

Derrida's Deconstruction and Critique of Femme Fatale Figure in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the character of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*. Most of the critical reading of the novel have centered on examination of African primitive life style, cultural practices of African people prior to Western civilization. Apart from the representation of African primitive life style, one dominant critical perspective seems to dominate the reading of the text, that is, the portrayal of the character of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure, who is villainous, morally ambiguous, vicious, lethal, seductive, cunning and luring men to death. However, this paper takes a different critical perspective from the usual reading of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure. It is the contention and argument of this paper that Ihuoma is not a fatal figure. This is the gap in scholarship which this paper seeks to fill. In attempt to interrogate this notion of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure, the writer made use of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction as a conceptual framework to critically dismantle the idea of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure.

Keywords: *Literature, Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, Elechi Amadi, Femme Fatale.*

INTRODUCTION

Elechi Amadi is one of the pioneer writers of African Literature. As a creative writer, he has five novels to his credit namely: *The Concubine*, *The Great Pond*, *The Slave*, *Isiburu* and *Estrangement*. Amadi, as a literary artist is widely known for his debut novel, *The Concubine*, which Eldred Jones described as "an outstanding work of pure fiction" (5). The novel has attracted a lot of critical responses from the literary community. Most discourses on the text revolve around the cultural background of pre-colonial Africa. Critics have tried to depict the narrative as a representation of the African traditional past, immersed in superstition and ardent belief in supernatural forces which influence the affairs of man.

In an article entitled "The Force of Charms in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Great Pond*," Labo Bouche Adou examines the role of charms in Elechi Amadi's two novels. The critic argues that Amadi uses charms to demonstrate that prior to the European occupation of African continent; a typical African society was a well-organized one. Accordingly, 'Africa was organized, contrary to the colonizer's appreciation.

Africans enjoyed a culture, a tradition and civilization. The use of fetishes by Amadi was a form of expression of these traditional religious beliefs" (216). Similarly, Agbonifo RoseMary and Emoge Ovekaemo examine "Religion and African Values: Exploring the Supernatural Forces in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*". In this paper, the writers posit that supernatural forces manipulate and act on the human characters contrary to their will.

This is shown on how the sea king attacks his victims; as demonstrated on the deaths of Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme, who at various times attempted to marry Ihuoma. Significantly, the influence of supernatural forces has drawn the attention of critics, especially Niyi Osundare, who argues that the sea king is “cold, indifferent, manipulative and unappeasable” (107). Like Osundare, Alastar Niven sees the sea king as “implacable” (181).

Gloria Eme Worugji examines the role of women in Amadi’s *The Concubine*. In her work “The Woman as a Male Appendage: A Critical Examination of Position of Major Female Characters in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*,” she explores the “woman’s traditional role and the expectations of the patriarchal society of her in terms of role-playing and behavioural pattern in a typical African society” (21). The paper attempts to justify that women’s strength, worth and dignity is recognized in relation to the appreciation of the male folk. In “Myths and Realities: A Study of Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*” Isaac Messiah gives a detailed account of the concept of the sea king as it affects the customs and traditions of Ikwere people of Rivers state, Nigeria.

He opines that “Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* is a reality not a myth” (119). The critic insists that the events of the novel are factual experience. According to the writer, the gods, Ojukwu and the sea king form an intrinsic aspect of the culture of Ikwere people. What is written in the novel is not fiction but cultural display of traditions and beliefs of Ikwere people. Also, Ebele Eko in *The Man and His Work* makes a similar point to that of Isaac Messiah that Amadi uses the text “to assert and celebrate a people’s cultural integrity”(32).

James Tar Tsaaior in “Oral Aesthetics and Cultural Distillates in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*” addresses the question of “hybrid heritage of the African novel based on the reality of fusion of its African oral antecedents and the Western novelistic tradition, using Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* as an exemplum” (1). The writer notes that even though the novel is not of African origin, African writers have domesticated the genre through the use of indigenous oral forms.

According to the critic, African writers use folktales, songs, chants, proverbs, myth and legend to express issues of thematic concern in an African environment. Additionally, Helen Chukwuma in “Man and Fate in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*” examines the role of fate in the novel. According to the critic, “*The Concubine* is a tragic love story which is best understood in the light of the triangular love conflict between Emenike and Ihuoma, between Ekwueme and Ihuoma, and between the sea king and Ihuoma”(7). In this relationship, the sea king has sworn to eliminate any man who interferes with the bond between him and Ihuoma. This movement of fate is evident in the death of Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme. At the human level, “the sea king intervenes and claims his victim. Fate becomes the final arbiter and takes precedence over all desires” (13).

In view of the literature review on Amadi’s *The Concubine*, it is shown that scholars have studied the text from different literary theories such as mythic perspective, feminist discourse and humanist based orientation. However, the critical perspective on this novel has not interrogated the notion of Ihuoma as a femme fatale figure. This leaves a research gap which this study wants to engage using Derrida’s deconstruction...

Jacques Derrida’s Account of Deconstruction

According to Christopher Norris, “deconstruction denotes language as the most rigorous and the most unreliable source of knowledge” (xi). For J.D. Caputo, deconstruction “deprives the present of its prestige and exposes it to something ‘toute autre,’ wholly other beyond what

is foreseeable from the present, beyond the horizon of the same” (42), while Jacques Derrida sees deconstruction as a “concept under erasure” (see Caputo 43). Deconstruction is an idea that is associated with the French philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida. On 21st October, 1966, Derrida presented a paper at Johns Hopkins University on the topic “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences.”

This paper signaled the end of structuralist movement; and marks the inauguration of deconstruction. Prior to Derrida’s critique of structuralism, there were other thinkers who have done similar things like Derrida. They include the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger. Nietzsche, a German philosopher, attempted a critique of Being and truth in his philosophy. While Freud focused on self-presence, Heidegger was more interested in destruction of metaphysics, ontology and Being. The idea of deconstruction forms a significant aspect of Derrida’s writing. This is seen notably in his works, like: *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena* and *Margins of Philosophy*.

Hillis Miller quoted in Crawley as saying that deconstruction presupposes that “criticism is a human activity which depends for its validity on never being at ease within a fixed method. It must constantly put its own grounds in question” (Crawley 39). The implication of this assertion is that deconstruction is not a theory or a method. In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend” Derrida declares that “deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (273). To him, deconstruction is not a method because “method suggests something systematic and closed, a procedure that comes to an end” (Beardsworth 5). For Derrida, deconstruction is a strategy of reading (see Akwanya 295, Jim Powell 13 and Timothy Clark 190). A deconstructive reading of literary text does not aim at transcendental signified where the text makes meaning outside the text. As Derrida’s remark has shown, deconstruction:

... cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psycho-biographical, etc.), or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside language. (158)

By this statement of Derrida, deconstructive strategy does not aim at signified which exists prior to the publication of the work, to unravel socio-political situation of the country or the author’s life intention. Instead deconstructive reading follows “the movement of language itself” (Sharon 12) and the “very possibility of writing” (Derrida 8). This movement of language and excess of writing betrays the writer’s intention. In literary art where language is at stake according to J. Hillis Miller “Language is not an instrument or tool in man’s hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his world” (44).

Deconstructive reading aims at retroactive defamiliarisation of a text by teasing out conflicting aspects of signification such as ambiguities, gaps, contradictions, aporia, and conflicting modes of thought patterns. Deconstructive reading aims at these patterns of ambiguities because its mode of reading is aware that “language, especially written language, is reflexive rather than representative; it folds back on itself in very interesting and complex ways, which produces meanings that proliferate beyond an author’s conscious control” (Derrida 26). In this paper, Derrida’s perspective on deconstruction is deployed to argue that Ihuoma is not a femme fatale figure. The issues argued are as follows: contestation of Ihuoma as an unusual character, interrogation of Anyika’s divination and superstition and the sea king and the death of Ihuoma’s suitors. The argument of this paper rests on these issues to support the thesis that Ihuoma is not a femme fatale figure.

Demystifying the Unusual Ihuoma

One of the main issues that have drawn critical attention in Amadi's *The Concubine* is the unusual nature of Ihuoma, who is usually represented in the figure of femme fatale. According to Charles Nnolim, a femme fatale is a "dangerous woman who is a siren luring men to their death with her bewitching beauty and song" (51). For Ebele Uko, Ihuoma is a "death carrier....She is more dangerous than the classical sirens" (43).

This assertion is hereby contested by several textual evidences in the work to suggest that there is nothing like femme fatale figure in the novel. The idea of unusual Ihuoma is first mentioned in the novel by Anyika, the native doctor. When the marriage plan between Ihuoma and Ekwueme is mentioned, all the parties present agreed to the marriage proposal except Anyika. His reason for that is because there are spiritual forces against the success of the marriage. Moreover, that Ihuoma is unusual. This remark of Anyika does not go down well with the parents of Ekwueme who "exclaimed simultaneously" (195) in great surprise. Yet, Anyika insists that Ihuoma is unusual.

From textual evidence, there is little or nothing to support this claim that Ihuoma is unusual. Etymologically, the word unusual suggests a sense of odd, weird, out of the ordinary, abnormal and different. When we examine the text closely there is nothing unusual about Ihuoma. She is just a pretty woman from Omigwe village married to Emenike from Omokachi village. The fight between Emenike and Madume has inflicted severe health challenge on her husband. During the time of her husband's sickness, "Ihuoma showed her great devotion to her husband in every way she could think of" (7).

This gives a clear illustration of the character of Ihuoma as a kind hearted woman. She is a character who is humane and generous. This very act of generosity cannot be done by a character that is weird and unusual. Apart from her devotion, her husband can "boast that in their six years of marriage she had never had any serious quarrel with another woman" (12). In fact, it is said that she even settles quarrels between older women.

Superstition and the Authenticity of Anyika's Divination

Anyika is a native doctor who lives out his spatio-temporal existence in Omokachi village. According to the narrator, "no one quite knew where Anyika had come from" (5). In his mediation between the spirit world and the people of Omokachi, Anyika charges mandatory fee of two manilas. The first time we encounter Anyika in the text, he demands for the two manilas from Nnadi, Emenike's brother. In their interaction we have an idea of the importance of the two manilas to Anyika. We read thus:

Well, Nnadi, you know the procedure, he said.

Eh, Anyika, Nnadi replied and brought out two manilas. He knew that the medicine man could not open his medicine bag without this sum, for it would be an insult to his personal gods and they would render his medicine ineffective. (6)

In this interaction between Anyika and his client, Nnadi, we learn of the significance of the two manilas. One, it is consultation fee without which Anyika cannot proceed to treat his patient. Furthermore, it is an insult to his personal gods, which will render his divination ineffective. In other words, without these mandatory two manilas his divination is null and void. In one instance when Madume was bitten by a spitting cobra that spit into his eyes, the mandatory consultation fee of two manilas was paid by his wife, Wolu.

“Wolu went for some money and came running back. She paid the divination charge of two manilas” (70). We see the importance of the two manilas as a necessary condition before any treatment can be given to a patient. In the case of Madume, payment of the two manilas made it easy for him to know the problem of Madume, which he says that “several spirits are involved here” (70). The significance of the two manilas is evident. After the payment of the two manilas, Anyika says that several spirits are involved in the case of Madume. Consequently, without the payment of the two manilas there is no solution would be sought.

In another instance in the text when Ahurole’s marriage is threatened by Ekwueme’s closeness to Ihuoma, Ahurole goes to Anyika to prepare love potion for her so that Ekwueme will forget Ihuoma completely. Even though the medicine man has a contrary view to that of Ahurole, he still demands for the two manilas. “Let’s have two manilas, he said. Ahurole produced them and he set to work” (159). The outcome of payment of the two manilas in the case of Ahurole is that the gods refuses her request to procure love potion. From these instances enumerated, one fact is established. For Anyika to engage in any act of divination the two manilas must be paid to him to have access to the gods. Without the two manilas his divination is rendered ineffective.

In the case of Ekwueme, different aspects of Anyika’s divination are depicted. One wonders whether he is talking as an oracle of the gods or as a mere mortal with vested interest. These are critical questions involved in Ekwueme’s case. When Ekwueme’s parents consult Anyika concerning their son’s marriage to Ihuoma, he does not demand the customary two manilas as required by his gods.

This is a development Adaku finds strange as she laments, “it is strange how he volunteered a divination without fees, Adaku said” (198). Furthermore, Adaku reiterates that “he often said that if people did not pay, his spirits would not let him see clearly into the future. Maybe he is wrong this time since he wouldn’t let us pay” (198). This non-payment of two manilas casts doubt in the mind of Ekwueme who “told his father repeatedly that Anyika’s unsolicited divination was misleading” (199).

If the payment of two manilas is compulsory for Anyika to have access to his personal gods for an effective divination, on what grounds can we validate his divination that Ihuoma is never meant to get married, die untouched by men, and “could be someone’s concubine” (196), that the sea king tries to destroy any man who makes love to her? From the textual evidence, it strongly suggests that this divination of Anyika is based on false premise. It does not follow the normal ritual of Anyika’s access to his personal gods. According to Anyika, Ihuoma “was a wife of the sea king, the ruling spirit of the sea” (195).

The supposed union between Ihuoma and the sea king is hardly realized in the text. It is a union that is only known and spoken of by Anyika. Other textual evidence denies the said marriage between Ihuoma and the sea king. The principal character, Ihuoma, says that “these things are strange and almost funny. I certainly don’t feel a daughter of the sea” (201). If Ihuoma denies vehemently any connection with the sea, on what grounds is she adjudged the daughter of the sea. It is an idea that is contestable considering the fact that Ihuoma spends her existence among her people.

Also, the boatman hired by Ekwueme to take them to the river for sacrifice does not take the idea of the seaking seriously. He laughs over it. In his conversation with Ekwueme, the boatman makes his remark succinctly, “Well, you see, people often said they see the sea king, but I never saw him myself.

I always felt the medicine men were deceiving them” (212). The boatman raises a fundamental issue on the identity of the sea king, who is he, is the sea king real or mere phantom of the imagination of Anyika? Perhaps the character of the sea king is rendered ghostlike and insubstantial in the consciousness of Anyika. The illusory existence of the sea king provokes existential struggle in Ekwueme.

To him, he is determined to marry Ihuoma come what may. For Ekwueme, Ihuoma “is a human being and if marrying a woman like her is before my death my soul will go singing happily to the spirit world. There also I shall be prepared to dare the wrath of four hundred sea kings for her sake” (197).

Ekwueme’s determination to marry Ihuoma despite all odds places him on the same pedestal with Greek heroes like Prometheus and Oedipus Rex. These are characters that were willing to suffer to the end for what they believe in. However, Ekwueme’s courage is aptly described by Friedrich Nietzsche as the “titanically striving individual” (72), whose individuation accounts for his tragic end.

The Sea King and the death of Ihuoma’s Suitors

If the existence of the sea king cannot be validated by rigorous textual evidence, the whole idea of the sea king causing the death of any man that attempts to or marries Ihuoma is questionable. There are three men in Ihuoma’s life: Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme. The crucial question before us is whether their death was caused by the sea king or other factors.

The first man in Ihuoma’s life is Emenike. According to Anyika, “as soon as Emenike married Ihuoma his life was forfeited and nothing would have saved him” (195). There are several conflicting views in the text with regard to the death of Emenike. Emenike in conversation with Wodu Wakiri says “that his illness was not necessarily a result of the fight” (8). Wolu, Madume’s wife sees a connection “between the fight and his subsequent illness and death” (19). This link with the fight between Emenike and Madume cannot establish the cause of Emenike’s death.

After his fight with Madume, Emenike has fully recovered and had gone for a thanksgiving sacrifice. The narrator reveals that “after an illness it was customary to offer some sacrifices to Amadioha for all his help. So on one Great Eke Emenike made ready to go to the sacred woods of Amadioha. Emenike walked among them, carrying a bright-red cock and two fat yams for his offerings” (15).

At this stage, the narrative voice does not help in unraveling the cause of Emenike’s death and subsequent illness. It is said that “after an illness it was customary to offer some sacrifice to Amadioha” (15). The nature of the illness is not disclosed. What he is offering sacrifice for is not established considering Emenike’s conversation with Wodu Wakiri “that his illness was not necessarily a result of the fight” (8). It is textually unverifiable to establish which illness that has caused the death of Emenike.

The question of the death of Emenike is an issue that engages the thought of Madume. For Madume, “the death of Emenike “occurred after he had apparently recovered from the fight” (55). If Emenike does not die as a result of his fight with Madume, invariably Madume is exonerated of all blames in the death of the former. In a conversation with his wife, Madume tells his wife that “[he] did not kill him” (55). In a dramatic twist of event, Ihuoma’s mother Okachi attributes the death of his daughter’s husband to an unknown persons. She laments, “They have killed your husband and now they want to laugh at you” (20).

Okachi adds a new twist to the issue of Emenike's death. The use of they to refer to the murders of Emenike implies that Emenike is *murdered* by unknown persons.

Essentially, Ihuoma thinks that the fight between her husband, Emenike and Madume caused his death. This is a position which her husband had denied when he was a live that "his illness was not necessarily a result of the fight" (8) between him and Madume. On the other hand, Ihuoma's mother thinks that Emenike dies as a result of "Lock-Chest" (21). But Ihuoma counters her mother's opinion that her husband does not die of lock –chest. Instead, Ihuoma maintains that this is not the first time her husband is working in the rain.

The gods are also implicated in the death of Emenike. The text reveals that "Emenike went for a customary thanksgiving after his illness to the sacred woods of Amadioha" (15). At the shrine of Amadioha, when Nwokekoro, the high priest, looks at the worshippers "the old men averted their faces when the priest appeared to glance at any one of them" (17).

Emenike "gazed at the priest and immediately regretted that he had done so, for in the priest's face he read mild reproach, pity, awe, power, wisdom, love, life and –yes, he was sure-death" (17). Perhaps, Emenike's death may be attributed to his lack of experience while the older men averted their faces when the high priest stared at them, Emenike gazes at the face of death. To some extent, it may be argued that one of the causes of Emenike's death is his encounter with the high priest which signaled death for him.

Anyika, the native doctor has another perspective on the cause of Emenike's death. According to him, "Ihuoma's late husband apparently died of lock-chest but actually it was all the design of the sea king. As soon as Emenike married Ihuoma his life was forfeited and nothing would have saved him" (95).

Anyika adds that "just before Emenike died I detected some water spirits among the throngs that eventually liquidated him" (95). He gives a contradictory account of the death of Emenike. Some of the causes of Emenike's death according to Anyika are lock-chest, the sea king, and finally "some water spirits ...eventually liquidated him" (95). Moreover, judging from the account of Anyika's opinion of the cause of Emenike's death, it is worthy of note that the veracity of Anyika's views of the water spirits cannot be ascertained.

As soon as Anyika mentions the water spirits, he immediately denies its existence. In his words, "I also stumbled on these water spirits and somehow their connection with Ihuoma eluded me. ... The sea king himself probably confused me at the time" (196).

From the statement of Anyika, one raises the question about the possibility of the existence of the water spirits. Does it actually exist or is it mere fabrication of the consciousness of Anyika? If the existence of the water spirits eludes him, on what grounds does Anyika pontificate that the water spirits liquidated Emenike? In Anyika's divination, he says that "she could be someone's concubine.

Her sea king husband can be persuaded to put up with that after highly involved rites" (196). In the case of Ekwueme, Ihuoma cannot be called his wife because he has not paid her bride price. She may rightly be called Ekwueme's concubine, which is allowed according to Anyika's divination. If Ihuoma is allowed to be a concubine, why is the death of Ekwueme attributed to the sea king. To associate the death of Ekwueme with the sea king is to contradict the divination of Anyika. Besides, it is doubtful to hold that the sea king killed Ekwueme when Nwonna mistakenly "shot directly" (213) at Ekwueme in his attempt to kill a lizard.

CONCLUSION

The paper interrogates the reading and interpretation of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* as a femme fatale figure. Though this is a major critical perspective on the novel. However, from the textual analysis carried out using Jacques Derrida's conceptual tool of deconstruction, it shows that Ihuoma is not a femme fatale figure.

From the study it is shown that Ihuoma is like any other character in the novel, who is married and has a family. The divination of Anyika that Ihuoma is a wife of the sea king has no textual evidence to validate this assertion. Ihuoma has no connection with death of the men in her life. In view of this study, it is shown that Ihuoma is not a femme fatale figure.

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