

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN FLORA
NWAPA'S *EFURU*, *ONE IS ENOUGH*, AND BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE
JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD AND THE BRIDE PRICE*.**

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Abstract: Marriage in Africa particularly within the Igbo community of Nigeria holds profound cultural significance. In precolonial African societies, marriage was a highly esteemed institution, often viewed as a rite of passage. The Igbo experience offers a lens through which to understand the broader African marital landscape, which differs markedly from European traditions. This article examines various forms of marriage practiced in Igbo society and their representation in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough*, as well as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Bride Price*.

Keywords: Marriage, Igbo community, Nigeria, Africa.

Résumé : Le mariage en Afrique en général, et dans la communauté Igbo au Nigeria en particulier, revêt une importance capitale. Dans les sociétés africaines précoloniales, le mariage est un événement hautement valorisé. Le cas de la communauté Igbo illustre comment le mariage constitue un passage obligé pour les Africains. Contrairement aux traditions européennes, l'Afrique connaît plusieurs formes de mariage. Cet article étudie les différentes formes de mariage pratiquées dans la société Igbo et leur signification dans les œuvres de Flora Nwapa *Efuru*, *One is Enough* et Buchi Emecheta *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*.

Mots-Clés : Mariage, communauté Igbo, Nigeria, Afrique

INTRODUCTION

In traditional African societies and particularly in Nigeria marriage and motherhood are deeply revered. These two elements form the foundation of societal expectations for women. In many Igbo communities, a woman's status is often measured by her marital and reproductive roles. This cultural standard, while elevating the importance of marriage, has also contributed to the marginalization of women, making marriage a compulsory milestone for all children.

Historically, women had little autonomy in choosing their partners. Marriages were arranged by parents, often without the daughter's consent. Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, both native Nigerian authors, explore these dynamics in their novels, portraying the lived realities of women in traditional Igbo society. Their works challenge patriarchal norms and offer alternative narratives to marriage and motherhood.

Feminist thinkers have long critiqued marriage as a tool of patriarchal control. Mary Astell, cited by Sarah Gamble (2001:186) in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post feminism*, described marriage as "domestic slavery." In contrast, M. Nwoye, quoted by O. Victor Ogbuide, defines marriage as:

A sacred and permanent contract enacted when two people (man and woman) decide on their own accord and in the presence of at least two witnesses to exchange formal consent to live a life promoting their mutual growth and welfare (2011:103).

Ogbuide views marriage as a union based on mutual understanding and affection. However, this idealized view contrasts sharply with the realities depicted in Nwapa's and Emecheta's novels. This raises critical questions: Does marriage truly foster mutual growth? Is it a matter of affection, or does it perpetuate domestic servitude?

The Significance of Marriage

Marriage, a legal and social union between a man and a woman, is a universal institution. In African literature especially works by female authors it serves as a lens to examine gender relations. In *Efuru*, *One is Enough*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Bride Price*, marriage is

portrayed as the highest status a woman can attain in Igbo society. Yet, paradoxically, it is also the space where women face the most discrimination.

These novels critically explore the challenges of marriage for Igbo women, highlighting its dual role as both a cultural expectation and a source of oppression. The authors use their female characters to question whether traditional marriage truly reflects the lived experiences of women.

Mate Selection Methods

Marriage begins with mate selection, a process that varies across cultures. Bron B. Ingoldsby identifies three primary methods: marriage by capture, arranged marriage, and free-choice marriage. Additional forms include marriage by inheritance and elopement.

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (1994), mate selection in African societies resembles a market system, governed by complex rules of exchange between families. Parental choice often outweighs romantic affection, with marriages serving strategic purposes such as property consolidation and alliance formation.

In Igbo society, romantic love is rarely the foundation of marriage. Instead, prudence and calculation dominate. Nwapa and Emecheta reflect these realities in their novels, portraying characters whose marital choices are shaped by tradition, family pressure, and societal expectations.

Marriage by Inheritance

Not all women in Igbo society enter marriage through capture or elopement. A significant number become wives through marriage by inheritance, a practice deeply rooted in Igbo customary law. This tradition allows the first son to inherit his deceased father's wife regardless of age difference provided she is still capable of bearing children. This section analyzes how Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa portray this form of mate selection in *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, and *Efuru*.

Gregory Okorobia Onwuzurigbo (1990:446) notes that “widow inheritance” has endured despite the influence of Christianity. It typically manifests in two scenarios :

- In the first, the deceased man's eldest son inherits his young wife.

- In the second, if the sons are minors or absent, a brother or close relative of the deceased assumes the marital role.

This practice is recurrent in Buchi Emecheta's novels. In *The Bride Price*, Ma Blackie is inherited by her late husband's brother, Okonkwo. The custom is explained to Aku-nna by Ogugua:

You're almost fourteen years old now and you still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for (1976:64).

Here, Emecheta uses Ogugua's voice to educate readers about the tradition. The theme reappears in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where Nnaife inherits Adaku after his brother's death: "Adaku, on the other hand, had a daughter, she was better looking than Ego-Obi, and she was very ambitious, as Nnu Ego was soon to discover. She made sure she was inherited by Nnaife" (1979:117).

Additionally, Nnu Ego's father, Agbadi, reveals his own participation in the custom:

"Listen daughter, I have seven wives of my own. I married three of them, four I inherited on the deaths of relatives" (*The Joys of Motherhood*).

Both Ma Blackie and Adaku enter marriages through inheritance, yet both unions ultimately fail. Through these outcomes, Emecheta critiques the effectiveness and emotional toll of the practice, suggesting its limitations within modern or evolving contexts.

Flora Nwapa also addresses marriage by inheritance in *Efuru*, through the character of Nwashike Ogene, Efuru's father. He recounts: "I inherited all wives of my father. But Efuru's mother was my choice. I love her very much. After a long time, she had Efuru. Then six years ago she died. I was heartbroken" (*Efuru*, 1966:23).

A unique aspect of this marital form is the question of offspring. In some African societies, children born from inherited marriages are considered the progeny of the original husband. However, among the Igbo, such unions are treated as distinct marriages, and the children belong to the new husband. This is evident in *The Bride Price*, where Okonkwo becomes the legal father of his deceased brother Ezekiel Odia's children.

In summary, marriage by inheritance is a recurring theme in Buchi Emecheta's literary works, including *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, and *Second Class Citizen*. Her portrayals offer a faithful reflection of Igbo customs while simultaneously critiquing their impact on women's autonomy and emotional well-being. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* also contributes to this discourse, enriching the understanding of inherited marriage within Igbo society. The next section will explore marriage by free mate selection.

Free Choice Mate Selection

Romantic attachment in marriage is not absent from African societies. It becomes the foundation of marital union when parental authority is minimized or rejected. In communities where traditional laws are deeply respected, some defiant young women succeed in choosing their own suitors. These women challenge oppressive cultural norms that threaten the love, cohesion, and happiness that should ideally define marital relationships. This section examines how Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta depict marriage by free mate selection through their characters in the selected novels.

Free mate selection, typically grounded in love, is vividly portrayed by Emecheta in *The Bride Price* through the relationship between Aku-nna and Chike. Their bond is emotionally compelling, marked by mutual affection and support. Chike's humane and gentle treatment of Aku-nna starkly contrasts with the rough and coercive behavior of Okoboshi, the suitor chosen by Aku-nna's stepfather, Okonkwo.

Another example appears in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979:204), where Kehinde, daughter of Nnaife and Nnu Ego, chooses Lapidu a Yoruba man from a Muslim family as her partner. This union brings shame to Kehinde's family for two reasons: first, she rejects an arranged marriage with an Ibuza man to "run away to a Yoruba man" (1979:215); second, it highlights the ethnic tensions between the Igbo and Yoruba communities. As the narrator explains: "Most Ibos, at the time, did not like their children marrying Yorubas. One tribe always claimed to be superior to the other. Even an Ibuza girl who chose another Ibo person outside Ibuza as a friend was regarded as lost. To go so far as to befriend a Yoruba man was abominable" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979:202).

Emecheta uses this narrative to expose longstanding tribal conflicts in Nigeria and their impact on marriage. Through the cases of Aku-nna and Kehinde, she illustrates that even free choice in marriage is subject to societal constraints and parental approval. This is further emphasized in Nnaife's conversation with his daughter:

You don't have to like your husband," he assured her. "You don't even have to know him in advance. You just marry him. You are lucky, you already know this one, you know what job he is in. Things have changed, before; you might not have known him at all." (The Joys of Motherhood, 1979:204).

Here, parental authority is portrayed as a barrier to personal autonomy, especially for women. However, Nnaife's attempt to enforce tradition fails due to their urban setting, where colonial influence has begun to reshape social norms.

Similarly, Flora Nwapa explores free mate selection in *Efuru*. The novel opens with Efuru choosing her own husband, Adizua, without seeking her father's permission or receiving a bride price. This act of defiance shocks the community, as traditional marriage involves formal negotiations between families and the payment of bride price to preserve familial honor.

Efuru bypasses these customs, asserting her right to love and personal choice. Her courage is evident when she responds to her father's emissaries:

Tell my father that I shall be the last person to bring shame on him. Since my mother died five years ago, I have been a good daughter to him. My husband is not rich. In fact, he is poor. But the dowry must be paid. I must see that this must be done (Efuru, 1966:9–10).

Despite her determination, Efuru's marriage ends in divorce, suggesting that love alone cannot guarantee marital success in a society governed by rigid traditions.

This theme continues in *One is Enough*, where Nwapa presents Amaka's aunt as a woman trapped in an arranged marriage: "I married a man I did not like. Although I have my children, I have neither respect nor regard for my husband" (*One is Enough*, 1986:8).

Later, the mother of Amaka reflects: “Who is talking about love now? You children got the idea of love into your heads when you went to school and read those books. [...] I had nothing to do at all in the marriage between your father and me. It was my mother who arranged everything. I protested. I said I didn’t like him [...] but she said he was a good man and from a very good family. [...] I think nothing of him, except that he was the father of my children. There was no affection as such, even when he died, he was no loss to me” (*One is Enough*, 1986:138).

These testimonies underscore that love was not the primary motive in mate selection within the Igbo community. Instead, marriage was often arranged, with women’s self-interest shaped by the limited choices available to them.

Ultimately, Emecheta and Nwapa present free choice mate selection as a modern alternative to traditional practices. However, their narratives reveal the challenges and societal resistance faced by women who pursue autonomy in marriage. Their message advocates for a new generation of women to embrace equality and personal agency in marital decisions.

The next section will explore marriage by arrangement, the most prevalent form of mate selection in traditional Igbo society.

Marriage by Arrangement

Marriage by arrangement is a traditional method of mate selection in which the bride’s family plays a central role. Among the Igbo people, it is common for parents to arrange the marriages of their children. Typically, the man expresses interest in a woman, but the final decision rests with the bride’s family. In the novels under study, this practice is portrayed as a privilege of the parents, especially the father, who selects a wife for his son based not on character but often on financial considerations.

Marriage is widely recognized as the foundation of family life. However, marrying off a daughter without her consent can be deeply distressing. In many African societies, arranged marriage remains the most prevalent form of mate selection. Parents, often aided by relatives or professional matchmakers, choose spouses for their children. This system is more common in communities where extended kinship networks are strong, and marriage is viewed as a collective

rather than individual concern. Economic factors frequently outweigh romantic love in these decisions.

Buchi Emecheta explores marriage by arrangement in various ways. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego accepts two arranged marriages first to Amatokwu, then to Nnaife without objection, demonstrating her conformity to Igbo social norms. Her father, Agbadi, takes the initiative in both cases, reflecting the traditional expectation that parents control their daughters' marital choices. Nnu Ego's submissiveness is evident in her words: "If you wish it so, so it will be." Her acceptance of a second arranged marriage, even in an unfamiliar place, underscores her deep-rooted obedience.

However, not all female characters in Emecheta's novels accept arranged marriages. Nnu Ego's daughter, Kehinde, rejects her father's choice, as does Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*. Aku-nna's story is particularly complex. Her first menstruation marks her transition into womanhood and signals her readiness for marriage within the traditional Ibuza society. Okonkwo, her uncle, sees this as an opportunity to arrange her marriage and collect the bride price.

Fatou Diop Kandji (2015:153) notes that menstruation has long been surrounded by mystery and cultural significance. Emecheta uses this moment to highlight both the symbolic and practical implications of womanhood. While essentialist feminism views menstruation as a proud symbol of maturity (Gamble, 2001:248), traditional Igbo beliefs often regard it as impure. Ifi Amadiume, quoted by Kandji (2015:155), explains that menstrual blood was considered polluting, and menstruating women were barred from sacred spaces and sexual relations.

Mary Daly, cited by Gamble (2001:248), adds that patriarchy has historically framed menstruation as a sign of impurity. Yet, for Okonkwo, Aku-nna's menarche is a cause for celebration not for her benefit, but to secure bride price and elevate his social status. In contrast, Chike, Aku-nna's love interest, treats her with compassion and respect. When she experiences her first period at school, he discreetly helps her, offering aspirin, his jacket, and sanitary supplies. Katherine Fishburn (1995:83) describes Chike as "a perfect Western hero" for his sensitivity.

Aku-nna's menstruation symbolizes her marriageability, but she resists the traditional path. She hides her menarche for two months, fearing the consequences of being labeled "unclean." When

she finally crosses a stream during her period, she prays for forgiveness, revealing her internal conflict between tradition and personal autonomy.

The celebration of her womanhood is not in her honor but serves Okonkwo's ambition. Despite his expectations, Aku-nna elopes with Chike, defying caste-based discrimination. Chike is an *Osu*, a descendant of slaves, and Igbo tradition forbids marriage between free-born individuals and *Osu*. Aku-nna's love for Chike and her rejection of Okoboshi, the suitor chosen for her, highlights her resistance to arranged marriage.

Her dilemma is profound: she cannot understand why love should be sacrificed for tradition, nor why she has no voice in her future. Her elopement challenges the unwritten laws of caste and questions the legitimacy of bride price as a prerequisite for marriage. Okonkwo's refusal to accept bride price from an *Osu* underscores the rigidity of Igbo customs, even as Aku-nna seeks freedom and self-determination.

CONCLUSION

The novels examined *Efuru*, *One is Enough*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Bride Price* present a rich tapestry of marital practices within the Igbo community. These include marriage by selection, capture and elopement, inheritance, free choice, and arrangement. Each form reflects deeply rooted traditions that give meaning to African cultural identity.

However, these practices also reveal the darker side of marriage in traditional African societies. Women are often reduced to objects of exchange, subjected to humiliation if barren, and denied autonomy in choosing their partners. Through their female characters, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta critique these norms and advocate for a more equitable and modern approach to marriage one that values love, consent, and mutual respect.

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