

## Plotting Marriage and Love in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*: Extended Realism in the African Novel

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Born in a village near Port Harcourt in Rivers State, Nigeria, Elechi Amadi (1934-2016) has sidestepped the environmental concerns directly taken up in the work of many other Niger Delta writers. By contrast, in most of his fiction Amadi focuses mainly on human-human relationships, especially the catalytic and volatile relationship of romantic love. In putting eros at the heart of his fictional project, Amadi also distinguishes himself from most other 20<sup>th</sup> century African writers for whom love could be accommodated only in minor sub-plots embedded in grander narratives engaging and resisting colonial and postcolonial derangements of African society and culture. Amadi is often contrasted with Chinua Achebe, both authors who have contributed to the sub-genre of what has been described as the “village novel.” George Nyamndi notes in his monograph on Amadi’s novel titled, *The West African Village Novel with Particular Reference to The Concubine*, that the term “village novel” was first used by Judith Gleason in *This Africa* (1965), where she refers to Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as “the purest and most precise village novel so far in English” (81). Gleason’s study was, however, published a year before Amadi’s novel, which may also claim that distinction. Amadi published his “village novel,” *The Concubine*, in 1966, making him what has been termed a writer of the “second wave” (Peters 13). But, apart from Achebe’s seniority in terms of age, many critics have, in addition, regarded *The Concubine* as derivative of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe’s novel that put African literature on the international literature map. (Ebele Eko, author of a monograph on Amadi’s career, *Elechi Amadi: The Man and His Work*, recounts that Achebe was the prefect of Amadi’s house (26) at Government College Umuahia, the very prestigious high school attended by a significant number of the Nigerian intelligentsia of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.) But there is a striking difference in the concerns of Achebe’s village novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964), and Amadi’s village trilogy, comprising *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* (1969) and *The Slave* (1978). Achebe’s two novels present the village violently riven from the outside, where the equanimity of the community is threatened by British imperial ambitions, more narrowly, and colonial modernity, more widely. The community in Amadi’s trilogy, in contrast, is riven from the inside – individual people and the life of the village as a whole are both enabled and sometimes threatened fatalistically by the gods.

In *The Concubine*, the novel studied in this essay, it is a jealous god that cleaves the romantic union of the hero and heroine, whose love relationship stretches but does not breach the core social conventions of the culture represented. Romantic love in this conception has the generative potential to transform but not cause society to collapse – love makes things change, without making them fall apart. Yet in *The Concubine*, the social accommodations catalyzed by love finally are thwarted. This occurs since even though *The Concubine* captures village life with coherence, Amadi as author embodies a modern-nonmodern double vision that overdetermines the narrative. Amadi's village novel, thus, may reveal romantic love in precolonial society but strategically cannot allow the happy ending since that would make it a "romanticized," politically invested village novel writing back to empire. The love-marriage plot in *The Concubine*, in the light of the author's anxious double vision, is structurally constrained from presenting a happy ending.

### The Love-marriage Plot in the Novel: Origins and Permutations

A comparison between the failed love-marriage plot in *The Concubine* with the love-marriage plot as it unfolds in the novel form, more generally, is interesting and productive. Given the European origins of the form of the novel (Moretti, *Distant Reading* 1-42), and its dissemination through colonization and imperialism (Moretti, "Conjectures"), it is illuminating to contrast Amadi's epistemologically alternative reworking of the love-marriage plot with the ways in which the love-marriage plot has predominantly operated in the novel.

In order to appreciate the manner in which *The Concubine* alternatively plots love and marriage, especially love and marriage that cross into the spirit world, in a narrative that never departs from realism, one needs to retrace the significance of the love-marriage nexus to the novel form. As a preamble, however, a few words must be said about the social significance of marriage generally. Universally, marriage is a highly significant rite of passage that forms the basis of kinship, which establishes societies. It is only with late-20<sup>th</sup> century social transformations in the global north that the idea of marriage as a building block of society seems to crumble. Sociologist, Jane Lewis, for example, asks the question whether marriage has ended with the decoupling first of sex and then parenting from marriage (but concludes that alternative forms of connubial relations continue to survive). The love-marriage, unlike marriage itself, which is trans-cultural and trans-historical, is a form of sociality that has developed in the trajectories of modern western societies, and cultures within their spheres of influence through colonization and later globalization. This is not to say that across histories and cultures, people have not married for love. It is to suggest that love as the only acknowledged *sine qua non* for marriage is a modern Western phenomenon. This is the idea

that subtends the studies of intimacies of sociologists like Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Niklas Luhmann and Zygmunt Baumann. Luhmann articulates the idea most clearly when he suggests that love “as a foundation for marriage is a modern [Western] achievement”, (27) “which goes hand in hand with increasing societal complexity” (28). Whether the love-marriage nexus is the highpoint of a hierarchical scale of intimacies, or simply one type of union on a continuum of intimacies is a question addressed in this essay, through the reading of Amadi’s novel.

The social and cultural trajectory that makes love the cornerstone of modern marriage may be traced in the genre of the novel too. If marriage is the building block of the family that is the building block of the social, then the love-marriage *plot* is significantly constitutive of the form of the novel. Joseph Allen Boone, in a broad survey of Anglo-American fiction, argues that the love-marriage plot, in part, is formally constitutive of the novel as a genre in its 18<sup>th</sup> century European origins (5). Boone shows the “predominance of the marriage tradition in English and American fiction” (5) and goes so far as to suggest that marriage has a deeper significance “as a primary shaping influence and potent symbol of order in the novel” (5). The love-marriage plot in the novel is also closely linked with transformations in the idea of the subject connected with European modernity, where individual formation is, to an extent, shaped by romantic love as an ideal. In terms of the conventional love-marriage plot, the body of the narrative presents the obstructions to the union of the hero and heroine. Marriage at closure in these narratives indexes the individually chosen contractual connections constitutive of affiliative societal structure. Boone, like most scholars, tracks the love-marriage plot back to the medieval courtly love tradition, where marriage is utilitarian, and adultery is where passion may be found. The realist novel form in the 18<sup>th</sup> century transforms courtly love conventions in bringing together utility and eros in the love- or companionate marriage. However, the modern companionate marriage crucially elides the continued significance of utility by privileging only eros as the single accepted foundation of marriage. The bourgeois realist novel thus naturalizes through narrativizing the idea that love is the sole socially sanctioned basis for marriage. The pattern that one sees is one where the hero and the heroine in the realist love novel are like two spheres in space whose love arises out of and negotiates obstructions both internal and external, culminating in the marriage of matching halves united, on the face of it, exclusively by love.

The classical European romance plot is most clearly figured by Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which has been termed “the mother of all romances” (Crusie 1). As with all Austen’s novels, *Pride and Prejudice* is set in a small community – one might say a village – whose rhythm is determined by decorum and propriety in equal measure. The heroine is a naïve young person of precarious social standing and the hero is a bachelor who enjoys some status and significant wealth. The romance plot in *Pride and Prejudice* presents the courtship of the initially flawed hero and heroine, each shifting and

changing in response to obstructions and each other, horizontally in linear time, finally to achieve self-realization and union with the other. Marriage becomes possible only when the lovers have self-knowledge and understanding of the other. This plot innovation showing the personal development of both hero and heroine is held to be a narrative development pioneered by Austen. In earlier romance novels, for example, Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, the heroine existed statically, and the patrician hero moved through space, but showed no moral advancement. The love-marriage nexus, whose social dominance is linked with European modernity and is dramatized perfectly by Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, achieves a global reach through colonialism and globalization, especially in the template it provides for popular romance fiction and romance in other media like film and television (Cartmell 95). But, despite the global triumph of the ideal of the love-marriage nexus, the scenario presented by *Pride and Prejudice* is troubled by an underlying economic motive. In all Austen's novels, and *Pride and Prejudice* is no exception, women marry for love, but always also quite conveniently for money and status, but with such utilitarian concerns seemingly outside of the range of Austen's vaunted self-reflexive irony.

The love-marriage plot in its structure and dynamic appears to endorse equality in intimate relations that is not seen to exist in the non-modern utilitarian marriage. Paradoxically, as Boone proves through a survey of Anglo-American novels, novelistic representations of the love-marriage nexus reveal its continued hierarchy, and oppression of the female partner in marriage. The love-marriage nexus thus is supposed to be part of a general move towards the democratization of intimacies, underscoring freedom of choice and equality – but it reinscribes inequalities and non-modern oppressive gender roles. If we consider the literary highpoint of the ideal of the love-marriage nexus to be represented by Austen's novels, Boone observes that this highpoint is quickly superseded by the tradition of the oppressive love-marriage plot. The unhappy love-marriage plot comes to be challenged by the “counter-tradition” of alternative novel forms. There is the novel of adultery, most notably Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the novel of marital stalemate, for example, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, and the novel of the successful single life that “calls into question the viability of marital roles and arrangements” (Boone 19), like George Gissing's *The Odd Women*.

Amadi's singular achievement in *The Concubine* is to construct a narrative that, more than challenging the tradition of the marriage plot as the novels cited by Boone do, locates the love-marriage plot in an opened-up, more complex network of affective relations that includes the non-material. *The Concubine* transmutes the love-marriage plot itself to incorporate “alternative” zones of reality in what remains a realist narrative form. Amadi's novel presents multiple heroes and heroines concurrently in plural marriages that exist on a continuum. These intimate relationships are presented in circular time, and in a conception of space that is cut through vertically by the spirit world –

employing a narrative form that does not depart from formal realism. There categorically is no magic realism in this “third world” novel.

Alternative permutations of the marriage plot in *The Concubine* represent a fundamental reshaping of the form of the novel, which signals an epistemologically variant conception of the origins of kinship and society out of the “building block” of conjugal union. Literary form in this analysis is viewed as an abstraction of social relations that points to a more complex relationship of mimesis than simple reflection, as Franco Moretti (“Conjectures”) suggests. Moretti also suggests that the novel is a metropolitan form disseminated to the colonial periphery by centrifugal forces (*Distant Reading*). This essay argues, by contrast, that *The Concubine* is a peripheral novel that, through transforming the marriage plot, intimately rewrites the metropolitan novel originating in formal realism (Watt) without thereby occupying an “oppositional” non-realist, magical narrative. The tragedy in *The Concubine* thus ensues as a consequence of the dramatic representation of a complex network of relations beyond what may be known by procedural ontologies, in a coherent, but unromanticized world. Amadi brackets out the rupture of colonial modernity in order to transfigure, through radical alteration and reinscription of the marriage plot, the apparently axiomatic structure of the European realist novel, the most noteworthy cultural form coeval with modernity.

### Love in the Village: Amadi and Achebe

In order to foreground the distinctiveness of Amadi’s treatment of affective relationships, it is helpful to compare Amadi’s village novel with Chinua Achebe’s. It will be argued that while Amadi alternatively scripts novel *form* through variations of the marriage plot, Achebe alternatively scripts the novel mainly at the level of *content* – presenting a different image of Africa. In other words, while Amadi transforms novel form through plot, Achebe presents a counter-image to the stereotypes of Africa through characters and content.

Given the fact that Amadi has been regarded, for the most part, as a “lesser” Achebe without canonization in world literature scholarly circuits and syllabuses, his work has attracted considerably less, in fact, very little criticism. A full overview of the limited critical reception of Amadi’s work is provided in the comprehensive monograph by Eko (223 – 230). Two scholarly voices that shape a literary debate, however, are those of Eustace Palmer and Simon Gikandi. Palmer stages a defense of Amadi through foregrounding the literary-aesthetic quality of his fiction, especially *The Concubine*, which he terms a “small masterpiece” (“Elechi Amadi” 57). Gikandi, on the other hand, highlights Amadi’s conservatism through the use of myth in *The Concubine* to repress individual desire and the quest for individual identity. (Gikandi does not, however, intimate the ways in which myth also lies at the foundation of all societies, including the denied, but ultimately inescapable mythologies, of European

modernity and its postmodern variants.) Whatever the disagreements among Amadi's supporters and detractors, Amadi is a writer who cannot be excluded from most general overviews of African literature.

Another point that is agreed among critics is the centrality of love as a theme in Amadi's oeuvre, especially in *The Concubine*. Again, Eko's insightful monograph on Amadi foregrounds a number of key points on love, in general, and romantic love, in particular, in Amadi's work:

Love is central to all Amadi's plots in tune with his vision of a cosmos governed and powered by love. Amadi sees love as a paradox of the beautiful and painful just like life. As a theme, it frames his works and lightens his tragic vision. Love unites man with his fellow man, drives, directs and powers his motives and when mishandled, it brutalizes and destroys. One of his strongest legacies to African literature and culture is the proud exposure of the hitherto hidden phenomenon, the beauty, freshness and sweetness of African romantic love. His love pairs in every novel are individuals of exceptional talent who manage to rise above the emotional enclosures and decorums of traditionalism, to love for the sake of love. Amadi refuses to see this as Western love. "It is African love only well hidden from view until recently [sic], he argues. [sic] Lovers are very much there in traditional society, but they communicate in secret." Amadi explores this delightful aspect of experience and how each couple grapples with the circumstances and threats to love's consummation. (10)

Eko succinctly captures a number of central issues. For Amadi, love is an important human emotion that is linked to beauty and generative creativity, and through these to the social good. In Western philosophy, these associations are made most clearly and are most well known in Plato's theory of love in the *Symposium* (Santos 14-57), and with variation in Christian notions of *agapē* (Singer 159-161). Given that Amadi so openly identifies with, and is inspired by the apparently abstract thematics of love, his project appears to eschew urgent political questions in favour of a stuffy, old-fashioned European bourgeois defense of the universality of culturally very specific ideas about art. The notion that art, quite narrowly defined, represents a complex ethical horizon is crystallized in attention to universal themes, like love. In some ways Amadi has fed into this perception through an endorsement of an apparently unreformed hegemonic European Enlightenment aesthetic, uncontextualized and uncontrasted with related aesthetics in other world cultures, for which "literature shall always remain more as a form of entertainment and appeal to the sense of beauty, than a political tool or a source of information for shocking facts that may move man ideologically" (quoted in Eko 12). Commenting on the challenge to colonial modernity in the content of most other African writing of his generation, Amadi has maintained that "[i]t is a sort of commitment I call prostitution of art" (quoted in Eko 12). He contrasts his own challenge to the aesthetic and cultural supremacy of colonial modernity as follows: "I confront the West very subtly, ... I hate overt didacticism, I find frontal confrontation dull and crude in novel writing. I like subtlety" (quoted in Eko 31). Amadi's personal reflection on the apolitical nature of his creative practice leaves fundamentally untheorized the ways in which he fundamentally

rewrites the form of the novel through love, as indexed by variations in the marriage plot.

Eko captures yet another dimension of Amadi's art in the observations quoted above. In Amadi's fictional practice, affect in African human relationships transcends the horizontal plane of human-human relations connecting, through animist apprehension, cosmic spirits in the natural world. *The Concubine* has been a commonly prescribed set work in high school English curricula across the African continent as a representative text capturing pre-colonial Africa for African students alienated from local cultures for various reasons. It is prescribed since, according to Palmer, against the background of the other village novels, *The Concubine's* cosmogonic version of formal realism appears most authentically to narrativize village life: "... of all African novels, including those of Achebe, Amadi's *The Concubine* conveys most truthfully the quality of life not just in one particular region, but of most African societies" (*Introduction to the African Novel* 117). The realism of *The Concubine* extends counter-intuitively also to its representation of the supernatural. While Achebe's two village novels present the consciousness and practices of characters who believe their gods and believe in the practices established by their gods, the gods have no command over plot, and tragic closure is determined, in part, by the "deus ex machina" of colonial modernity, rather than Okonkwo's *chi* or Ezeulu's god, for example. Or, as Palmer states the case, "... in Achebe's work, man is primarily the agent of his own destiny" ("Elechi Amadi," 56). By contrast, in Amadi's trilogy, gods have power over plot, much like the power of the gods in genres like the ancient Greek epic. However, in Amadi's novel the gods are never presented "on stage," so to speak, and their power is not spectacular, but is mediated through the actions of human beings and the processes and outcomes of nature. Bernth Lindfors, in a short review of the novel, captures this paradox in the observation that "[*The Concubine*] evokes the setting, pace and mood of traditional life so completely and so convincingly that the supernaturalism in the closing chapters does not seem out of place" (366). Lindfors refers here to the revelation at the ending that the heroine is a goddess, unbeknownst to herself. It refers also to the retrospective confirmation that the deaths of the heroine's husband and suitors were motivated by the vengeance of a god. The conclusion is the entirely natural outcome of a wider realism that the novel, we realize at the end, has formally encompassed throughout. (Palmer provides a more detailed account of Amadi's narrative strategy for an extended realism in both of his essays on *The Concubine*, which need not be repeated here.) Thus, unusually, unlike the presentation of the supernatural in other "third world" texts, Amadi's supernaturalism does not lead to magic realism, but to a more exacting, extended realism that emerges most clearly, as we shall see, through transformations of the love-marriage plot.

Eko's observation above also highlights the extent to which Amadi's oeuvre centres on romantic love. Amadi, unlike other African writers of his generation, foregrounds romantic love as a universal emotion and explores African inflections of it since it is one form of a

more general love tending towards the social good. Romantic love, furthermore, is a uniquely “super-charged” creative and generative form of love that often reinvigorates the social through testing conventions and norms. While the nodal points and lines of familial love, embedded as they are in filiative relations, are almost completely scripted by blood connection, romantic love is most often an affiliative relationship that breaks various intra- and inter- social boundaries through the explosiveness and unpredictability of desire. The transgressive nature of desire subsequently often comes to be contained in the formalities of marriage. African literature in European languages and its scholarship have virtually completely excluded the study of affect, in general, and romantic love, in particular. This is a fact noted by Amadi himself: “I put much premium on love. By the way, many have asked me why I choose to write about Western romantic love. But this is not true. I write about African love, just as it is in the village, but glossed over by most other writers” (32). This problematic gap left by much African literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Moolla 118-121) has been identified by notable Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, who intervenes in this landscape of absence both through her novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1993) and through her edited volume, *African Love Stories* (2006). (Curiously, Aidoo does not mention Amadi at all even though *The Concubine* is claimed by Eko as “no doubt one of the greatest love stories of the African novel ...” (52).) The most obvious reason for the lack of focus on interpersonal relationships in African literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the attention mainly to more political questions of colonial encounter and postcolonial derangement in African literature with an international circulation. Love, however, dominates African oratures and most forms of popular culture (Moolla 119-120). The 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a sudden onrush that reverses the trend, has witnessed a transformation with the increasing visibility of love plots in African and African diasporic literature available to a global market, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* being the prime example.

### Love and Marriage: The Continuum of Eros and Utility in *The Concubine*

The plot of *The Concubine* reveals in surface manifestation multiple variations of the classic marriage plot of the European realist novel. The narrative tells the story of the heroine Ihuoma, who is the perfect model of physical and moral beauty. Ihuoma’s perfection is the consequence of the fact that she is an aquatic goddess incarnated against the wishes of her husband, the Sea-King. The Sea-King’s love for her of all his wives is the reason why she is not killed on becoming mortal. But his anger and jealousy manifest in his injunction that Ihuoma will never be any man’s wife – her relationship with earthly men can only ever take the form of concubinage – an interesting term used to refer to the non-modern mistress. (Even though motherhood is what finally establishes marriage in many African cultures, the focus



on desire in Amadi's project makes the rituals of marriage and consummation a sharper focus of the Sea-King's jealousy).

The novel opens with the death of Ihuoma's husband, Emenike, possibly as a result of a fight he has had with the village troublemaker, Madume. With the husband out of the way, Madume then contemplates marriage with Ihuoma mainly, once and for all, to appropriate the land that belonged to her husband. Madume commits suicide after he is struck blind by a spitting cobra when accosting Ihuoma on the disputed piece of land. The focus of the narrative, however, falls on the love of a third man, Ekwueme, a married man whose unusual courtship of Ihuoma provides the main narrative drive in the novel. The courtship is unusual since it is socially condoned by what the village sees as Ekwueme's madness. Ekwueme's instability is explained by the love potion given to him by his wife, riled by her husband's clear preference for Ihuoma. Ekwueme's parents and the rest of the village accept that only Ihuoma will be able to lead Ekwueme back from his folly. Towards the end of the narrative, the village *dibia*, or medicine man, reveals Ihuoma's status, unknown to herself, as a goddess. The *dibia* also reveals the Sea-King's curse that Ihuoma will never be any mortal man's wife. Ekwueme is determined to challenge the power of the Sea-King, with the help of another *dibia*, who believes his medicine is strong enough to overcome the ruthless god. But even before the sacrifice to bind the power of the Sea-King takes place, Ekwueme is struck by a poisoned arrow shot by Ihuoma's son, who had been instructed to catch a brightly coloured lizard as part of the sacrifice.

The narrative, as the summary above shows, does not open with encounter and courtship of the hero and heroine. In this respect, *The Concubine* is quite different from the classic romance novel plot. Instead, an early chapter begins with the warmly described family joys of Ihuoma's very happy marriage, followed by her husband's death and her widowhood. Marriage thus is not the plot terminus, but its point of departure, and the marriage represented is a highly successful one in which both partners appear content. In the traditional European romance novel, the trials and tribulations of courtship are the matter of the body of the novel with marriage presented at its end. In *The Concubine*, conversely, multiple courtships are presented, none of which terminate in marriage.

The first courtship is the courtship of Madume, the man who may have been responsible for Ihuoma's husband Emenike's death. The courtship here is the courtship of a man who is already married, given the polygynous social foundations of the community represented. Since Madume is already married, he sends his first wife as emissary to negotiate with Ihuoma to be his second wife. The plural, or more specifically polygynous marriage, is entirely normalized in this context, and far from being oppressive, is often desired by the wives themselves. (This is not unique to the fictions of male writers. It occurs also in the writing of female novelists like Flora Nwapa.) Wolu, Madume's wife in this case, however, objects to the marriage. But she does not object since she finds the second marriage offensive or

oppressive to either herself or Ihuoma. She objects to the marriage since she does not think it fitting to be the senior wife to a woman she considers her moral superior. (In the polygynous marital landscape of the community Amadi represents, adultery is for structural reasons non-existent. The novel of adultery, in contradistinction, is a very important sub-genre in the Anglo-American literary line that forms part of the “counter-tradition” to the classic marriage plot tracked by Boone. Tony Tanner, furthermore, links the novel of adultery with the incipient rupture of the formal realism of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century European novel.)

A second courtship occurs in the novel. This time Ihuoma is courted by Ekwueme, who is already betrothed in a child-marriage to Ahurole, daughter of a family in a nearby village. (Ekwueme and Ahurole were pledged to each other by their families when both were children.) Ihuoma’s mother, distressed that her daughter suffers the emotional and sexual loneliness of young widowhood, encourages her daughter to enter into a relationship of concubinage with Ekwueme if she does not want actually to marry him. Ihuoma is reluctant to marry Ekwueme since calling off the child-marriage to Ahurole is socially unthinkable. Thus, unusually, the mother encourages the daughter to cohabit in the interests of the young widow’s happiness and fulfillment, an option that is not the norm in this community, but would not appear to constitute a scandal either. Furthermore, in her widowhood, Ihuoma is in a sense “married” to her brother-in-law, Nnadi, who takes over all the duties of a husband, except sexual responsibilities, although this also is an option allowed by Igbo custom and the ethics of most other African cultures in which procreation is paramount, given the value attached to human life. Nnadi himself has another wife, making Ihuoma a second “wife.” These are the relationships in the human world. At the end of the narrative, when it becomes apparent that Ihuoma is a water goddess incarnate, married to the Sea-King all along, then Ihuoma’s actual marriage to Emenike and her “social” marriage to her brother-in-law, Nnadi, need to be re-defined as concubinage.

Ihuoma’s relationships, apart from the first doomed union with Emenike, never reach the stage of marriage as a consequence of her “real” but non-visible husband’s overwhelming love for her in excess of his love for his other goddess wives. Polyamory here, we see, extends and proliferates on the horizontal and the vertical planes, crossed over by Ihuoma in her incarnation as a mortal. Anyika, the *dibia* or priest-healer explains Ihuoma’s situation thus:

‘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. ...

‘Do you mean to say,’ he [Wigwe, Ekwueme’s father who consults the *dibia* regarding his son’s desired marriage to Ihuoma] said between clenched teeth, ‘that this girl was never meant to get married?’

‘Under the circumstances, no.’

‘She was to die untouched by men?’

‘Well, she could be someone’s concubine. Her Sea-King husband can be persuaded to put up with that after highly involved rites. But as a wife she is completely ruled out.’ (195-96)

Circling back in time, the novel thus does not open with monogamous marriage and widowhood, but with polygynous marriage in the real but non-visible world. Ihuoma’s marriage to the Sea-King is a marriage that is not utilitarian, but fired by passionate, enduring and jealous love. Ihuoma, the goddess, is a character who challenges her husband, a formidable god, and transgresses the boundaries of the material and spirit worlds to satisfy her curiosity. Ironically, concubinage is permitted by the Sea-King since he loves Ihuoma too much to destroy her. Concubinage is also advised by Ihuoma’s mother since she loves her daughter and wants to see her sexually satisfied. However, concubinage is not what Ihuoma and Ekwueme will settle for since their desire for each other, and self-fulfilment through the other are satisfied only through a socially acknowledged marriage, which, in this case, is precluded.

Much like Jane Austen who creates a small world or, as she describes it, a cameo created on “a little bit of ivory, two inches wide”, ignoring the bigger currents of politics and history, Amadi excludes the epistemological rupture of colonization, which is the canvas of most of the other writers of his generation – to write a love story. The romance of Ihuoma and Ekwueme has many of the features of the contemporary romance narrative, influenced as it has been by Austen. Ekwueme and Ihuoma’s first meeting is pregnant with possibilities for the fulfillment of the desires of the hero and heroine, both of whom also vicariously fulfill the desires of the reader of romance. Ihuoma is maturely graceful, classically beautiful with her “ant-hill” coloured skin, and physically is voluptuously attractive. Ekwueme is a manly presence who can hold his own on the wrestling arena, has an admired singing voice and is an Igbo gentleman. Both hero and heroine are preoccupied with each other, but the romance is constrained by Igbo proprieties which allow the couple to communicate only guardedly through emissaries and is obstructed by other impediments, including other rivals. Ihuoma’s respect for social conventions will not allow her to come between Ekwueme and his betrothed, and will not allow her to be his mistress. The desired outcome, which is very nearly achieved, is the monogamous love marriage in which the utilitarian concerns of property exchange and procreation are not motivating factors. The love between the soon to be formally married couple is glowingly suggested in the closing pages of the narrative:

Ekwueme tickled her sides and she laughed again.

‘Are you drunk tonight?’ she asked still laughing.

‘I am and it was you who gave me the drink.’

‘I didn’t give you any palm wine.’

‘You did.’

'When?'  
'This evening.'  
'That is not true.'  
'Being with you is to be drunk.' (202)

The marriage in which this enduring love is fulfilled is, significantly in this polygynous social context, an incontrovertibly monogamous relationship. When Ihuoma playfully teases her future husband about a second wife, he replies resolutely that, "[t]here will be no second wife" (214).

As with popular romance novels, *The Concubine* also shows how through love and obstructions to love, the lovers each achieve self-knowledge and self-realization. The narrative tracks the personal development of Ekwueme and Ihuoma, with Ekwueme growing in maturity out of life experience and his observation of Ihuoma's virtues, and Ihuoma growing in confidence, willing to bend conventions that constrain rather than facilitate socially desired outcomes: "So we are both wiser now. And older too," Ekwueme remarks in a lovers' exchange towards the end.

But, quite unlike the Austen-inspired romance, this love story begins with the widowhood of the heroine and ends tragically with the hero's death. Furthermore, while the normative romance moves towards the union of the hero and heroine, classically in monogamous marriage (but in the contemporary romance, also in cohabitation), Amadi's novel inserts the romance plot in the broader social context of plural marriages *and* cohabitation, where the union of Ihuoma and Ekwueme foreshadows the open and accepted possibility of a second wife. What is presented are fairly flexible networks of intimacy on the horizontal plane, that open up to networks of intimacy on the vertical plane with the final revelation that Ihuoma is the spouse of the Sea-King. These overlapping networks produce a range of multilayered entanglements of affect, which nevertheless do not preclude potentially monogamous amatory relationships.

Thus we see that the "Austenian" love-marriage plot is embedded in Amadi's narrative in a much wider network of alternative models for intimate relations of which the monogamous, companionate marriage is only one form. That love is just one requirement of marriage that may well come after the marriage is consummated is epitomized by Ihuoma's neighbor and friend, Nnennda, who although in love with Ekwueme in her youth, could quite unproblematically marry another man with whom she appears to be content. In the background of the narrative, the reader is presented with successful marriages that serve material needs, underlining the utilitarian ends subtending the Austenian love-marriage plot, otherwise concealed. Indeed, Ihuoma's first, very happy marriage, appears to have been a conventional "functional" Igbo union in which social and procreative aspects were paramount. In the background to the monogamous love-marriage, we also see plural marriages, and marriages in the non-visible but very real spirit world.

Alternative narrative figurations of the marriage plot reflect alternative figurations of the social, which cross epistemological

boundaries. What makes Amadi's narrative so compelling is the way in which social alternatives are not presented through exoticizing magical modes, but through a complex extended realism that encompasses an Igbo, but also generally non-modern apprehension of the world. Through the revelations made by the *dibia* at the end of the story, none of the coincidences may be accepted as coincidences any longer. Emenike did not die of "lock-chest" because he had worked in the rain after having been weakened by Madume's assault on him. Instead, it is clear that he was struck by the Sea-King since he had dared to be Ihuoma's husband. Similarly, Madume is not blinded by the spitting cobra by chance; rather the spitting cobra is the god taking on reptilian form to teach Madume a lesson. Likewise, the arrow that kills Ekwueme, is vicariously shot by Nwonna, Ihuoma's son going after a lizard, but actually is motivated by the Sea-King. The supernaturally directed plot is presented with as much validity as the plot explained by natural, scientifically, sociologically and psychologically verifiable causes. Ihuoma's husband could have died of a disease since he was physically compromised. Madume may have disturbed the snake, rather than Ihuoma who had been close to the same tree in which the spitting cobra was lurking. And Ekwueme could have been "intentionally" killed in an oedipal drama in which Ihuoma's son is the center. The story links Nwonna and Ekwueme as potential rivals for the mother's affection from the beginning. We are told that Ihuoma is so youthful and attractive that she looks like the sister rather than mother of her children. On their first meeting, Nwonna is reluctant to greet Ekwueme, perhaps sensing in him a threat to his own possession of the mother now that his biological father is out of the way. Thus the narrative's retrospective resolution of events permits equally cogent natural and supernatural explanations.

The heterosexual, monogamous love-marriage, whose social dominance is linked with European modernity, and is dramatized and epitomized by Austen, achieves a global reach through colonialism and globalization. When the love-marriage plot of "high" literature is disseminated through popular romance fiction and in audio-visual media, it also achieves a reach across social stratification. Amadi's narrative, unlike the "counter-tradition" described by Boone and the incremental changes that may be tracked in popular romance, locates the love-marriage plot within a located, non-modern culture. Within this culture, it is only one form of marital relationship, against the backdrop of many others, including relationships in a spirit world. In the context of the plot, for example, Igbo social conventions allow, at the one extreme, the arranged marriage-by-troth of Ekwueme and Ahurole as children. Because of the investment of the families in this marriage, it must take place. The community also, however, recognizes the point at which the marriage breaks down completely since the partners are wholly incompatible. Social propriety around the marriage by troth to Ahurole having been fulfilled, the family, the community, and Ihuoma herself, no longer object to the marriage of Ekwueme and Ihuoma. The love-marriage nexus, although not dominant in this community, is accepted as one of a range of recognizable forms of

marriage. The love-marriage nexus stretches the social norms of the community, finally achieving accommodation, rather than the collapse of conventions that maintain social cohesion and cultural coherence. We see that the monogamous love-marriage plot is linked to a network of alternately conceived intimate relations upon which the society is constructed, and is embedded in a narrative of extended realism. Amadi thus has written an extended narrative, cognizant of but also “provincializing” the universality of the love-marriage plot in the novel, which symbolically captures the social significance of the love-marriage nexus. The love marriage as an ideal emerges out of the cultural and historical trajectory of European modernity and is spread through colonization and globalized hegemonies of affective relations. The narrative of *The Concubine* presents intimate relations and marriage on a wide continuum incorporated into an extended realism encompassing African spiritualities and their socially shaping influence.

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