

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *OMEN?k?* AND *IJE ODUMODU JERE*

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Abstract

Omen?k? by Pita Nwana and *Ije Odumodu Jere* by Pita Nwana are the first two novels written in Igbo language. These works are rich in Igbo cultural values, oral narrative traditions and Igbo literary figures. They are the most outstanding works of Igbo prose fiction. Presently, it has been observed that some readers find these works obscure. Some readers are of the view that they do not contain contemporary issues. So, they are no longer worth reading and studying. However, this paper aspires to examine the two novels, to determine their areas of similarities and differences and the extent to which they have contributed to the development and growth of literary works in the Igbo language. The study adopted descriptive research approach in analyzing the selected novels and this resulted in the following findings: the theme, plot and the structure of the two novels under review are closely related, the writers of the two novels made unconscious use of the Igbo proverbs in their works, the language of the two novels is simple, Leopold Bell-Gam borrowed a lot structurally from *Omen?k?*, the novels have made and continue to make outstanding contributions to the growth and development Igbo literary works. However, the paper recommends that young writers, researchers and readers ought to study and appreciate the first two Igbo novels so as to exploit the wealth of knowledge the authors presented in the works.

Introduction/Synopses of Two the two Novels

Pita Nwana's only work, *Omen?k?* was published in 1933, after winning a prize in All African literary contest in indigenous African languages by the International Institute for African Languages and culture in the same year. It is a pioneer modern Igbo prose fiction

and a biographical novel. In other words, it is the first concrete work of Igbo creative literature. In April 2010, a conference was held in honour and celebration of 78th years of existence of *Omen?k?*. The novel told a story of the hero; Omenuko; a prosperous trader who went on a mandatory self-exile after committing a heinous crime against the people and the gods of his land. Later he returned home not necessarily because of the crime. But because the Igbo believe that a sojourner is bound to go home.

Unlike *Omen?k?*, *Ije Odumod uJere* was originally written in Lepsius orthography and later transliterated into Adam – ward orthography by Mr. L.A. Amadi. It was published in 1963. The novel is partly realistic and auto-biographical. It told the story of adventures and civilizing mission of Odumodu, the principal character in the novel. The shipwreck which occurred on their way from Eko to St. Helena exposed Odumodu to all sorts of dangers and adventures, as he searched for something to wear (P. 4 – 12). The urge and curiosity to find out the terminus of the jungle in which he found himself after the shipwreck led him into the land of Finda (P. 12 -14).

In Finda, after receiving some initial maltreatment and threats (usually meted to a suspicious stranger), Odumodu was given a place of honour. He learnt the language of the people and was made the secretary of the state. Later, he married the daughter of the king of the land with whom he got three sons, he and his children, who were well educated helped to civilize the people of Finda by stopping them from practicing cannibalism and by revolutionizing their agriculture and legal system.

As a result of the tussle that erupted between him and the son of the king of the land over succession issue, he escaped to Mimba, a neighbouring town. There he got the king of the land to build schools and churches in which their children were educated and baptized respectively. Ritual killings and cannibalism were also stopped. With the unexpected death of his wife and three sons in

Mimba, Odumodu felt that he had completely lost the game. It was this sense of loss that forced him back to his home town, Ahaba, just as sense of insecurity forced Omenuko out of IkpaOyi and back to his home town.

Critical Analysis of the two Novels

Background

Based on their background, *Omenuko* is the first concrete work of creative literature in Igbo. It was written by Pita Nwanna and published in 1933. It is a biographical/historical novel. *Omenuko* is an ironical novel. Igwegbe Odum is the real name of Pita Nwanna's Omenuko, a native of Arondizuogu in Imo State. He was one of the most influential and successful warrant chiefs of the early colonial days in Igboland. Pita Nwanna was really threatened by the life of Omenuko (Igwe Odum). But *Ije Odumodu Jere* is a pre-war novel. It was written by Leopold Bell-Gam and published in 1963. It is a satirical novel. L. Bell-Gam aimed at proving that the Black can do better than the Whites as against the thought of the later. The Whites were making mockery of the Blacks. Consequently, Africans went back to civilize them. It is also an adventure novel. But *Ije Odumodu Jere* borrowed a lot structurally and otherwise from Omenuko.

Theme

This refers to the subject of a discourse, discussion, and piece of writing or an artistic composition. Beaty et al, (1992:223), define theme as “The central idea, the thesis, or even the message of the story”. It refers to the generalization or abstraction from a story. it deals with the arguments, the over-all meaning, focus, or significance of the action. It is always present without purpose, for a writer cannot avoid expressing ideas, events and characterizations always imply some view of human behaviour. Theme or though is one of the major sources of unity in a prose, drama or poem, for action may be organized around a central idea, motif, or concern.

Usually, in a prose, drama or poem, a critic may discover the major

theme and other sub-themes. The major theme is the central or main idea the writer wishes to share with his audience, while the sub-themes are the moral lessons the writer wants his audience to understand. Based on their themes, Pita Nwana attempted in *Omenaka* to x-ray the life and achievement of Omenuko against the background of an Igbo adage that states that “O biara ije new ula”, meaning that a sojourner is bound to go home and this formed the theme of the novel; Omenuko. Coincidentally, this theme is clearly stated by Pita Nwana himself in his introduction on the first page of the novel, where it is stated that:

N'akuku obodo anyi n'ime Africa okwu di ka iwu e nyere enye, a na-asina o buru na onye o bula agaa n'obodo ozo biri n'ebe ahu dika obia ma o di mma, ma o bu onye ebere, ma o bu onye amara, ma o bu onye na-ekpe ikpe n'uzo ziriezi, mgbe dum ihe ufodu gana-echetara ya na ya onwe ya bu obia, n'ala ahu, o gana-ejikere onwe ya na o ghaghi ila obodo ebe a muru ya. Mgbe o bula a turu ya n'ilu, ma a gwawara ya agwa na o bu obia, o ghaghi ila.

Translation:

In parts of our country in Africa, this saying is tenaciously held, that if anybody leaves his own land to go and settle in a foreign land, as long as he remains a stranger, no matter his goodness, and kindness to his hosts and no matter the extent to which he is held high esteem as a righteous judge, certain events will constantly remind him that he is a stranger in that land and so he must be prepared to face the hard fact that home – going is inevitable. From time to time, he is reminded either through allusions or direct statements that he is a stranger and that he must go back to his home. It is around this assertion that the entire story is woven and the hero of the story, Omenuko highlighted.

Omenuko conducts his business activities between his home town and Bende in company of his servants and porters; he met a calamity on the way. On getting to river Igwu, a dilapidated bridge they were

crossing gave way under them and they fell into the rapid flowing river and all Omenuko's articles of trade got swept off by the current and none was recovered. But Omenuko and his men survived the unfortunate incident. This is the turning point in Omenuko's life. To make up for his loss, he sold off his servants and porters into slavery. He thus committed a crime against the people and gods of his land. The only immediate choice left to him according to the law of the land was to go on exile. He thus went on a compulsory self exile to Mgborogwu.

His stay in Mgborogwu was marked with success and prosperity from the earliest time of his arrival there to almost the time of his departure from there. A catalogue of Omenuko's successes and progress include – the heroic welcome accorded him by Mgborogwu People (p. 16); he became the successor to the throne of Mgborogwu, following the king's will before he died (p. 17), his role as a warrant chief and the spokesman of Mgborogwu people (p. 24 – 25); the progressive expansion of his family to the point of acquiring a personal empire – IkpaOyi – for the family (p. 32 – 36). Above all, he enjoyed the good-will and respect of people as a result of his demonstrable wisdom, generosity and kindness (p. 24 – 26).

But in spite of all these, later events and developments kept reminding Omenuko that he was a stranger both in the land of Mgborogwu and Ikpa Oyi. Envious of his political and economic prosperity, the chiefs and elders of the land protested against his continued rulership over and stay in Mgborogwu and environs (p. 76 – 88). It is this incident and the resultant bitter struggle and fight carried by these chiefs against Omenuko, coupled with the District commissioner's friendly advice and warning (p. 82) that sent Omenuko packing for his home town.

What the study is trying to drive at here is to justify that the theme of this great work of literature is that “a stranger in a place is bound to go home”, rather than “crime and expiation” as proposed by some

Igbo literary scholars.

While the issue of “stranger and home-going” pervaded the entire frame-work of the story and formed the hub on which the message of the entire story revolved. The issue of “crime and expiation” is merely limited to a small proportion of the story involving the presentation of Omenuko's crime and his attempts to atone for it and this was discussed in only about three chapters of a novel of fifteen chapters.

It is true that an earlier chapter of this book (chapter 9) expressed Omenuko's wish to go home (even before he started experiencing some serious opposition in Mgborogwu) and the necessary moves he made to see through the expiation of his crime (chapter 10), the fact remains that at the end of the expiation exercise, Omenuko continued to stay but at Ikpa Oyi contrary to expectation. The fact that he continued to stay until certain unbearable conditions started to remind him that as a stranger in the land, that he must be prepared to go, coupled with the fact that he finally left the foreign land, not out of his own volition but because of a force he was unable to combat, made the theme of “stranger and home-going” an undisputable one for the story.

But Bell-Gam's *Ije Odumodu Jere* is revolutionary partly because it is more or less detached from the Igbo cultural milieu both in background and texture, it presented the story which centered on “Odumodu's civilizing mission”, the author could not resist the influence of Omenuko both thematically aid in plot just as he could not resist the use of supernaturalism and quest adventures of the oral narrative.

When Odumodu set out in a ship bound for St. Helina, the readers were not told that he had a particular mission at St. Helina or elsewhere. But with the shipwreck and the circumstances in which Odumodu found himself after that, adventure became inevitable. It was not a quest for getting to Finda but a quest for determining the

terminus of the forest in which he found himself that eventually led Odumodu into Finda. The main supernatural incident in the story came with Odumodu's encounter with some tiny men who lived in holes.

From this point, the setting and texture of the story start to have some foreign overtones. Finda and Mimba were populated by the white people but contrary to expectation, their culture was primitive, mundane, and uncivilized. Here lies the irony of the story, for as white people, it was expected that Odumodu, a black man should be further civilized through his contact with them but paradoxically it was Odumodu who went to remodel their legal system, revolutionize their agricultural system, build schools for them, educate their children and stop them from practicing cannibalism. Here, Bell-Gam, indeed tried his hand in satire writing.

Like in theme of “stranger and home-going” as illustrated by Omenuko, Odumodu encountered some bitter experiences that went to remind him from time to time that he was a stranger in the land. It is true that the good – will enjoyed by Odumodu in Finda and Mimba is second only to that enjoyed by the king of the land. For instance, he was the Secretary of State in Finda, he was given the King's daughter in marriage, the throne of Finda was willed to him on the death of the king of the land, his marriage was blessed with three male issues who later became very well educated, he enjoyed and unmitigated freedom and respect, yet he very narrowly escaped with his life the day he left Finda for Mimba. Nor was his stay in Mimba freed from bitter experiences. But the climax of them all was the death of his wife and three children. When he discovered, as Omenuko did in IkpaOyi, that he had lost the game, he was left with no other choice than to go back to his home Ahaba.

Structure and Plot

Gillespie, Fonseca and Sanger (1996:984), define plot as, “the arrangement of the events in a story according to a pattern devised

by the writer and inferred by the reader”. They go further to add that, “Plot develops when characters and situations oppose each other, creating conflicts that grow and eventually reach a climax, the point of highest intensity of the story. After this climatic turning point, the action of the story finally declines, moving toward a resolution of the conflict”. Like in the folk – narratives, from which most Igbo novels have their roots, the plots of the Igbo novels are fundamentally simple. Writers, having been heavily influenced by the folk – narrative technique, usually adopt epic or the traditionally form the form commonly used in folk – narratives in their writings. As a result of this, most of the novels so far written in Igbo are linear in structure. In them, the different incidents and episodes are sequentially linked to one another primarily in their order of casual relationship. In other words, the plot is such that the first action or incident triggers off the second and the second triggers off third and in this relay type of cycle the sequent actions and incidents come in, in their order of occurrence. This, in effect, means that the removal of any strategic action or incident from the story plot will completely dislodge the entire story plot. If this happens, it is either that the original story plot is re-fashioned into a different one altogether or that the logicity will be called to question.

At this juncture, for the purpose of illustration, the plot of *Omenuko*, a novel with typical folk – narrative plot would be examined.

1	A Prosperous Merchant
2	Misfortune Strike
3	Commits crime result
4	self exile
5	Economic and political prosperity
6	Urge to reconcile with home people
7	Expiation and reconciliation
8	Rose to the pinnacle of economic and political power
9	Enviied and harrassed by rival chiefs
10	Forced to go home

Apart from the fact that the story made out of the plot tabulated above is linearly structured, the actions and incidents enjoyed casual relationship. Similarly, Bell – Gam presented *Ije Odumodu Jere* in traditional form and linear structure.

Setting

Nwadike (1992:78-80) explains that the setting of a literary work could be the place, time- past, present or future and the circumstance in which the actions in the work took place. The study would look into the general atmosphere and locale in which the actions in a narrative or dramatic works took place or were presented. There is general setting as well as a scenery setting. For instance, the general setting of Omenuko is the early period of colonial administration in

Nigeria. But it has to be pointed out here, however, that since the story in the book is presented across two different historical periods, it is safer to say that the first part of the story (Omenuko's life before exile is in Mgborogwu) has its general setting as the era of slave trade in Nigeria, while the second part of the story (His life from the time he arrived at Mgborogwu to the end of the story) is set in the early colonial period in Nigeria. Then, Omenuko's economic and political activities are set in Mgborogwu and Ikpa Oyi, and this is the scenery setting of the work.

Unlike Omenuko, Bell-Gam presented the story in *Ije Odumodu Jere* in fictitious scenery. Finda and Mimba in *IjeOdumoduJere* are fictitious and legendary. The places were said to be inhabited by White men, some of whom lived in holes. These species of white men were presented as primitives, cannibalistic, and completely uneducated. They were regarded as idol and fetish worshippers and the atmosphere in which the rituals were carried out were horrifying and awe inspiring. The story was set in this type of atmosphere so that a wonder – evoking situation would be created, not only in the work, but in the imagination of the reader.

Character and Characterization

The major character in Omenuko is Omenuko. Omenuko fully qualifies as a round character. A round character is that which by the nature of his presentation or portrayal exhibits a trait that is a mixture of normally and superfluity in all – round behavioural attributes and other qualities expected of a normal person functioning in real life situation. So he is either seen as a normal human being or as an inflated human being. In such characters, details about their backgrounds are supplied. They are identified with various types of behavioural traits and qualities. According to Abrams (1981: 20-21), in his interpretation of E. M. Forster;

A round character is complex in temperament and motivation and is represented with subtle particularity; thus he is as difficult to describe with any adequacy as a person in real life, and like most

people, he is capable of surprising us.

Omenuko was given a robust and well rounded presentation by Pita Nwana. The provision made of Omenuko's background coupled with the details in which this was presented; the details provided about his life and activities from the beginning to the end and the full presentation of his personality readily gave the reader a full picture of the man – Omenuko.

Similarly, in *Ije Odumodu Jere*, some details were provided about Odumodu's background but he was presented as good from the beginning of the story to the end. Odumodu was so good and sound that he automatically graduated from being ordinary manual labourer to being a ruler, a missionary educationist and counselor, a law maker, a scientist, an agriculturist, a moral preacher, etc. The university he attended being the jungle in which he found himself after the shipwreck.

Obviously, Omenuko and Odumodu are developed characters. Developed characters are those characters that feature almost from the beginning of the story to the end of it. They are usually the chief characters.

Language and Tone

Hornby (1989:662), defines language as, “The system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings”. Language is crucial to all manners of oral and literary expressions. Many people can speak and write, but not all have the mastery of the art of language use. This is partly why one speech could be more powerful and captivating than the other or a piece of writing more beautiful and inviting than the other.

Sometimes, one can see that an honest writer who does not possess the gift of this special art of language use may present his work in the most modest language. He either presents the work in a language that is as plain as possible or presents it with a little flowering with

proverbs and other figures of speech in which he feels he can afford or control. On the other hand, there are some overzealous writers who betray their lack of the mastery of the art of language use by over-doing things – proverbs and other figures of speech forced in here and there, clustered here and there, resulting in overlapping. But in the hands of a talented story-teller and master of language use, everything is allowed to come in naturally, each taking its position where it should be and performing the appropriate functions which the writer originally intends that it should perform. In the case of Igbo novel, it could be seen that each writer, be he talented in special art of language use or not, makes sure that his work contains, at least, a few Igbo proverbs. Perhaps, the socio – cultural factors responsible for this is the high regard which the Igbo language places on the use of verbal art in speech making and rhetorics. So, any speech or writing that is devoid of these verbal arts is equated to a well – prepared soup that does not contain salt or oil. The mere fact that an author is an Igbo, writing in Igbo, has more or less conditioned him to certain mandatory socio – linguistic choices. And the use of proverb seems to be the most popular choice open to these writers. It has also been discovered that apart from very few writers indeed, the rest knew no other ways of enriching the language of their works other than through the use of proverbs and may be, a few idioms, similes and metaphors.

In the course of the study, it was observed that Pita Nwana and Bell - Gam made unconscious use of the Igbo proverb in their works. They were not after proverbs as they write, the few that came in as they write were invariably, original, strategically positioned and functionally very effective.

The proverbs on page 18 of *Omen?k?* says:
 ... ka any?site n'ugbu a b? ehizie ch?wa nwa ewu ojii n'ihina mgbe
 chi jiri, ?ch?ch?gbaakwa, any?agagh?ach?takwa ya.

Translation

... we have to start now that is still daylight to look for the black goat

for when the night comes and darkness sets in, we shall not find it. This proverb is a re-echo of another prominent Igbo witticism, *e mee ngwangwa, e meghara odachi*, meaning that avoidance of delay is avoidance of accident or misfortune. Mgborogwu used these proverbs to remind his people of the need for appointing a successor to his throne before he died, having thought of the implications of failure to do that and in appropriate time too. The proverb, apart from providing a re-enforcement to Mgborogwu's speech to his kinsmen, helped to highlight the cultural significance of such meeting as well as evoking the solemn atmosphere demanded by such deliberations.

Also used on page 59 is another sound and original Igbo proverbs. It state: ... ? na-ab? ?k? k?wa mad? , mad? ibe ya ak?? ya, ma ? k?wa an??h'a, ? gachiwe ah? ya n'osisi.

Translation:

... when a man feels some itchings, his fellow man will scratch him, but if an animal feels some itchings, it goes to rub its body on a tree trunk.

This proverb is fundamentally rooted in the Igbo belief that everyman is his brother's keeper. When Omenuko started thinking seriously about reconciling with his home people, he needed somebody who would serve as a go – between. This role was played by Igwe, his friend. All the few, but carefully selected proverbs used in *Omen?k?* function the same way and it could be said that the uniqueness, solidity and beauty of the work owe a great deal to the images created in these few proverbs used in the work.

Similarly, only about three proverbs could be found in Bell - Gam's *IjeOdumodu Jere*. These proverbs were very strategically positioned and utilized for re-enforcement of discussions and for providing some cultural touch in the message. These proverbs are:

- a. Chi nyere nwamgbei ji awom ga-enyekwa ya mbaz? o ji egwuru ya (p.8).

Translation:

The God that lead an orphan into finding a yam (buried in the ground) will also provide him with a stick to dig it out.

- b. Ururu s?'kama isi ya ga-at? anw?r? ?k? , ka ikwukwe ?s? kwee ya'.

Translation:

The squirrel said, 'instead of allowing its head to be tainted in the fire smoke, it is better to run itself into dizziness'.

- c. Ana – eji umere mmad? mara agb?ru a m?r? ya.

Translation:

From someone's behaviour, you know the kindred/family into which he is born (or from which he has come).

These proverbs speak for themselves. Their terseness contributed to the pungency of the messages which are intended to convey.

Besides, it was observed that the writers of the two works in view preferred to retain the foreign or loan words used in them in their original English spellings. No attempt was made to Igbonize their spellings. For example, in *Omen?k?*, one can see: District Commissioners (p. 20), Warrant (p. 20), Monday (p. 21), Paymaster (p. 21), Chief (p. 23), Sir (p. 23) etc. Similarly, in *Ije Odumodu Jere*, one can find: Niger (p. 2), St. Helena (p. 3) etc.

In the case of tone, the story in *Omen?k?* was presented in soft and hard tones. While the story of Odumodu's civilizing mission to Finda and Mimba looked like a very big joke and it is possible that Bell-Gam adopted this strategy of inverting the actual roles in real situation in order to underscore some ironical effects that were intended to mock the White man's civilizing mission to Africa. On this score, Bell-Gam was innovative in his work.

Findings and Conclusion

From the analysis above, it could be seen that *Omen?k?* has a great

influence on *Ije Odumodu Jere*. The influence of Omenuko in the work is evidenced by the fact that there are common incidents in the plot and structuring of the two works especially as they affect the two main characters of the work – Omenuko and Odumodu. Both men were involved in dispute over succession in their lands of sojourn. The dying king in each case bequeathed his throne to these strangers. Both experienced loss in water – Odumodu in shipwreck and Omen?k? in a river when the bridge collapsed. They were both forced out of their lands of sojourn by circumstances beyond their control. They both experienced movement from one place to the other – Omenuko, from Nd?Mgb?r?gw? to ?kpa oyi and Odumodu from Finda to Mimba. But the circumstances that forced Omenuko out of his home land differ from that under which Odumodu left his home land, just as the condition in which the two men got back home varied – Omenuko went home with all his wealth, personal effects and family, but Odumodu went home virtually empty handed.

From the discussion above, it could be seen that the first two novels written in the Igbo language are unique, wonderful, well written and full of information and inspiration. Therefore, the study recommends that young writers, researchers and readers ought to study and appreciate these works so as to exploit the wealth of knowledge the authors presented in the works.

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