

Add to entry on ELECHI AMADI:

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Ebele Eko, "African Aesthetics in Elechi Amadi's The Slave," The Literary Criterion, 23, 1-2 (1988): 143-153;

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Elechi Amadi

~~(1934)~~

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BOOKS

The Concubine (London: Heinemann Educational Books, ~~1966~~; African Writers Series, 25, 1966);

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Few African novelists writing in English have portrayed rural life in Africa with as much authenticating care and detail as has Elechi Amadi in his four published novels. In fact, it is fair to regard him as one of the foremost chroniclers of the African village in creative literature. In his novels, African villagers come alive

in the immense variety of their individual and group activities which are deeply informed by a collectively shared sense of religion and ethics, of social etiquettes and culture. The novels tend to project the image of an idyllic and stable world. But this world does not remain stable for very long; it is sometimes undermined by the intervention of fate and the supernatural forces that determine the destinies of men and women in the traditional society, and, in some cases, because of the people themselves who, through stupidity or excessive passion, knock down the walls of the stability of their world. In Amadi's novels, the idyllic is never too distant from the tragic.

Amadi himself was a child of the African village. Born in Aluu, a village in the rainforest belt of ~~the~~ south-eastern Nigeria, near Port Harcourt, he had his early upbringing in his home region. Later, he ventured outward to receive his secondary education in Umuahia Government College and his university education in University College, Ibadan, but the village remained embedded in his consciousness and was readily drawn upon when he turned his mind to fiction. His first

three novels <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ each set in the cluster of villages around where he was raised, while his fourth novel is set principally in Port Harcourt, the largest urban centre <sup>in</sup> in the region surrounded by these villages. The success of Amadi's novels is attributable to the surefootedness with which he describes the setting and the cultural environment of his narratives. He could describe village life and experience, sports and games, rituals and social practices with a degree of verisimilitude possible only to an insider.

Amadi's best contribution to the novel in Africa, however, remains his having perfected a ~~unique~~ <sup>style</sup> style of narration and dialogue which captures <sup>the</sup> the rhythms of traditional speech. It is a style of great flexibility which lends itself admirably to the dramatization of action, the expression of emotion and the exposition of ideas.

Many commentators on his novels have noted this achievement of his art, his having evolved the simple but profound narrative style akin to the style of the classical story-tellers. Indeed,

the reviewer of The Great Ponds in The Spectator had in mind Amadi's narrative style as well as the world of his novel when he said this: "If there is something of Homer and Virgil in the physical descriptions of battles and parleys...there is still more in the powerful sense of what it is like to be ruled by supernatural forces." And Alistair Niven, who has written most about Amadi's novels, describes The Concubine as "a novel of classic simplicity".

A mild and intensely private man not given to self-dramatization, Amadi has nonetheless a very clear view of what he set out to achieve in his fictional works. In one of his few statements on the role of the novelist in Africa he asserts that "...an African writer who really wants to interpret the African scene has to write in three dimensions at once. There is the private life, the social life and what you may call the supernatural". Each of his rural novels amply illustrates the validity of this statement.

The Concubine (1966) is regarded ~~by critics~~ as a successful first novel and acclaimed for combining formal excellence with depth of meaning and insight. ~~Richard Mayne in the New Statesman~~

says that the novel "reveals the author as a fine writer ruminating on a past turning into legend", and Anne Duchene in the Guardian praises the author for having drawn "a lovely and dignified picture of a society not only ruled by Gods, but governed by a great delicacy in human relationships". Eldred Jones extols the novel as an "outstanding work of pure fiction", while Alistair Niven praises it for possessing "the timelessness and universality of a major novel", and Eustace Palmer asserts that "it is difficult to find flaws in this small masterpiece". These Critics agree that it

The Concubine is a well controlled narrative with a proper balance between character and situation and between action and background.

It is hard to imagine that it is the author's first novel.

The concubine in the story is Ihuoma, a beautiful young woman of inimitable charm and character, the crown-jewel of feminine propriety and the pride of the village of Omokachi. Unknown to her, she has been betrothed to the Sea King, a malevolent water-spirit who is content to allow her to become a concubine but not the wife of any mortal man. Any man who falls in love with her and seriously

contemplates marrying her is soon struck down and exterminated by the ever-vigilant Sea King. Such is the fate of Emenike the noble villager, Madume the land-grabber and Ekwueme the love-sick young man. In the middle of all the upheaval is the tragic heroine who is totally oblivious of her immense potentiality for destruction.

On the most superficial level, the story would seem to belong to the genre of pure folklore with the heroine in the archetypal role of the fatal female who brings disaster on her lovers. But the strength of The Concubine rests on the fact that it is not folklore but realistic fiction, in spite of its strong penetration by the supernatural.

Amadi's success in the novel can be attributed to two main *accomplishments,* ~~reasons.~~ First, he has drawn a convincing picture of the traditional society in which he situates the action. In this society, human beings are in close contact with the world of Gods, spirits and ancestors. There is, therefore, no call on the reader for a suspension of disbelief or for the dissociation of sensibilities. The close interplay of the natural and the supernatural, of the



physical and the metaphysical and of the secular and the spiritual provides a strong backdrop to the drama of destiny played out by the characters. Secondly, the characters themselves are clearly drawn and their actions are given dramatic effect through the novelist's superbly controlled dialogue. Amadi's skillful portrayal of the characters and their society and his matter-of-fact handling of the supernatural combine to produce a convincing illusion of reality and to make The Concubine a significant novel.

The Great Ponds (1969) is about the feud between two fishing villages near the Niger delta for the possession of a communal fishing pond. The Pond of Wagaba is really of no greater consequence than other ponds but it has become a cause célèbre or in fact a vibrant casus belli and its symbolic value has risen by the degree of prestige invested by each community in its effort to possess it exclusively. In the true tradition of heroic contests, the possession of the pond becomes a challenge and a channel through which the warriors on each side celebrate their bravery,

martial sagacity and magical prowess. On either side there is a champion whose destiny is co-terminous with that of his community, Olumba of the people of Chiolu and Wago the leopard-killer of the people of Aliakoro.

Amadi's understanding of traditional life is again revealed by his detailed description of the arts of war and peace, including his recourse to the supernatural to break the impasse when war begins to prove too costly for the contestants. The resolution of the controversy is subtle and unexpected, including the loss of the pond by both parties and the structural use of the influenza epidemic of 1918. Elechi Amadi is not only a consummate storyteller but he is also a master of plot construction; for, even though the end of the tale is unexpected, there is nothing forced or overtly contrived about it. He succeeds in trimming the action away from fantasy and exaggerated gestures and towards empiricism.

The Slave (1978) is even more restrained than The Great Ponds from the point of view of the author's having imposed upon it the necessary demands of conventional realism. Even though a degree of

heightening is essential to sustain interest in a work of fiction, Amadi deliberately reins in his enthusiasm and plays down the sense of wonder to keep his action within a proper range of credibility; the magical is kept down in the novel.

The Slave tells the story of Olumati, a young son of a dying family whose parents have been victimized by their village and been stampeded into seeking refuge in the service of a God in a neighbouring village and thus embracing slavery as a means of securing their lives. Olumati, now a grown young man, attempts to reclaim his patrimony by restoring his family to social respectability, but the forces that oppressed his family reassert themselves and combine with his own deeply embedded complexes to nullify his effort. In a mood of extreme despondency he escapes into voluntary slavery as his parents had done before him, thus proving the truth of the adage that what killed mother rat never allows <sup>her</sup> ~~its~~ children to open their eyes. The Slave is a very pessimistic tale.

The Slave is Elechi Amadi's best effort so far at exploring the

inner life of a character. Whatever social obstacles lie in the way of the main character's efforts to restore his family are not as formidable as the state of deep unease and insufficiency within himself. In the end his failure becomes inevitable because he has suffered psychological damage too deep to recover from. Not even the help of his friends and some of the people <sup>of the village</sup> could restore him, because his problem is both within and without. The internal sickness is more difficult to cure than the external. For him, the test of his acceptability would have been the marriage of Enaa, the village elder's daughter whom he has come to regard as a justifiable prize for his ~~his~~ economic success. When she is betrothed to his friend who is an artist, he regards the action as a sign of his rejection by the community and he goes away to embrace his destiny in the shrine-house.

Like The Concubine and The Great Ponds, The Slave is also set in pre-colonial eastern Nigeria and has been written in the same <sup>evocative</sup> ~~evocative~~ style. But it is somewhat misleading to regard the three novels as a trilogy as some critics and the publishers have tried to do. There is no organic relationship between the novels; neither do the characters

link up; nor have they a unifying theme, to justify the use of the term.

In his fourth and latest novel, Estrangement (1986), Amadi shifts the focus of his fiction from ~~the~~ pre-colonial times to the post-colonial period, and specifically to the period of the Nigerian Civil War. The novel deals with how the war affects Alekiri, a young, devoted housewife from Port Harcourt, a Biafran city that had fallen to the federal soldiers, how her marriage collapses and she is driven into the arms of Major Sule Dansuku, a federal field commander.

The novel gives a glimpse of the dilemmas and tragedies that faced individuals in one of the monumental disasters of modern history. Everyone of the major characters bears the scar of the war—Alekiri, Major Dansuku and Ibekwe, Alekiri's alienated husband—but the end of the war also finds each of them gathering together the pieces of their shattered lives. But the old stabilities have gone for ever for some of the people.

Amadi explores his themes and his characters' predicaments with integrity and compassion and gives a very touching picture of the

community's effort to help its members to heal the wounds of the war. He shows that the trauma of this terrible upheaval did not completely destroy the traditional community's vitality even though it cannot be said to be as strong as those communities so endearingly sketched in Amadi's novels set in the pre-colonial times.

Elechi Amadi himself experienced the Biafran War at first hand. He was detained in Biafra during the war before he escaped to join the federal side. Two years before the war, he had retired from the Nigerian army with the rank of captain in the educational corps. Re-joining the Nigerian army after leaving Biafra, he became a major. His experiences during the civil war have been described by him in his third book, Sunset in Biafra (1973), a memoir which, as Alistair Niven says, "is written in a compelling narrative form as though it were a novel."

In addition to the novels, Amadi has shown his creative versatility by writing four delightful plays directed mainly at secondary schools. These are Isiburu (1973), a ritualistic play about a famous wrestler who in spite of the odds becomes the chosen favourite of the Gods;

Peppersoup and The Road to Ibadan (1977), a combined publication, the first a comedy on inter-racial marriage and the other a civil war story that seems to anticipate Estrangement; and Dancer of Johannesburg (1978), a spy story with <sup>an</sup> unexpected ending that features an African High Command and the defeat of apartheid.

In addition to the novels, the memoir and the plays, Amadi has also written a well-researched book on morality and culture in Nigeria called Ethics in Nigerian Culture (1982). It is a work of good scholarship and could become a useful companion reader to Amadi's novels, because it discusses many of the cultural institutions and values from which the novels take their moral and sociological bearings. The book reveals that in addition to being an excellent story-teller, Amadi is also a philosopher, a thoughtful and well-read man.

With Estrangement, Amadi has shown that he is a novelist of broad visions and wide sympathies that encompass the modern as well as the traditional scenes. It is not too much to expect more novels that address contemporary issues and themes from him. And if he can be as surefooted here as he has been in the exploration of the rural past,

there is no doubt that his reputation, already high among African novelists, would soar even higher. He has the potential of becoming a very great novelist.

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