

LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL FEATURES IN ELECHI AMADI'S "the concubine"

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Abstract

This paper examines sociocultural values in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*. In this textual world, oral aesthetics and cultural distillates are observed. As this society of the novel constitutes oral literary aesthetics, it is worth analysing these oral features which dominate and govern this social existence, and thus considered as constant markers of cultural values. To reach our goal, different approaches have been resorted to, especially sociocriticism, psycholinguistics, stylistic enunciation, and narratology. This paper focuses on two main points, namely linguistic features which determine any society, and sociocultural features.

Keywords: sociocultural features, orality, literary aesthetics, oral tradition, linguistic value.

Résumé

Cet article examine les valeurs socioculturelles dans « The Concubine » de Elechi Amadi. Dans ce monde textuel, l'esthétique orale ainsi que l'essence culturelle sont observées. Comme cette société du roman contient des éléments esthétiques oraux, nous avons jugé bon d'analyser ces particularités qui dominant et régissent cette existence sociale, et qui sont donc considérées comme des marques permanentes des valeurs culturelles. Pour atteindre notre objectif, nous avons recouru aux différentes approches, spécialement la sociocritique, la psycholinguistique, la stylistique de l'énonciation, ainsi que la narratologie. Ce travail se focalise sur deux points principaux : les valeurs linguistiques qui déterminent toute société, et les valeurs socioculturelles.

Mots-clés : traits socioculturels, oralité, esthétique littéraire, tradition orale, valeur linguistique.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is entitled “Linguistic and sociocultural features in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*”. It attempts to show how sociocultural elements like orality, are mingled in this literary text. Therefore, while reading this literary output, we noticed that it is painted with oral features as its dominant literary aesthetics.

The word “sociocultural” is used to describe the differences between groups of people relating to the social class and culture in which they live.

The term culture is used to refer to all the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things and people that we learn when we become members of social groups. It can be defined as “socially acquired knowledge.” (George Yule 2010: 267). Thus, sociocultural involves a combination of social and cultural matters.

The insertion of these oral elements in the narrative urges us to study them so as to show our readers how they are inserted in the work as markers of cultural values which should not be written down in their very nature. As we know, there are two literary forms. There is literature presented in form of orality and in written form.

Etymologically, the concept “orality” comes from Latin “Oralis”, that is mouth. Orality is the use of speech rather than writing as a means of communication, especially in communities where the tools of literacy are unfamiliar to the majority of the population. Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. (www.thoughtco.com/orality-communication-1).

Therefore, the nature of the African form of literature, according to different scholars is oral. But, with modernism, African writers started to write down their imaginative creations. Thus, when African writers use the written form, they try to adapt their creation through the insertion of oral antecedents to make their people understand. This means that the African writings are first of all written for the African audience in particular, and then the world audience in general.

Furthermore, it was worth for African writers integrating this oral tradition in the written form as points or ideologies that characterise the African novel. The term ideology is stated as follows:

Ideology refers to that aspect of the human condition under which people operate as conscious actors. Ideology is the medium through which human consciousness works. Our conception of religion, politics, morality, art, and science is deeply influenced by our ideology. In other words, what we see and believe largely depends on

our ideology, ideology being the medium through which we comprehend and interpret reality. (Ngara 1990: 11)

Following this idea, Amadi's ideology in writing *The Concubine* depends on the way he conceives his people's culture; that is, he was inspired by his society. The way he perceives his society is what we refer to as authorial ideology. Besides, he also applies aesthetic ideology which refers to the literary convention and stylistic stances adopted by him. But these aesthetic ideologies he uses in his narrative are not describable in terms of literary movements, but they operate at his personal level, throughout the incorporation of people's oral cultural elements as an important principle of his artistic creation.

To carry out this research, we resorted to different approaches.

The sociocriticism approach helped us to analyse the society of the novel and their everyday activities. This will be combined with sociolinguistics for any society is determined by the language they use to vehiculate their message. According to Wardhough and Janet (2015: 1), *Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives, how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language.*

Through **psycholinguistic approach**, we happened to analyse some linguistic behaviour, for it is defined as the study of psychological aspects of language. Therefore:

Psycholinguistics that means psychology of language is the study of the psychological and neurological factors that enable humans to acquire, use, comprehend and produce language. (Altman, 2001: 1, quoted by Hojat Jodai in "An Introduction to psycholinguistics", 2011: 3).

Through the use of this approach, we tried to show how the language of an individual is mainly influenced by his mental state. There are expressions used by people in good mood, as there are those used by people in trouble. It is clear that an angry person speaks differently from a happier one.

Enunciation, being a sub-field of pragmatics, enabled us to analyse characters' utterances so as to be able to think of the mood and context which influence their speech act.

It is thanks to **stylistic approach** that we analysed the style of the language used in the narrative. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short argue that *Stylistics simply defined as the (linguistic) study of style, is rarely undertaken for its own sake, simply as an exercise in describing what we use is made of language.* (Leech & Short, 2007: 11).

As it has been said earlier, *The Concubine* constitutes oral literary aesthetics and cultural elements. As these oral cultural antecedents dominate and govern the social existence, it is without a doubt that there are also some relationships between culture and language. Therefore, linguistic features adopted by the creator in his diction can bear either cultural aesthetics or “specifically the kinds of words which he selects from all the words which are theoretically available to him in the English language” (Gibbons 1979: 1).

It is worth noting that the author’s diction depends on characters who are seen acting in the fictional world. In fact, characters are portrayed in different ways depending on their social and cultural backgrounds, and the situation in which they are.

Narratology has finally helped us to insist on text organisation by the narrator.

It is aforementioned that this paper focuses on two main points, namely, linguistic and sociocultural values.

1. LINGUISTIC VALUES

Language is a system of linguistic modes of communication particular to a group; this includes spoken, written and signed modes of communication. (Ronald & Janet, 2015: 2)

Linguistic features are parts of sociocultural values in that, each community has got its language and other cultural codes shared among members of that community. Language is one of the cultural elements which determine a given society.

Thus, characters as people who populate the writer’s fictional world may use language in different ways depending on their social status, class or gender on the one hand, and social background, on the other. The speaker’s social background sometimes urges him to deviate some linguistic norms of language. He can sometimes use words which are translated from his/her first language. As a result, some of the expressions used are nowhere to be found in standard English. Thus, when these lexical items are translated from local mother tongue into the second language (English), they do not have their equivalent in standard English and are therefore considered as veiled expressions. This is illustrated in the following extract.

Madume had one fault most villagers disliked. He was “big eyed”: that is to say he was never satisfied with his share in anything that was good. He would roar until he had something more than his companions’ shares.
(PP. 4-5).

Through this passage, the word “big eyed”, which is even written between inverted commas, is used by the narrator. This is a kind of figurative language used in

the passage which cannot be taken literally. Then, thanks to the narrator's explanation in the rest of the passage, the reader can guess the meaning of this expression. Depending on the context, this would mean "greedy or fool person", in that, he is never satisfied and he always looks for some more than others' share.

In the same passage, there is the use of personification and metaphor. This means that the character under description is compared to the lion, and this is seen through the use of the verb **to roar**. Besides, as far as personification is concerned, Moody argues that *Following up the process of making clearer and more dramatic, some writers go so far as to think and write of some of their ideas as though they were living people with human quality.* (Moody, 1968: 32)

Hence:

"Turumbe! Turumbe! In imitation of their parents. When he entered Wigwe's compound people assumed it was in connection with Ekwueme's recent mental disturbance [...], welcome, Agwoturumbe", Ekwueme greeted. Thank you, my son. (p. 206).

The expression, "thank you, my son" is a matter of culture and language use. This statement bears some kind of linguistic or stylistic value, in that, for the character talking to another one, and using the expression "My son", should normally be used to by someone biologically fathered by the person making the address. Otherwise, the term does not conform to the convention of standard English. So, for both stylistic and cultural value, this expression is used to show minimal distance between the speaker and the hearer. Instead, the addresser would say "Thank you, Mr. Ekwueme" in standard form.

In the following extract, the narrator highlights:

"The hunter who is never satisfied with small game may be obliged to carry home an elephant one day. I have always said this of him," Chima said. (P. 73).

In the passage, "the hunter who is never satisfied with small game may be obliged to carry home an elephant one day" is a proverb uttered by the narrator. As Finnegan states, *"proverbs are a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw. [...] In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form"* (Finnegan, 1970: 389-90).

In the same vein, a proverb is a short saying used as a technique of verbal expression, containing deep hidden meaning. It is an artistic oral form characterized by shortness, sense and salt, and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth expressed in it.

In our passage, the hunter is compared to Madume, the character and the victim of greed in the novel. As “he is never satisfied with small game he may be obliged to carry home an elephant”. An elephant here is used metaphorically. It implies difficulties or serious problem. Apart from this kind of comparison, there is also hyperbole, in that, no one can carry an elephant. Hyperbole constitutes a violation, in some degree, of the maxim of quality (Leech, 1983: 145). Hence, it is clear that the proverb is used by the character and reported to the audience by the narrator in the passage and carries with it the figurative quality. The figurative language is used “when referring to the implication of language imaginatively” (Okello, 1997: 65). Besides, Perrine argues that figurative language often provides a more effective means of saying what we mean than does direct statement. (Perrine, 1988: 573)

Furthermore:

Ahurole unreservedly poured out the domestic troubles and emphasized the role played by Ihuoma.

“I would never have believed it from anybody’s lips but yours. I always thought she was a decent woman,” Wonuma said.

“No, mother, she is the quiet dog that eats up the hen’s eggs without a bark.” (p. 157)

The last sentence of the extract is a proverb in that the message in it is veiled. The statement “The quiet dog” stands for a hypocritical person; that is Ihuoma. This term is used figuratively, especially in form of metaphor for the figurative term is substituted for or identified with the literal term. Hypocrisy in this saying is noticed when Ahurole strategically uses it to blame Ihuoma. The speaker uses it to enrich the semantic value of interpersonal communication. In order to dispel her mother’s misconception about Ihuoma.

2. SOCIOCULTURAL VALUES

The Concubine also contains a group of people sharing some values. This fictional society is regulated by social norms of behaviour and artistic form. By social norms we mean that which is regarded as normal or typical, and any rule is set up by members of a community. In fact, each community is regulated by a set of rules, and whoever breaks the law is severely punished by the eldest or by supernatural beings. Besides, as it is aforementioned, culture includes the arts, customs, lifestyle, background and habit that characterize a particular society or nation. In other words, it

is the beliefs, values, behaviour and material objects that constitute a people's way of life. It is in this respect that we said that socio-cultural involves a combination of social and cultural matters.

In the passage below, the narrator states:

He thought himself clever to have come to Anyika to know the true story behind what he thought of as his toe disaster. He had not been mistaken. The gods were behind it. It was certainly a premonition. "You were lucky". Anyika said slowly, "to have come out alive from Emenike's compound." [...] "Several spirits swore to kill you there and then." "Emenike's spirit must have been among them."

"No, you are mistaken. He was not among them. Unknown spirits, some of them from the sea, teamed up to destroy you?" (p. 58).

In this society, whenever there is something wrong, people are accustomed to meeting the medicine man. And each one in the community is supposed to have his own dibia. In this fictional society, it is said that, Ihuoma, the main character of the novel was selected to serve the sea-king, and no man could dare wooing her. She is responsible for Emenike's death, her first husband. After his death, Madume plans to start love affairs with her and he is mysteriously wounded just at the first meeting. As Madume could not understand, he decides to get in touch with his medicine man for more information. The dibia finally confirms the sea-king's jealousy. Sociocultural elements as orality are noticed through the character's interaction about their beliefs. Furthermore:

I thought the elders had settled this land problem once and for all", Ihuoma replied, looking straight at him.

"Who told you that?" [...]

Ihuoma, there really is no need for us to quarrel over a head of plantain, if you will be reasonable. Let's be friends and forget all our disputes. I am tired of them myself." [...] But Madume was quick. He gripped her two shoulders and forced her to face him. Too full for words she looked down and her tears flowed fast. [...] Madume let her go and she went home crying. Nnadi her brother-in-law hurried into her compound. [...] "Ihuoma, what is it? Please tell me [...]" Nnadi struggled towards him but the neighbors held him fast.

[...] "Don't fight, the elders and spirits will decide this matter", the neighbor said and began to drag Nnadi homewards with great difficulty. (pp. 68-9)

This passage proves the roles of elders in the society. They really have the duty to provide pieces of advice or to reconcile people in quarrel. This is well said in the extract when elders tried hard to reconcile Madume and Ihuoma's husband (Emenike) who had land problem that was settled before Madume's wickedness urges him to take the advantage of the widow. Furthermore, Madume's way of expressing himself shows how he really loves the widow as it is said in the statement "Let's be friends". As he persists, it is described in the passage that it is up to the spirits to decide the matter. This shows clearly how the society in the novel believes in spirits and it is culturally accepted to get in touch with them whenever it is needed. Hereafter, Madume's punishment is observed:

Help! Help! Oh help! My eyes! My eyes! He cried in panic. [...]
"What is it?" The nearest neighbor asked. The others came round and they examined his eyes.

"Spitting cobra", someone explained. Instinctively they all looked towards the plantain tree just in time to see the tail of a huge serpent gliding away rapidly. [...]

"Adanna, go and fetch Anyika", Wolu ordered her eldest daughter. She run quickly to the dibia's hut [...] Now listen. This is obviously the act of a god, probably a very powerful god. [...]
"Several spirits are involved here," he said. "I dare not to treat your husband until the gods have been appeased with a suitable sacrifice." (p. 70)

It is clear that the god is more powerful than the elders. As a super being, it does not have mercy on wrongdoers. In the passage, it is also stated that medicine men also are to select cases which are at their level so that they may not expose themselves to the spirit's wrath. Madume's dibia is well informed about this pitiful situation which needs suitable sacrifice.

From what is said in the passage above, it is worth noting that this is the way this society is organised. Whenever members of the group are in trouble, they always get in touch with medicine men before taking any decision. This means that, any decision is from the dibia after holding consultations. Sacrifices also depend on the spirit's firmness and strength.

The society of the novel has a culture suitable for its members, that includes beliefs and traditional practices. Other beliefs and practices are also highlighted in the following passage:

The basket will be supported on the stick with three forks. The other cock (not the white one) will be strangled and hung from one of the forks of the stick.

You will then speak as follows:

*Amadioha, Ojukwu, Mini wekwu,
Ancestors, gods of the night!
No one digs up immature yams;
My hair is not grey, my work undone;
Accept my sacrifice and spare me.
“Having said this we shall both run back as fast as possible”. (p. 59)*

When there is something wrong with a member of the community, the medicine man is there to settle the matter. In doing so, there are some practices performed by both the wrongdoer or patient and the traditional priest. This priest calls upon the spirits through prayers or recitations, which are also repeated by the person in trouble. It is clear that the prayer or recitation will depend on someone's need. Orality in this extract is seen through the use of embedded narratives. The narrator in this passage appears as a second narrator in that what he is telling has nothing to do with the main story: the first paragraph of the passage contains the dibia's instructions given to Madume, the wrongdoer. The second is a sample of cultural utterances used during sacrifice.

The narrator of the main story has given the floor to one of the characters who, on his turn, behaves as the master of his story. Both paragraphs are from this second narrator, that is, an intradiegetic narrator, but who associates another narrator in his speech through repetitive poetry.

The second paragraph falls into another genre, referred to as religious poetry, especially mantic poetry. As Finnegan says: “*Mantic poetry represents a different type of religious literature. It can take several forms. One consists of the utterances of mediums believed by themselves and/or others to be possessed by some spirit. When oracular utterances take the form of poetry, they have their own convention.*” (p. 187) So, it is clear that mantic poetry is related to divination.

Other kinds of ceremonial practices are well described here below:
He poured out some gin as libation and muttered as each drop reached the ground:

*“Gods of the night, take this;
Gods of the Earth, take this;
Ojukwu the fair, take this;
Amadioha, king of the skies, this is yours.
And you ancestors, small and great,*

*Guardians of this compound,
Take this.” (p.6)*

These words are uttered by the medicine man through libation. This is the act of pouring a liquid or liquor, usually wine, either on the ground or on a victim in sacrifice, in honour of some deity. It is also a ritual pouring of a liquid, or grain such as rice, as an offering to a deity or spirit, or in memory of the dead. (<https://en.m.wikipedia/wiki>). The content of the poem shows that there are different kinds of deity, and each one receives what he deserves. This practice is performed like this so as to satisfy each spirit's need and appease their wrath.

This extract differs from the previous one in that the narrators here are of two kinds: the narrator of the main story, and that of the second story. This first narrator gives the floor to the second one so that he may tell what he knows in his own setting. Note that the main narrator, being the organiser of the whole story, appears in the first line. The floor that he gives is shown through the use of punctuation, that is, colon (:). The second starts invoking. This is another literary genre inserted in the narrative.

Apart from the priest's invocation, the novel contains other poems which are recited or sung by non-professionals as it is shown in this passage:

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

*Do you know that Emenike is dead?
Eh-eh-eh,
We fear the big wide world,
Eh-eh-eh,
Do not plan for the morrow,
Eh-eh-eh,
The instruments took over for only a short time and
few people danced. (p. 28)*

This passage is similar to the aforementioned ones with two parts. They all concern internal focalisation. In this respect, there is also integration of a new genre different from the main genre. The orality is clear when Wakiri inserts a song/poem in the narrative. It is said that the tune was charming but the words were sad. This is obvious since it is a song associated with death as rite of passage. We said that the song is sung by a non-professional for, culturally, when someone dies, any mourner can sing for they are aware of the circumstance that compels them to do so, and it is the degree of relationship with the mourned or deceased, which will thus shape their voices.

The rite of passage is a very common occasion for singing. The song here above is lyrical for it expresses some emotions; thus, songs are always short and some verses can be repeated several times as it is the case in the song under analysis. Culturally speaking, this kind of genre should not be written down for its very nature is oral. So once written down, some aesthetic elements of this genre are destroyed. These elements are, among others, the singer's tone, mood, as well as the general atmosphere which need to be interpreted by listeners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has dealt with linguistic and sociocultural features in Amadi's *The Concubine*. It tried to examine oral aesthetics and cultural distillates immanent in the textual world of Elechi Amadi. To reach our goal, different approaches were resorted to, especially sociocriticism, psycholinguistic, stylistics, enunciation as well as narratology. As far as linguistic features are concerned, we noticed that there is a kind of deviation of some linguistic norms. This deviation is due to stylistic value. That is, some words are veiled or uttered figuratively as a communicative technique to create some effect. Another deviation can be noticed when there are words which are translated from the local mother tongue. As a consequence, the expressions translated from what the speaker thinks of in his local language (mother tongue) do not have their equivalent terms in Standard English. Concerning sociocultural features, we noticed that the society of the novel is regulated by a set of norms. We therefore showed how these norms are well known by the community and that whoever breaks the laws is severely punished.

In fact, evildoers settle their matters under the elders' guidance, and in case the quarrel persists, there is intervention of gods with suitable sacrifice to appease their anger.

It is said that the people in this fictional world believe in supernatural forces for their everyday help and activities.

Therefore, sociocultural elements as orality are inserted when the narrator adopts the internal point of view through the use of embedded texts. In this case, there is integration of other genres in the narrative; that is, texts inside the other. Likewise, different passages describing the rite of passage and other ceremonial utterances are spread here and there in the narrative as oral literary aesthetic of the people's cultural heritage of the society.

It is worth reminding that the integration of orality in a written form destroys the beauty of oral literary effect in that, what is told orally in front of the audience sounds much smarter than the written form.

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