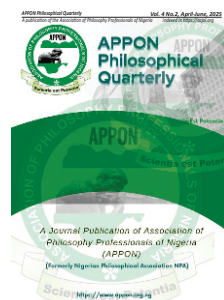


**SPIRITUAL CONFLICT AND
SOCIAL ORDER: A PHILOSOPHICAL
DISCOURSE ON ELECHI
AMADI'S *THE CONCUBINE* IN
AFRICAN COSMOLOGY**



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the metaphysical conflict between the spiritual and human realms in *the* novel by Elechi Amadi. The narrative is situated within the broader framework of African cultural beliefs. African cosmology is fundamentally characterized by the interconnectedness of the visible and invisible worlds, where spiritual forces actively influence human existence. Drawing on myth criticism and structuralist theory, this paper explores how the tragic experiences of Ihuoma and her suitors reflect an enduring tension between human agency and supernatural determinism. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study interrogates key thematic elements such as fate, freewill, spiritual jealousy, and the inevitability of destiny as mediated by divine forces, particularly the Sea-King. The findings reveal that the novel reinforces traditional African ontologies that perceive misfortune not as random occurrences but as spiritually orchestrated happenings. Furthermore, the narrative underscores the limitations of human autonomy within a cosmological system governed by unseen powers. This paper argues that *The Concubine* serves not only as a literary text but also as a cultural document that encodes indigenous epistemologies about existence, morality, and the consequences of violating spiritual order. The study contributes to African literary criticism by foregrounding the continued relevance of myth and spirituality in interpreting human experiences and conflicts. Its methodology is qualitative and analytical, falling within the area of philosophy of literature.

Keywords: African Cosmology, Fate, Freewill, Spiritual Conflict, Social Order

Introduction

For centuries, there have been numerous conflicts between humans and supernatural forces. Although one of the two parties involved is evidently invisible, this kind of conflict is not strange to Africans who widely and rightly adjudge it as

asymmetrical in nature. In Africa, many people in different socio-cultural milieus believe in the existence of and human relationships with supernatural forces who are more powerful than human.¹ As human interactions inevitably breed conflicts, there are manifestations of conflicts (sometimes

¹ William Bascom. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 35-58.

deadly) in the relationship between humans and spiritual or supernatural forces. There are instances in Judeo-Christian tradition as evident in biblical accounts, both old and new testaments, emphasizing conflicts between the physical and supernatural realms. In the Old Testament, there were occasions of conflicts between God and human agents such as Adam and Eve, Pharaoh, and the children of Israel, while in the New Testament, Paul affirmed that adherents of the Christian faith wrestle with principalities and spiritual forces and powers in the firmaments. In Yoruba philosophical thought as contained in *Ifa* literary corpus (*Odu Ifa*), there are numerous instances of conflicts between either an individual, a family, or a community and supernatural forces, particularly the deities or ancestors, which often warranted sacrifice or rituals to placate them as a form of conflict settlement or resolution.²

Africans live in a religious universe, and the reality of existence and manifestation of spiritual forces in human affairs is a fact. It is not a subject of debate in African theology and philosophy.³ To deemphasize the concept of a spirit being in African traditional culture is to proscribe the African religious belief system. Apart from belief in God, other principal component of African Traditional Religion is belief in divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine. African Philosophy acknowledges as a principle that there are different levels of existence. At the superficial level of existence, nothing is known beyond the object of sense perception. At this level, the only forces known are those that are perceptible with the senses. But there are other forces at a deeper level of existence. There are mystical or supernatural forces,

which defy scientific explanation or analysis. These forces surpass and sometimes counter act physical forces. They can be manipulated by man and employed for both good and evil purposes such as; protection, prevention of calamity, cure of diseases, procreation and bringing about death, sickness and other kinds of misfortune to people. There are, however, only few people who have discovered these forces, who have access to them, and who can manipulate and utilize them. These are the priests traditional religion, medicine men, diviners, rainmakers, witches and wizards, sorcerers or magicians.⁴ Africans view the world as an intricate, co-penetrating, and highly structured in bipolar realities - the visible and invisible. The physical world is linked with the spiritual world and there are also interactions between the two worlds.⁵

African traditional thought is deeply rooted in a cosmological framework that posits a dynamic relationship between the material and spiritual realms. Unlike Western dualistic conceptions that often separate the sacred from the secular, African worldviews emphasize continuity and interaction between humans, deities, ancestors, and other supernatural entities. Scholars have argued that African cosmology is fundamentally holistic, with spiritual forces exerting profound influence on human destiny, morality, and social order.⁶ Within this framework, literature becomes a vital medium for expressing and preserving indigenous knowledge systems. *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi is a quintessential example of how African narratives dramatize the complex interplay between human desires and supernatural forces. The novel tells the tragic story of

² Wande Abimbola, *An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976), 117

³ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1990), 32-33.

⁴ Joseph Omeregbe, *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational and Research Publishers, 2002), 22-24.

⁵ Fidelis Ajah, and Utre Iwara, "Spirit Being in African Indigenous Religion: The Mbembe Perspective," *International Journal of Religious and Cultural Practice* 4 no 1 (2018): 1-8

⁶ Toyin Falola, *Yoruba Metaphysics: Spirituality and Supernaturality* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2025), 45-180. Joseph Awolalu, and Pius Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonjo Press Limited, 1979), 28-68.

Ihuoma, a woman whose beauty and virtue are overshadowed by her spiritual identity as the wife of a jealous sea deity. The deaths of her suitors, including Emenike and Ekwueme, reveal an underlying metaphysical conflict that transcends ordinary human understanding.

Despite its rich thematic complexity, critical engagement with the novel has often focused on its tragic elements without sufficiently interrogating the deeper ontological tensions it presents. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the conflict between the spiritual force and humans as depicted in the novel, situating it within African cultural beliefs about fate, destiny, and supernatural agency. The central argument of this paper is that the tragedy in the novel is not merely accidental but is rooted in a culturally specific understanding of cosmic order, where spiritual forces ultimately determine human outcomes. This paper is significant because it contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about African literature as a repository of indigenous epistemologies. By foregrounding the role of myth and spirituality, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of how African narratives articulate existential questions about life, suffering, and the limits of human control.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Myth Criticism and Structuralist Theory. They provide useful analytical tools for interpreting the symbolic and ideological dimensions of African literary texts. Myth criticism, as articulated by scholars such as Northrop Frye⁷ and Joseph Campbell⁸, examines how myths function as foundational narratives that shape cultural consciousness and human understanding of reality. In the context of African literature, myths are not merely fictional constructs but are deeply embedded in lived experiences and social

practices. They serve as explanatory frameworks for phenomena that defy empirical logic, including death, misfortune, and destiny. In *The Concubine*, the myth of the Sea King operates as a controlling narrative that governs the fate of Ihuoma and her lovers. Thus, illustrating the pervasive influence of supernatural forces in African thought.

Structuralist theory, particularly as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, complements myth criticism by emphasizing the underlying binary oppositions that structure human cognition and cultural narratives.⁹ These oppositions, such as life/death, human/spirit, freedom/determinism, are central to understanding the conflict in the novel. The tension between Ihuoma's human existence and her spiritual identity exemplifies a fundamental contradiction that drives the narrative's tragic trajectory. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this work adopts a multidisciplinary approach that highlights both the symbolic and structural dimensions of the novel. Myth criticism allows for an exploration of the cultural meanings embedded in the narrative, while structuralism provides a framework for analysing the patterns and oppositions that shape the conflict between the spiritual and human realms. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how *The Concubine* reflects and reinforces African cultural beliefs about the inevitability of spiritual influence in human affairs.

Spirit in African Cosmology

Spirits are conceived as those apparitional entities which form separate category of beings from those described as divinities.¹⁰ In a broader sense of conceptualizing spirits, Africans believe that God, divinities and ancestors are different form of spiritual realities. The spirits are said to have

⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), 131-39.

⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), 27-155.

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206-31.

¹⁰ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Press, 1962), 157-65

shadowy form of body and assume different shapes like human, plants, animals and other inanimate objects. While some of the spirits can appear like aged women or men, others carry the picture of young and dazzling boys and girls, and can be identified as so-and-so person. The evil-minded spirits appear with a terrifying posture, which in most cases arrests the mental disposition of the victims who only recover to normal by God's divine grace. Spirits are invisible but may, on their own volition or in unconscious adherence to strong and forceful manipulation of magic men and diviners, be seen by men. Stories of physical encounters of men with spirits physically showing their presence are usually ephemeral. Given the ubiquitous nature of the spirits and their ability to influence the rest of creation, every aspect of life of Africans is directly linked to them.¹¹

The concept of "spirits" occupies a central and indispensable position in African cosmology, shaping indigenous understandings of reality, causality, and human existence. Within this worldview, spirits are not regarded as abstract or peripheral entities but as active, conscious forces that inhabit the invisible realm while maintaining continuous interaction with the human world.¹² Classical African thought, as articulated by scholars, conceives of the universe as a structured hierarchy comprising the Supreme Being, divinities, ancestors, and various categories of spirits. In this hierarchy, spirits occupy an intermediate ontological position, functioning as mediators and agents through which supernatural influence is exerted upon human affairs.¹³ This understanding reflects a broader epistemological orientation in which reality is perceived as a

continuum rather than a dichotomy, thereby dissolving rigid distinctions between the sacred and the secular. Further elaboration of this concept reveals that spirits are not homogeneous but exist in diverse forms and categories. A defining feature of this cosmology is the principle of interconnectedness, which emphasizes the inseparability of the spiritual and physical realms. As Mbiti observes, spiritual consciousness permeates all aspects of life in African societies, rendering the presence of spirits a constant and integral dimension of human experience. Consequently, events such as death, illness, and success are interpreted through a spiritual lens, and practices such as divination, sacrifice, and ritual consultation serve as means of negotiating the relationship between humans and the unseen world. Within this framework, spirits are not external intrusions into human life but co-participants in a shared ontological reality.¹⁴

Spirits can be good or bad, and the essential distinction conditions how human beings relate with them. Evil spirits have their abode in the same places and objects where the benevolent ones are found, such as rivers, forests, and trees. Africans dread evil spirits because of their negative impacts on human existence. Sometimes, the overriding attitude of the African persons towards spirits is fear. Thus, speaking on the whole about spirit in Africa, they are regarded with dread.¹⁵ People seem to be more conscious of evil spirits than the good ones. Through experience or divination, people become aware of where evil spirit inhabits, and they try to avoid them so that the ruthless spirit will not harm or kill them. No matter how human beings try to avoid the

¹¹ Ajah, and Iwara, *Spirit Being in African Indigenous Religion: The Mbembe Perspective*, 3-5

¹² Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, 35-58. Joseph Awolalu. *Yoruba Belief and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman, 1979), 43-118.

¹³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 33-35. Kenneth Agetue, "The Cosmological Significance of Spirits in African Thought: A Critical Approach," *Okwu Ebeh International Multidisciplinary Journal of Knowledge* 1 no 1 (2026): 136-40.

¹⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 33-34.

¹⁵ Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, 36. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 61-150.

evil spirits, sometimes, it is believed that they go around seeking to harm or destroy people and their possessions. Prayers and sacrifices are made to ward them off or to placate them from carrying out their malevolent activities or to be controlled by magic. Africans fear evil spirits because the world of African people is constantly threatened by the presence and activities of malignant spirits. This makes the craving for security one of the most fundamental preoccupations of people in Africa.¹⁶

Due to limited human knowledge and the brevity of life, the absolute control of the universe is rather in the hands of the spiritual realities bringing with God as the principal action and cause of all things. In fact, “the invisible sphere dictates the pace, regulates and influences what happens at the visible sphere. It is therefore a spirit-filled world at the visible reality; a world where all activities are interpreted in terms of the intricate interactions of these realities”. There is nothing and nowhere in the life of an African that the presence and operation of the spirit are not found. The farmland, market, mountain, and hills, bushes and forests, streams and rivers are the abode of the spirits. Hence, spirits, according to African belief, are ubiquitous; there is no area of the earth, no objects or creature, which does not have a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Thus, there are spirits of the trees, that is, spirits which inhabit the trees. In these different abodes, various spirits are consulted, and sacrifices are made to them. The sacredness of places, things, and people in Africa derives from the belief that they are inhabited or possessed by spirits. These objects or places or persons become means of encounter with spirits as well as vehicles through which the spirits manifest themselves.

Anthropological studies, including

those of Parrinder and Evans-Pritchard, identify distinctions among nature spirits associated with physical environments such as rivers and forests, ancestral spirits who maintain enduring relationships with the living, and other free or wandering spirits that may be implicated in misfortune or disorder. These categories underscore the functional diversity of spirits within African cosmological systems, where they serve as explanatory mechanisms for phenomena that transcend empirical or purely rational interpretation. The functional significance of spirits is further evident in their roles as regulators, mediators, and causal agents within human society. Spirits are believed to enforce moral and social order by rewarding virtuous conduct and punishing transgressions, thereby sustaining communal harmony.¹⁷ They are also perceived as the ultimate causes behind events such as illness, death, prosperity, and misfortune, reinforcing a worldview in which occurrences are rarely attributed to chance. In addition, spirits mediate between human beings and the Supreme Being, particularly through ritual practices and systems of divination. This perspective aligns with the notion of “vital force,” which posits that all beings, both visible and invisible, are interconnected within a dynamic network of power relations that governs existence.¹⁸

Contemporary scholarship has both sustained and reinterpreted these classical perspectives, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of belief in spirits within modern African contexts. Thinkers such as Gyekye and Opoku argue that spiritual beliefs continue to shape social practices and worldviews despite the influences of modernization, globalization, and the spread of world religions. Rather than diminishing, the significance of spirits has evolved, often coexisting with Christianity and Islam in

¹⁶ Ajah and Iwara. Spirit Being in African Indigenous Religion: The Mbembe Perspective, 3-8

¹⁷ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*. (New York: Penguin Press, 1969), 20-140. Edward Evans-

¹⁸ Pritchard. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 18-68.

complex and syncretic forms.¹⁹ Olupona further emphasizes the dynamism of African religious systems, highlighting how spirits function not only as metaphysical entities but also as cultural symbols that inform identity, social relations, and responses to contemporary challenges.²⁰ In addition, contemporary literary and cultural criticism has expanded the analytical scope of the concept by interpreting spirits as symbolic and discursive constructs within African narratives. In this regard, spirits are understood as representational devices through which writers articulate psychological tensions, social conflicts, and philosophical questions about existence. This interpretive shift does not negate their ontological significance within traditional belief systems but rather enriches their meaning by situating them within broader cultural and intellectual contexts.

In sum, spirits in African cosmology are best conceptualized as ontologically real, functionally active, and culturally embedded entities that mediate the relationship between the visible and invisible realms. Classical perspectives underscore their role within a hierarchical and interconnected universe, while contemporary approaches highlight their continued relevance and adaptability in modern African societies.²¹ This conceptual clarity is essential for interpreting African literary texts, where the interaction between spirits and humans reflects deeply rooted cultural beliefs about causality, morality, and the limits of human agency.²²

Synopsis of the Novel

The Concubine by Elechi Amadi is a tragic

narrative set in Omokachi village, a traditional Igbo community, exploring the complex interplay between human desires and supernatural forces. The story centres on Ihuoma, a lady renowned for her exceptional beauty, grace, and moral integrity. The plot of the story revolves around the heroine-Ihuoma, her human suitors-Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme along with her spirit husband-the Sea King. The central character becomes the object of conflict climaxing in chains of deaths. While the Sea king is the villain, the human characters are the victims of the tussle over a woman with dual character. Ihuoma is married to Emenike, a brave and respected hunter, and their union appears harmonious until his sudden and mysterious death shortly after a fight. Following Emenike's death, Ihuoma becomes a widow, attracting the admiration of several suitors due to her charm and virtue. Among them is Madume, whose persistent advances are met with rejection. Madume attempts to force himself on Ihuoma but is mysteriously struck blind shortly afterwards.²³ This incident reinforces the community's growing suspicion that unseen spiritual forces are closely tied to Ihuoma's life.

The conflict manifests in the mysterious and tragic deaths of Ihuoma's potential husbands and lovers. Emenike, Ihuoma's first husband, dies from a locked chest illness after a physical fight with another villager, Madume. While the villager initially interpreted the death as a result of the fight, it is later revealed to be the work of the Sea-king. Madume, Emenike's rival, attempts to claim Ihuoma but is blinded by a cobra. He subsequently hangs himself. This

¹⁹ Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 68-154. Kofi Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. (Accra: FEP International, 1978), 35-130.

²⁰ Jacob Olupona, *African Religions: A very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18-35.

²¹ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 158-165. Awolalu and Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 253-54.

²² Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 60-120.

²³ Elechi Amadi, *The Concubine*. (New York: Heinemann Publishers, 1966), 57-74.

is also attributed to the Sea-king. The central romantic focus of the novel emerges through Ihuoma's relationship with Ekwueme, a young and promising man betrothed to another woman, Ahurole. Despite social expectations and familial pressure, Ekwueme genuinely falls deeply in love with Ihuoma and eventually seeks to marry her. However, his decision is met with strong opposition, particularly from his parents, who consult a diviner to uncover the spiritual implications of the union. The divination reveals a shocking truth that Ihuoma is not an ordinary woman but the earthly wife of a powerful Sea-King, a jealous spiritual entity who destroys any mortal man who attempts to marry her. This revelation redefines the tragedies surrounding her, suggesting that this supernatural force orchestrates the deaths and misfortunes associated with her suitors. The diviner, Anyika, reveals Ihuoma's spiritual condition as a sea goddess who chooses to live among mortals, gets married, and procreates like human beings. He further explains to human fiancé that he had a powerful rival, a very jealous Sea-King who eliminates any one with matrimonial intention towards the heroine. According to Anyika:

She (Ihuoma) belongs to the sea. When she was in the spirit world, she was the 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 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... it is death to marry them and they leave

behind a harrowing string of dead husbands. They are usually beautiful, very beautiful but dogged by their husbands of the spirit world.²⁴

After divining Ihuoma's supernatural origins as wife of the jealous Sea-King, Anyika remarks, "Look at her... have you seen anyone quite so right in everything, almost perfect? I tell you only a sea goddess - for that is precisely what she is-can be all that." Other villagers are quick to concur with Anyika's assessment, though Ihuoma protests when she is told of her link to the spirit world. "I certainly don't feel like a daughter of the sea". The dibia further reveals to Ekwueme and his family that the greatest that Ihuoma can be to any man is a concubine, never a wife, with the right ritual of appeasement.

Ekwueme and his family seek the help of a spiritualist as an alternative solution in an attempt to find a resolution of the conflict arising from a knotty romantic affair involving Ekwueme, Ihuoma, and the Sea-King. They approach another medicine man and plan a sacrifice to appease the Sea-King. Agwoturumbe, the flamboyant medicine man, convinces Ekwueme's anxious parents that the Sea-King can be bound following a costly and dangerous ritual that entails a nighttime canoe voyage to the middle of the sea in far-off Aliji.²⁵ However, it appears that the Sea-King does not want to be placated in this situation because he attacked just before the anticipated wedding. Tragically, on the day of the ritual, Ekwueme is accidentally killed by a stray barbed arrow shot by Nwonna, Ihuoma's eldest son, while hunting for a red male lizard, the last item needed for the midnight sacrifice or ritual. He dies shortly after midnight, leaving Ihuoma inconsolable, his parents despondent, and the community perplexed.²⁶

The tragic death of Ekwueme confirms

²⁴ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 195-96.

²⁵ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 182-190.

²⁶ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 191.

the prophecy and cements the inevitability of spiritual intervention in human affairs. Ihuoma is left once again in sorrow, bound to a destiny beyond her control. The novel concludes on a sombre note, emphasizing the dominance of fate and the tragic consequences of defying supernatural order. Through Ihuoma's story, *The Concubine* presents a powerful depiction of the tension between human agency and spiritual determinism within African cosmology.

Discourse on the Spirit-Human Conflict in the Novel

The conception of conflict as “a struggle over values, claim to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the opposing parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize and eliminate rivals” is the most appropriate for this discourse.²⁷ The conflict in Amadi's *The Concubine* revolves around the parties, namely, the Sea-King (Ihuoma's spiritual husband), Ihuoma (a Sea-goddess and the best wife of the Sea-King), Emenike, Madume, and Ekwueme (men of Amokachi village). The conflict is asymmetrical in nature as the Sea-King is a very powerful spirit being who uses all the power at his disposal against his foes and to eliminate all his rivals. He therefore functions as accuser and Judge over the involvement of Emenike, Madume, and Ekwueme with his wife, Ihuoma. According to the narrator, “He is too powerful to be fettered with, and when he is on the offensive, he is absolutely relentless. He uses all the power at his command. They are fatal.”²⁸

The conflict between the spiritual and human realms is not abstract but concretely dramatized through a series of tragic events, character experiences, and communal interpretations. These manifestations reveal a worldview in which the invisible realm actively shapes human destiny. The most

fundamental expression of spirit-human conflict in the novel is the supernatural claim over Ihuoma by the Sea-King. Unknown to the human community for much of the narrative, Ihuoma is spiritually married to this powerful deity, who jealously guards his possession. This divine ownership directly conflicts with human social norms, where marriage is a communal and interpersonal institution. Every attempt by mortal men to establish a relationship with Ihuoma becomes a violation of this spiritual bond, thereby triggering fatal consequences. The conflict here lies in the incompatibility between human desires (love, marriage, companionship) and the exclusive demands of the spirit world.

Different personalities inhabit the two different settings in the novel. In the physical setting (Omokachi village), there are evidences of religious settings like shrines, temples, and medicine houses. These are the abode of elemental forces and they are sacred places of communion between man and gods. Although, Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme seek divine intervention from the mediums when death threatens their existence, the trio ended up as victims of transcendental forces. Despite the powerful influences of the Dibias to remedy the situation for the suitors' survival, man eventually became the victim of his fears as the three of them ended up dying. The second setting, which is metaphysical in nature, is represented by the sea. This setting is different from the familiar material realm and it is the setting from which the heroine incarnated from. There is an interaction between the physical setting of man and the metaphysical realm of existence that the sea represents. The two worlds of existence are parallel to each other; the spiritual is superior in all spheres to that of the world of man. This makes the conflict an imbalanced struggle.²⁹

²⁷ Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), 8-11.

²⁸ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 196.

²⁹ Oghenechuko Unoroh, A Deconstructive Analysis of Marriage in Elechi Amadi's *the Concubine*, *African Journal of Humanities & Contemporary Education Research*, 3 no 1 (2022): 14-15.

However, the culture of the village encourages man to marry either a young woman or a widow. Unfortunately, Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme trespasses the culture of marrying a married woman. Even though Ihuoma marries Emenike as a young woman, she is already a married woman before her birth and she is not conscious of being an incarnate of a Sea goddess. In Omokachi community, the society frowns at it as a disregard to the institution of marriage. The implication is that what seems right to Emenike, Madume, and Ekwueme is actually a taboo.³⁰ Ihuoma embarks on a journey from the sea-world to the world of man and her incarnation in form of human translate her from the metaphysical realm of existence to the physical realm. Her coming to the world of man is a form of adventure. She dreams of tasting the life of humans and she was the most beautiful woman in Omokachi village. She succeeds but her aim of fully utilizing the opportunity given to her by her spirit husbands becomes illusion and her adventure turns to frustration owing to subsequent death of Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme in the hand of the jealous Sea king. Thus, instead of pleasure and happiness that she intends to derive from her relationship with human husbands, sorrow and mourning become her lots because she is fated to bring misfortune too her lovers. She becomes a death trap and carrier since all the three men who seek her hand in marriage die one after the other.

The deaths of Emenike and Ekwueme serve as the most dramatic manifestations of the conflict. These sudden deaths illustrate how spiritual forces intervene decisively in human affairs to enforce metaphysical boundaries. Human beings, despite their intentions or moral standing, are rendered powerless against supernatural authority. Thus, tragedy becomes a medium through which the spirit world asserts dominance over the human realm. Madume's blindness

further exemplifies the punitive dimension of spirit-human conflict. His attempt to violate Ihuoma physically is met with immediate supernatural retribution, as he is struck blind under mysterious circumstances. This incident underscores the moral surveillance of the spiritual realm, where transgressions, especially those involving sacred or spiritually marked individuals, are swiftly punished. It reflects the belief that spiritual forces not only govern destiny but also enforce ethical conduct. Another critical manifestation of the conflict is seen in the role of divination. The human community initially struggles to understand the recurring misfortunes surrounding Ihuoma. It is only through the intervention of a diviner that the hidden truth of her spiritual identity is revealed. Divination thus becomes a crucial interface between the human and spiritual worlds, exposing the underlying cause of the conflict. However, even with this knowledge, humans remain largely incapable of altering the outcome, highlighting the limits of human agency.

Although the essence of marriage is for companionship and happiness among others, all the characters that involve themselves with Ihuoma in marriage end up without achieving their desired aspirations. Emenike dies because of an assumed "lock chest", Madume dies as a blind man and hangs himself. Ekwueme becomes the victim of the arrow against a lizard. The narrator put an allegory thus: "Tortoise whose trap had caught an impossible fairly in the form of an animal. If he took the animal away, he was to die. If he sets it free, he was still to die".³¹ The allegory of the tortoise by the dibia reflect the hopeless state of the last suitor. The moment Ekwueme shows his interest in Ihuoma, he becomes a marked man for death. Ihuoma is a symbolic representation of the trap while the trapper represents Ekwueme. The allegory foreshadows the death of Ekwueme. It also

³⁰ Unoroh, A Deconstructive Analysis of Marriage in Elechi Amadi's the Concubine, 13-18.

³¹ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 117.

indicates that he cannot escape the wrath of the Sea king. The essence of the motif of sacrifice is to avert evil, in Omochachi setting, the people belief in the efficacy of sacrifice. It is a medium to appease divine or supernatural entities. Through sacrifices, they hope to prevent all forms of predicaments. In Amadi's *the Concubine*, Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme and members of their families propitiate the spirits, ancestors and their gods to no avail. The impending doom they try to avoid befall them all. They did not escape the wrath of the Sea king despite their sacrifices.³²

The tension between fate and freewill is a recurring thematic expression of spirit-human conflict. Characters such as Ekwueme exercise personal choice in pursuing love, yet their decisions are ultimately overridden by predetermined spiritual realities. This suggests that human autonomy is constrained within a cosmological order governed by destiny. The inevitability of Ekwueme's death, despite warnings and rituals, reinforces the idea that spiritual decrees are absolute and unchangeable. The community's reaction to the tragic events also reflects the manifestation of this conflict. The villagers interpret misfortune not as coincidence but as evidence of supernatural displeasure or intervention. This collective consciousness reveals a cultural framework in which the boundary between the natural and supernatural is porous. The community becomes both a witness to and interpreter of the conflict, reinforcing belief in the pervasive influence of spiritual forces. Overall, the manifestations of spirit-human conflict in *The Concubine* are expressed through death, punishment, revelation, and inevitability. These elements collectively illustrate a cosmology in which human existence is deeply entangled with, and often subordinated to, the will of the spiritual realm. The novel thus powerfully dramatizes the fragile position of humanity

within a universe governed by unseen but omnipotent forces.

The Moral Paradox: Human Ethics and Spiritual Necessity

At the heart of the novel lies a philosophical problem: the clash between human agency and spiritual determinism. Elechi Amadi stages this conflict through the deaths of Emenike and Madume, two men punished for a covenant they did not know existed. In *The Concubine*, Elechi Amadi presents a moral paradox where human ethics demand innocence, while spiritual necessity demands sacrifice. From a deontological perspective, Emenike and Madume cannot be held morally responsible for their fate. Human morality, rooted in Western and universal ethical thought, holds that culpability or moral responsibility presupposes knowledge, intent and free will. Kant argument that a person must be treated as an end in himself and not merely as a means is violated when innocent men are killed unjustly. Since both men loved Ihuoma and acted in good faith without knowledge of the Sea-King's covenant, their punishment is unjust and violates the principle of *mens rea* or guilty mind. Madume's lament, "What have I done?" not only captures human sense of injustice, but also expresses human cry against guilt without culpability.³³ In this order, ignorance is a valid defense.

However, from the standpoint of consequentialism and spiritual morality, their deaths are presented as necessary. In Igbo cosmology, the individual exists within a larger metaphysical order governed by Ala, ancestors, and spirits. Thus, the individual is subordinate to the community and to cosmic order. The Dibia explains that Ihuoma's marriage to any mortal man violates a pre-existing covenant with the Sea-King, and that such a violation threatens the entire community with calamity.³⁴ Here,

³² Unoroh, A Deconstructive Analysis of Marriage in Elechi Amadi's *the Concubine*, 20.

³³ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 168

³⁴ Amadi, *The Concubine*, 145.

the good of the community outweighs the good of two individuals. The deaths of two men are justified if they restore balance and prevent greater suffering for the many. The gods, unlike humans, do not operate by intent but by law. Amadi shows that in Igbo cosmology, freewill operates within the limits of fate. The suitors' fate made conflict inevitable, but their freewill choices determined their destruction. The tragedy of *The Concubine* is therefore both fated and chosen, affirming that violation of spiritual order produces both personal tragedy and social disorder.

This tension is best clarified by Oluwatoyin Adepoju's fourfold framework of endogenous African thought. Adepoju argues that African societies operate within Metaphysics, Rationality, Spirituality, and Supernaturality simultaneously.³⁵ Emenike and Madume function within Rationality: they reason, choose, and act based on what they can know. The Sea-King, however, functions within Supernaturality, a realm where covenants are binding irrespective of human awareness. In this sense, ignorance is not a defense because the law is ontological, not procedural. Thus, Amadi does not offer a resolution but rather presents a paradox. He stages a clash between two valid but incompatible moral orders. What is "morally right" by human ethics is "spiritually wrong," and what is "spiritually necessary" is "humanly cruel." The tragedy is that human agency is crushed not by human evil, but by a deterministic spiritual order it cannot negotiate.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate conflict between the spiritual and human realms in *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, situating the narrative within the broader framework of African cosmology. Through the combined lenses of myth criticism and

structuralist theory, the analysis has demonstrated that the tragic trajectory of Ihuoma and her suitors is not merely a product of individual choices or chance occurrences, but rather a manifestation of a deeply embedded metaphysical order in which spiritual forces exert decisive control over human destiny. The novel foregrounds a central tension between human agency and supernatural determinism, revealing the limitations of rationality in the face of unseen powers. Ihuoma's dual identity, as both a human woman and the spiritual consort of the Sea king, embodies a fundamental contradiction that drives the narrative conflict. The recurring pattern of loss and death underscores the inevitability of fate within the African cosmological system, where the spiritual realm is neither distant nor abstract, but actively intervenes in the affairs of the living. In this sense, the text affirms the cultural logic that misfortune is often interpreted because of disrupted spiritual equilibrium rather than random occurrence. Furthermore, the study has highlighted how the novel functions as a cultural repository, preserving indigenous epistemologies that articulate moral order, communal values, and existential meaning. The portrayal of divination, communal interpretations of tragedy, and reverence for supernatural authority reflects a worldview in which harmony depends on adherence to spiritual laws. By dramatizing the consequences of violating these laws, the narrative reinforces the ethical and cosmological principles that underpin traditional African societies.

In contemporary contexts, the relevance of these themes remains significant. Despite the influence of modernization and scientific rationalism, belief in spiritual causality continues to shape perceptions of reality in many African communities. Thus, *The Concubine* not only offers literary insight but also provides a valuable framework for

³⁵ Oluwatoyin Adepoju. Between Metaphysics, Rationality, Spirituality and Supernaturality in Endogeneous Yoruba Thought: Rethinking the Opening Concept of Toyin Falola." *Yoruba Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2016): 61-70.

understanding enduring cultural attitudes toward fate, suffering, and the unseen dimensions of existence. Ultimately, this study contributes to African literary scholarship by reaffirming the importance of interpreting texts within their indigenous philosophical contexts. It underscores the need for culturally grounded analytical approaches that recognize the legitimacy of African cosmologies in explaining human experience. Future research may extend this inquiry by exploring similar spirit-human conflicts in other African literary works or by examining how such traditional beliefs are being reconfigured in contemporary narratives.

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