." After mourning these young women, according to the myth, their mothers became pregnant. When most of these women gave birth to girls, it was believed that the river goddess had replaced "the ones she had taken."

There is also a god of the river that Aku-nna finds herself praying to when she crosses the river while in the midst of her second menstruation.

The myth of the *ogbanje,* or the living dead, is mentioned. Aku-nna is labeled with this name early in the story. One of Okonkwo's wives explains the fate of someone who is an *ogbanje.* "They are only in this world on contract, and when their time is up they have to go. They all die young, usually at the birth of their first baby. They must die young, because their friends in the other world call them back."

Metaphor

Emecheta uses extended metaphors in this story. The first exemplifies the conflict that Akunna and her brother feel, caught, as they were, between traditional culture and European customs. She creates an image of fish caught in a net, referring to Aku-nna and Nna-nndo as

> helpless fishes . . . [who] 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.

In another, longer metaphor, Emecheta has Aku-nna and Chike sitting under a tree, watching a group of brown ants.

> No single ant deviated from the main column, all followed
> the same route one after the other, as if at the
> command of a power invisible.

With this metaphor, Emecheta uses the ants and their willingness to follow that invisible power as an example of the people of Ibuza following the traditional ways without questioning the reasons behind them. When Aku-nna asks Chike why the ants are following one another, Chike responds: "Because each ant would be lost if it did not follow the footsteps of those in front, those who have gone on that very path before."

Aku-nna's death could be read as a metaphor. Why did she die? Was it because she was too young and malnourished as suggested by the doctor? Or was it because her stepfather, in vengefulness and voodoo-like practice, calls her spirit back home? If her death is looked at as metaphor, it plays out the main conflict of the story. Inside of Aku-

nna, the clash between the European (scientific) world and the African (traditional) world ultimately lead to her death. Aku-nna's death acts as metaphor for all young African women who struggle with the new culture that cries out for independence and reliance on self, and the old culture that thinks with a male-dominated, group mind. Her death is symbolic of the psychological deaths that these women must pass through in an attempt to be reborn into a new role for themselves.

Emecheta, however, reminds the reader that contrary to this interpretation of the metaphor of Aku-nna's death, the villagers used it differently. Instead of freeing the women, the story of Chike and Aku-nna became a metaphor for death - a death with no heaven on the other side. "Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nna's death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children's children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid."

Historical Context

Politics

Lagos, the port city and at one time the capital of Nigeria, was given its name by the Portuguese who settled in Nigeria as early as the sixteenth century. It was out of Lagos that the Portuguese exported their flourishing slave trade. The Portuguese maintained control over the city until 1861 when the British took control and eventually abolished the trade. In the early 1950s, Nigeria was still under British control with a British governor ruling from Lagos.

Villages, especially among the Ibo people, usually consisted of scattered homesteads called compounds. Each compound housed a man, his immediate family and some relatives. A number of compounds made up a village that was usually populated by people all claiming a common ancestry. Each village had a chief who was, on the whole, left alone to rule his village in a traditional manner. There were, however, European officers, nearby, who guided the chiefs. Sometimes this guidance included influencing the choice of a chief based not on the qualifications of the candidate but rather on the ease with which the British could manipulate him. The British, in an attempt to prevent united opposition to its authority, kept Nigerian groups separated, using their chosen chiefs to help them in this effort.

Just prior to the 1950s, Nnamd Azikiwe, an Ibo man, joined Herbert Macaulay (called the father of modern Nigerian nationalism) to establish the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons. African men trained as soldiers in World War II, as well as restless youths, market women, educated villagers, and farmers, joined the National Council to protest the British tax laws and to demand political representation. Eventually succumbing to the pressure, the British gave up control, and Nigeria was granted independence on October 1, 1960.

Pre-Colonial Times

Before the colonization of Nigeria, traditional Ibo people were not united as a single tribe but rather lived in autonomous local communities. A typical village might include as many as five thousand people who could, in some way, trace their lineage back to the founder of the village. Linguists, who have studied the Ibo language, believe that some of these villages may have existed in the same location for as many as four thousand years.

Although the village was traditionally ruled by men, the people believed in common deities that included both gods and goddesses. Also, both men and women farmed, with women's work seen as complementary to the man's. Many women were, in fact, economically independent. Women were expected to give birth to many children, hopefully sons, to ensure the future of the group, but as she grew older, the woman

received assistance from younger wives who took care of the children, so the older wife could farm and make crafts, thus allowing her the opportunity to achieve impressive economic status.

In the oral tradition, women were prominent storytellers. These stories were peopled with women characters as heroines and founders of great dynasties and civilizations. The women not only performed the stories, they also composed new stories or transformed old ones in order to incorporate a woman-centered perspective on village life. Women storytellers were also known to use political story-songs or abusive songs as forms of social control.

Colonial Times

European colonization influenced village life in many areas. There was the introduction of Western style education, the English language, and Christianity, as well as new forms of money, transportation, and communications. The Europeans also brought with them the Victorian concept that women belonged in the home, nurturing the family. With this concept came the emphasis on the man as the primary source for the economic stability of the family. It became the man's sole responsibility to grow cash crops like yams, while the woman was relegated to growing only subsistence crops that brought in less money. In addition, cheap goods from Japan and Europe were imported, thus diminishing the demand for local craft work that had, before colonization, been another source of income for the African women.

Victorian colonizers praised and encouraged the creation of a social and political hierarchy that privileged Nigerian men. One of these privileges was the encouragement that boys received to attend school. With males graduating from school in far greater numbers than females, it was not surprising that the first voices to be heard in Nigerian literature belonged to men. Stories, from that time, that concerned Nigerian women were always interpreted through the vision of the man. The first few women who emerged on the literary scene thus used male literary themes as their role models. Some Nigerian women were very active, during this time, in organizing protests against the colonial influences.

Independent Nigeria

Nigeria is marked by great differences not only in physical landscape and climate, but also in social organization. To the north, Moslem communities thrive. While the central area is sparsely settled and is the least developed part of Nigeria, the southern area, in contrast, is the most economically developed and is dominated by three distinct groups of people: the Yoruba to the west, the Edo in the center, and the Ibo people to the east.

After gaining independence from the British in 1960, these ethnic, as well as economical and educational, regional divisions caused very serious problems for Nigeria. Each region fought for power, fearful of domination by the others. Stress from ethnic competitiveness, educational inequality, and economic imbalance between the regions

caused a breakdown in government, which ultimately led to the need of military control. Assassinations, ethnic massacres, and a further breakdown in military rule eventually lead to an attempt of the Ibo people in the East to declare secession from the rest of Nigeria. On May 30, 1967, the Republic of Biafra was created. A war ensued over the next two years between Biafra and the ruling Nigerian government, leading not only to heavy casualties, but also to a plea by the Biafran government to the international community for food. The Ibo people were starving. On January 11, 1970, Biafra surrendered to government officials in Lagos.

Nigeria was subsequently divided into twelve different states to ease the ethnic tensions, but by 1976, the year that Emecheta published *The Bride Price,* civil rule had not returned to Nigeria.

Critical Overview

There is a great discrepancy between how Buchi Emecheta's book is received and reviewed inside her own country of Africa and outside of it. There is also a discrepancy between how African male and African female critics review her work. The discrepancy goes so far, in some instances, that the criticism becomes lost in a void of silence.

Female writer Professor Osayimwense Osa, for instance, in a 1996 essay published in *Research in African Literatures* declares that *The Bride Price* is a "masterpiece of African children's and youth literature that sophisticated younger readers will find as satisfying reading." Writing from a great distance from Africa, male critic Richard Cima in the *Library Journal,* says that Emecheta "in addition to presenting a fast-moving story with characters the readers can care about, the author gives a fascinating picture of pre-independent Nigeria."

The Bride Price is a "captivating Nigerian novel, lovingly but unsentimentally written," says Valentine Cunningham in the *New Statesman.* Emecheta creates "a world of ballad-like simplicity, enlivened by tenderly beautiful descriptions." Cunningham also states that Emecheta has proven herself, with the creation of this book, as a "considerable writer."

But Rosemary Bray in the *Voice Literary Supplement* (as quoted in *Discovering Authors*) declares that "Emecheta is a prophet without honor." In other words, Emecheta is speaking out of the silence that male African writers have created in reference to the African woman. Emecheta is also speaking into a silence, in some regards, as the audience for whom she most wants to write - African women - often do not have access to her books.

Both the silence and the lack of honor multiply the closer Emecheta's work is examined, especially when it is examined under the microscope of feminism by male African critics. African literature has until recently been void of any female voice. Even today, African literature is dominated by male writers who have tended to depict female characters as being completely satisfied with their lives and their subjugation to African men. The emergence of female writers, such as Emecheta, challenges these male assumptions that include not only the female's submission to the male but also her approval and pleasurable response to that submission. Therefore, it is understandable that these African male writers do not like the image of the African women that Emecheta creates. Katherine Frank in *World Literature Written in English* claims that Emecheta's novels "compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant of the African woman. She exposes and repudiates the feminine stereotypes of male writers and reveals the dark underside of their [male African writers] fictional celebrations of the African woman."

Emecheta's books, if not totally ignored or overlooked by African male critics - who dominate that country's writing - are criticized, in general, with a negatively charged tone. Cynthia Ward, in her article "Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta," puts it this way: Emecheta's "work has been and continues to be a catalyst for passionate

debate over issues concerning the role of African women within their societies, cross-cultural experiences of gender and identity-formation, African 'patriarchy,' the responsibilities of the artist to her nation and culture and even what constitutes the canon of African literature: several African literary critics have pointedly excluded Emecheta from the list of African authors, claiming her viewpoint is not representative of African women." Ward goes on to say that much of Emecheta's literature is judged a "literary success or failure according to a notion of 'politically correct' behavior."

Obeonia Nnaemeka, writing in her essay "From Orality to Writing" states that male critics "often insist upon setting moral standards for these writers [Emecheta and a handful of other female African writers] with the result that any character who deviates from established expectations is heavily descended upon, condemned and disparaged." For instance, says Nnaemeka, one male critic, Taban Io Liyong, responds to Emecheta's hints of feminism in her writing with the comment: "I suspect that feminism may destroy that which up to now has enabled Africa to withstand all the buffeting from other cultures." Emecheta, by instilling a desire in her protagonist toward selfhood, in other words, is setting up the circumstances for a breakdown in African culture.

To male critics, feminism is a dangerous thing, but they forget, say Nnaemeka, that "historically, feminist activism has always been a part of the African women's experience. Although non-conformist characters continue to be marginalized," in novels like Emecheta's *The Bride Price,* the "inevitability of change is never in doubt." Emecheta belongs to the second generation of African female authors. Their (written) voices have been silenced for a long time. The first generation of female authors did little more than mimic the writing of their male African predecessors. But storytelling that was told in a female voice has a long history in Africa. It is with Emecheta that the historical feminine voice is finally emerging in print.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Hart is a freelance writer and former editor of a literary magazine. In the following essay, she looks at how feminist and post-colonial literary theories define the Other, how Emecheta's novel demonstrates this categorization, and how her protagonist, Aku-nna, attempts to resist it.

Reference to the Other is used both in feminist and post-colonial literary theory. The Other refers to the concept of establishing a norm, then relegating everything that is not the norm to the sidelines where it becomes the Other. To make this a little clearer, in a patriarchal society, man is considered the norm. Everything is defined in terms of the masculine. In general, all who have masculinity as their biological trait are given power, priority, preference, and privilege. In other words, man is what is defined as important. Women, on the other hand, become the Other or the unimportant. They are categorized as the powerless and, thus, they are marginalized. Feminist literary theorists examine the marginalization of women that occurs in literature when man, or the patriarchy, is set up as the norm.

Post-colonial literary theorists examine the marginalization of groups of people who have been colonized by outside powers. In this case, it is the outside powers that have set themselves up as the norm. For example, when the Europeans descended on Nigeria, European law prevailed over traditional rules. European languages were used in schools. Schooling was based on the educational standards of Europe. European religious beliefs were ingrained in the minds of the indigenous people while the traditional practices were simultaneously outlawed. A post-colonial literary theorist looks at the ways in which the indigenous people, as well as their traditions, have become the Other.

In a colonized country like Nigeria, the setting of Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price,* this concept of the Other becomes even more complex. The indigenous people, as they prepare for independence (and, thus, enter a post-colonial era) have been changed. They have lived under colonial rule for many generations, and now they must decide what will become the new norm: what they have become under colonial rule or what they once were.

All these elements play themselves out in Akunna, the protagonist in *The Bride Price.* Relegated to the role of the Other by both the colonial powers and her patriarchal society, Aku-nna, once she becomes aware of her own marginalization, resists. Slowly she learns to vocalize her thoughts, which, in the beginning of the book, are heard only inside her head. It is through this development of her voice as she moves from daughter to wife, from city girl to country woman, from prepubescent teen to mother, that the reader gets a sense of how it feels to be the Other, and what it takes to resist and, hopefully, break down the confines of that role.

From the outset of this story, Aku-nna is still steeped in her traditional role. She wants to make her father proud of her and is determined to marry well so as to bring her father a

good bride price. Once that issue is settled, she would first have her marriage "solemnised [sic] by the beautiful goddess of Ibuza, then the Christians would sing her a wedding march . . . then her father Nna would call up the spirits of his great, great-grandparents to guide her." This is Aku-nna's dream.

In the beginning, Aku-nna is very silent. Although concerned about her father's health and his aberrant behavior, she wants to question him, but she keeps her thoughts to herself because in "Nigeria you are not allowed to speak in that way to an adult, especially your father. That is against the dictates of culture." In the beginning, Aku-nna does not question those dictates.

There is a hint of tension building in Aku-nna, but that tension is not totally conscious. It is still quiet, like Aku-nna's voice. When questions build up inside of her, she reminds herself that "good children don't ask too many questions." When her father does not come home for supper as he had insinuated he would, she relaxes with the thought that in her culture her "neighbors would look after them . . . in that part of the world everyone is responsible for the next person." But Aku-nna feels betrayed by her father when she discovers, through her uncles, that he is not coming home, that he, in other words, has lied to her. It is the narrator's voice that must inform the reader about certain facts concerning the culture that Aku-nna herself has not yet learned. The narrator states that Aku-nna's people think with a "group mind." Not only do they think alike, but it "would not occur to any one of them to behave and act differently." Upon reflection, The Other refers to the concept of establishing a norm, then relegating everything that is not the norm to the sidelines where it becomes the Other." Aku-nna forgives her father for lying to her. "He responded as much as their custom allowed - for was she not only a girl?"

It is during her father's funeral that the realization of being fatherless dawns on Aku-nna. "Nobody is going to buy you any more [clothes]," an aunt tells her. Then the aunt turns to another woman and says, "The pity of it all . . . is that they will marry her off very quickly in order to get enough money for Nna-nndo's [Aku-nna's brother] school fees." Then turning back to Aku-nna, the aunt continues, "This is the fate of us women. There is nothing we can do about it. We just have to learn to accept it."

With these thoughts stirring in her head, Akunna accepts her fate and leaves Lagos and her former life and returns to her parents' ancestral village. As she walks down the dusty road toward her village, a cousin tells her stories about village life, realizing that Aku-nna knew little about the customs of her people. Listening to the tales that her cousins relates, Aku-nna exclaims, "It's just like the stories you read in books." It is as if she has distanced herself from her own life, not yet realizing that she has become one of the characters in those books. It is also along this road that the first hint of rebellion expresses itself when Aku-nna stands her ground and refuses to take the bicycle ride that is offered her and then, later, refuses to undress to take a public bath. These are small discretions, but nonetheless they are Aku-nna's first steps toward asserting her opinions.

Once she reaches the village, Aku-nna watches as the women, who only minutes ago were laughing, immediately begin to cry. This abrupt change is Aku-nna's introduction

into village life. At this point, although she thinks it strange that the women can change their emotions so quickly, she is resigned to join in. "After all, she was going to be one of them," she says. With this statement, it is apparent that Aku-nna is still trying to understand her role and accept the restrictions within it.

Two year pass between Aku-nna's arrival at the village and the next chapter in the story. Akunna is fifteen and attending school. Her education "by the Europeans," plus the fact that she has not yet had her first menstruation, set her apart from most of the other girls. In the meantime, Chike, the young man who is the descendant of slaves, falls in love with Aku-nna. He falls for her because "he had never seen a girl so dependent, so unsure of herself, so afraid of her own people." It is through Chike that Aku-nna learns to voice her thoughts and gains the strength to resist the customs of her people. Her voice is still very quiet. She talks in secret to Chike. The reader is left to ponder whether she would have gained her voice at all had not a man been there to encourage her.

The first strong voice, although it is described as "faint and whispery," comes out of Aku-nna when Chike brings her things to help her through her first time of menstruation. They make slight sexual passes at one another, and when Chike asks what she thinks they should do about their forbidden relationship, Aku-nna responds: "Tell my people that you want to marry me." Chike is taken aback, but Aku-nna, gaining strength in both body and voice, covers his mouth with her hand "not knowing where the boldness which was working inside her came from." These actions and this voice are coming out of Aku-nna as if they did not belong to her. She seems to know neither the source nor the reason for them. "I always say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing. You are the only person I know who I am not afraid of." It is because of Chike that Aku-nna can speak. But her voice is still not strong enough. She is asking Chike to speak for her.

On her second cycle, the news of Aku-nna's menstruation goes public. Aku-nna realizes that from this point forward everything will be different. When the young girls around her begin to prepare her for the reaction to this news - the young men and their fathers bargaining a bride price with Aku-nna's stepfather - Aku-nna begins to understand more of the complexities of her newly embraced womanhood. She will soon be forced to marry, and her people will never consent to her marrying Chike.

> Little by little, the warm joy she had felt only minutes before seeped away. How could the world be so blind? Could not everyone see they [Aku-nna and Chike] belonged to each other? She had never felt so strongly about anything in her life.

It is through her love of Chike that Aku-nna discovers her hidden strength as well as her hidden self. Her wanting Chike is the first time that Akunna has admitted that she has a self. When she refers to the world being blind, it is her first awareness that this female self, in a patriarchal culture, has been defined as the one without power; in other words, she is the Other. It is not that the world is blind, but rather that the female self, in the male-dominated culture, has been made metaphorically invisible.

Despite her awareness of her position in her society and her impulse to resist her culture, on her way home from the fields, Aku-nna is afraid of dishonoring the god of the river by stepping into it while she is menstruating. This scene predicts the dilemma that will haunt Aku-nna until the end of the novel. Try as she must, she cannot rid herself of her culture.

When she returns home from the river, her stepfather (the "voice of authority, that authority which was a kind of legalised [sic] power") delineates Aku-nna's marginalized position, in case she had not yet figured it out for herself. She must marry according to his decision; and she must stop seeing Chike. "He was telling her, not in so many words, that she could never escape. She was trapped in the intricate web of Ibuza tradition. She must either obey or bring shame and destruction on her people."

Ironically, it is at this moment when she feels most trapped that Aku-nna also asserts her most independent and rebellious thought. "She was beginning to feel that it was unjust that she was not to be allowed a say in her own life, and she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all." Although Aku-nna is still not taking her life into her own hands, she is at least coming closer to doing so. First, she wanted Chike to stand up and speak for her. Now, she is berating her mother for not doing so. At this point, Aku-nna, at least, sees potential power in a female.

Aku-nna breaks with tradition by refusing to eat the chicken that has been slaughtered in her honor. However, she bows to tradition in the custom of allowing young suitors to fondle her breasts. She takes two pills that "deadened the pain," prays to God (possibly the Christian God, this time) to take her life if she should have to marry a man other than Chike, then goes out to meet the young men. Her protest against their groping and against the fear and anger that she experiences is a silent falling of tears. The masculine, in the form of Chike's fists, step in to rescue her. Once the tears are dry, Akunna again silently questions her role in her society. "What kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and make so many people unhappy?" When her mother, again, turns against her, Akunna reaches for Chike's hands.

Shortly after, when Aku-nna is kidnapped, it is not until she hears Chike's whistle, coming from the bushes, that "her numbed mind came alive." From that point on, she uses her own wits to save herself from being raped. An unrecognized voice rises up from somewhere deep inside of her.

> Maybe she was mad, because when later she remembered
> all that she said to Okoboshi [her newly
> intended husband] . . . she knew that the line dividing
> sanity and madness in her was very thin. Out
> came the words, low, crude words, very hurtful and
> damaging even to herself.

This is the pivotal moment, the climax of the story. Aku-nna has figured a way to play the traditions of her people against themselves. She makes up a story, telling Okoboshi that she is not a virgin. Not only has she taken away from Okoboshi the privilege of

"devirgining" her, she has insulted him and his family by claiming that she lost her virginity to Chike. Since tradition has determined that this act with a descendent of a slave is taboo, Aku-nna has won a temporary victory. She has delayed the rape by insulting Okoboshi. Although this sets up her ultimate escape to freedom, this is not the end of the story.

Chike, once again, rescues Aku-nna. And she, in the moment of victory, takes "refuge in passing out completely." The patriarchy may have changed faces, but, again, the masculine is the strength, and the feminine is the weakness. The two outcast characters, both marginalized into roles of the Other, leave the village and the traditions behind. Or do they?

At first it seems that joy has come into their lives. They live in a nice home, they buy nice furniture, they find jobs and are very happy. So happy are they that Aku-nna becomes fearful and again prays to the European God because too much happiness has come too quickly to them. And both of them pray to God every night to help them through Aku-nna's subsequent pregnancy. But it appears that the European God has been marginalized by the traditional deities. Aku-nna's stepfather, that voice of law, has called on the ancestral gods to curse Aku-nna because she has rebelled against his authority. She has disgraced him to such a degree that he refuses the bride price, multiplied many times over, offered by Chike's father.

Remembering that narrative passage from the beginning of the book, the one that describes what psychologists call the group mind - the mindset that demands all members of the tribe to think as one - brings this story full circle. "It would not occur to any one of them to behave or act differently." The existence of the tribe depends on this. So when Aku-nna, more so than Chike who is even more marginalized than she, tries to think independently, she finds that it is far more difficult than she imagined. She could run away. She could marry the man she loved. But she remains in bondage to the traditional ways of her people. Her mind is connected to the group mind. And it is the group mind that sentences her to death.

It is interesting to see that the only hope of freedom in this story comes from being born so far out on the edge that tradition no longer cares about who you are or what you do. Aku-nna's baby girl is that hope of freedom. Aku-nna has paid for her child's freedom with her own life. That freedom, despite the high cost, is not, however, totally unhindered. That child is still a female living in a patriarchal society whether or not she is accepted by her people. The independence comes to her at the price of not only losing her mother but of losing her grandmother, aunts, cousins, and all the men folk of the Ibuza village. To maintain that freedom, she must, as Emecheta herself must, remain an expatriate, possibly visiting her relatives but never living there. She lives so far out on the edge of the Other that she barely exists in terms of her own culture.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *The Bride Price,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Fishburn examines narrative intention in The Bride Price *and how a Western reading of the text could result in an incomplete understanding of the novel.*

Critical Essay #3

Returning to the issue of narrative intention, the question raised by the ending of *The Bride Price* then becomes the following: toward what goal has this novel been oriented? Or, more specifically, what direction do *Western readers* expect this novel to take? Does this expectation help us understand the novel, or does it interfere with understanding? For those of us who were trained to find patterns in literature by Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism,* I would argue that the tacit assumptions we bring to *The Bride Price* virtually ensure that we will (try to) read it as New Comedy. This mode, according to Frye, is commonly centered on "an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot." Although the blocking agents initially govern society, a new society emerges at the end "after a discovery in which the hero becomes wealthy or the heroine respectable." As we can see from the following outline, for most of Emecheta's novel this comic pattern holds true□just long enough for us to expect a happy ending. But, ultimately, the narrator disappoints our expectations: first by failing to redeem the hero, then by killing off the heroine and apparently agreeing that it is best that she die, and finally by reinstating the power of the old society.

When Aku-nna is thirteen years old, her father dies unexpectedly. Following tradition, Ma Blackie takes her two children back to Ibuza to live, where she marries her husband's older brother. Shortly after Ma Blackie's marriage, the community school teacher falls in love with Aku-nna and begins to court her. [Boy meets girl.] Their love is forbidden, however, because Chike is the descendant of slaves. [Outside interference tries to keep them apart.] Though Aku-nna is widely sought after by many suitors, she knows she will be happy only with Chike. Once she becomes eligible for marriage, one of her suitors arranges to kidnap her□ which, according to custom, is a legitimate way of getting a wife. [Boy loses girl to outside interference.] To save her virginity after she is captured, Aku-nna tells Okoboshi the lie that she has already had sexual intercourse with Chike. She then finally escapes and runs off with the man she loves. [Boy regains girl.] Her uncle is so enraged by her scandalous behavior that he divorces her mother and refuses to accept the bride price from Chike's father. [Here the comic plot begins to break down.] Akunna and Chike love one another deeply, but she never recovers from the fact that her village and family refuse to forgive her. The novel ends when Aku-nna dies giving birth to a daughter whom Chike names Joy. Following Aku-nna's death, the narrator concludes the novel with an extraordinary paragraph, in which she explains that ultimately Chike and Aku-nna reinforced "the traditional superstition" they had been unwittingly challenging. Moreover, she tells us that Aku-nna's death is used by her people as an object lesson to young girls, who are warned not to pick husbands on their own and to make sure their bride price is paid. If it is not paid, they will surely die, like Aku-nna, in childbirth. This cautionary tale, according to the narrator, still carries "psychological" weight today, but why it does is "anybody's guess."

If we have been reading the novel expecting a comic resolution, not only are we astounded by Aku-nna's untimely death, but we are at a loss as to what to make of the narrator's attitude toward it. Are we to mourn Aku-nna and pity her for her foolishness?

Is her death tragic? Or is it a necessary punishment for her sins? Should we be glad for her society that its values were upheld? But if, indeed, Aku-nna must die, we expect at least the narrator to be sorrowful over this necessity. When she expresses no sorrow, she challenges us to rethink the genre we have been using to understand the novel. Clearly, the conflict between an individual and her society is more complicated here than we had originally been led (by our own cultural expectations) to believe. A Western reading would assume that tradition had somehow failed Aku-nna because it punished her for being herself. But the narrator's concluding remarks cast doubt on this interpretation. It will be recalled that the first time Emecheta wrote this book, the story ended with Aku-nna and Chike "living happily ever after, disregarding their people." But Emecheta finally concluded that the community's values were more important than a (Western-style) happy ending. So when she rewrote the story, she created a girl who purposely picked "her own husband because she was 'modern' but was not quite strong enough to shake off all the tradition and taboos." Aku-nna is thus destroyed by the guilt she feels for having disobeyed her mother and uncle. This outcome, justifiable as it might appear to Emecheta, troubles most Western readers, however, because of our predisposition to side with these two lovers, who have become social outcasts. It troubles us, in A Western reading would assume that tradition had somehow failed Aku-nna because it punished her for being herself. But the narrator's concluding remarks cast doubt on this interpretation. It will be recalled that the first time Emecheta wrote this book, the story ended with Aku-nna and Chike 'living happily ever after, disregarding their people.'" other words, because the beliefs it is based on are embedded in a tradition alien to our own.

At the same time, an obverse reading to the one just proposed□that Akunna fails her people by violating tradition□seems equally questionable since for most of the novel the narrator is extremely sympathetic to this rebellious heroine. Emecheta achieves this sympathy, in part, by narrating the novel from Aku-nna's point of view. The opening scenes, for example, seem calculated to pull on our heartstrings, as we witness first the unusually close relationship between father and daughter□and then see this bond torn apart by the father's unexpected death. In fact, Emecheta's heroines are usually closer to their fathers than to their mothers. Aku-nna's relationship, in particular, seems to symbolize that she would like to take over the role of the father by deciding for herself what she will do. After her father dies, it seems significant that Akunna temporarily loses her voice during the mourning rituals. This double loss (father/voice) suggests that in losing her father she has lost an advocate. At the same time, the death of her father can be seen symbolically as the Death of the Fathers; for once she has regained her voice, she "speaks out" against the Will of the Fathers by going against tradition. But hers is an ill-fated rebellion, soon silenced by the Voice of Tradition. What happens here is similar to what Peter Brooks describes as happening in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (suggesting that some European fiction can, indeed, help us understand Emecheta's novels). When the father dies, Brooks argues, "the Nameof- the-Father□the father as prohibition, law, 'morality'□emerges only the stronger, to be submitted to in full abnegation, or else rejected in a total revolt." Aku-nna's rebellion fails, as we see later, because she is incapable of marshalling the resources needed for the total rebellion Brooks identifies. But before the failure becomes manifest, Aku-nna does seem to be assuming her father's protective mantle.

Once Aku-nna moves to Ibuza, for example, she becomes convinced that she will have to help take care of her mother and thinks she might be able to do so by becoming a teacher. She recalls sadly at this point that her father had wanted her to have more education. But this same loving father has named his daughter "Aku-nna, meaning literally 'father's wealth,' knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price." What the narrator means by "consolation" is not entirely clear, however. Does Ezekiel need consolation because he is disappointed that Aku-nna is not a son? Or does he need it because he will lose Aku-nna to another man? Or both? Whatever the meaning, Aku-nna herself is not upset by the arrangement. In fact, she only hopes she will not be a disappointment to him. Our sympathy for Aku-nna deepens after her father's death, when we see how ill at ease she is in her new surroundings. Though Ibuza is the village of her ancestors, Aku-nna is so unfamiliar with the customs of her people that one of her young relatives chastises her for her ignorance. Her mother is not much help either. It is not only ignorance but also shyness that makes the transition hard for Aku-nna. Not having been raised in Ibuza, for example, she cannot understand why it is acceptable for men to see her bathing naked in the stream or for her suitors to play roughly with her breasts. These customs are also alien to Western readers, who probably have much the same reaction to them as Aku-nna. Perhaps we sympathize with her as much as we do because she is like us in being unfamiliar□and uncomfortable □with Ibuza customs.

For his part, Chike makes a perfect Western hero. He is a handsome, charming, reformed rake who is absolutely devoted to his new love□treating her with kindness and compassion when everyone else ignores her. Perhaps the most touching scene in the novel occurs when Aku-nna gets her menarche during school. She is in pain and embarrassed, but Chike is so gentle and tactful that she lets him take care of her. After giving her an aspirin, he loans her his jacket so no one can see the blood on her dress; later he brings her a supply of sanitary napkins with a little booklet explaining what to do□all this from a man whose culture still teaches that a menstruating woman is unclean. It is no wonder Aku-nna falls in love with Chike. We practically do ourselves. Our sympathy only intensifies when it becomes clear that Chike and Akunna will not be allowed to marry because his ancestors were slaves. To us, this is a prohibition that makes very little sense. But the villagers and the narrator insist that for her "to marry the descendant of a slave would be an abomination." Class differences we might be able to accept (especially if we were British), but this goes beyond class. Chike, in fact, comes from a wealthier (and better-educated) family than Aku-nna. Nor would we regard marriage to the descendants of slaves as an abomination. Such events occur without censure□or comment □all the time in our culture. In sum, Western readers have trouble anticipating□and accepting□ the ending of *The Bride Price* because the narrator focuses so much attention on Aku-nna and Chike's courtship ritual. In watching them meet and gradually fall in love, we ourselves become emotionally involved in their relationship□especially as they have to contend with the older generation's prohibitions. Illustrative of the difference between African and Western readings is Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's description of Aku-nna and Chike's relationship. Where I as a Western reader enjoy the emotions evoked by their touching love story, Ogunyemi dismisses the "sentimentality evoked by the lovesick couple." How, then, are we to read this novel?

Since our Western comedic genre is not particularly useful, we need to ask if we have any other genres that might do a better job of helping us understand Emecheta's novels.

Critical Essay #4

Bakhtin makes several distinctions between the epic and the novel that are useful to Western readers trying to understand Emecheta's fiction. The epic he associates with the "absolute past" and the power of tradition because it speaks in the monologic voice of unquestioned authority. The novel, on the other hand, "is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future)." Its dialogic (competing) voices speak in "unofficial language and unofficial thought." In short, where the epic is a closed genre reflective of what has already occurred, the novel is open□to the present and the future. As such, the novel is almost by definition a progressive genre. Since we in the West believe that Chike and Aku-nna would do no lasting harm to society by falling in love and marrying, at first glance "epic" seems a more suitable term to describe *The Bride Price* than "novel," as it certainly appears to valorize the past and to reaffirm tradition. Because we value individual rights over community rights and because we cannot take seriously the taboos surrounding the descendants of former slaves, we think Chike and Aku-nna should be free to marry. From our perspective Aku-nna's punishment by death is unwarranted, unmotivated, and implausible. To us, this ending is reactionary, invoking the archetypal endings of an absolute past when heroines were not free to do and become what they wanted.

But if we read the novel from more of an Africanized perspective, the ending, while perhaps not very progressive, does not seem to be particularly reactionary. It is conservative in that it does reestablish the old society, but Aku-nna and Chike's transgressions apparently threaten the very fabric of village life□as is evident in the villagers' response. In revenge for Aku-nna's behavior, for example, the Ofulues destroy all the vegetation on the plantation owned by Chike's father, and Ma Blackie's new husband divorces her. Though we in the West are horrified that Aku-nna must die to reaffirm her people's tradition, the narrative suggests that the sacrifice of this individual rebel is necessary for the well-being of the community. In her death, moreover, Aku-nna signals that she has accepted the importance of tradition. Because these traditions can be quite flexible, Ward argues that it is not necessary for Aku-nna to accept them blindly. But Alasdair MacIntyre, another student of tradition, sheds a different light on the situation when he argues that because an individual is part of an ongoing (narrative) history, she becomes, consciously or not, "one of the bearers of a tradition" □an assertion the novel seems to support. For even though Aku-nna might have felt initially that her actions were her own and thus of little interest to the community, she soon comes to realize that she herself is the community, that what she and Chike do affects everyone, not just themselves. After trying to make a life for herself, she realizes that she can live only within the community that raised her. Her death therefore becomes a symbol for the fact that she has finally accepted her role as a bearer of her people's African traditions.

But for us in the West to see that the ending of *The Bride Price* is not necessarily so tragic, we have to be able to foreground our own prejudices□ and listen to the competing voices that, in Bakhtin's terms, make this more a novel than an epic. Whereas the monologic epic has a "singular belief system," the dialogic heteroglossia of

a novel makes for multiple competing belief systems. Bakhtin finds, moreover, a correlation between what a character does and says—with the one informing the other ideologically. In the dialogic or competitive environs of a novel, unlike the monologic world of epic, the hero's discourse is constantly being challenged, leading Bakhtin to argue that the "idea of testing the hero" may be the single most important "organizing idea in the novel." Here Bakhtin distinguishes between "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse"— which I invoked in my discussion of Adah Obi. Authoritative discourse originates externally in religion, politics, and morality. It is, therefore, associated, like the epic, with the authority of the past and treated like "the word of the fathers. . . . It is akin to taboo." Internally persuasive discourse reflects the ideology of the individual character, but, in direct contrast to authoritative discourse, it carries no status in society. Within a novel (but never an epic), these two kinds of discourses engage one another dialogically in the consciousness of a single character, helping to form his or her belief system. In what I will then call Emecheta's *novel,* the struggle between Aku-nna's internal discourse and the authoritative discourse of her African fathers can be seen most readily in how the hero/heroine copes with the pressures of tradition. Though Aku-nna listens to her own internal discourse and finds the courage to reject certain traditions, others she dutifully accepts.

Let us first look at the customs Aku-nna accepts, those that have to do with menstruation—the symbol of her womanhood that signifies her marriageability. She begins with a minor rebellion that she is unable to sustain. Because she does not want her family to arrange a marriage for her, she keeps the fact of her menarche secret for two months. She reveals her secret to her friends only when she needs to consult with them whether it will be permissible for her to cross a stream in her "unclean" condition. Far better to tell her friends, she thinks, than to risk being treated forever "as an outcast leper." When Aku-nna finally does cross the stream, she prays "that the god of the stream would be lenient with her for this terrible sin she was committing." This scene at the river suggests the differences between Emecheta's African and our Western attitudes toward nature, a difference that would certainly seem to favor Africa. Though it would never occur to most Westerners that they could sin against a river no matter what the act involved, we might all be better off if we were able to conceive of this possibility, as much of the world continues to use its fresh waterways (and its oceans) as repositories of untreated sewage. But Aku-nna is a traditional African woman who has been taught by her people the necessity of maintaining the purity of the village water supply. This teaching has been reinforced through myth and taboos to such an extent that it constitutes the very fabric of Aku-nna's being. Rather than reading these taboos as evidence of the sexism in Aku-nna's culture, Western feminists might better ask what is served by such customs. Philomina Chioma Steady argues, for example, that the taboos surrounding menstruation are not as misogynistic as they might seem to Westerners, since semen also "can be seen as polluting."

Though it simply does not occur to Aku-nna to question her unclean status as a menstruating woman, she does question other taboos—if only implicitly. In Bakhtin's terms, Aku-nna represents a "potential discourse," which is largely unspoken but nonetheless quite evident from her actions. In this novel, the authoritarian, closed language of the fathers (custom, tradition, taboo) is continually being challenged by the

unofficial, open language of the daughters□a challenge seen in most of Emecheta's other novels. Though the language spoken by the daughters is not the revolutionary woman's language called for by French feminists, the terms of the battle are quite similar. Emecheta herself clearly establishes the primacy of the fathers' language. As soon as Aku-nna's stepfather, Okonkwo, learns that she has begun menstruating, he tells her she must give up her friendship with Chike, speaking to her in "the voice of authority . . . which was a kind of legalised power. He was telling her, not in so many words, that she could never escape." The discourse of the fathers is so powerful that Okonkwo needs no words to tell Aku-nna she is trapped by tradition. She knows it, and the knowledge destroys her. Because the men hold the women enthralled by the power of the authoritative discourse of the fathers, the daughters must speak another language (an internally persuasive unofficial discourse) if they are ever to liberate themselves. When Aku-nna is kidnapped, it looks for a while as if she just might have the will to speak such a language. She is so sickened by the prospects of being married to Okoboshi that she achieves a mysterious strength that gives her courage to defend herself and "fight . . . for her honour." Significantly, she saves herself by what she says□and what she says is a lie. It is a lie that overturns reality by challenging the legitimacy of the fathers' discourse. Furthermore, it is a lie that insults Okoboshi's manhood. Aku-nna says scornfully that his father is merely a "dog chief," since all he has been capable of stealing is "a girl who has been taught what men taste like by a slave." But hers is a doomed rebellion. Though she successfully defends herself against her kidnapper's sexual advances, she is soon discouraged by the realization that she has nowhere to run. Because she has brought shame on her family, her uncle prevents her mother from intervening and would kill her himself if he caught her. But Aku-nna knows that if she has to stay with her kidnappers, she will not live long since no one violates "the laws of the land and survives." Even after betraying her people, Aku-nna remains a believer, begging Chike, for example, to pay her bride price so she will not die in childbirth. Though Chike's father offers her uncle a large sum of money, Okonkwo refuses to accept it. Determined to kill this girl who has brought such shame on his household, Okonkwo makes a fetish in Akunna's image, the purpose of which is to force her to come home. Soon Aku-nna tells Chike's father that her stepfather "calls me back in the wind." Though she vows to stay, inevitably she surrenders to the authority of the fathers' discourse□the "voice" that tells her to return to her family.

Critical Essay #5

Although Aku-nna's internal discourse is no match for the authoritative discourse of her African fathers and she herself is ultimately silenced by death, the novel itself is a veritable forum of competing discourses. Additional heteroglossia is evident, for example, in statements such as the following one, which describes Ma Blackie's attempts to have a third child by Ezekiel; desperate, she returns to her village in hopes that she can "placate their Oboshi river goddess into giving her some babies." There is no way that this statement can have the same meaning for Westerners as it would for Africans. It is not even clear that it would have any meaning for Westerners, if by this we mean to imply we actually think we understand what has been said. For, at best, we would probably consider it a quaint notion that a river goddess would have anything at all to do with fertility. We certainly would never believe it. What is a river goddess anyway? More particularly, what is an *Oboshi* river goddess? This passage and our questions about it suggest that Emecheta has not forsworn her African point of view, for the narrator never questions the premise behind Ma Blackie's attempts to placate the river goddess. There is absolutely no suggestion that the narrator thinks it is either a quaint or irrational approach to what (most) Westerners would regard as a straightforward medical problem. The question arises, therefore, of how we Westerners are to read Ma Blackie's behavior and informing beliefs. Do we accept her behavior on its own terms and regard it as rational, or do we judge it on our terms and regard it as irrational? At the very least, if we are sincere about trying to make sense out of an alien practice, we might do well to return once more to Peter Winch's advice about understanding Azande magic. It will be recalled from my discussion of his ideas in previous chapters that Winch believes it is wrong for us to try to force the Zande category into our own familiar distinction between science and nonscience. Instead, because it is, after all, we who want to understand them, we have the far more difficult challenge of trying "to extend our understanding" of their categories. As we have already seen in our discussion of genres, Bernstein argues that the "primary issue [for Winch] is not whether the Azande make logical inferences according to the same rules that we use." Rather, what is at issue is "how we *classify* what they are doing."

To return, then, to the practice in question, Ma Blackie's visit to a river goddess. In describing the place of river goddesses in African culture, Elaine Savory Fido reports that such a "deity is usually beautiful, seductive, powerful," whose actions "can vary between malevolence and protective good nature." This description, however, does not offer much help to us Western readers who are still not quite sure how to categorize the concept of a river goddess. What we want to know is, how does placating a river goddess compare, for example, with our Western notion of prayer? How does it compare with soliciting advice from a medical doctor? Or are both these categories insufficient for understanding what is going on here? Is there a genre somewhere between faith and medical science that might be more useful to us in coming to terms with Ma Blackie's pilgrimage? Moreover, have the attitudes of Igbos themselves toward their own river goddesses changed significantly over the years? How would these or other African readers today interpret Ma Blackie's behavior? Would they find the

behavior quaint and outdated? Or would they find real value in what she is doing? Unfortunately, Emecheta's novel remains silent on these questions—and in so doing reminds us of the differences that separate us.

Other examples of heteroglossia (which lead to similar problems of classification and interpretation) can be found in the African terminology that Emecheta includes—terms that also reflect a worldview alien to that of the West. As a child, Aku-nna gets sick every time an illness goes around; she is sick so often that Ma Blackie often implores her daughter to make up her mind if "she was going to live or die." This seems relatively clear. Any distraught Western parent might say the same thing. But then the text continues with the information that Ma Blackie could not tolerate "a 'living dead', an *ogbanje*". Emecheta does not stop to explain just what the term "living dead" means to these people. It does not mean what Westerners mean by it. It is not the same as a zombie. An ogbanje is a baby or small child who refuses to stay alive or dead: to torment its parents, it keeps getting born and then dies soon thereafter. In other words, if a family has three or four young babies die, it is the same ogbanje being born over and over again.

Ezekiel's response to his wife's infertility is another classic example of the heteroglossia in this novel, as it moves from one worldview to another in a single sentence. Keenly disappointed by the fact that he has only one son, he reminds Ma Blackie how unfair it is since once he had "paid this heavy *bride price*[,] he had had their marriage *sanctified by Anglicanism*" (emphases added). Ezekiel's funeral is a more extensive example of heteroglossia, as its components are created out of a melange of the old and the new. When it comes time to decide who gets to stay beside the body, Ezekiel's friends are faced with a real problem since the choice of mourners will determine where he goes after death. The men want him to join his father in the earth, but the more rebellious Lagos women "preferred Nna to go to heaven," attracted as they are to the exotic "imported" religion. In making the distinction between the old and the new, the narrator unexpectedly describes the old way as "pagan"—thus raising the question of whether she shares the Christians' negative perception of indigenous African religions. This question is raised in another passage when the narrator, having been a kind of advocate for her culture, suddenly takes the viewpoint of an outsider (who seems to have her own problems with classification). It is relatively easy, the narrator notes, for a visitor to see that Ibuza is an Igbo village. It is harder, however, to decide "whether to classify the people as Christians or pagans." As much as the term "pagan" sticks out here, it is also not clear what the term "Christian" means to people who believe in river goddesses, bride prices, and ogbanjes. Certainly, it does not quite mean what it would to a Western Christian. Other terms that are familiar to Westerners also have a different meaning in this African novel. The concept of "father" is extended to those male relatives who take care of children; "and in Ibuza one's brother-in-law was also given the title of husband." Some children might have such an abundance of "mothers" and "fathers" that they "may not see much of [their] true parents." The fact that the narrator explains these customs at all, of course, suggests a Western influence—for African readers (or at least most Nigerian readers) would already know about them and not need to have them explained.

In sum, in *The Bride Price* there is, indeed, a rich and complex dialogic relationship between the voices of tradition and those in rebellion against tradition □the very dialogic heteroglossia that helps qualify this text as a novel. But even though Akunna's unofficial challenge to authoritative discourse helps open the text to many interpretations, Akunna herself eventually does allow the Voice of the Fathers to overwhelm her internal voice, graphically reminding us of how dependent we are on others for our sense of self and our sense of reality.

Critical Essay #6

In *The Social Construction of Reality,* Berger and Luckmann describe a dialogic relationship between the individual and society that is similar to the one Bakhtin describes. Though objective and subjective reality can be characterized as basically "symmetrical," on Berger and Luckmann's view, there is always more objective reality than an individual can internalize. Because we simultaneously experience ourselves as a part of, and apart from, society, the status of the relationship between external and internal reality, then, is always being negotiated; in short, it is dialogic and dialectical. The "instrument" of our socialization, moreover, is language itself as it has been incorporated in "moral instruction, inspirational poetry, religious allegory and whatnot." At the same time that the maintenance of external reality is dependent on our conversation with others, the maintenance of an individual's subjective reality is also dependent on our various language systems. In sum, language defines us as human and saves us from the terrors of isolation. As Emecheta's novel convincingly illustrates, because of our (discursive) interdependence, even the simplest challenges to everyday reality are hard to maintain without some sort of group support. In most cases of individual rebellion, according to Berger and Luckmann, the heretic surrenders to the superior strength of the community with very little fanfare. In extreme cases, however, when someone seriously threatens everyday reality, society takes more active measures to protect itself by trying to re-educate the rebel. In effect, the rebel is talked out of her heresy through the therapeutic maneuvers of the analyst's couch or the confessional. If this relatively benign persuasive route fails, society labels the heretic insane or criminal and, if necessary, incarcerates her for either her own or society's good. African societies may be less threatened by heretics, may try to call them back to the fold by the informal intervention of relatives or friends, but the principle remains intact: individuals must fit into their social roles. The person who fails to be socialized, according to Berger and Luckmann, "is socially predefined as a profiled type□the cripple, the bastard, the idiot, and so on." Such predefining has the socially desirable consequence of denying both plausibility and permanency to any heretical self definitions that the individual might dream up.

So it is in *The Bride Price.* For whatever reason, Aku-nna does not accept all teachings of her people's authoritative discourse as her own. But in rejecting one of her people's most fundamental tenets, she fails to find enough external support to sustain her rebellion. Though Chike clearly adores her, his love is not enough to counter the overwhelming influence of what Bakhtin calls tradition "sacred and sacrosanct." Though the discourse of *The Bride Price* is not to be *equated* with that of an epic, therefore, the ideals of the past are justified and reconfirmed here in a process that is *similar* to what occurs in an epic. Tradition is not only how things were done but how they are still done. When Aku-nna's father dies, for example, even though Ma Blackie is still alive, her people treat Aku-nna like an orphan. Even in modern-day Nigeria, the narrator observes, a family without a father is "in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much." In Berger and Luckmann's terms, therefore, we might say that Aku-nna has been socially predefined as an "orphan"□or, at the very least, she has

been allowed to forget that she is a child of the community and must abide by its conventions. Chike is by birth socially predefined as an outcast. When they fall in love and break a taboo, therefore, they are simply acting out the outsider status they seem already to have. Because they are outsiders, their actions can have no validity or merit. Chike is doomed to social approbation and isolation because of his ancestry, but Aku-nna must be reunited with her people, if only in death□ for tradition must be honored. Because this is a novel and not an epic, however, the ideals of the past are also shown to be vulnerable to challenge□ a vulnerability that we have already seen in the text's abundant dialogic heteroglossia.

Though, indeed, Aku-nna herself fails the heroine's test and is ultimately silenced by death, neither side achieves narrative hegemony. The fathers fail to silence the heroine's internal discourse (Aku-nna never does go home), and the heroine fails to overthrow the fathers. Complicating the issue for Western feminist readers, however, is the fact that the fathers' language represents traditional African values, whereas the daughter's language, in some respects, represents almost a Western alternative to these old ways. Lest we think that the novel's meaning lies only with the daughter's voice, however, it is important to remember that the narrator speaks in yet another voice□one that is richly complex and full of contradictions.

In *The Bride Price,* as in all of Emecheta's fiction, the narrator functions as a kind of mediating voice between the fathers' and daughters' discourse □and between an African and Western discourse. Because Emecheta's narrator mediates between cultures, we might even suggest, adapting an idea from Marcus and Fischer, that she is functioning as an ethnographer. Envisioning the ethnographer as positioned *outside* the alien culture, however, they suggest□borrowing themselves from Clifford Geertz□that an ethnographer juxtaposes the alien culture's "experience-near or local concepts" with those "experience-far concepts that the writer shares with his readership." For my purposes I want to reverse the stance and suggest that the writer (narrator) in Emecheta's case is more likely to share the experience-near or local concepts with her subjects and, as a consequence, is frequently not speaking in terms familiar to her readers. Though we, as Western readers, may be tempted to see the narrator as speaking primarily in experience-distant concepts (our own), I think it is a temptation we must work to overcome. This shift cannot help but remind us that much of what we read is truly alien to our Western experience and not easily accommodated within our own horizons. Only by accepting these differences, after all, do we have any hope of seeing ourselves anew. This is not to say that we are so locked into our own language game that we cannot understand anything in the alien culture; it is to say that it is more difficult to understand than we might wish□or think. For Marcus and Fischer, when we attempt to understand across cultures, the ethnographer functions for us "as mediator between distinct sets of categories and cultural conceptions that interact in different ways at different points." From this I infer that we can expect some interactions to be relatively painless while others will be almost unbearably difficult. Clearly, there is much in Emecheta's fiction I feel confident I understand. But I am equally confident that much of this confidence is misplaced.

Following the passage cited previously in which Okonkwo has told Aku-nna to break off relations with Chike, for example, is this statement: "He walked away, leaving her standing there by the egbo trees, *for he must not come near or touch her now when she was unclean*" (emphasis added). What is unclear in this sentence is whose point of view the italicized part represents. It immediately follows Okonkwo's authoritative statements and could represent his thinking. Yet it is contained in a paragraph that expresses Aku-nna's point of view and internal thinking. We can be certain that Okonkwo, the Voice of the village Fathers, would *share* the perception that she is unclean. We can also be pretty certain from what occurred at the stream that Aku-nna shares the same perception. But we cannot tell whether the narrator joins them. In short, though we know who *could* be speaking, we are not sure who *is* speaking. According to Barthes, a text's plurality reveals itself in our inability to decide who is speaking□in fact, the "more indeterminate the origin of the statement, the more plural the text." The more plural the text, we might add, the more difficult our interpretive task of understanding. While we might simply be content, in this postmodern age, to enjoy the novel's plurality and let it go at that, if we accept Emecheta's texts as ethnographic documents (as they perforce must be accepted, at least to a certain degree), unthinkingly embracing their plurality seems a facile solution to a problem of "translation" that deserves more careful attention. At other times, however, submitting to the plurality of Emecheta's texts seems the "right" thing to do. Since the people who inhabit Emecheta's novel are, for the most part, not plagued by what Bernstein calls Cartesian anxiety, submitting to the plurality of her texts certainly seems an African thing to do.

Source: Katherine Fishburn, "The Sense of an Ending," in *Reading Buchi Emecheta,* Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 80-92.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay excerpt, Holst Petersen examines The Bride Price *as "a logical development" of Emecheta's autobiographical writing.*

It comes as no surprise that the manuscript Francis burned in *Second Class Citizen* surfaces as Emecheta's 1976 book, *The Bride Price.* With this book, set in the early 1950s in Lagos and Ibuza, she departs from her own life story. Despite this radical shift in subject matter, *The Bride Price* is a logical development of her writing. She continues to explore the injustices of caste, one of her main concerns in the first two books, but the emphasis is somewhat different. Whereas in her autobiographical books Emecheta stresses the possibility of overcoming the restrictions of caste or caste-like conditions through personal initiative, in *The Bride Price* and the following novels set in Nigeria she stresses the destructive potential of rigid caste structures, which persist in the otherwise rapidly changing Igbo society. Her main pre-occupation continues to be the role of women. Aku-nna, her name significantly meaning "father's wealth," is a young girl of thirteen when her father dies, and she is forced to move from Lagos with her mother and brother back to their village. Her desire to continue school is frowned upon but accepted, as educated girls fetch higher bride prices. Aku-nna is alienated from the village youth and falls in love with the school-teacher. He, however, is the victim of another caste structure: he is a descendant of slaves and thus not allowed to marry a freeborn. True love runs its course - they elope under dramatic circumstances, get married, and settle down to a good life, supported by the oil boom, education, and Western values, but tradition takes its revenge. The bride price is not paid, and according to tradition the bride must die in childbirth, which is what Akunna does. Emecheta's explanation for this hovers uneasily between either presenting it as a psychological effect of a strongly held belief - resulting in fear and fatalistic surrender - or using modern medical terminology. The book thus ends with the defeat of what is clearly portrayed as progressive forces, but this somewhat surprising defeat only helps to highlight the injustice of the situation.

Source: Kirsten Holst Petersen, "Buchi Emecheta," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 117: *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers,* edited by Bernth Lindfors and Reinhard Sander, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 161-62.

Topics for Further Study

The beliefs of the Ibo people embraced both the traditional gods of their ancestors, as well as the Christian rituals of the European colonizers. Look over the passages that cover the death and burial of Ezekiel Odia. How do these belief systems work together? Where do they clash?

Aku-nna and her brother, Nna-nndo, are raised according to their gender. What are the major differences in how their roles are defined? Although gender roles in America might not be as rigidly defined and the differences in raising boys and girls may be very subtle, do you think children in the United States grow up with any restrictions based on gender? List these restrictions, however slight, as they might appear, for instance, in the American home, or in teacher expectations in elementary school, or in relationships between young men and young women in high school.

Ma Blackie is often caught up in her culture's traditions. However, she is an intelligent woman who has lived in the city and her thoughts differ slightly from the other woman in her village. In what ways does Ma Blackie break, or at least stretch, some of the boundaries imposed on her by her village traditions?

Menstruation signals the emergence of a young girl into womanhood. In *The Bride Price* a traditional ceremony is performed to honor this transition. In American culture, there is little, if any, celebration of this passing from one stage to the other. If you could create such a ceremony, what elements would you include? Think about this transition as a rite of passage and write a description of such a ceremony. How could you use similar passages (like the metamorphosis of a butterfly) to symbolize change? Do you know of a poem that might be read to honor this transition? What role could men play? How might you use music, dance, and costumes?

There is only slight, overt mention of Europeans and European culture in *The Bride Price.* However, despite the subtle references, European culture is definitely a strong and intrusive issue in this story of the Ibo people. Find passages that make references to the colonial powers. How are the Ibo people influenced by the European culture? Think in terms of the schools, the churches, and the European laws.

Most of the world is ruled under a system of patriarchy□social organization marked by the supremacy of the male (or father) and the subsequent legal and economic dependency of women and children. The supremacy of the male is defined differently, according to various cultural standards, but the basic tenet remains the same: the male dominates the female. Compare the Ibo cultural standards to American standards. How do they differ? Are there any ways in which the patriarchal rules of the Ibo culture work to the advantage of the Ibo women? Are there any ways in which the Ibo women might have advantages over American women?

The offering (the bride price) that an Ibo male must give the family of his intended bride could be looked at, as well as criticized, as an archaic form of purchasing a woman.

However, the American (or European) tradition of buying an expensive diamond ring as a sign of engagement might similarly be looked at, as well as criticized, as another form of purchasing a woman. Are there any differences between the two traditions? What if you compared these traditions from a different point of reference such as Europe in the eighteenth or nineteenth century when arranged marriages were still prominent? What if you compared them in terms of European royalty where marriages were arranged to ensure peace between two countries?

Compare and Contrast

Pre-Colonial Times: Traditional rule is centered in the village with the chief as the head. Women affect decisions due to their strong economic status.

Colonial Times: Due to the influence of European standards, women are subjugated to a domestic role and ruled by the male leader of the family. Although chiefs retain some autonomy in the village, they are overseen by local, European- based, government officials.

1960: Nigeria is given full independence.

1967-1970: Ibo people unite, secede from Nigeria, and form the country of Biafra until their surrender in 1970, when they are reintegrated into Nigeria.

Pre-Colonial Times: Traditional religions based on multiple gods and goddesses prevail.

Colonial Times: European influence brings Christianity to the Ibo people. During this time, a mixture of Christian and traditional Ibo religions prevails, although Europeans try to outlaw the traditional practices.

1980: The majority of Ibo people are Christians, although some traditional beliefs still linger and are practiced openly. The practice of traditional religion is no longer illegal.

Pre-Colonial Times: Children in the Ibo culture are trained to carry on their adult roles according to gender. Young boys learn about the agriculture of specific crops through apprenticeship training. Young girls learn their roles, which include agriculture and crafts from the women of the village. They also learn how to rear the younger children. There is no formal educational system.

1843: The first missionary school is established in Nigeria. Girls are discouraged from attending.

1914: There are fifty-nine government elementary schools, ninety-one missionary elementary schools, and eleven missionary secondary schools in all of Nigeria.

1950: A three-tiered school system is established that includes: primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Over one million children attend elementary schools throughout Nigeria; thirty-six thousand attend secondary schools with 90 percent of this group coming from the southern portion of Nigeria (where the Ibo people live).

1980: Forty-seven percent of all children attend school, and over one hundred thousand go on to college.

Pre-Colonial Times: Women have the capability of gaining impressive economic status. Women's work is complementary to men's work. Through the help of younger

co-wives, older women are free to work in the market, selling their produce and crafts. Women are blamed if they did not produce children; male children are the preferred gender. When a woman marries, she has less influence in her husband's family than his mother and his sisters. Single women (whether never married, divorced, or widowed) are looked down upon.

Colonial Times: Male supremacy is encouraged. Economic status of women declines as they are not allowed to grow cash crops and are discouraged from working outside of the home.

1980s: Although polygamy is still practiced, the support of co-wives has diminished. In 1982, a national feminist movement is inaugurated, and it calls for the abolishment of polygamy. However, the general population of Nigerian market women are against this decree. Although laws have been created to protect women's rights, women rarely receive any of their husbands' property upon their husbands' death. Single women are easily exploited economically with their property often being sold without their consent.

What Do I Read Next?

The Slave Girl (1997), by Buchi Emecheta, as the title suggests, is about a young slave girl living in and dealing with Nigerian culture in the early part of the twentieth century. She is eventually freed when a man purchases her as a bride. Her freedom is in concept only, as she becomes her husband's property.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) takes place in Lagos, Nigeria. It is a story that continues along the same lines as Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976). It tells the story of the suffering of women in a male dominated culture caught in the clash of change as Nigeria works toward independence. Emecheta's own move toward unorthodox female characters intensifies in this novel.

Jamaica Kincaid, who grew up in the Caribbean, writes a story about a 19 year old young woman who must leave her island homeland to work in the United States as an au pair. *Lucy* (1990) is the story of a young black woman struggling to find her own identity.

In *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1994), Ntozake Shange reveals the complexities of Liliane's life as she struggles against racism and bigotry in the United States. This story also deals with Liliane's angers and frustrations in dealing with the loss of her mother, as well as her relationships with her father and close friends.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a tale about the challenges that face a young, black woman living in the American South. It is a coming-of-age story in which a young woman flees from a pre-arranged marriage and struggles to create an acceptable understanding of life.

A young Haitian woman, Sophie, from Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), is sent from Haiti to live with her mother in New York. Sophie's relationship with her mother is a key issue in this story, one that she does not fully comprehend until she finally returns to her homeland.

Further Study

Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart,* Heinemann, 1958.

Read Achebe to get a male's perspective on some of the same issues that Emecheta writes about in reference to the African experience. This is Achebe's first novel about Nigerian tribal life, and it takes place during Nigeria's fight for independence. It tells of the downfall of one Nigerian man as his traditional African culture crumbles around him.

Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal, http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/clcwebjournal/clcweb00-1/asante- darko00.html (March 2000).

Professor Kwaku Asante-Darko from Lesotho, Africa, discusses post-colonial literature written in Africa. He examines the differences between aspects of African literature and European and colonial literary tradition.

Fraser, Gerald, "Writer, Her Dream Fulfilled, Seeks to Link Two Worlds," in *New York Times,* June 2, 1990, p. 15.

Fraser gives a brief literary biography of Buchi Emecheta. This article has several long quotes from Emecheta, as well as some background information on her struggles to become a published writer.

Hooks, Bell, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics,* South End Press, 2000.

Writing from an African-American perspective, hooks offers a clear and inspired overview of what feminism is and how it affects everyone.

Lagos Online, http://www.lagos-online.com (May 8, 2000).

For an interesting and personal perspective on life in Lagos today, visit this web site to read postings written by Nigerian students and community leaders. One particular posting written by Reverend Felix Ajakaye, "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," discusses the problems Nigeria faces concerning the vast diversity in cultures between multiple Nigerian ethnicities.

Maier, Karl, *This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria,* Public Affairs, 2000.

This interesting book is about the history of Nigeria, told with a sense of humor despite many horrifying details. Although, according to Maier, the outlook for Nigeria's future is grim, he tells inspiring stories about the people's resilience and sense of humanity in their struggle for independence.

Marriage and Slavery in Buchi Emecheta, http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/nigeria/emecheta/marriage.html (June 25, 2000).

This web site, dedicated to postcolonial literature in Nigeria, discusses one of Emecheta's main themes: Nigerian women's enslavement to men.

Postimperial and Postcolonial Literature in English, http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/nigeria/ (June 2000).

At this web site, students from Brown University English classes have researched the role of women in Nigeria during pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times. This site also offers information on Buchi Emecheta and other Nigerian writers.

Soyinka, Wole, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis,* The W. E. B. DuBois Institute Series, Oxford University Press, 1997.

Wole Soyinka, a Nobel laureate, tells the story of Nigeria's struggle for independence and the consequences of the brutal dictatorship of General Abacha. Soyinka states that Nigeria might experience a series of acts of civil disobedience, and his book tries to offer suggestions on how to carry this off successfully.

Ward, Cynthia, "Reading African Women Readers," in *Research in African Literatures,* Vol. 27, September 1, 1996, pp. 78-79.

In this interesting article on the difficulties presented to the European mind when trying to read and understand literature written by non-Europeans, Ward discusses the different ways that various cultures pass down stories from one generation to the next, both in oral and written traditions.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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