

Female Sites of Power: The Bride Price Tradition in Uganda and a New Historicist Reading of Okot p'Bitek's *White Teeth*

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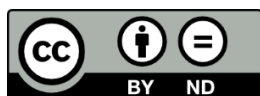
Abstract

This article examines how the bride price tradition in Uganda is portrayed in Okot p'Bitek's novel, *White Teeth*, and explores how gender roles within this practice affect individuals. It emphasises how female characters sometimes control male characters during the bride price negotiation process. The discussion addresses the common view that women and female characters are primarily victims of tradition, while men are perceived as controllers and beneficiaries. It highlights the psychological and financial pressures on men as they attempt to meet societal expectations, such as providing specific amounts of cash or assets to the bride's family. Using a new historicist approach, the analysis compares the fictional portrayal in Okot p'Bitek's novel with societal perspectives from various Ugandan sources. These sources include research by the Non-governmental Organisation MIFUMI, which discusses the social, economic, and psychological aspects of bride price transactions. From an African feminist viewpoint, the analysis focuses on the conditions and perceptions of Ugandan women, both in literature and reality. This approach reveals the gendered dynamics of the tradition and how women influence male expectations. It also shows that both men and women can be victims of the tradition, challenging the typical portrayal of women as the sole victims in literature.

Keywords:

Bride price, New historicism, Feminism, Okot p'Bitek, MIFUMI

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Introduction

The discussion on bride price contributes to ongoing debates about its significance in the solemnisation of couples' marriages and the consequences for marital relationships. Some views emphasise the importance of bride price and the belief that the tradition cannot change because it is significant and sacred. In some cultures, including many parts of Africa, marriage agreements are sealed by the payment of a bride price. The tradition involves the transfer of agreed-upon wealth, typically in the form of cash, cattle, or other forms of gifts, from the groom's family to the bride's family (Ogbu 1978; Goody & Stanley 1973; Asen 2017; Akurugu et al. 2022). Those with contrary views think that the payment is not necessary and promote the assertion of some adjustments or abolition of the whole tradition because it has elements of gender oppression. As individuals and researchers have gained a deeper understanding of the diverse impact of the practice and its consequences on gender relations, a growing number of sociological and literary discussions concerning the tradition have ensued (Asiimwe 2013; Sommer 2023; Titi 2019; Wendo 2004; Lowes & Nunn 2018). Drawing on the prominent African female writer, Buchi Emecheta, in her novel, *The Bride Price*, presents events that, to a large extent, summarise the views of most African female writers on bride price in the African context. The author portrays the frustrating conditions of the female characters in a patriarchal society and devastating ends which are a result of the societal need to obtain wealth through young girls. The same viewpoint is also found in Sutherland's *Marriage of Anansewa* and Sofala's *Wedlock of the Gods*, where the writers criticise the systems that perpetuate the commodification of female characters through bride price and forced marriage. The literary critics of these sample works have primarily focused on the frustrating impact of bride price on women and the need to address the conditions for change. In their view, the practice has perpetuated unequal gender relations for many years, and they advocate for reforming it in ways that will improve the lives of women in marriage (Angya 2002; Asen 2017; Akhter & Khalil 2025).

P'Bitek is one of the early writers of African fiction and has addressed the subject in his novel, *White Teeth*, and a poem, "Return the Bride Wealth". In these two works, p'Bitek attempts a satirical representation of men finding pride in paying bride price and ending up in a more frustrating situation, sometimes a worse one than that of the female characters. Like in many other African countries, bride price in Uganda is a historical tradition and has for many years been recognised and probably influenced gender relations in

marriage. It is a contract between families where material items, including cattle or other animals and money, are paid by the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride's labour and her capacity to produce children. Different terms are used to refer to the properties given or delivered by or on behalf of a prospective bridegroom to the relatives of a prospective bride. Such terms include 'bride price', 'bride wealth', 'marriage consideration', 'marriage gifts', 'dowry' and 'marriage payment'.

In this discussion, I use the term 'bride price' to refer to any property or services given or provided to the family of the bride to allow the man to take the woman as a wife. Bride price, in this context, can be paid fully before the bride begins to live with her husband, or the bride's family can receive half of the bride price. The couple is allowed to live together, provided that the payment will be made later on. If, for any reason, the marriage fails, the materials or livestock paid are supposed to be refunded to the groom's family (Asiimwe 2013; Oguli 2004). Thiara and Hague (2011) show in the MIFUMI report that there are approximately 62 communities in Uganda that use varying bride price practices. Some of the common conditions involved in most Ugandan communities during the bride price process include the payment in the form of cattle, which is typically paid to the bride's family. However, cash has recently replaced cattle in some of the communities. The agreements also include a bride price refund in the event of marriage failure, such as when the woman fails to have children or is involved in unsatisfactory behaviour, and the inheritance of the woman's property in the event the husband dies (Bishai et al. 2009; Kaye 2005; Musubika 2019).

The payment of bride price is a valued cultural practice in Uganda, with numerous studies and research on its significance to the couple and society as a whole. However, the practice has received criticisms from different groups and associations on what they claim to be the tradition that promotes male superiority and gender inequality. Most research studies conducted in parts of Uganda on the tradition show that the practice has been linked to poverty and abuse of women in marriage. For example, some families in trying to obtain bride price have sold family properties or men have been forced to secure bank loans to pay bride price, the conditions which are said to lead to families' bankruptcy after the couple get married (Asiimwe, 2013; Sinani et al. 2023; Thiara & Hague 2011).

While debates and a body of literature highlight the significance attached to bride price in Uganda, some groups and associations have conducted

campaigns aimed at persuading the masses to consider adjusting the amount of the bride price to be paid or abolishing it altogether. Some of the initiatives are reflected in the International Conference on Bride Price held at Makerere University in 2004,¹ which involved participants from Africa and other parts of the world. The purpose of the conference was to develop a program of action to reduce or remove the significance of bride price as a factor contributing to violence and gender inequality (Thiara & Hague 2004). In 2005, Uganda's Poverty Eradication Action Plan identified bride price as the most significant factor hindering women's empowerment in Uganda (Muhumiza 2013). The 2007 constitutional petition² between MIFUMI and twelve other individuals challenged the constitutional or customary practice of demanding payment of bride price (Thiara & Hague 2007). The few mentioned associations demonstrate the need for reform of the tradition, which is believed by many to be making their social and economic lives difficult. In recent research on bride price in Uganda, Nagashima and Yamauchi emphasise the provision of formal education to women as a means to adjust the tradition, which seems to be a burden to individuals and families. According to them, women's empowerment through education decreases their level of dependency in marriage, as well as giving them enough capacity to leave abusive marriages (Nagashima & Yamauchi 2023). The efforts by these associations and individuals suggest that the bride price tradition needs to be revisited and evaluated in terms of its impact on individual freedom and choices.

In this literary analysis, I examine the sites of female power and control that are evident in the bride price transaction process and the tradition as a whole. Diverging from the views of most scholars in literary and sociological perspectives, I argue that the debates position men as beneficiaries throughout the course. At the same time, there are spaces/sites in which they possess neither power nor control over the different conditions that feature in the practice. The discussion aims to reveal the kind of power that female characters have and how they use it to subvert male expectations, where, in

¹ International Conference on bride price organised by MIFUMI; Held from 16th - 18th of February in 2004 at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. See the conference report - <https://mifumi.org>

²The constitutional petition no.12 of 2007 between MIFUMI (U) LTD and 12 others: The petition challenges the constitutionality of the customary practice of demand for, and payment of bride price as a condition precedent to dissolution of marriage to be declared unconstitutional.

the end, men find themselves the victims of the bride price practice, just like women. In the discussion, I use the novel *White Teeth* by Okot p'Bitek and the MIFUMI report.³ To examine the female sites of power in the bride price tradition in Uganda.

White Teeth is a novel by the late Ugandan author of the famous *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. This story is about Okeca Ladwong, an Acoli young man, who is in love with the beautiful Cecilia Laliya. He painfully wishes to marry her; however, he cannot raise the bride's wealth. To overcome this problem, he decides to travel to Kampala to seek paid employment. He spends years struggling to obtain the bride price and ends up losing everything while on the bus on his way home from Kampala.

On the other hand, MIFUMI is a women's rights agency that has been operating in Uganda since its establishment in 1997. It is an agency involved in various activities, including providing support for survivors of violence and abuse, addressing oppressive traditions like bride price and polygamy as main factors leading to violence against women and children.⁴ The two texts are brought together through a new historicist approach, which allows the interrogation of texts from different fields on the same subject. In this case, the analysis focuses on the bride price tradition in the Ugandan community and its impact on gender relations, particularly in the context of marriage. Using the two texts, the discussion focuses on the sites of female power and the mechanisms by which they utilise their power to affect and disempower male characters who have been viewed as beneficiaries of the practice.

Theoretical Approach

In this discussion, I employ new historicism to analyse the bride price tradition in Uganda, as presented in the two selected texts. The approach offers an opportunity to gain a new understanding of the subject by examining two texts that are not necessarily in the same field of study. The two texts inform the reader about the continuing tradition of bride price in Uganda as well as societal views and criticisms on the matter. Lyu and

³ The report used as a co-text in this article contains the findings of the research by Professor Gill Hague and Dr Thiara Ravi on 'Bride Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda'. The research was conducted in collaboration with the MIFUMI organisation.

⁴ See, <https://mifumi.org>

Abrams agree that the text is always informed by existing politics, culture, and ideology (Abrams, 1994; Lyu, 2003). Dobie, in the same line, emphasizes that new historicism is the practice which involves removing literature from its pedestal and accepting it as one among many and some of them include “scientific tracts, legal papers, and popular songs, seemingly distant from the sublimity traditionally attributed to literary works” (Dobie 2011, p. 20). Dobie’s description provides clarification on the feature of New Historicism, where the investigation of a subject brings together different texts simultaneously, allowing for unlimited interpretation of the subject and the various ways in which it can be examined or evaluated. Using this approach, this discussion provides possibilities for applying literature from different fields in the interrogation of the bride price tradition in Uganda, rather than focusing solely on the novel, *White Teeth*.

Greenblatt, a pioneer in establishing this approach, introduced it in 1982, with a primary focus on the relationship between literature and society. According to Greenblatt, the approach challenges the demarcation between texts that interrogate the same subject. Greenblatt says as follows:

The approach ‘challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between ‘literary foreground’ and ‘political background’ or, more generally, between artistic production and other kinds of social production’. In this assumption, the differences in the texts are made up or instead created and ‘constantly redrawn’ by artists, audiences and readers (Greenblatt 1981, p.6).

Greenblatt emphasises that one text cannot be separated from other texts with the same subject and from their different perspectives. Readers can discover new ideas from the same texts that were previously thought to be the end in themselves. As a result of such a relationship, as Veesper argues, “literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably’ and additionally, ‘No discourse, imaginative archival gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature’ (Veeser, 1994, p.2). The above views provide the reader with the opportunity to explore new ideas that exist in texts on the same subject. In circumstances where two or more texts are involved, the process of parallel reading enables one to observe how the

socio-cultural and historical conditions of a specific society have been presented in different texts over time (Mambrol, 2017).

The discussion on bride price involves the representation of societal culture and the different ways individuals perceive it. The tradition has existed in Ugandan society for a long time and has been presented in various texts and from different perspectives. Greenblatt emphasises the importance of considering the culture that gave rise to specific literature to understand it. New historicism is an interpretive strategy that creates possibilities for a new kind of reading, evaluation, and definition of a particular subject within existing ideologies. This allows the analyst to see and analyse the interplay between a literary text and non-literary texts which speak of the same subject. The representation of the bride price tradition in *White Teeth* and the MIFUMI report on the bride price conditions in Uganda presents the interrogation of the tradition, which has existed and been involved in debates for a long time. In the discussion, I draw on the novel *White Teeth*, a fictional representation of the subject, and the MIFUMI report, which presents societal views on the existence of the tradition in Uganda and its influence on gender relations.

The new historicist concern with the narrative of the marginalised creates possibilities for examining the conditions of women, who, as explained earlier, are considered marginalised in the bride price processes. In the discussion of the conditions of women in practice, I employ a feminist approach in conceptualising power and analysing female characters in patriarchal society. While looking at gender relations between men and women, which, according to the Feminist critic, Allen, is “a relation specifically, a relation of (male) domination and (female) subordination” (Allen, 2018, p.7). Feminist concerns examine the conditions of female characters within the said tradition, highlighting their status as both subordinated and powerless, as well as their capacity for power and resistance, which is not always easily noticeable or recognisable. Allen’s conceptualisation of the power of women, which is ‘power-over and power-to’ (20), describes the power of women over the other gender and the mechanisms that describe that power in women, defining their agency both intentionally and unintentionally. Considering the tradition as practised in Uganda, the African Feminist approach acknowledges the diversity of traditions within the continent and individual responses to influences from the African cultural environment and beyond. The African Feminist approach offers an opportunity to investigate patriarchal operations in Uganda and the roles of men and women in gender relations, particularly in

bride price transactions (Dosekun, 2019; Emenyonu, 2000). In this case, the approach will lead to the discussion of how female characters and Ugandan women in general, in their narrow spaces, control men in the bride price tradition, and how men, on the other hand, end up being the victims of the practice. Both new historicism and feminism, according to Conway, “travel into diversified fields that now constitute literary and cultural studies” (p. 26). Within this framework, one examines how texts are produced and interpreted in specific social and historical contexts. The two approaches are progressive and bring the narratives of the marginalised to the centre, where the accounts of the underrepresented, like slaves and women under patriarchy, are given importance. Moving from the long history of embracing and normalising male-dominated narratives, new historicism and African feminism open the doors for challenging what Newton refers to as ‘dominant historical narratives’, especially those which praise masculinities and undermine femininity. Through new historicism, the experiences of Ugandan women in the real world intersect with the fictional representation of Ugandan women. From an African feminist perspective, their conditions and decisions are discussed and evaluated.

Female Body and Fundamentals of Price and Value

Most of the discussions related to the situations of women in the African novels revolve around what Ogunjipe has named ‘the six mountains on her back’ (Ogunjipe 1994, p.128). The mountains on the back of an African woman include tradition, backwardness to do with colonisation, race, patriarchy, the global order and lastly and most importantly, herself. Agreeing with Ogunjipe, I consider the bride price tradition one of the mountains on the female characters’ backs because of how the patriarchal society, in many ways, uses the women’s bodies for its profit/benefit. Bride price is one among many practices which has normalised women's subordination because of its nature as a transaction.

Several feminists have identified the Marriage institution as one of the areas where female subordination is justified and accepted. The processes involved in officiating the institution and the nature of teachings from religious and non-religious groups have legitimised the subordinate position of a woman in marriage. Bride price processes mark one of the stages in officiating marriages, and this stage is critical compared to all other stages, as it involves the exchange of wealth and property. While other

stages might involve dances, prayers, and teachings, bride price consists of the exchange of wealth, which, in other words, comes with the power of ownership. In this tradition, a woman is symbolically transformed into a commodity owned by the one who is capable of paying the required amount. The standard terms referring to the practice of using women's bodies for economic and physical gains include the objectification and commodification of women (Adjei and Mpiani, 2018; Kaye et al., 2005; Sommer, 2023). Reading from a feminist perspective, the objectification and commodification of women reflect the conditions of women in marriage and family, where they are counted as properties of a man in their status as a wife or daughter. While the studies that support bride price emphasise the significance of the gifts provided in binding the two families, the continuity of the status of women in the exchange as commodities continues to raise new points of discussion. Among others, Ogundipe and Ng'cobo have discussed the relationship between bride price and the denial of female agency. For both, the bride price commodifies a woman and disempowers her completely. They also argue on the societal institutionalisation of practices like bride price, marriage, maternity servitude, virginity test, and others, and how they influence women to accept their position as objects of male possessions in a patriarchal society (Ng'cobo, 1988; Ogundipe, 1994).

The price and value of a woman in bride price tradition are defined and determined by the purchasers as they decide on the value of one commodity compared to other commodities. The number of narratives on the commodification and objectification of women in the bride price practice suggests that it is only women who are victimised in the process. The discussion in this paper, through the selected texts, suggests otherwise. In this discussion, I diverge from the most debated aspect of the bride price subject, which often portrays women and female characters as victims and men and male characters as the beneficiaries. The discussion focuses on a situation where women, whether consciously or unconsciously, create conditions that hinder male characters' expectations of gaining economically through women or female characters. In this section, I examine how female characters, through physical and social mechanisms, utilise their powers to challenge male expectations and disrupt traditional notions of masculinity, ultimately benefiting women and their bodies.

The bride price practice involves gender power relations whereby the power or capacity that each gender has over the other results in one gender

dominating the other and generates superior and inferior individuals in a given society. In her conceptualisation of power, Allen recognises the two aspects of power established by feminists: the male powers of domination over women and female empowerment, where special female traits, which are not found in men, are given priority. Allen develops a different definition of power that exists between genders. One of the aspects of it is 'the power-over', whereby, by definition, "it is the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a non-trivial way" (Allen, 2018, p.33). In this discussion, the concept of power established by Allen is helpful as it easily identifies the thin lines in which female characters intentionally or unintentionally diverge or shatter male expectations to benefit through the bride price processes. The concept of female power encompasses the intention of female characters to resist after learning about the oppressive patriarchal powers in society. This kind of power produces a form of resistance, based on Butler's view, which provides women with the means to resist male control and domination by utilising the available means inherent in the female gender (Butler, 1990). In this understanding, Butler is against the representation of women as always, the victims and sees the way they find the means to subvert the dominant rule, where in most cases "the female application of any kind of power in the patriarchal domination aims at achieving resistance" (Butler 1990, p.74).

The novel *White Teeth* is the author's representation of the societal expectations for a man at the time of marriage. The novel presents Okeca's struggle to obtain the bride price, and the failure in the end suggests the author's sarcastic view on the tradition. The novel portrays Okeca's psychological struggle to leave his family behind to go to sugar plantations and the amount of suffering he goes through while working in the plantations: hunger, homesickness, mistreatment by overseers, and little payment. The difficulties he faces and the pressure from society's members demonstrate that male characters suffer greatly in their attempts to fulfil the requirement. The textual representation of the bride price tradition justifies that the process is gendered and promotes the difference between the genders. In the novel, the female character identified as Orchan's mother is severely beaten by her husband, and according to her, every time she is defeated, she is also reminded of the bride price the husband paid for her. Orchan's mother expresses her dissatisfaction with her marriage and reminds her fellow women that all the suffering they endure is the result of the bride price paid at the time of their marriage. Orchan's mother says,

“We are mere property bought off the market stall” (18). Orchan’s mother defines her status and that of other women as a ‘commodity’, which suggests that the whole process was a transaction, much like the exchange of different commodities. This indicates that she was neither consulted about the amount her family was supposed to receive as a bride price, nor did she receive any amount after it was paid.

The lack of agency in the process and inside marriage suggests the feelings of being used and dehumanised among female characters. The text shows that, at the time of her wedding, Orchan’s mother insisted that her parents should have taken a small amount of wealth as a bride price to save her from the husband’s insults. The text indicates that Orchan’s mother’s efforts to reduce the amount of bride price paid for her are unsuccessful due to her parents’ influence and power over the process. In the same incident, the novel reveals her awareness of the mechanisms that control males’ power over women, resulting from the bride price payment. On the other hand, the MIFUMI report presents societal concerns and their support for the tradition. Still, it acknowledges the distortion of the tradition that has led to women being treated as commodities. The findings extend the novel’s concerns on women, where different from the novel; the findings show that both men and women are concerned about the consequences of the tradition and intend to ‘get rid of the parts that discriminate women, and hurt them’ (Thiara and Hague, 2011, p. 11). Both the novel and the report show that women can project the number of insults and abuse that can result from a certain amount of bride price. In other words, the two texts demonstrate that the woman’s space of power lies in her ability and the possibility to control the amount. While the novel presents limited opportunities for women to control the amount, their level of consciousness about how they can reserve this power is crucial for this discussion. The report is partly an extension of the novel’s portrayal of the female characters’ struggle to regulate their agency, as shown in the report, where both men and women discuss the importance of controlling the amount to preserve female autonomy.

Additionally, Thiara and Hague, in their report on bride price, show that in Uganda, women occupy a subordinate position, where “they cannot decide for their bodies or minds, and the male dominant society decides everything for them” (Thiara and Hague, 2011, p. 7). Negotiations typically involve senior men from the two families, who decide what a woman will do and how she will behave during the process. In this context, bride price

practices stand as the source of women's subordination and oppression, both in the novel and the research findings. In the novel, Orchan's mother's concern about the amount of bride price suggests the strength of a female character before marriage. While the conditions indicated that negotiations over the bride price amount are dominated by senior men of the clan or family, it is also at this point that the female's potential for control is evident. As men pay a considerable amount of bride price to reserve more power in silencing the woman, in the context of Orchan's mother, it shows that women struggle to control the amount paid, thereby reserving little control over their husbands in marriage. However, the novel shows that due to male power and dominance in her society, Orchan's mother cannot control the amount of bride price, where the male's success in paying more has thrown her into such a kind of suffering. In this case, bride price acts as a weapon to both; to the man, paying more assures him of complete and long-term control over a woman and the means to protect his masculine status. As for the woman, when the man pays less to her family, the expectation is that it lessens the male's control and creates room for her to liberate herself later in marriage.

According to Irigaray, "the exchange of women in the market is a man's business" (Irigaray, 1977, p.800). In the text, it is the bride's family, led by the patriarchal figures, who decide the amount the groom is supposed to pay. It is at this point where female characters like Orchan's mother wish they could intervene to determine the amount, but are overpowered by men who need to benefit intensely from their daughters. Orchan's father's reaction to the marriage suggests that he has never been happy with the transaction he made to secure his wife during the marriage process. His frustration and anger, revealed through the beating, can be interpreted as an unconscious demonstration of dissatisfaction. Orchan's father, amidst his rage over his wife, reminds her of how he suffered to earn the money he paid for the bride price. He shouts, "Do you realise I bought you with money that I suffered to earn" (18). The situation suggests that male characters do not view the bride price as an appreciation to the girl's family, but rather as a form of payment that requires total obedience in marriage.

Orchan's father's discomfort and anger at the amount he paid communicate to the reader that before marriage, the bride and her family are powerful and can decide any amount to be paid. The societal expectations of a man

prompt male characters, such as Orchan's father, to pay the required amount to maintain their status and reputation as men. On one hand, the commodification of female characters is considered to be a heartless practice. Still, on the other hand, it is a mirror of the value attached to the woman, which cannot be underrated. Before the patriarchal family sets the price, they have specific values attached to them (women), which determine the kind of men they should marry and the amount that a man should pay. This explains the woman's power to control men before marriage by herself or through the patriarchal figures of her family/clan.

Like Orchan's father, Corporal Okello insults his wives and mistreats them while reminding them that he paid for them. Corporal Okello brings a prostitute to his home and forces his wives to let her in so that he can sleep with her in the same house with his wives (48). This level of humiliation by Okello comes with a demand for obedience from his wives, as he has paid the bride price. The text demonstrates that both Orchan's father and Corporal Okello demand obedience from their wives without considering the amount of humiliation that accompanies this obedience. Such males' treatment of their wives can be interpreted as 'men's psychological need for compensation' of the bride price they paid for their wives. Just as certain values are attached to a commodity purchased in the market, the two male characters demonstrate that bride price is paid with expectations of unconditional values, such as submissiveness and obedience. On the other hand, the narrative reveals the influence of masculine power, driven by financial gain, in conditions where women possess nothing and are dependent solely on men. Gould describes the possible actions of this male character: "...he can behave in a bullying, sexist fashion, and if she is without means to earn a living, she is powerless" (p.62). Gould's explanation shows how a man can act when he is sure that he is the only one to make the woman survive financially, where the text mainly portrays the 'sexist fashion', like when Okello brings a prostitute into the compound and reminds his wives that he paid the bride price. Gould adds that when a woman finds herself in such conditions, she is powerless and she is forced to stay in a marriage she would otherwise leave. These female characters are a symbol of the struggle their men went through in obtaining them. While the female characters wish their husbands defined the struggle with pride, the two male characters misinterpret it as a punishment. Without really considering the husband's reactions, Orchan's mother and Okello's wives were valuable and worthy of compensation in the first place. The value defined in the patriarchal society creates competition and pressure

for the purchasers who are men. Eventually, their anger and discomfort over the price they paid for it are revealed after they are married.

The bride price set for a woman symbolises a value attached to her, where, for example, under normal circumstances, a commodity without value cannot be purchased, and this creates the need for men like Orchan's father to suffer to obtain the bride price. Hague and Thiara, in the MIFUMI report, demonstrate that women's importance is recognised through the struggles men face in obtaining and paying bride price (Hague and Thiara, 2009, p. 15). In the report, women take pride in being paid because it clearly shows that they are essential, even after they get married. However, the representation of the women's feelings about the payment of the bride price in the two texts forms two categories of women. The first category of women is represented in the novel, where they exhibit a heightened awareness of the consequences of bride price in marriage and the importance of their agency after marriage. The second category, as identified in the research report, involves individuals who are comfortable with the price being paid without considering the consequences. This second category is proud that men are working hard to obtain the bride price, which symbolically defines their value to these men. The two texts under discussion present two groups of women with different kinds of feelings associated with the concept of bride price and the value attached to women before marriage. This condition suggests that women or female characters do not share the same feelings or views about bride price, despite all being paid for.

Allen's description of the feminist conceptualisation of power reveals how this power can be used as a form of resistance to patriarchal expectations in the novel. This conceptualisation of power shows that "an individual intentionally or unintentionally maintains a course of action that limits the set of options from which he/she will be able to choose" (135). The writer, through Okeca, portrays three ways in which young male characters can obtain bride price in the novel: through parental or family support, individual labour on plantations, and, lastly, through their sisters' bride prices. In this context, Okeca is an orphan and wealthless. As such, he has only two options for obtaining a bride price: through his sister or working on the plantations. The description of Aciro, who is Okeca's sister, is that of a 'sickly' individual. According to Okeca, "all kinds of diseases had fallen

deeply in love with Aciro; sore eyes, ulcers, scabies, ... all sorts of diseases" (29). Aciro's body condition, as described by her brother, Okeca, does not fit the market, and generally, the appearance will not attract any man in the future. Okeca's evaluation of his sister echoes Lightstone's critical opinion that the value attached to the body of a woman depends on the economic value it is expected to produce (Lightstone, 2007, p.7). Aciro's lack of attraction predicts failure in marriage, whereby the societal expectation is that she would not be productive in terms of material and children. Her 'sickly' condition does not attract a bride price because her general look does not promise benefits to the purchasers. Okeca expresses his sister's condition as a misfortune in the family, just like other misfortunes that have befallen their family, including the death of the father and the acute poverty.

As purchasers mainly focus on what the body will produce later on, the inner qualities of an individual can sometimes be suppressed. Lightstone describes this condition where she emphasises that, "Body image is viewed about values that are learnt or expected culturally and not necessarily innate" (p.9). Okeca's chances of obtaining a bride price through his sister, Aciro, are shattered because the market conditions are well known to him, and he is amid a misfortune over which he has no control. Aciro, in her physical condition, unintentionally denies her brother the chance to obtain the bride price through her. The problems emanating from health and appearance are a kind that neither Okeca nor his sister can control. Frustrations of the sort that Okeca finds himself in, represent the conditions of male characters when the bodies of their women /sisters fail to attract bride price and force them to opt for other means of obtaining bride price. Okeca's decision to go to Kampala is an example of how the female characters' body conditions can redirect male characters' choices of the means to obtain bride price. In Aciro's case, the male characters' direction in obtaining the bride price is unintentionally dictated by the sister.

The novel also presents Onen, Okeca's friend, who is also forced to go to Kampala to work in sugar plantations because he could not obtain bride price through his two sisters. One of the sisters gets pregnant before marriage, and another elopes with a man who is not ready to pay the bride price. When Okeca hears this sad story in the sugar plantation, he refers to

his sisters as 'his wealth' (89). The word 'wealth' implies the value he had attached to his sisters and the expectations that the value would bring a desirable amount of wealth that would help him pay the bride price. While ignoring the brotherly care and protection, the two sisters have made their own decisions and used their bodies without considering the consequences on their brother's bride price. In the discussion on female agency and body control, Tamale refers to this situation as the female struggle to resist patriarchal control and regulation through their bodies. Tamale also adds that it is through the understanding of their bodies that women can 'launch a concerted struggle to resist patriarchal control and regulation' (Tamale, 2011, p. 11) in a society where women are conditioned to have children after the bride price is paid. The marriage solemnised, pre-marital pregnancy, and elopement of these two female characters have created a form of resistance that interferes with the brothers' societal expectations. The two sisters' actions and consequences portray the female power over male characters before marriage, where the expectations and plans of the whole family and brothers are entirely altered.

The fictional representation of the consequences of women with body challenges and the MIFUMI report shows that women who are sick or not strong cannot marry because they would not attract a bride price (Hague and Thiara, 2011). According to the report, women for whom the bride price was not paid for different reasons, including sickness and body weakness, were regarded as inferior and stigmatised. The societal reaction in the two texts represents an existing feeling of not valuing women who cannot attract a bride price. In Lightstone's words, the 'innate' features of an individual are not counted as important as the economic importance that is attached to the woman (Lightstone, 2007). While the said conditions affect women by feeling marginalised, the same happens to brothers who expect to obtain the bride price through the marriage of their sisters. These conditions show that both men and women are affected economically and psychologically. As the woman feels marginalised and less valuable, the man is forced to leave home to work to obtain the bride price.

p'Bitek uses a sarcastic representation of male characters who fail to obtain the bride price by selling their women. Okeca's fear about his wife-to-be, Cecilia Laliya, highlights the importance placed on a woman's age and image in the transaction process. The families of the female characters want

their daughters to marry at the peak of their beauty and body strength, as Okeca himself admits, “a girl should get married when she has just shot up, her breasts still sitting erect on her chest” (29). The quotation describes the right time for marriage of a girl in the Acoli society, where words like ‘breast sitting erect’ symbolise strength and readiness for reproducing children. These conditions change over time, and they are the source of contradiction for Okeca because he must pay the bride price to Cecilia’s family before it is too late. When Okeca decides to go to Kampala to work for years to obtain the bride price for Cecilia Laliya, his major fear is that if he does not return home within the time to marry her, Cecilia will be given to someone else. In his frustrated conditions, Okeca asks himself difficult questions: “I must marry Cecilia soon. Now! But where could I steal the money with which to marry her” (28). His question highlights the contradiction between Cecilia’s readiness and his inability to pay the bride price.

As for Cecilia, her family does not have a problem with her choice of a man to marry, but instead with the man who can pay the bride price for their daughter, given that she is strong and beautiful. Ng’cobo elucidates the factors influencing a woman's choice before the payment of the bride price in most African states, where the groom and his family look beyond the woman herself and focus on what she can bring into their family. According to Ng’cobo, “it is not marriage, it is the children of the marriage, it is not the companionship, nor the love or friendship, nor the mutual emotional satisfaction of the couple” (p.534). In Okeca’s words, “A girl should get married when she has just shot up, her breasts still erect on her chest” (29). The text presents Okeca’s knowledge on the best time for a woman to marry, while also highlighting the challenges faced by the younger generation from low-income families, such as his own. His failure to pay the bride price on time puts him at risk of not marrying the woman of his choice. The societal requirement that the girl marry at a younger age to benefit from the groom’s family, as stated by Ng’cobo, puts Okeca in danger of not marrying the woman he loves. Societal focus on the importance of the girl marrying at the right time threatens the possibility of Okeca finding Cecilia waiting for him to return from Kampala. While the novel portrays societal views about the right time for a girl to get married, the MIFUMI report condemns the practice and considers it an early marriage. The report shows that the bride price tradition causes some low-income families to force immature girls to withdraw from school and marry, so that their

families can obtain wealth. Considering the novel as a text that also depicts experiences of a certain age, the two texts represent colonial Uganda and contemporary Uganda, where current conditions indicate that early marriages are highly discouraged. In one way, the current conditions suggest that the presence of schools provides women with the opportunity to mature and increase their levels of independence, particularly in situations where they pursue higher education and secure employment.

As the woman's value in the bride price exchange diminishes with age and time, the chances for men to marry the women of their choice are narrowed by the unavailability of the bride price. In a society where male authorities lack the mechanism to protect the weaker individuals, characters like Okeca do not have choices but live by taking what is available. The age and image of the bride in patriarchal transactions of bride price determine the value and amount attached to the woman during the exchange. The female characters' power is in their ability to exclude men from a poor background, even when they feel that a man is seriously in love with a confident woman. The male character's failure is revealed when the woman is attractive and the family requires larger amounts from anyone who wants to marry her. In other words, the payment for bride price becomes another ground for male competition and identification of their categories of being powerful or powerless in terms of their capacity to pay the required amount. Since the value defines the price, and sometimes, as shown in the two texts, both men and women fall victim to the situations, it is the male characters who find themselves in conditions they cannot control. For some who cannot control their situations, they find difficulties on their way to fulfilling societal expectations of a man. The failures and challenges they face, in this analysis, suggest that men are not always the beneficiaries, as female characters consciously and unconsciously create barriers in men's ways, hindering their struggle to achieve the required evidence of maturity by paying the bride price.

Socio-Psychological Control of Male Practices

The African culture, characterised by traditional ideologies and masculine beliefs, delineates men as brave, noble, emotionally intelligent, and strong, and thus, must not be irrational or emotional in

the face of challenges or overwhelming events (Ezeugwu and Ojedokun, 2020, p.1)

This quotation describes the societal expectations of a male response to challenges. In a patriarchal society, a man is supposed to act differently from women in the face of psychological or social difficulties. The novel's response to this expectation demonstrates the male characters' response to the social and psychological conditions that interfere with their desire to obtain and pay the required amount of bride price. In exploring the male characters' psychological and social responses to bride price practices, I focus on the spaces where these characters are subjected to conditions that cause them to demonstrate behaviours unexpected of men in their struggle to obtain and pay the bride price.

In the novel, the author has created the marketplace as both an economic and social space. The representation aligns with Agboola's assertion that the market is a public space and a location that provides an environment for social and economic interaction (Agboola, 2022). In the novel, characters of both genders meet in the market once every week to sell and buy goods, as well as create and maintain social ties. In expressing their feelings, women describe the kind of suffering they face in marriage, while insisting that it is because their husbands paid the bride price. One of the female characters, Orchan's mother, declares her readiness to leave her husband and marry another man who can pay a larger amount of bride price. Orchan's mother says, "As for me, if I could find a man who could be in a position to refund the bride wealth of Orchan's father on me, I would run away to him" (18). While female characters are expected to struggle for agency, by moving from abusive marriages built on bride price, this context shows that female characters focus more on humiliating their husbands. Individual liberation from abusive marriage seems to be undermined, and what Dube refers to as "disempowerment of men by men" (p. 116) is brought to the surface. The circumstances governing bride price payment in the represented society indicate that any man who can repay the bride price for another person's wife can marry her, a condition that suggests vulnerability to men in poor financial conditions. The text reveals that female characters are powerless in decisions related to whom to marry and the amount of bride price to be paid, yet simultaneously shows how these same characters can manipulate

existing systems to bring a man down. As an expression of the female characters' dissatisfaction with how patriarchal systems work, this serves as a punishment for the husband, who was once powerful and capable of paying the required amount of bride price. These events demonstrate how men are disempowered by their fellow men and the consequences of the disconnected masculine network in the represented society. The female characters' declaration of availability and their call for a man who can repay the bride price for another marriage suggests insecurity on the part of the male characters. The novel suggests that the payment for the bride price does not guarantee a permanent marriage tie with the woman, as the doors are left open for her in case another man with a larger amount shows interest. These conditions expose the male's failure to control their women and the level of insecurity in marriage.

The narrative portrays the market as a space for ending relationships and forming new ones, and also as a platform for announcing an individual's availability for marriage. While women use the space to humiliate their abusive husbands, some men use the space to find new wives. The narrative says that "Market-day: Saturday! It was a hunting day and a day to be hunted" (17). The narrative exposes men and women who are victimised by bride price, including male characters whose wives have eloped with other men who could pay a greater amount of bride price to their parents. The market serves as a space where both men and women can freely express their difficult marital conditions, which the consequences of the bride price tradition have exacerbated. A similar event in the text is represented by a prison sergeant who declares that his wife "eloped with an army sergeant ..." (19). This frustrated the prison sergeant, and he began to look for another man's wife to elope with, just as his wife had done. The stated event exposes the masculine society without limitations on how the exchange of women should be administered. The role of the marketplace in accommodating characters like the army sergeant can be explained in Stuart and Studdert's views:

Market role as a site of social inclusion refers to the fact that it can operate well as a public space where marginalised groups come to spend time, thereby providing opportunities to escape isolation in the home or elsewhere (Watson and Studdert, 2021, p.14)

The quotation emphasises that the market serves roles beyond being a space for the exchange of goods. In the context of the novel, characters utilise the marketplace as a space for expressing their marital conditions and frustrations, including the loss of their partners or the need for new ones. It is in this space that the text reveals male characters also face the frustrating conditions resulting from the bride price and need to be heard by the public about their situations. This kind of need for a forum to discuss individuals' feelings in Ugandan society can be related to the formation of associations mentioned earlier in this article. The 2014 court case in Uganda can serve as a good example of individuals' efforts to express their feelings about bride price and the kind of change they wish to see. Moreover, the Constitutional Appeal of 2014 in Uganda demanded that the court declare the bride price refund for the dissolution of marriage unconstitutional (Constitutional Appeal No. 02 of 2014, p. 3). The refund practice in Uganda is a problem to both men and women, as it makes it difficult for women in abusive marriages to leave, and also makes it difficult for the parents and brothers of the married daughter or sister to refund the bride price after years of marriage. The societal efforts in these kinds of forums suggest that individuals need to express the difficulties they go through in maintaining the tradition. The two texts show that men also struggle and suffer, as there are negative consequences on their part, like wife elopement, and hence, the need to express their pain like female characters in the market.

Whereas it can be defined as an objectification of female characters when they are sold from one owner to another, it also becomes a problem for the men from whom their wives are taken away. Male characters like Orchan's father live in the risk and fear of losing the wives he had paid for. In circumstances where the regulations that protect the marriages of those who had paid the bride price are not clearly stated, those who are powerful economically threaten the marriages of the weak and poor men in the same society. Female characters' actions show the weakness in the patriarchal system, which creates tension for men even after they have paid the bride price. It is in this weakness that females exert their powers and alter males' expectations of control by leaving them for other men. In other words, it is a form of betrayal that leads to frustration and hatred between men within the system.

The psychological conditions of male characters who fail to pay the bride price, such as Okeca in the latter part of the novel, reflect the delicacy involved in the practice. The narrative presents a frustrated and embarrassed young Okeca after years of working in the sugar plantation. The money he obtained in Kampala after many days of hard work was stolen while he was on the bus back home (102). Okeca is sure that things will not go well. He says, "I have suffered, I am suffering and will continue to suffer because of the high bride price in Acoli land" (103). In a situation where a man has failed to obtain the bride price, as in the case of Okeca, the novel does not depict society's members uniting to help. The society also does not change any of its regulations to accommodate men like Okeca, who is coming from a low-income family and has lost all the money he obtained in Kampala. The writer, through Okeca, presents the ways men pay the price of proving their manhood by paying the bride price.

In the patriarchal system, the hierarchies between men cause more pain, especially for those who come from low-income families. The author portrays the political and economic conditions of the time, in which the cash economy in colonial Uganda had disrupted the communal life of society. In a society where goods obtained by the clan, such as minerals, cattle, and loinclothes, were used for collective purposes like weddings, festivals, and bride wealth, the introduction of the cash economy had altered the system. In the cash economy system, individuals would obtain money and use it on their terms (Sinani, 2023; Gyekye, 1997). The same conditions are observed by Thiara and Hague, where the report shows that poor men, when they need to pay the bride price, often decide to borrow substantially and end up bankrupt soon after marriage. In other painful incidences, men are forced to pay back the bride price for the sister leaving her husband or paying for a deceased wife (Thiara and Hague, 2011). Examining the eras of representation, the texts suggest that since the introduction of colonialism and the advent of cash, the practice has not been easy for men. Additionally, the texts show that the system does not exempt the poor but applies the same rules to all, whereby those who obtain a bride price from parents and sisters are treated in the same way as those who have to work for years, like Okeca, to obtain a bride price.

In such circumstances, no matter how much the female characters love their men, they do not have any room to support their men in paying the bride

price. In situations where men fail to pay the required amount of bride price, women are not involved. Additionally, upon their failure to pay, the bride or her family can choose to marry another man who can pay the required amount. In the text, Okeca is engulfed in sorrow, thinking of the time he lost in Kampala and the few possibilities left to him to marry Cecilia Laliya, the woman he loves. Okeca blames the systems that have made the payment of bride price an individual's responsibility; he also remembers how the cows and goats left to him by his late father were sold by his relatives (12). Okeca represents the kind of frustrations and embarrassment that men experience when they fail to pay the bride price, and the Acholi society struggles to maintain the old tradition in the new socioeconomic systems.

New historicism "treats literature as a participant in a dynamic, changeable culture" (Greenblatt 1982, p. 204). The potential for change becomes vital because it means that literature has a role to play in shaping society. In this analysis, the approach favours the evaluation of the role of formal education in the lives of women and men about the bride price tradition. In *White Teeth*, it is boys who are prioritised in access to formal education in the colonial Uganda. Significantly few girls are involved in education, and the novel shows that after boys acquire education, it provides them with the opportunity to earn an income, as well as for girls. Okeca speaks with concern about the category of men he belongs to, which is that of a low-income family and one that would never be able to afford to take him to school. On his way to Kampala to work in a sugar plantation, Okeca finds some boys coming from school on the bus (41). In the situations where the cash economy is the dominant system, being educated, in Okeca's view, is a symbol of success for a man. Formal education as a new way of life in colonial Uganda creates a new space that excludes a specific category of men, especially those from low-income families and creates opportunities for others. The novel represents one side of the impact of education. In contrast, the MIFUMI report reveals the other side, as the bride price transactions empower women and are counted as an added value to the individual.

In line with the analysis presented in the two texts discussed above, a specific app was developed and circulated on various social media platforms, particularly in Nigeria and South Africa, in 2014. The app was designed to calculate a woman's marital value, considering attributes such as height, weight, beauty, cooking skills, and education. To equate the attributes, the

app⁵ was used to calculate the amount of bride price that a woman is supposed to receive, depending on the results obtained from the factors above. Minna Salami⁶, a Nigerian journalist, commented that the app encourages the continuation of the oldest tradition, which commodifies women. While I may agree with her views on the app, recognising education as an essential factor in determining a woman's value can be significant. It can also be viewed as a recognition of a critical quality that both men and women share equally. The equality demonstrated in the provision of education is often overlooked when calculating bride price, indicating that the value and cost of a woman increase with the level of education.

The role played by education in this context is to transform the lives of women by reducing their level of dependence on others. In previous discussions, female characters like Orchan's mother and other women in the marketplace struggle to find marriage to men who can improve their poor conditions, implying a high level of dependence on men by women. In other words, the equality in the provision of formal education has probably created the only kind of equality between the seller and the buyer which would not have been made through the ownership of property. Ashraf and others outline the benefits of educating a girl, arguing that the higher the bride price paid for an educated woman, the more likely families are to invest in their daughters' education. While patriarchal families do that to earn more from the woman, it is, on the other hand, an advantage to the woman receiving education (Ashraf et al, 2020; Oduro et al, 2020). In the MIFUMI report, upon the increase in the value of a woman because she is educated, and the increase in the costs because she spent time in school and colleges, the bride price tends to be higher and leads to the failure of most men to pay and marry the women of their choice (Hague and Thiara 2009, p.18). In its general sense, education empowers women in terms of knowledge and financial resources. However, it challenges men because it leads to the demand for larger amounts of bride price, as the larger amounts are meant to compensate for the bride's education costs.

⁵ In South Africa, it is recognised as a Lobola App, developed by Robert Matsaneng. The App like other software is found in google play and users can download it and use for calculating individual's value for bride price. The software developer admits that the culture is too important to be replaced by software but at the same time believes that the app can complement it

⁶ Minna Salami is a Nigerian-Finish feminist author and social critic. The author of *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*

Conclusion

The two texts in this discussion identify the factors and characteristics that influence the bride price tradition in the Ugandan community across different eras. Both texts exhibit male dominance in the practice, and the most affected are women. As for the novel, p'Bitek creates a literary piece which criticises the bride price tradition in Uganda. p'Bitek's view of the tradition, which is sarcastically presented, summarises the author's opinion on the tradition, where men possess power and authority over something that destroys and embarrasses them. The two texts describe the conditions of men, which is recapitulated in the title of the novel 'white teeth', an Acoli translated proverb '*lak tar miyo kinyero wilobo*' which means, in its general sense, making people pretend to be happy by laughing a lot on earth (Ofuani, 1996, p.185). While the texts suggest that the tradition puts men in the same place as women when it comes to the negative consequences, men have shown a great desire to hold to the tradition, which suggests that it is imperative in ensuring female subordination in marriage. The two texts generally portray the persistence of the tradition while campaigning for the regulation of the practice, but not with the intention of abolishing it. The economic and psychological conditions observed in the lives of some male characters and respondents show that men do not always benefit in the process. Instead, in some instances where women succeed in using their concealed powers, men do suffer the consequences.

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