

## **Fate, Uncertainty and Mystery of the Supernatural: Ironical Indictment as Literary Hermeneutics in Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine***

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### **Abstract**

This paper reevaluates Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* (1969) and *The Concubine* (1969) within the frames of reference of magical realism and the supernatural, using irony as a critical tool of analysis. It argues that irony is the vehicle of meaning in the two novels. The paper highlights the major incidents in the plot structures of the two novels pointing out the hidden ironies in these events. The paper engages with the concept of Magical Realism to respond to the

significance of African metaphysical nuances to depart from the Western scope of narratives that dwells on realism. The paper concludes by examining Amadi's perception of irony in the two novels. In *The Great Ponds*, Amadi envisions a society where peace and harmony are the order of the day. He achieves this by vividly depicting the woes that accompany wars and anomie in any human society. However, in *The Concubine*, Amadi envisions a society where the gods are given their place while humans remain in their place. This he believes is necessary for cosmic harmony in the universe. Nonetheless, in both novels, gods and human intermingle to create an ambience of magical realism.

**Keywords:** magical realism, ironic indictment, the supernatural, Elechi Amadi, *The Great Ponds*, *The Concubine*

## Introduction

Elechi Amadi was an accomplished Nigerian author, from Ikwerre in Rivers state, Nigeria. Notwithstanding Amadi's background of science and mathematics, his novelistic enterprise recalls a recurrent enduring success. Despite his death on 29 June 2016, his reputation as a cultural icon has never been in eclipse. Amadi's novels include *The Great Ponds* (1969), *The Concubine* (1969), *The Slave* (1978), *Estrangement* (1986), a war diary-*Sunset in Biafra* (1969). Amadi has also written some plays: *Isiburu* (1973), *Pepper soup and The Road* (1977), *Dancer of Johannesburg* (1978), and *The Woman of Calabar* (2002). Amadi's novels evolve into spaces where the supernatural and magical realism are constantly enunciated. In the words of Clara A. B. Joseph, Amadi's works are "peppered with witty translations of proverbs and numerous references to age-old customs. His narratives highlight the importance of tradition (more than language) in the creation of a political community" (2001, 59-60). Apprehending a referent of the supernatural in both *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubines* is not a difficult enterprise. The two novels create possible spaces where living, death, happiness, and despair are often interrogated through the gambit of the supernatural that intrudes into the lives of major characters.

## Magical Realism in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*

Magical Realism reconciles the contradiction between realism and non-realism that embodies elements of exotic otherness. Magic Realism is an increasingly important genre in the fictions of Africa, Latin America, Pacific, Asia, and other colonized territories. Situating magical realism in an appropriate historical context helps to clarify and delineates

the emerging perspectives on the genre. The term magical realism started with the German art critic, Franz Roh who coined the term in 1923(Cited in Reeds 2013, 41). Homi Bhabha sees magical realism as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (1990, 6). Jean Franco reiterates that magical realism is “little more than a brand name for exoticism” (1999, 204). Fredric Jameson affirms that magical realism is “a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism” (1986, 302). Durix argues that magical realism has succeeded in creating “a new multicultural artistic reality” (Durix 1998,162). Matei Calinescu acknowledges that magical realism has the potential of becoming “a major, perhaps the major, component of postmodernist fiction” (Zamora and Faris, dustcover 1995).

Christopher Warnes contends that magical realism complicates the tension between two discursive strategies mutually exclusive of each other. If magic is assumed to lie outside of the realm of the real, realism excludes the magical. However, the two are linked by recurring thread that tends to naturalize or normalize the supernatural (Warnes 2009, 3). Emile Durkem remarks that the supernatural as it relates to the world of the mysterious reconstructs all sorts of things that confound the limits of our understanding (Cited in Waskul and Eaton 2018,7). The expression of the aesthetics of the supernatural in both *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine* underscores deservedly the significance of magical realism in the two novels. Mark Mathuray emphasizes that a preponderance of the presence of ritual, oral tradition, narratives about gods and myth or mythic personalities in the African fiction goes a long way to distinctively authenticate the “Africanness” of the literary production associated with the continent (2003, 45). In considering the elaboration of literary mysticism in Amadi's oeuvre, it becomes important to take a cognizance of a syncretic blending of magic and realism in both *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine* that raises an important awareness of the role of the supernatural in the lives and actions of the individual and communities in the precolonial and post-colonial Africa.

Amadi like Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian novelist of Igbo extraction. The Igbo in Nigeria inhabit Imo, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Delta, and Rivers states in Nigeria. Like most traditional societies in Africa, the Igbo embraces the supernatural as it manifests in its religion, cultural beliefs, and mythology. The Igbo believes that there is an interconnection between the physical and the supernatural (Usongo 2021, 36). Considered a sacred responsibility, the Igbo does not neglect the mythical and physical dimensions of

divination because its importance derives from a reliance on the navigation of the supernatural. As exemplified in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*, the Igbo's world view revolves around seeking divination intermittently to unlock a hidden mystery. Kenneth Usongo argues that divination among the Igbo entails an uncanny ability to predict and unravel the mysteries lurking in the immediate and in the future of an individual or a community (2021, 44). Niyi Akingbe suggests that the recurrent interactions between the physical and the supernatural in most African literary productions, testify to the mining of literary mysticism (2023, 8). Hence, the paranormal activities through divination in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine* ostensibly drive and subvert the essence of realism in the lives of Olumba, Wago, Emenike, Ihuoma and Ekwueme.

### **Irony in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine***

Irony is a rhetorical device often employed by creative writers in their works to convey meaning. D.C Muecke contends that attempts to define irony are often problematized by the multiple dimensions of looking at it (2020, 4). Linda Hutcheon views irony as a favoured trope in discursive communities due to its propensities to mock, attack and ridicule, embarrass and humiliate (1995, 19). As a literary device however, there has been a lack of consensus as to what irony means thus prompting D.C. Muecke (1969) cited in Maduka (1999) to argue that getting “to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could. To attempt a taxonomy of a phenomenon so nebulous that it disappears as one approaches is an even more desperate adventure” (139). Similarly, Booth (1974) quoted in Maduka (1999) further adds:

There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim... that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it. For both its devotees and for those who fear it, irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroying by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation (139).

Thus, Maduka (1999) goes on to add that irony is “no longer very useful as a critical idiom” (139) and that “any scholar wishing to use the term should try as much as possible to give precision to it... so that he may not be misunderstood by readers” (139).

However, we do not fully agree with Maduka that irony is no longer ‘very useful’ as a critical idiom. Since creative writers continue to employ irony in their works whether

consciously or unconsciously as Maduka (1999) admits, irony would continue to be very useful as a critical idiom in the discussion of such works. Given the limited scope of our task here, we shall not go into detailed discussion of the types of irony. We shall restrict ourselves to a discussion of Amadi's use of irony as a major structural device or as a vehicle of meaning in his novels under study. Our conception of irony is in line with Muecke's (1969) definition cited in Maduka (1999) as "ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting etc in which real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with the ostensible or pretended meaning" (141). This includes, according to Maduka (1999), "not only saying one thing and meaning another but also saying two things and meaning neither" (141).

### **Irony as Form in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine***

Nwachukwu-Agbada (1997) defines form as "the pattern into which the parts fit so as to produce a single, concrete entity" (34). Defined this way, form has the same meaning as structure. Thus, the structure or form of a literary work consists in the repetition of particular words or sentence patterns, the recurrence of symbols etc. in that work of arts. The form of *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine* consists in the recurrence of different types of irony in these novels.

*The Great Ponds* is the second novel in a famous trilogy that includes *The Concubine*, and *The Slave*. The three novels deal with life in traditional African societies in the years before colonialism. *The Great Ponds* centres on a great feud between two villages Chiolu and Aliakoro, both of Erekwí clan over the ownership of a fishing pond: the Pond of Wagaba.

The struggle to claim fishing right over the pond leads to a brutal war in which many lives are lost, women and girls are kidnapped, and economic activities are paralyzed in the two feuding villages. At the height of the crisis, the traditional rulers of all the other villages in Erekwí clan intervene. An oath is administered on Chiolu's strong man, Olumba who is made to swear by *Ogbunabali* on behalf of his village that the pond is theirs. Olumba is to be released from the oath after six months if he does not die; meaning that the pond belongs to Chiolu. But if he dies within the six months period, the pond will go to Aliakoro.

Within the period of the oath, there is an outbreak of influenza killing many in its wake all over the world. But because of ignorance and their rabid fear of natural forces and their deities, the two warring villages attribute the outbreak to *Ogbunabali*, the god to which the oath was sworn. Olumba survives the oath, but his village still loses the pond because Wago, his

antagonist from Aliakoro commits suicide in the pond thus making it an abomination for anyone to fish there.

Irony lurks behind nearly every utterance in *The Great Ponds*. As earlier stated, irony consists of its form. Even the events are shrouded in irony. Chief among the different kinds of irony employed by the author is structural irony which according to Abram (1981), "depends on a knowledge of the author's ironic intention, which is shared by the audience, but unknown to the speaker" (90). This is commonly known as dramatic irony. Amadi describes the effort of the leaders of Erekwí clan to settle the feud through administering an oath. But ironically, the oath is nearly thwarted by the sudden outbreak of *Wonjo* which kills the people in their multitudes. Ironically, the villagers attribute *Wonjo* to the fierce wrath of *Ogbunabali* even though the outbreak is universal thus leading to the deaths of millions of people across the world. Through their actions, it is quite clear that the Aliakoro villagers are not prepared to wait for the god *Ogbunabali* to decide the owner of the pond. Therefore, they engage a diviner to thwart the judgment of this god which they perceive might not be in their favour. This in turn points out the insincerity of the villagers who worship this god zealously often erecting its image in their homes and market squares offering lavish sacrifices but at the same time employing dubious means to thwart the intervention of the same god.

The major irony, however, lies in the fact that at the end of the day, the suicide of Wago at the disputed pond denies both warring parties the right to fish in the pond. Thus, after years of recriminations, heavy losses of human and material resources, both parties also lose whatever benefit they might have received from the said pond. This pond with its array of fishes which should have been a blessing to the people ironically turns out to be a curse. No wonder Okehi's wife does not mince words in stating such (72).

Furthermore, there is a tinge of cosmic irony or what might be called irony of fate in the story. In the words of Abrams (1981), irony of fate "refers to literary works in which God, or destiny, or the universal process, is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead to false hopes, but then to frustrate and mock the protagonist" (92). The universe of the novel is full of malevolent gods and spirits thus contributing to the aura of fear and perplexity among the two warring villagers. Despite his immense strength, Olumba is plagued by fear of these gods and the spirits of the dead (127). It is such pervasive fear common among the villagers that nearly makes them paranoid at the outbreak of *Wonjo* in their communities. Immediately, they attribute it to the god *Ogbunabali* and began to erect shrines for it and to offer elaborate sacrifices as well. As they do all these, the reader laughs at their great ignorance and

blindness. Kenneth Usongo reflects on Amadi's appropriation of the magical realism in *The Great Ponds*, to provide a satiric commentary on the World War 1 fought between 28 July 1914 and 11 November 1918 (2019, 160). Consequently, the bitter internecine feud between Chiolu and Aliakoro communities over the fishpond of Wagaba references the hypocrisy associated with the global intolerance which led to World War 1. Ironically, this hypocrisy significantly manifests in the rivalry and the differences between the two villages. It is ironical that the priests of these deities and their diviners who claim to know whatever is beyond the knowledge of ordinary human beings could not divine accurately the cause of deaths in their communities. Through this ironic twist, Amadi exposes the inconsistencies and inherent gaps in the indigenous religion which only thrives on the ignorance of its adherents in the *Great Ponds*.

Similarly, Irony is the vehicle of meaning in Amadi's another novel *The Concubine*. *The Concubine* is the story of Ihuoma, a young woman who is widowed very early in her marriage. Ihuoma's husband, Emenike, has died of "locked chest" just weeks after recovering from the injuries he sustains in a brutal fight in the farm over the ownership of a farmland with another villager, Madume. After years of mourning, hope comes her way again when a very promising young man from her village, Ekwueme approaches her for marriage not minding that she already has three children from her first marriage. There is a tinge of cosmic irony here as Ihuoma's hopes are not realized. The village diviner, Anyika, on consultation reveals that Ihuoma is not to be possessed by any man in marriage. According to him, before her incarnation, Ihuoma was the wife of a sea king; and against the wish of her (supernatural) husband sought human incarnation among the living. The sea king became jealous and very angry and vowed to kill any man that would attempt to possess her as a wife. This jealousy of the sea king is what is responsible for the death of her first husband Emenike.

Not satisfied with Anyika's divination, both Ekwueme and his father, Wigwe travelled to far away Chiolu in search of another diviner, Agwoturumbe who gives similar divination but adds that he could tame the sea king so that the marriage could proceed. On the very day that the prescribed sacrifice is to be offered to the sea king, Ekwueme dies from the injury he sustains when a barbed arrow shot by Ihuoma's son pierced his stomach. The little boy who is hunting for a lizard that would be used for the sacrifice unintentionally kills Ekwueme, who ironically was the one that sent the boy to catch a lizard.

Niyi Akingbe argues that by appropriating Igbo oral traditions in the two novels, Amadi draws on the aesthetics of orature grounded in proverb, anecdotes, legends, myths, tales, and historical narratives to embellish the African belief system in the supernatural (2013, 150-151).

For reverberating the African world view within the context of illustrating moral points, the contemporary African writers do normally incorporate elements of oral tradition into their fictions (Cooper 1998, 40). Just like *The Great Ponds*, the story of *The Concubine* is conveyed through a series of ironies. First, it is undoubtedly ironical that the very day that Emenike goes to the shrine of Amadioha with a chicken to thank the god for his recovery from the sickness occasioned by the fierce fight with Madume that he sees his approaching death. While at the shrine, he notices that “that the old men averted their faces when the priest appeared to glance at any one of them; so, he decided to stare back whenever the priest’s glance fell on him. His opportunity came before the thought was through his mind. He 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). Thus, he goes back home and suddenly develops “locked chest” which kills him shortly afterwards.

Secondly, it is an irony that Ahurole’s desire to administer love potion that would bind her husband, Ekwueme, perpetually to her leads to the dissolution of the marriage. Her husband becomes deranged, and she runs back to her parents. When Ekwueme recovers, he decides to marry Ihuoma instead of bringing back Ahurole.

His desire to marry Ihuoma is well received by his parents who view the impending marriage as one that would bring much laughter and prosperity to their family. But ironically, the marriage brings disaster and eventually could not hold as Ekwueme dies while preparing for the sacrifice that would hold off the sea king thus making it impossible for him to marry Ihuoma. This thus confirms the divination of Anyika that any man that attempts to marry Ihuoma would die.

Perhaps, the greatest irony created by Amadi in *The Concubine* is the obvious contradiction between the name of the protagonist “Ihuoma” and what eventually becomes her fate. “Ihuoma” means good luck. But judging by what happens to this character in the novel, it is certain that she is loaded with tons of bad luck. Although she is the *belle* of Omokachi village, she is conceived and crafted as a *femme fatale*. Thus, she ends up bringing bad luck to all the men that either marry or attempt to marry her. Her first husband Emenike dies mysteriously early in their marriage; Madume that attempts to marry her becomes blind after a spitting cobra attacks him in the farm where he goes to harvest plantain. He eventually hangs himself. Ekwueme also dies mysteriously while trying to marry her. It is therefore clear that she brings nothing but ill luck to any man that desires to have her as a wife or mistress.

#### Amadi’s Vision of Irony in the two novels

What then is Amadi's vision of life in deploying the various types of irony in these novels? Did he use the ironies for their sake or to achieve any specific purpose? Irony is used in the two novels to foreground a reterritorialization of magical realism in the African fiction. Utilizing appurtenances of the supernatural in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*, Amadi strenuously strives to prove that African literature has evolved from the complacency of the Western narrative mode of realism to assert its authenticity through magical realism. At this point, we must note Maduka and Eyoh's (2000) view that a "text exists like a pseudo-cosmos with a life of its own, even though it is the society that provided the raw materials used in creating its world" (108). The vision of life or society portrayed in a text is in the final analysis, that of the author's.

According to Maduka (1999), believes that many literary works contain a network of ironic situations, each situation revealing a vision of life and society. Thus, one could have ironies within ironies, all combining with one another to eventually reveal the totality of vision of life or society portrayed by the author in the work. Based on the foregoing, we can safely add that authors of literary works use irony as a trope to reveal their vision of life.

Beginning with the ironic portrayal of traditional religion, Amadi depicts some aspects of this religion as inadequate. Erekwí clan, with its array of revered gods and deities, still wallows in self-hate. The villagers could erect shrines in honour of their gods, offer elaborate sacrifices to such gods and still work to thwart the same gods to achieve their selfish ends. In *The Concubine*, one notices lack of faith in the diviners that proclaim the will of these traditional gods. These trends in these novels are common in our day. Nigeria, as it were, is one of the highly religious countries on earth. With many preachers jostling for space within and outside the country, Nigeria exports Christianity and its brand of Islam to other parts of the world today. Ironically, Nigerian political elites are noted to be among the most corrupt people on earth. This means that there is a total disconnect between the religion we practice and our conduct as Nigerians both in private and public places. This is totally reprehensible.

Similarly, Amadi deplores the villagers' unnecessary fear of gods and spirits to whom they attribute every misfortune that comes their way, even when such misfortunes arise from their carelessness. He equally deplores the crass ignorance of these people in attributing even disasters that are universal like the influenza to their gods. This kind of ignorance robs them of initiatives towards solving their problems. Rather, they feel helpless as they continue to offer useless sacrifices to unseeing gods that cannot in any way help them. This trend is also noticeable in our day. It is rather unfortunate that currently and daily, we in Africa are still living in crass ignorance leaving our fate in the hands of our gods. This attitude is directly responsible for our

underdevelopment and backwardness. If Chiolu and Aliakoro villagers had accepted the reality of the epidemics that has already decimated their population instead of attributing it to the anger of a phantom god, they might have thought of a way of arresting the situation. Amadi seems to be saying that rather than leaving our destinies in the hands of unknown gods, Africans should take their destinies in their own hands by investing enormously like other races, in science and technology.

Furthermore, Amadi criticizes the men folk in both Chiolu and Aliakoro for their “stupid exchange of fish for human lives” (106). Indeed, it beats one’s imagination that two small villages that descended from the same ancestral lineage could manifest such morbid hatred for each other just because of a fishing pond. In the end, the leaders of these villages, alongside their army of male supporters are utterly to blame.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has to a reasonable extent explicates the significance of magical realism in Elechi Amadi’s *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine* as novels with a predilection for intermingling reality with the supernatural. In the two novels, Amadi reverses and subverts a realism narrative mode with the magical realism considered indigenous to the colonized territories in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific.

Irony is engaged in the paper for the narrative of the hypocrisy of the communal strife between the warring Chiolu and Aliakoro communities in the *Great Ponds*. Again, irony is manipulated for the deconstruction of individuals and communities’ ignorance and misconception in the two novels.

Finally, Amadi relentlessly articulates his belief in traditional deities in *The Concubine*. The dexterity with which the diviners foretell Ihuoma’s fate, and the accuracy of their divinations are a sure manifestation of his confidence in the African belief system.

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