

The Sea-King and Ihuoma's Men: Determinism in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*

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ABSTRACT: This paper debates the concept of determinism in the reading of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, arguing that determinism is depicted as a powerful and inescapable force, where human agency is overshadowed by preordained destiny. The interplay of determinism and human longing in the novel underscores the futility of resisting a fate sanctioned by supernatural forces. By locating determinism, this article illuminates Amadi's nuanced exploration of fated men: Emenike, Madume, and Ekwueme. It argues that the novel's tragic outcomes of the three male characters' lives are not merely personal misfortunes but reflections of a broader philosophical inquiry into the nature of human existence, fate, and the limitations imposed by an immutable cosmic order. This reading offers fresh insight into the deterministic underpinnings of the text and its portrayal of human struggles against unseen, insurmountable forces. This study deploys narrative analysis to examine the selected novel. Qualitative data is collected through close reading of the primary text, while secondary data is explicated to aid in the textual analysis.

KEYWORDS: Supernatural, Determinism, Sea-King, Fate, Destiny

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Locating Determinism

Hoefer (2023) posits that traditionally, causal determinism holds that every outcome is predetermined by antecedent events and conditions as well as natural laws. Hoefer's assertion implies that events do not happen randomly or in isolation. Instead, they are part of a continuous chain of causation. Yang (2024) argues that determinism is the notion that every event or state of affairs, including human acts and choices, is the outcome of earlier causes or conditions. Essentially, what Yang means is that determinism believes that there is a universal causation in the world. In affirming the idea of causation, Stoics hold that:

Prior events are causes of those following them, and in this manner all things are bound together with one another, and thus nothing happens in the world such that something else is not entirely a consequence of it and attached to it as cause. [...] From everything that happens something else follows depending on it by necessity as cause (Long; 1996, p. 164).

1.2 Ihuoma's mysticism

Ihuoma, in *The Concubine* fits Kaplan Anna's African description of a femme fatale. Anna opines that "The African femme fatale adores and has long lived in a world where her presence, like that of the continent from which she belongs, is both perplexed and despised. Rather than being a normal human being, she is thought to be a water deity or an incarnation of evil sent to punish men" (p. 16).

'Listen,' the dibia began. 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)

This explanation offered by the dibia suggests that Ihuoma's life in the human world is influenced by her previous relationship with the sea-king. Her destiny is inextricably linked to the divine will of the sea-king, who allows her to live out her earthly life while remaining emotionally connected and possessive. Miller John (1974) characterizes a femme fatale as "an archetypal female personality whose wicked features compel her to either unknowingly be destructed or consciously seek retribution" (p. 89). In the case of Ihuoma, she is not consciously destructive but is rather controlled by an external spiritual force that ensures she is an agent of destruction. The sea-king's jealousy and attempts to destroy any man who loves Ihuoma strengthen the notion that her relationships are doomed to fail. Regardless of her personal decisions or those of the men who follow her, the outcome is determined by the sea-king's quest to safeguard what he considers his sole right.

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In essence, Ihuoma is bound by destiny, with her existence and the lives of everyone around her determined by the sea-king's overarching will. Her relationships end in catastrophe not because of personal flaws or choices but because her status as the sea-king's former wife dictates a tragic and inexorable fate.

1.3 Emenike's Tragedy

Emenike's predicaments begin right from the onset of the novel when he encounters Madume, his fiercest rival in Omokachi village. Amadi begins the novel thus, "Emenike was sure he heard someone cough ahead of him" (p. 1), after which he "tightened his grip on his razor-sharp matchet and swung his wine calabash over his shoulder with his left hand" (p. 1). In no time, Emenike encountered Madume and was at once sure of Madume's intentions. They had argued over a piece of land the previous day and Madume had promised to beat up Emenike. In the ensuing altercation:

Madume leaped for a flying tackle. His opponent sank on one knee, collected him on his shoulders and flung him heavily to the ground. Emenike disengaged himself and waited. He would not close in yet Madume got up and decided to come to grips with his man. For several minutes they pushed each other about treading down bushes like antelopes caught in a rope trap. At last Madume got his two arms under his opponent's armpits and began to push him back at full speed hoping that some undergrowth would entangle his legs and make him fall. It almost happened, but as Emenike was about to fall, he turned slightly sideways, engaged his opponent's left leg with his own right leg and did a rapid half-somersault Madume was thrown into the air over Emenike's head and landed with a thud on the far side. Emenike leaped after him, sat on his stomach and unleashed several painful jabs to his face. As Madume weakened he decided to stuff his mouth with sand as a final humiliation. (p. 2)

The above extract depicts Emenike as a great wrestler and a tactful fighter. He is seemingly outsmarting Madume and temporarily outmaneuvers him, but soon after Madume manages to get up:

Emenike's caution deserted him as he gained confidence. He charged at Madume but the latter stooped, carried him shoulder high and dashed him to the ground with elephantine fury. Emenike's side hit the jagged stump of a tree and he lay wriggling weakly. His assailant gave him several hard knocks but realizing that he was putting up little or no resistance left him and fled. (p. 2)

Later, Emenike succumbed to the injuries he sustained during this fierce fight. In retrospect, Amadi explains to us that the main conflict between the two men was surrounding Ihuoma. Madume was disgruntled that Emenike had snatched away from him the most beautiful girl in Omokachi village and swore revenge. However, the first casualty of Emenike's possession of Ihuoma is the sea-king who seeks vengeance by setting up the fatal Emenike-Madume fight to get rid of Emenike. From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that Emenike, the experienced wrestler, is ultimately subdued by Madume, whom he had previously won a fight against. The reference to the tree stump that wounds Emenike during the fight is a pivotal factor that reinforces determinism. The implication in this case is that the outcome of the fight is not tied to wrestling skills but rather to environmental factors that, though seemingly remote, play a decisive role in sealing Emenike's fate. Talking of Emenike's defeat, Wosu is categorical that "his [Emenike's] gods were simply not at home. I can't see Madume beating Eme" (p. 16). Wosu's confirmation that the gods had abandoned Emenike foregrounds the determinist ideals advanced in this research. The brutal force of the sea-king, as a predestined cosmic power, embodies an inescapable determinism that overrides the protection of Emenike by the gods. If the sea-king, a more powerful force, had already willed Emenike's destruction, his gods were meant to stay away when he needed them most. Therefore, the sea-king had already set Emenike's demise in motion from the day he took Ihuoma away from him. Such deterministic thought pervades Madume's mind, who after temporarily feeling guilty of killing Emenike, begins to think otherwise:

As the days went by, however, he [Madume] grew less worried. He even felt at times that the gods themselves supported Emenike's death. After all, people had fought in the past without being killed and in that particular fight, he had a rougher time than his adversary. It was the tree-stump that had made all the difference. In any case people did not just die without reason. Invariably they died either because they had done something wrong or because they had neglected to minister to the gods or to the spirits of their ancestors. (p. 53)

1.4 Madume and the serpent

Madume's assault of Ihuoma and his quest to possess her angers the sea-king, triggering revenge. In explaining the concept of revenge, Osgood (2017) defines revenge as an "action in response to some perceived wrongdoing by another party that is intended to inflict damage, injury, discomfort, or punishment on the party judged responsible." This definition of revenge aptly relates to Madume's fate with the sea-king in *The Concubine*. The sea-king, perceives Madume's action as a direct transgression and affront. This "wrongdoing" triggers the sea-king's response, rooted in the concept of revenge, to assert its authority. Amadi explains that: Madume's real trouble began after he had 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 may be 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)

The spitting cobra can be seen as a reincarnation of the sea-king dispatched to exert revenge and protect his claim to Ihuoma. From a deterministic standpoint, therefore, Madume's wrath was not an accident; rather, it was the natural consequence of his disobedience of the spiritual order. Amadi tells us of Madume's predicament thus:

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After three days of Cooley lotions and peepery eye drops, Madume's eyes were more swollen than ever. They exuded a yellowish matter which helped to glue the eyelids together. Indeed, he had not opened his eye since the day of the incident (p. 71). Amadi explains that "Madume became blind through a spitting cobra and eventually hanged himself" (p. 195). Madume's tragedy is reminiscent of Unoka, Okonkwo's father in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, who was "an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, an evil fortune followed him to the grave..." (Achebe, p.13)

1.5 Ekwueme and the precision of an arrow

Ihuoma's beauty prompts Ekwueme to proclaim a death wish: "if 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). Ekwueme's statement expresses an overwhelming human need that trumps reason and self-preservation and tilts towards what Freud (1920) refers to as death drive. Mills (2006) posits that "Freud never used the term "death instinct" to refer to the organism's innate propensity for destruction; rather he called it *Todestrieb*, which is more accurately translated as the "death drive" (Mills, 2006, p. 375). Death drive is thus essentially the unconscious drive towards self-destruction, a key element in Ekwueme's crisis.

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Ekwueme's ambition to marry Ihuoma is thus both admirable and terrible, exemplifying the deterministic perspective that human choices are influenced by circumstances beyond individual control. His bravery and self-destructive yearning are not actions of free will but rather manifestations of a fate predetermined by the spiritual powers that rule his universe. His defiance of this spiritual truth does not alter the outcome but instead fulfills the prophecy of inevitable doom. This urge, viewed through determinism, might be viewed as an innate characteristic that drives people to act in ways that lead to their demise. His desire for Ihuoma blinds him to the catastrophic implications, implying that his acts are motivated by an insurmountable internal force fashioned by fate. His courage, though admirable, is not a choice but rather an essential component of his personality, leading him along the tragic path chosen by an external force.

Ekwueme dies by an arrow shot executed by Nwonna, Ihuoma's son, who intends to kill a lizard meant to be used as a sacrifice to appease the gods to allow Ekwueme to marry Ihuoma. In deterministic misdirection, "the arrow flying parallel with the wall just missed a lizard. It hit the upper part of Ekwueme's belly and he fell back across the doorway with a cry" (p. 215).

Ekwueme's death by an arrow aimed at a lizard, viewed through the perspective of determinism, emphasizes the idea that his fate was unavoidable, governed by external forces and spiritual destiny. His sad ending illustrates that even seemingly little actions, such as the lizard hunt, are part of a prearranged chain of events intended to realize his doomed destiny. The lizard hunt, which is nominally an attempt to acquire a sacrifice for appeasement, becomes a watershed moment in the circumstances leading up to his execution. This suggests that no effort on Ekwueme's part could alter his fate; the circumstances surrounding the hunt were merely the means through which his predetermined demise was executed. Nwonna's unintentional shot of Ekwueme looks to be a random act. However, from a deterministic perspective, this "accident" is the unavoidable result of spiritual force working against Ekwueme's union with Ihuoma. Collectively, thus, the cleansing ceremony, the hunting venture, and the precision of the arrow are all components of a wider cosmic scheme orchestrated to destroy Ekwueme.

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