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**IHUOMA, THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ELECHI AMADI'S *THE CONCUBINE***

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**Executive Summary**

Literature whether oral or written has, since its' origin, served as a vehicle for the diffusion of language, world-view, culture and belief of any given community. It evolves alongside these phenomena in order to fulfill its' function among the populace. The Nigerian society, thanks to her distinguished authors, has had her cultures and traditional beliefs projected to the lime light. Elechi Amadi is one of such authors who, through his works, has effortlessly disseminated the Igbo beliefs with regards to human activities and future as they are controlled by the gods. In his novel *The Concubine*, he postulates that human destiny is not subject to change; thereby, subtly re-enacting the doctrine of determinism. An ideology which suggests that man's destiny, actions and indeed all events of life have been predestined by powers from beyond. Without laying undue emphasis on the aforementioned ideology, the principal focus of this paper is to explore the destiny of four major characters as they are portrayed in this epic novel. The paper also casts a cursory glance on the culture, worldview of the Igbo society, the extramundane powers and the control which they exercise on human beings even against their will. Since the Igbo society is of a very high interest to this work, using destiny as our theoretical frame work, an expository and analytical method are applied in the study of the society and characters as they are presented in the novel.

**Key words:** Igbo, Society, Determinism, Extramundane, Culture, Destiny

## **Introduction**

Through his works, Elechi Amadi, just like many of his counterparts, has contributed immensely to the growth of Nigerian literature. The people's culture, belief and mentality have caught the interest of researchers, thanks to their works. His debut novel *The Concubine* happens to be at the heart of this studies. This work drew attention to itself because of the styles employed in it to put across the writer's message. Noteworthy are his manners of using transliteration to add local colors so as produce the desired effect on the readers, an element identified by Omenogor as Popular Nigerian English (PNE) or Nigerianized English. She explains that :

The adjective 'Nigerianized' is a coinage from 'Nigeria'. In the course of using the expressions, Nigerians try to maintain or comply with the principles and norms of the English language but give local colour or some features of Nigerian local languages in the English expressions used. It is the type of expressions explained above that we have termed 'Nigerianized English'. (145)

His reason for employing this technique is obviously to put life in this fictive work and bring it home to his Nigerian readers. Describing Madume as 'big eyed' (Amadi 4-5)(Anya ukwu in Igbo) instead greed is one example of such local colors. This is one of the styles that made his work a popular one.

Amadi also has a unique way of telling stories about Nigerian villages in order to show-case their world-view and culture. More interesting is his masterful way of commingling the physical and the spiritual, seen and unseen powers in order to bring out the unique cum ineradicable co-existence between them and how they interplay to give the Igbo culture and world-view a wholeness without which its ontology would not be recognized.

The principal focus of this paper is to explore the destiny of four major characters as they are portrayed in this epic novel. The paper also casts a cursory glance on the culture, worldview of the Igbo society, the extramundane powers and the control which they exercise on human beings even against their will. Since the Igbo society is of a very high interest to this work, using destiny as our theoretical frame work, an expository and analytical method are applied in the study of the society and characters as they are presented in the novel.

## **Culture**

An elementary definition of culture presents it as the people's way of life. Izunwa avers that: "culture is sociologically used to denote that body of historically developed, shared, learned behavior of the members of the society. As a concept, it encapsulates such common group behaviors as dressing, eating, dancing ..." quoting Mooney, Knox and Schacht (1997) he agrees that "culture refers to the meaning and ways of life that characterizes a society. Simply put, culture is about the way of life of a people." (124)

Imbedded in culture, are some elements like beliefs, customs, values and norms. Many beliefs of the Igbo society are clearly elucidated in the novel. The Igbo society believes in solidarity and communality: in marriage, village ceremonies, burials, sickness and religious worships, the extent of communality demonstrated by the villagers is noteworthy. The communality in this novel is what Onuoha (2019) identified as Igwebuiké. The society also believes in the intercession of the personal 'chi' of an individual especially to avert danger. This explains why many people consoled Emenike by telling him that his personal god must have been away on a journey during the fight he had with his opponent. (Amadi 5). Apart from this, there is also a constant recourse to a Dibia who has a tripartite function of making sacrifices to appease the gods and ward off bad omen, foretelling the future and communicating with the gods/ancestors in order to provide solutions and explanations to existential puzzles. The issue of destiny, determinism and freedom is also of keen interest to this paper. This is because these three elements form an intrinsic part of the societal world-view presented in the novel. There are incidents of broken marriages, sicknesses and series of untimely deaths in the novel. Where all these meant to happen the way they did or were they as a result of some misuse of human freedom?

### **Destiny and determinism**

Life itself is a mystery and it is submerged in mysteries. The fact that human beings try to apply logical explanations to the irrational things happening in this world is what Albert Camus captures in his philosophy as *Absurd*. For Camus, life is uncertain, the only certainty in life is death that makes life useless and absurd. (Karavournioti 4) As soon as a child is born, it starts to move towards its destiny which is death. All men are destined to die. The questions are: when, how and where and what happens after death? These are age long questions which have found no generally accepted answer. Destiny is one word which attempted to answer this existential question and in so doing Destiny as a word

has acquired different meanings which may not be completely far in meaning from each other. Many see it as fate.

According to Ogbujah, as fate, destiny is seen as an absolute inscrutable power which all living beings are subject, and which may be either personified or delineated as impersonal. It is a unity or agency seen as an inevitable necessity controlling all things." Man's experience shows the limited extent to which he is able to mould events to his purposes. His origin and very many experiences of his life are impressed upon him, first facts beyond his control; and secondly as data upon which he is to exercise his intelligence. These uncontrollable facts constitute human facticity or fate or destiny. (413)

The above succinctly recapitulates what Alfred de Vigny portrays in his poem *Les Destinées*. He writes:

#### **Brief recap of the Poem**

"Depuis le premier jour de la création, les pieds lourds et puissants de chaque Destinée pesaient sur chaque tête et sur toute action." Strophe 1. (Vigny 1) (From the first day of creation, the heavy and powerful feet of each destiny weighs on each head and upon each action. -Our translation) This already shows the ineffaceability of man's fate. From the creation of the world, destiny has constituted a heavy burden and suffering for man. A prophet who came to save mankind from destiny was killed despite the hope he gave. These daughters of destiny flew back to God and asked him what they should do. God told them to go back to the world and continue their work among men while He (God) will maintain a balance from on high. Destiny came back and continued dealing with men. And so man has little or no power over his destiny. "Retournez en mon nom, Reine, je suis la Grace. L'homme sera un toujours un nageur incertain Dans les ondes du temps qui se mesure et passe". "Notre mot eternal est-il: C'ETAIT ECRIT? - SUR LE LIVRE DE DIEU" ... (Vigny 1-6). (Return in my name, Queen, I am Grace. Man will remain un uncertain swimmer in the waves of time that measures and passes. " " Our eternal word is it: WAS IT WRITTEN? - ON THE BOOK OF GOD" ... -Our translation).

Ogbujah quoting Gbulie writes: "Fate to my mind, curtails every persons liberty to act or do as he pleases. It cuts every human being down to size, peasant and patrician alike; ... there is therefore no shaking off any situation or even changing the course of any event once fate has ordained it." (413) Many believe

that destiny is unchangeable. Ultimately death is the fate of every living thing. The means of attending this death is also understood by many as destiny. Ogbujah opines that: as finality, destiny is used to designate a future, a vocation or a movement towards a generally 'unknown'. As a future or a vocation, it can be applied to a visible end set for a moral personality". (413) He thereby reechoes what Vigny said in his poem above that man remains an uncertain swimmer in the waves of time...

Our interest centers then on destiny of the following characters: Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme concerning the choice they made individually with regards to the pretty Ihuoma. Ihuoma's situation was clear. Her destiny though unknown to her was revealed to the reader. "She is a little unusual". [195] She has supernatural origin and a specific destination. These facts were made clear about the protagonist. But the death of these three young men, who unintentionally dared the jealous Sea-god, arouses some sort of curiosity as regards their destiny. Would Ekwueme have died when, where and how he died if he did not begin the preparations to marry Ihuoma? Would Emenike and Madume have met their untimely death if Ihuoma (who ironical to her name, brought ill luck to her husband, suitors or intending suitors. ) were married into another village.

A hypothetical answer to these questions would be no! Whether we call it predestination, determinism or destiny, there are certain conditions which need to be present for them to be actualized. The death treat which the beautiful Ihuoma carries was targeted at any man who dares to marry her. To propose this marriage was like challenging the Sea-King to a wrestling context and since the spirit is more powerful than the physical, the victory usually goes to them.

We shall in the next few pages, confirm or disprove our hypotheses through an exploratory analysis of the novel using destiny as our theoretical frame work.

### **Synopsis of the Novel**

The novel was set in the rural community of Omokachi, A typical Nigerian village. The plot was centered around Ihuoma a beautiful young lady, "who was so right in everything, almost perfect." [196] As described by the dibia - Anyika. She was the beloved of everyone. Every young woman wanted to be her friend and every young man secretly or openly admired her. But whoever married or tried to marry her met their death each in a mysterious way. Emenike her

husband for whom she had three children, died of locked - chest after a fight with Madume. Even though he offered a thanksgiving sacrifice after recovering from the injuries sustained from the fight. Nobody is sure of what killed him exactly. Madume the big-eye, committed suicide, after he was temporarily deserted by his wife because he was blind and of difficult character. His blindness was as a result of a spittle from a cobra which attacked him in Ihuoma's farm. Finally Ekwueme died from the wound sustained from a barbed arrow which was shot by Nwona as he hunted for lizard to be used for a sacrifice to appease a Sea-King.

Unknown to everyone was an astonishing truth: Ihuoma was a Sea-goddess who escaped to find a dwelling among humans. Her jealous Sea-king-husband determined to eliminate any man who married or thought of marrying her. "She was to die untouched by men". [196] But after a huge sacrifice, the Sea-king could be appeased and the most she could be to a man was a concubine.

### **Ihuoma's destiny vis-à-vis Emenike, Mmadume and Ekweme**

In his diction, a writer consciously chooses words or phrases which would aptly convey his message. Amadi did not ignore this important aspect in his writing. Right from the first chapter, the two main characters were presented in such a way that one was liked and the other despised immediately. "His arms were folded across his chest and his biceps formed two thick knots. He was biting his lips and his eyebrows met in an angry grimace". (Amadi 1) Juxtaposing the two characters he wrote: Emenike was slight of build but well proportioned, and he was ranked as an average wrestler. Of Madume he said: "Madume had a narrow square head (axe-headed according to the villagers) and an iron trunk. Worse still he had a temper as bad as that of a man with whitlow on his ten fingers" (1)The above description already shaped the readers' minds as it concerns the destiny of these two men. Although both died - a fate which awaits all. One died honorably and was accorded a befitting burial while the other died abominably. In creating these fictive characters, Amadi created an Emenike who should fit into a mould of a loving husband to pretty Ihuoma. He was (an average wrestler) not as perfect as his wife because he was mere mortal but he was good enough to stand beside Ihuoma. He was also loved by everyone. This could be seen as people trooped in to visit him when he was sick. Even the jealous and powerful Sea-king was lenient with him and kept him long enough to have up to three children with Ihuoma.

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Madume on the other hand was created with some qualities that made him despicable in the eyes of the reader. He was axe-headed, he was big eyed, and had a terrible bad temper. He was lazy, he flogged his wife who bore him only girls. He did not enjoy a lot of popularity neither from the villagers nor the readers, yet he was not a complete write-off. He stature lent some strength to his village during inter-village negotiations. (Amadi 4) Even the Sea-king was ruthless to him by nipping his desire and admiration for Ihuoma in the bud. The first time Madume went to Ihuoma's compound he hurt himself, it was a big wound. "the gods were behind it. It was certainly a premonition....you were lucky to have come out alive from Emenike's compound'. Several spirit swore to kill you there and then. ... They don't want you to have anything to do with Ihuoma." (Amadi 58) It was not a surprise that unknown spirits, some from the sea, wanted to do away with Madume. Madume would not give up, he went to cut Ihuoma's plantain and to woo her, a cobra spat into his eyes. Ayinka confirmed that it was an act of a powerful god. That made Madume blind, he also became of a difficult character, his wife left him and he committed suicide. So Madume to a large extent was a flawed character. He did not enjoy any popularity neither from the villagers nor from the readers.

Ekwueme on another note, was a promising young man who enjoyed some favor from the villagers. Amadi deliberately created a character whose death would bring tears not only to the villagers but also to the readers. The love affair between Ihuoma and Ekwueme was so hopeful and consoling. It was going to dry up Ihuoma's tears and satisfy the deep desires of Ekwueme. At first, Ekwueme was to marry Ahurole who was betrothed to him when they were little children. That marriage failed despite the efforts on both sides to save it. His marriage with Ihuoma was approved by men but unfortunately forbidden by the gods. Ekwueme was the most daring character of all the suitors. Emenike and Madume did not have a fore knowledge of Ihuoma's true nature, so the unknowingly challenged the Sea-king. Ekwueme, on the other hand, knew all that and yet dared the Sea-king. His otherwise promising life was brought to an abrupt end. They made their choices.

Anyika, after his divination reveals who Ihuoma is. She was to die untouched by men. Ekwueme was desperate to have her and walks straight into his death trap. He declares: "Dede, I do not know whether you believe this or not. It does not matter. One thing is clear, I shall marry Ihuoma. She is a human being and if marrying a woman like her is a fatal mistake I am prepared to make it." (197) He

went ahead to find his way around this marriage. He says: "If I am her husband for a day before my death my soul will go singing happily to the spirit world" (197) even in the spirit world, Ekwueme would readily confront that Sea-king for Ihuoma's sake. The pretty Ihuoma reciprocated this love, their parents gave them their support, and the angry gods were to be appeased. Here Akwanya captures what he describes as a forbidden love in the following words:

The love relationship which is effortless on both sides and totally satisfying, or rather intoxicating (202), is the one that develops between him and Ihuoma, Emenike's widow. This is a love that proves inevitable in a tragic sense. Whatever is done to nip it in the bud, head it off, or dampen it only renders the couple dearer and closer to each other and justifies them in the eyes of the peoples. What they are to discover, however as they approached marriage is that this is a forbidden love. (Akwanya and Anohu 39)

And so Ekwueme's life was cut short while he was making the necessary preparations to marry Ihuoma. That was how he met his own destiny.

Ihuoma was the most perfect of all characters. Simply faultless. It is important to keep in mind that Ihuoma was not just an ordinary young lady. She was a little unusual, almost perfect in everything. A Sea-Goddess reincarnated in her. By reincarnation, this paper subscribes to what Ogbujah proposes when he wrote: "But to those who believe in monism, of the unity of body and soul even after death, reincarnation would mean the coming back of one undivided personality from its state of "corporal immortality" into bodily forms again" (422). The above refers to humans who, after death come back as mortals. The case of Ihuoma is a little more peculiar. She was a Sea-goddess who escaped from her abode to live among mere mortals. A goddess is a female deity, a supernatural being. A perfect metaphorical image of what womankind should be. Muthukumar quoting Carol Christ opines that three major views about a goddess have been distinguished: Firstly, the Goddess is seen as a personification - a divine female - who can be invoked in prayer and believed to really exist. Secondly, the Goddess is primarily a symbol rather than a metaphysical reality; "she symbolises above all life, death and rebirth energy in nature and culture, in personal and cultural life". Thirdly, the Goddess is a symbol, "but reads it differently as affirming above all the legitimacy and beauty of female power, made possible by the new becoming of women in the women's liberation movement". (4) This is an insight into what is encapsulated in the human body which Ihuoma represents. "The women adored her, Men were awestruck before her. She was becoming



something of a phenomenon.” (Amadi 153). The diviner Anyika extrays the true nature of Ihuoma. And reveals the death treat which she carries. She can be a concubine to someone but can never be a wife because he Sea-king-husband who is so powerful cannot withstand it. “There are few women like that in the world, ... it is death to marry them and they have left behind a harrowing string of dead husbands. They are usually beautiful, very beautiful, but dogged by their invisible husbands of the spirit world.” With the Sea-king husband, marriage with his Sea-goddess wife is impossible. “And when he is on the offensive, he is absolutely relentless. He unleashes all the powers at his command and they are fatal. (Amadi 196) In creating Ihuoma, Amadi creates a divine being. She has no power over her own life. She cannot even make choices. She chose to marry Emenike and Ekwueme they died. She refused to marry Madume, yet he died because he made advances towards her. Ihuoma’s hands are tied by destiny because she is a divine being. It is not the same with Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme.

The time between birth and death is life. Death is the fate of all mortals. Therefore during his lifetime, the human person is free to make choices and take responsibility for the choices he made. “The African human person is free. For instance when God or divinities punish or reward a man for performing an action. They are reaction to an action that was performed freely and conscientiously, and that is why there is a reward for punishment. (Kanu 49) So if man were not free, he should be blamed or rewarded for his actions.

It is arguably true that destiny limits, moderates and channels these choices. In making these choices, the human person realizes his vocation, lives it out and fulfills the conditions which will lead him to his death which is the gateway to the great beyond. Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme hastened their death by the choices they made: The dared the Sea-king by eating his forbidden fruit.

### **Conclusion**

Every human society has it’s dos and donts. The Igbo is not exempted. They have their omenala - Tradition, aru - abomination, Ibeene - nsoala nke n’abughi aru. There are also other rules which are neither aru nor nsola but which must be kept in order to avert the wrought of the gods. For example: going into the forbidden forest, women touching or eating certain foods, etc. It is to this category that marriage with Ihuoma belongs. There was a bane on her. Ihuoma, unknown to her, stands out as a metaphor of the forbidden fruit. Anyone who

dares to eat it dies. She is presented as beautiful, well mannered, the beloved of every one, an exemplar wife and mother. The dibia Anyika said of her:

You see, Ihuoma is a little unusual. ... Look at her, Anyika went on, have you seen anyone quite so right, in everything, almost perfect?... She was to die untouched by men? (Amadi 196.)

She was so good that her jealous spirit husband placed a bane on her and destroyed any man who came close to her.

Therefore Emenike had to die not because he fought with Madume nor because he starred at the Dibia during the sacrifice, but because he ate the forbidden fruit. He married the wife of a powerful and jealous Sea-king. He made a wrong choice and death was the consequence of his action. Madume who was created to be hated, also died not because he is big eyed after all he always manifested his greed each time they shared anything in the village. He did not die because his wife left him, he never regarded his wife who he flogged at will. He died because he desired Ihuoma and reached out to woo her. That too was his choice. The gods killed him using him as a weapon of his own destruction, he committed suicide. Ekwueme died from the wound he got from the barbed arrow. The Sea-king killed him because he ventured into what Akwanya and Anohu referred to as the forbidden love. He dared the Sea-king. Again he made a costly choice. Therefore Emenike, Mmadume and Ekweme died young and in the manner they did, not because they were destined to die when, how and where they did, but because they fulfill the condition to reach their destiny which death. They either married Ihuoma or were intending to marry her. They had their freedom but made the wrong choices which led to their untimely death. If these three men flirted with any other lady, they probably would not have died. Madume was married. Ekweme married the lady he was engaged to since childhood. If these two stuck to their marriages they would not have died. Emenike despite being a nice fellow still had to die. If he had not fought with Madume, or sustained the injury, he still would have died because he was married to Ihuoma.

The big-eyed Mmadume desired Ihuoma as a second wife which was not out of place in the igbo society. If another male character in the book desired this forbidden fruit, he also would have died. So Emenike, Mmadume and Ekweme died because they fulfilled the condition laid down for termination of one's life that is: eating or desiring the forbidden fruit.

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