

Myths and Realities: A Study Of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*

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Abstract Elechi Amadi is a prolific African writer and a literacy critic. He is of the view that literature is meant for aesthetic and entertainment value. Any deviation from this position is a prostitution of literature. This paper discusses myths and realities; A study of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*. It examines the concepts of myths and realities. The paper gives a detailed account of the concept of the sea-king as it affects the customs and tradition of the Ikwerre people of Rivers State of Nigeria where the author hails from, with adequate examples from the text. The paper posits that Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* is a reality and not a myth. Copious instances were cited to buttress this assertion.

Introduction

Elechi Amadi is the famous author of the trilogy: *The Slave*, *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*. In these three works, the gods featured prominently. According to Elechi Amadi what informs his giving prominence to the gods in his trilogy is to deviate from the norms of pre and post independence Nigerian writers like Achebe, Soyinka and so on who featured the white man in their various works. In these three novels no white man was mentioned but the African cultures and the influence of the gods in our daily activities were well articulated.

The focus of this paper is to establish whether Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* is a myth or a reality. Relevant passages would be cited to buttress my view point. The concept of myth and reality would be enunciated.

The Concepts of Myths and Realities

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 12) (2003):

Myths are specific accounts concerning gods or super human beings and extra ordinary events or circumstances in a time that is altogether different from that of ordinary human experience. As with all religions symbolization, there is no attempt to prove that these unusual, transcendent, or divine events are 'possible', or otherwise to justify them (793).

Because of this reason, every myth presents itself as authoritative and always as an account of facts, no matter how completely different they may be from the ordinary world. The original Greek term for myth is "mythos", which means "word" in the sense of a decisive, final pronouncement. It differs from "logos", "the word" whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. Because myths present extraordinary events without trying to justify them, people have sometimes assumed that myths are simple un-provable and false stories and thus have made the word myth a synonym for fable.

Myths are accounts with an absolute authority that is implied rather than stated. They relate events and states of affairs surpassing the ordinary human world, yet basic to that world; the time in which the related event take place is altogether different from the ordinary historical time of human experience (and in most cases is imaginably long ago). The actors in the narrative are usually gods or other extraordinary beings such as animals, plants, the very first people or specific great men who changed the human condition. Many other forms of literature share in one or more of the features of this definition of myth without becoming mythical.

In the study of folklore, according to *Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia*, "a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and human kind came to be in their present form" (1). The main characters in myths

are usually gods, supernatural heroes and humans. As sacred stories, myths are often endorsed by rulers and priest and closely linked to religion. In the society in which it is told, a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past.

Closely related to myth are legend and folktale. Myths, legends, and folktales are different types of traditional story. Unlike myths, folktales can take place at any time and any place, and they are not considered true or sacred by the societies that tell them. Like myth, legends are stories that are traditionally considered true, but are set in a more recent time, when the world was much as it is today. Legends generally feature humans as their main character, whereas myths generally focus on super human characters.

The basic and most important function of myths that strikes the outside observer of any tradition is that of explanation. Natural, social, cultural, and biological facts are explained by myth. Dynasties and ruling families in several ancient civilization found justification of their positions in myths, which state that they originated in the world of the gods or in heaven or from the sun or the moon (as in China, Egypt, Babylon, the Hittite Empire, Polynesia, the Inca Empire, and India). Even the Ogba people claimed they originated from Benin. According to Ohia (2004):

In Ogba, myth creation is a story telling event which presents fiction with some historical data to prove their authenticity. The Ogba myths portray the dynamics of lively and theoretical art form with some characteristics or features of literature. The mythic story is purportedly real but with a questionable veracity because of the transience of oral communication (31).

Myths can describe the origin of the world, the end of the world, or a paradisiacal state. Thus a myth is capable of describing what persons, using reason and observation that can never be scientifically proved.

However, the detailed analysis of myths, types, characteristics and various theories of myths is not the effect which this paper wants to achieve. Our attention will now be focused on the concept of reality.

The Concept of Reality

"Reality" according to *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* (2011) " is the state of things as they actually exist, rather than as they may appear or might be imagined" (p.1). In a wider definition, reality includes everything that is and has been, whether or not it is observable or comprehensible. A still more broad definition includes everything that has existed, exists, or will exist, not just in the mind, or even more broadly also including what is only in the mind.

Historically, philosophers have sometimes considered reality to include non existent things such as "gold mountains" in a sense referred to as a subsistence, as well. By contrast existence is often restricted solely to being compared with nature.

Reality is often contrasted with what is imaginary, delusional, in the mind, dreams, what is abstract, what is false, or what is fictional. To reify is to make more real, and to abstract is the opposite. The truth refers to what is real, while falsity refers to what is not. Fictions are not considered real.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2003 vol. 15), "realism connotes any viewpoint that accords to the objects of man's knowledge an existence that is independent of whether he is perceiving or thinking about them" (p. 539).

Having discussed the concept of myths and realities, we shall proceed further to establish whether Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* is a myth or reality.

Myths and Realities in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*

In Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, the heroine, Ihuoma, is the wife of the sea-king. The name Ihuoma according to Elechi Amadi is "beautiful face" or good luck" (p. 7). In the words of Nnolim (2009):

What good luck is it, one may ask, which ensures that Ihuoma who is fecund and has several children, would never know the joys of conjugal love? Her good luck bears in its train the curse of unhappiness, of repeated in widowhood, of never knowing the joys which come from living for long with the marked men for whom she unwittingly purveys death as their concubine (p 10).

Ihuoma, is the one clear case of the *femme fatale*, although she never intends to be one. When her friend, Nnenda praises her beauty she protests: "I don't want to look beautiful ... Beauty seems to carry sorrow with it ... ugly people do not seem to suffer as much as the beautiful" (p. 35).

Indeed, Ihuoma's remarkable beauty tinged with sorrow bewitches all beholders, both men and women: "the tired look on her face gave way to a sweet youth expression, softly alluring, deeply enchanting, which had a bewitching subtlety that only deep sorrow can give ... young men and even the old gazed at her irresistibly" (p. 36). Ihuoma's beauty occasions unsolicited comments from friend and foe alike. The author asserts:

Ihuoma's complexion was that of the ant – hill. Her features were smoothly rounded and looking at her no one could doubt that she was "enjoying her husband's wealth" (p. 10). Her smiles were disarming. Perhaps the upper row of her white regular teeth did the trick. At that time a gap in the teeth was fashionable. Any girl who was not favoured with one employed the services of carvers who could create them (p.11).

Ihuoma was an epitome of beauty and good behaviour. Elechi Amadi sees her as a role model for other women. He remarks:

She was sympathetic, gentle, reserved. It was her husband's boast that in their six years of marriage she had never had any serious quarrel with another woman. She was not good at invectives and other women talked faster than she did ... In this way her prestige among the women folk grew until even the most garrulous among them was reluctant to be unpleasant to her. She found herself settling quarrels and offering advice to older women (pp. 11-12).

Ihuoma's good nature was so undisputed that the unheard of happened. Potential rivals in love were willing to yield her place if their husband decided to bring her in as a second wife. Elechi Amadi might have stretched the point quite far, but Wolu, Madume's first wife was glad to yield her place as number one wife in their household, if her husband decides to marry Ihuoma. She observes:

She's just a well-behaved woman who takes good care of herself ... she is about the best woman in the village ... I would gladly be the second wife where she is the first; not the reverse ... she is .. she is ... better than I (pp. 54-55).

When Ekwueme first told his mother, Adaku, that he was contemplating marrying Ihuoma, she expressed reservations because Ihuoma was too good for him:

If you are thinking of Ihuoma, forget her she is easily the best woman in the village. She can't do anything shameful (p. 92).

With her graceful carriage, Ekwueme came near to worshipping her" and:

The women adored her. Men were awestruck before her. She was becoming something of a phenomenon (p.153). But Ihuoma was not happy. Elechi Amadi took recourse to the myth of the sea king as the cause of unhappiness for this perfect model with a curse on her head. When Ekwueme told her that she was beautiful, she protested: I am not responsible for my beauty ... Besides, beauty does not always mean happiness. I have not been a very happy woman (p. 214).

Events prove her right. Her first husband, Emenike had suddenly died of lock-chest. Big-eyed Madume who had manhandled her and later contemplated marrying her had committed suicide when a spitting cobra blinded him. And when Ekwueme became her second husband and she looked forward to being happy again, her son's arrow kills Ekwueme.

Nnolim questions, "why all this concatenation of unhappy occurrences? Amadi has recourse to mythology to prove that these occurrences are not just happenstance" (p. 13).

According to Anyka, the native doctor:

Ihuoma belongs to the sea. When she was in the spirit world she was a wife of the sea king, the ruling spirit of the sea. Against the advice of her husband she sought the company of human beings and was incarnated. The sea – king was very angry but because he loved her best of all his wives he did not destroy her immediately she was born. He decided to humour her and let her live out her normal earthly span and come back to him. However because of his great love for her he is terribly jealous and tries to destroy any man who makes love to her (p. 195).

The diviner also confirms that as soon as Emenike married Ihuoma his life was forfeit and nothing would have saved him, " and that "Madume's real trouble began after he assaulted Ihuoma while she was harvesting plantains. Added to this was the fact that he had a secret desire to make Ihuoma his lover or maybe marry her. All this was too much for the sea-king and he himself assumed the form of a serpent and dealt with his rival" (P. 195).

Nnolim noted that in Nigerian fiction, "Ihuoma is the best realized example of the femme fatale which enunciates the myth of the 'castrating female' or the dangerous woman who is a siren luring men to their death with her bewitching beauty and song" (p. 13).

Ihuoma's beauty prompts Ekwueme to a death wish; "if" he says, "marrying a woman like her is a fatal mistake I am prepared to make it. If I am her husband for a day before my death my soul will go singing happily to the spirit world" (p. 197). And so it happened. Ekwueme's death wish has been fulfilled. He has answered the call of the siren.

Even though Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* has been seen as a mythical novel by notable literary critics such as professors Charles Nnolim, Chidi Maduka among others, because of the prominence of the gods in the novel, it can also be examined as a realistic novel. This is because the heroine Ihuoma and other major characters such as Emenike, Ekwueme and Madume are real names of persons in a real life situation. The setting of the novel is Omokachi, a fictional town in Ikwerre kingdom of Rivers State Nigeria.

In the novel the cultures of the Ikwerre people such as wrestling, dancing, hunting, farming, marriage ceremonies and elaborate burial rites were highlighted. These are qualities of a novel that can be classified as a realistic novel. In their six years of marriage Emenike and Ihuoma lived peacefully and were a perfect match. This is manifested in Emenike's appreciation of his wife, Ihuoma dancing steps:

'Now dance' he said. She danced less seriously now, her cheeks dimpled with suppressed laughter. He husband embraced her in the traditional way and gave her the money. 'Thank you, my lord; she said and made for the kitchen (p. 13).

After the sudden death of Emenike, elaborate burial rites were organized for him, just as it is performed in real life situation in Ikwerre kingdom. According to Elechi Amadi, the author:

The song composed in Emenike's honour was sung with unavoidable melancholy. The tune was charming but the words were sad. Even Wakiri's usually clear voice was tremulous as he sang the first stanza:

Do you know that Emenike is dead?

Eh – Eh – Eh

We fear the big wide world;

Eh – Eh – Eh

Do not plan for the morrow,

Eh – Eh – Eh (p. 28).

Ekwueme is presented as an accomplished hunter in the novel. He killed several animals. When he was wooing Ihuoma, he presented her with animal as a gift. Amadi writes:

The sun was scarcely overhead when he came back with two prize animals – a porcupine and antelope –slung behind him ... 'wait and have your share; he said. He cut off a huge chunk. Nkechi fetched a large cocoyam leaf and wrapped it up. Ihuoma turned to go (p. 204).

Several instances to demonstrate that Amadi's *The Concubine* falls in the realm of realism abound in the novel. There are marriage ceremonies between Ekwueme and Ahurole, Emenike and Ihuoma, Madume and Wolu among others; farming, the main occupation of the Ikwerre people is also highlighted in the novel.

Various inter community wrestling matches were organized in the novel. All these instances are examples of a realistic novel.

In an oral interview with the author Elechi Acadi at the post graduate school in University of Port Harcourt in 2003 organized by professor Chidi Maduka the issue of the novel, *The Concubine* being classified as a mythical novel by literary critics was raised. Amadi vehemently refused. He remarked that he never sat down to write a mythical novel. He noted that the worship of the gods, Amadioha, Ojukwu and the sea-king are part of the cultures and traditions of the Ikwerre people. Therefore, the novel cannot be classified as a myth but a realistic novel.

Based on this premise and a detailed examination of the novel, *The Concubine* one does not require a soothsayer to divine that the novel is a reality and not a myth.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that the concept of the gods as typified by the sea-king abound in our daily lives. There are instances of women that and barren; some losing their husbands to the cold hands of death early in their marriages. When oracles are consulted the sad occurrences will be attributed to the evil machination of their spiritual husbands or the sea-king.

In this paper, the concepts of myths and realities were discussed. Copious examples in the novel were cited to demonstrate whether the novel is a myth or reality. However, it is the position of this paper that Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* is a reality and not a myth. It is our belief that this paper will contribute immensely towards further researches on myths and realities in African literature.

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