

Polygyny and conflict in Chukwuma Ibezute's *Dance of Horror*

Dr. Emmanuel Chibuzor Okereke*

University of Port Harcourt, East/West Road, PMB 5323 Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria
*Corresponding author: email address manmozo@yahoo.com, Telephone +234 803 771 9202.

Abstract

This article investigates Chukwuma Ibezute's portrayal of polygyny and conflict in Dance of Horror. The article first contends that the African writer as a member of his society deals with specific social issues of his times. The core argument in this article is that childlessness and son preference spark off the idea of embracing polygyny in the Nigerian traditional society. The article shows the conflict of birth details, wife characters, son characters, behavior, will, culture and choice of wife that emerge as a consequence of running a polygynous family. The article, however, recommends that a husband and wife should be patient with each other and should not allow the pressures of societal culture and tradition to lead them into making wrong decisions in marriage. In all, the article concludes that childlessness and son preference are responsible for polygyny, and polygyny generates conflict.

Keywords: Polygyny, conflict, childlessness, adopted son, biological son, family

Introduction

Chukwuma Ibezute of Nigeria is a novelist who has published thirteen novels between 1994 and 2013. These novels are: *Hamarian People's Revolution* (1994), *King of Alandu* (1995), *Victims of Betrayal* (1998), *The Temporary Gods* (1998), *The Triumph of the Just* (2002), *Goddess in the Cathedral* (2003), *Stain on a White Robe* (2004), *Dance of Horror* (2004) *Rake Rambling Lovers* (2005), *The Wisdom of the Chameleon* (2007) and *Tempters and Traitors* (2013). For the author, Ibezute, to have written these novels within a short space of time there must be something he is talking about his society to his people. However, critics of African literature appear to pay little or no critical attention to his writings. They do this not because he has not written enough but because of the questions of standard they concern themselves with. The recognition of sociological approach to the study of literature is reviled by the formalistic school and the new criticism of North America. In the view of the Formalists and the New Critics, art is independent and therefore, does not have any bond with society. This is evident in the study of Emmanuel Ngara's *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*. According to him, art is an "autonomous, closed structure unconnected to the real world around it" (Ngara, 1985, p.3). Whereas this is the stand of the Formalists, the literary sociologists' position is that literature and society are inseparable. While form and content can be distinct in theory, they cannot be delinked in practice.

Despite the sociologists' stance, critics still accuse the writer of not doing what he at no time contemplated to do and berate the writer likely of those features he tried to eschew. This paper contends that Ibezute's *Dance of Horror* (2004) deserves critical examination before a conclusion of whether or not the work is good could be drawn.

In the *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne Booth affirms that "the critic has no right to reject an author's subject" (Booth, 1983, p.43). This entails that the writer's subject and even his ideas deserve to be given attention. In addition to this, Wellek and Warren (1949, p.94) pinpoint the fact that, after all "majority of questions raised by literary study are, at least ultimately or by implication, social questions: questions of tradition and convention, norms and genres, symbols and myths". In effect, the writer as an integral part of his society, should exhibit knowledge of particular social situations. That is why

Chinua Achebe states that “an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant” (Achebe, 1981, p.78). Following Wellek and Warren, and Achebe, the writer is expected to use his work to reflect social realities, whether favourable or unfavourable, in order to foster an understanding and safeguard his society’s models and established ideals of life, or substitute them.

This article will look at Chukwuma Ibezute’s portrayal of polygyny and conflict in *Dance of Horror* (2004). The article will argue that childlessness and son preference aid polygyny, and when polygyny is set up conflict sets in.

Ibezute and Polygyny

Polygyny, a form of marriage wherein a husband marries more than one wife, is reflected in Ibezute’s *Dance of Horror*. This novel is a concise depiction of the theme of polygyny. It is a representation of polygynous families in Nigeria. It is set in the fictional Okuroda community of Odigan State, an allegorical representation of the eastern region of Nigeria, particularly the Igbo nation. In this novel polygyny is depicted as a marriage contract that is not worth entering, because it generates conflicts.

In *Dance of Horror*, Ibezute portrays a patriarchal African society where it is traditionally believed that considering a woman for marriage does not lie alone in the hands of the suitor but also in the hands of the family members and their kinsmen for approval; a society where women are marginalized and seen as reproductive machines as well as sexual gratifiers for men, or what Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* describes as “love babies” (p.53). In Ibezute’s novel, the type of wife a man marries determines whether or not his family will continue to exist. A woman who gives birth to females is considered to be erasing the husband’s family name whereas the one who gives birth to males is taken to be keeping the husband’s family name running.

In *Dance of Horror*, Ibezute seems to be of the view that childlessness and son preference in marriage are two of the factors responsible for the practice of polygyny in African traditional societies. In this novel the cause of childlessness in the family is neither the man nor the woman but there appears to be a supernatural involvement in it. Of course, in the novel, polygyny is not embraced intentionally. The behavior and actions of the husband character and the wife characters representing a polygynous family demonstrate this. The husband character, Okonem, a symbol of family disorder and African juju, whose first wife died after ten years of her marriage with him without a surviving child (she gave birth to two daughters who died a few years after their births) goes into polygyny because of his second wife’s childlessness. Out of culture harassment and, perhaps, psychological pressure he marries Victoria who is pregnant for another man. The reason for Okonem’s action is to ensure that he gets a male successor after his demise, because it is traditionally believed in Odigan state generally and Okuroda community particularly that the effacement of a family comes only when there is no son to succeed the father in the family. Though Victoria’s own community (Okonofa) culture prohibits parents from giving out a pregnant woman to another man who is not responsible for the pregnancy for marriage, there is nothing Victoria who sees herself as a “second-hand woman” (p.17) can do than to marry Okonem, the idolater. In this scene, Okonem’s acceptance of the second-hand woman (Victoria) as second wife is symptomatic of the enervation of his character. In addition, it shows to what extent a man is ready to go and adjust in the face of childlessness and ‘sonlessness’. In this instance it can easily be said that cultural and psychological pressures compel men and even women to go into a polygynous union.

Conflicts in *Dance of Horror*

Ibezute uses *Dance of Horror* to treat familial issues in modern Nigeria. In *Dance of Horror* conflict emanates from different birth circumstances of the main characters, Amaechina and Ahamefuna. In this novel, Victoria who is portrayed as a second wife as well as a second-hand woman (because she conceived out of wedlock) gives birth to Amaechina who becomes an adopted son to Okonem. However, seven years after Amaechina’s birth, the childless senior wife of Okonem gives birth to Okonem’s biological son, named Ahamefuna (p.12). In the novel, conflict between Victoria and the senior wife begins as soon as the senior wife is delivered of a baby boy. The emergence of this boy is seen as a threat to Victoria’s son’s position in Okonem’s family. Also, in the novel, the names given to Okonem’s adopted son and biological son reveal the dichromatic condition of Okonem’s family. For the adopted

son, his name Amaechina (an Igbo name) means 'the compound must not revert to bush', while for the biological son, his name Ahamefuna (an Igbo name) means 'my name should not be expunged'. In other words, for the Okonems of the novel's world, the name Ahamefuna symbolizes triumph and accomplishment. It also indicates family name continuity. The way Okonem's sons are named after their different birth circumstances gives a reason why Obiechina (1975), in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* cites E. Cassirer's words that "the name has an ontological significance in the thinking of traditional Africans. The name is the man and the man is the name" (p.82). The import of Cassirer's words is that as far as African naming culture is concerned, the personality of a man lies in his name. In this instance, Ahamefuna, signifying continuity of the family name, is preferentially treated. He is adorned and adored with Igbo-praise names as "Nwafor" (meaning, the legitimate child) and "Ezinwa" (p.39) (meaning, the good child). Adoring and adorning the boy, Ahamefuna, with praise-names here are invariably ways of ridiculing the adopted son and making him feel inferior, illegitimate and unacceptable by the family and the larger society. To show further that the personality of Ahamefuna lies in his name, Okonem explains why he names him Ahamefuna, thus:

By Ahamefuna, I mean that my name should not die nor be erased. When I say my name should not die nor be erased, I am not talking of Okonem – the present priest of Enumok and Enudo but the names of our ancestors who owned the land which we now farm on and earn our living from. They owned the trees which produce different fruits at their different seasons for our consumption. We owe our allegiance to those our ancestors from whom we inherited these things. We don't have to ignore them by dismissing the legacy bequeathed to us as worthless. It will have adverse consequences on us, especially anybody who championed the cause (Ibezute, 2004, p.21).

Even though Amaechina comes first to stop Okonem's compound from reverting to bush, the truth of the matter is that as long as Okuroda tradition is concerned, Ahamefuna, the biological son of Okonem, remains Okonem's successor irrespective of the fact that he is a younger brother to Amaechina. This shows that in most of African traditional societies an adopted son is not allowed to inherit the house of the adoptive father after his death if the adoptive parents later bear a son. The novel reveals that once the adoptive parents are blessed with their own biological son they pay much attention to him, which eventually creates uneasiness and fear in the mind of the mother of the adopted son and her son. Of course, in the novel there is presence of 'my-blood consciousness' in Okonem. This 'my-blood consciousness' (he is my offspring) makes Okonem sponsor Ahamefuna from primary school to university level. He sends him to Monrovia City University in Liberia where he studies International Relations up to a Master's degree. But for Amaechina, as long as he is not from Okonem's loins there are no "resources for his secondary education" (p.36). He schools to only primary six and ends up becoming a primary school teacher "in the village school run by the Catholic Mission" (p.12). However, through his self-help after a few years of teaching he acquires a "Teachers' Grade Two Certificate" and also "a diploma in Secretarial Studies" (p.34). The implication of this is that my-blood consciousness, aided by the culture of the land, creates room for unequal treatment. It endorses biological son preference and superiority. Hence the consequences are divisions, hatred and envy between brothers.

Ibezute (2004) uses analogy in order to give a clear picture of the conflict between Amaechina and Ahamefuna. The case of two brothers- the elder brother and the younger one- who disagree in the sharing of their father's property is similar with that of Amaechina and Ahamefuna. By virtue of what tradition and custom of the land offer the younger man is supposed to inherit the father's compound and lead and direct every affair in the family, but the elder brother, not minding the circumstances of his being, considers himself a senior and shares their father's belongings unequally:

The elder brother had claimed he had given him his due share, but the younger fellow dismissed his claims, saying that the elder brother allocated and gave him what he felt like giving him instead of the whole thing being shared according to their tradition and culture (Ibezute, 2004, p.135).

What is deduced from the above excerpt is that insincerity, greed and lawlessness characterize a polygynous home. While the elder brother disobeys the tradition and custom of the novel's world by not granting the younger one access to his traditional customary rite, right of inheritance, the younger one breaks the law of the land by first inviting the police and arresting his elder brother. The consequence of this is that when the police advise the two brothers to go and resolve their cases in their community it divided the community into two groups: A group for the elder brother and another for the younger

man. These divisions make the judgment of their cases to end in a deadlock, indicating unending conflicts.

However, in the case between Amaechina and Ahamefuna, Amaechina refuses to take his matter to his kinsmen because of their untrustworthiness. His kinsmen are seen as agents of confusion. He also rules out the idea of going to court to context the owner of the family house.

His fear was that Ahamefuna could use his influence and position to tower above him in the court, and might even go further to make a case that he Amaechina was not an offspring of Okonem...he thought it was wise to keep on using invisible means to undo Ahamefuna (Ibezute, 2004, p.136).

In *Dance of Horror* there is an insight into the obnoxious roles of wife characters in a polygynous home. There is conflict of senior wife against second wife. For instance, Ahamefuna's mother (senior wife) is portrayed as being querulous and as such threatens Victoria (the second wife) with Amaechina's birth detail. It is indicated in the novel that "about twice", while quarreling with Victoria, the second wife, the senior wife, Ahamefuna's mother, "who was a moron...had used a proverb to the effect that at the right time, they would determine who was who in the family of Okonem" (p.18). The implication of this proverbial statement is that a person's birth detail serves either as a means of oppression or as a vehicle of security of wives in a polygynous family. The proverbial statement of Ahamefuna's mother gives rise to Victoria's fear that her husband, Okonem, might one day betray her and her son. On this note, she poisons the mind of Amaechina against Ahamefuna by saying that: "Ahamefuna is not only strong-eyed, but exhibits cleverness and some gait of a flying fox". She goes further to tell Amaechina that with Ahamefuna "and his mother who is aware of everything, I am afraid of your future in this house" (p.12).

Victoria instills fear and hatred of Ahamefuna in Amaechina. Of course, she masterminds evil and leads her son into carrying it out against his half-brother. She further admonishes her son so: "You must get rid of him in any possible way that won't implicate you, if ever you and your children will live in this village and possess your rite of heritage (p.55).

From the foregoing, conflict does not just start in a polygynous home simply because it is a polygynous home, but it is also instigated by bad wives who battle over whose son is more superior to the other. It is important to point out that none of the bad wives or mothers lives to witness her desire for her own son. At Ahamefuna's ten years of age his mother dies, without seeing him grow and occupy and head Okonem's house and family. Victoria who plans to undo Ahamefuna dies too. And Ahamefuna fails to partake in her burial, which is a mark of disharmony among the family members.

There is viciousness of brother against brother in the novel. This is made manifest in the actions taken by Amaechina against Ahamefuna. He upholds and executes his mother's instructions by involving himself in occult and diabolic practices, which, according to the novel's narrator, are "the major sources of human conflicts, leading to endless rat race among men and women of the society" (p.85). He consults the native doctor at Okonofa (his maternal village) in order to make Ahamefuna go insane. He plans "to get rid of Ahamefuna first, and then his two male children" (p.97). For Ahamefuna's three daughters, he has nothing against them, because the patriarchal nature of Okuroda community does not permit female children to "have any say about inherited assets" (p.99). The inference here is that while sons are seen as the fulcrums on which the paternal family moves, daughters are seen as belonging only to their matrimonial home, hence treated as outsiders in their paternal home.

In the polygynous family of Okonem diabolic practice is the order of the day. Through diabolism a brother tries to render his brother useless. In this instance Amaechina makes sure that Ahamefuna does not have any savings. It is illustrated in the novel that Ahamefuna spends "the greater percentage of his earnings in spiritual homes, struggling and battling to live" (p.98). As if that is not enough, Amaechina also spiritually manipulates his brother and stops him from going to his father's house in the village:

Ahamefuna feared that the forces which could move a distance of hundred kilometers or more to attack him in Dokinab would be there in their plenty to lay their hands on him, should he volunteer to sleep in that house for even one night, what more living there (Ibezute,2004, p.98).

Though Amaechina uses diabolic means to retard Ahamefuna's progress, still Ahamefuna, due to his hard work and his faith in God, is promoted to the rank of Director General (DG) in the civil service. Because of Ahamefuna and his wife's successes, Amaechina tarnishes their image. He falsely propagates that Ahamefuna and his wife belong to a powerful secret cult. This is ironic, because in the novel

Amaechina is the one who uses his magical power to terrorize the people of Odigan state and Okuroda community in particular. For example, Amaechina, through charms, kills a young man who impregnates his daughter and refuses responsibility. One of the six youths who first attacks Amaechina because of his atrocious act against the irresponsible woman impregnator, also, does not survive. With his charms he kills him instantly.

Another example of viciousness of brother against brother is demonstrated in the story of two men borne of the same parents. While one has six sons and a daughter, the other has four daughters only. The father of six sons celebrates within himself how he would inherit his brother's land and property when he dies. Consequently, as his brother falls sick, he fails to take him to hospital for treatment. What transpires between these brothers is quite revealing. It reveals that a marriage that is not blessed with a son (or sons) is considered effaced as soon as the 'family man' dies. It also reveals that sons bring fortunes in the family whereas daughters do the opposite; sons are more regarded and recognized than daughters. It reveals not only that daughters have no rights of inheritance in their paternal home, but, also that selfishness and greed are reasons conflict refuses to cease in the family and in the nation.

In *Dance of Horror* conflict of character is highlighted. Here conflict of character denotes differences in behavior of individuals, especially those of the same household. In this novel, it is indicated that Amaechina takes after his own biological father's (the irresponsible laborer's) lecherous lifestyle. Amaechina's sexual imbalance is shown in his "running after the female teachers in the school which he headed" (p.58). Even his "attitude towards his female colleagues had been there long before he got married..." (p.61). He is described in the novel as a man of double standard before he reverts "to the worship and service of the gods which his ancestors worshipped" (p.89). However, conflict sets in as Okonem (his adoptive father) observes that Amaechina's character neither reflects his nor that of his lineage. In this instance he disapproves of Amaechina's character/behavior: "Each time he watched Amaechina behave in a manner which did not in any way relate to his character nor to the traits by which their lineage was known, Okonem would shake his head and bite his lips in disappointment" (p.19). Amaechina reads meaning into Okonem's mood and relates it to Victoria's premonition that he must fight Okonem's biological son, Ahamefuna, by all means so as to establish himself in Okonem's family. And he obliges to it.

Furthermore, there is conflict of will in the novel. This is made manifest in Okonem's will. It is pointed out that Okonem assembles his kinsmen and makes his will for his two sons known to them:

He told them that he had a few years earlier shown Amaechina where he would build his own house and live with his family. He went on, saying that the compound which he inherited from his father in which all his ancestors were buried should be the bona fide right of Ahamefuna. The question of farmland was simple. The younger man shared while the elder chose first... 'That's my will. Elders should understand my reasons for doing this' (Ibezute, 2004, pp.62-63).

From this passage cited above, one can easily say that Okonem recognizes Ahamefuna as his first son, and not Amaechina who is not his biological son, though born first. He does not openly or directly tell Amaechina his position in the family. Therefore, he ends up creating confusion and strife, instead of creating peace and harmony in his home. To further show that his will is not for peace and unity, when one of the elders asks him whether he has seen anybody who has done what he did, rather than responding to the elder's question, he warns the elder not to beat drums in celebration of his misfortune "on the issue of childbirth"(p.63). This reveals Okonem's reason for having a polygynous home.

In reading *Dance of Horror*, one will not lose sight of the fact that the theme of culture conflict is demonstrated. There is conflict between local (African) culture and foreign culture. Besides, there is inter-village culture clash. Every culture clash is played out in Okonem's polygynous family. One instance of conflict between local culture and foreign culture is seen in the different types of religion practiced in Okonem's family in particular and Okuroda village in general. From the onset Okonem is known for his belief in traditional gods. Thus he believes that his two sons, especially his biological son, Ahamefuna, will embrace the worship of Enumok and Enudo, the gods of Okuroda village. This is in his recognition of the fact that destiny, kismet or the supernatural determine a person's successes or failures in life. But unfortunately Ahamefuna (unlike Amaechina who resorts to the worship of traditional gods) betrays him by embracing Christianity instead. He bluntly refuses to identify himself with his father's idols. In this regard he jettisons his surname, Okonem, and goes by the foreign name,

Benson. This is captured in the following: "I have already cut off my links with the gods as I have earlier told you by answering Ahamefuna Benson" (p.36). He also shows his objection to the worship of idols by reciting the catechism of worshipping the gods of Okuroda to his father, thus:

It is foolishness to worship the gods
Because they are made by man
Talk, they do not talk
Laugh, or cry, they don't either
Walk, they don't walk
Run, they don't run
Body movement, they don't make
Intelligence, reasoning and wisdom, they have none
Et cetera, et cetera (Ibezute, 2004, p.36).

These poetic lines signify abandonment of African traditional religion. But despite the father-son religious differences, Okonem, due to 'my-blood consciousness' in him, still shows Ahamefuna love and care.

In the novel conflict of choice of wife is highlighted. For example, Ahamefuna refuses to go by his people's tradition of influencing a man's choice of wife. His father's hope that he will marry a woman whom he (Okonem) and his people will first endorse is dashed. Okonem rejects Ahamefuna's choice of Emylia as wife because he sees her as a city woman who wears trousers and who frequently titivates her face and who often speaks English other than her native language. Because of tribal sentiment- that his people dislike marrying a wife from Mkpononyo tribe where Emylia hails from, he also kicks against his choice of Emylia. This interference in one's choice of wife is rebutted by Amaechina who has been at loggerheads with Ahamefuna, thus:

My own wife is a native. You and your elders agreed and approved of her before our marriage. But today what is happening? Is everybody not in sympathy with me? All our people know her to be a hard woman (Ibezute, 2004, p.67).

From the foregoing, it can be said that Ibezute however seems to be of the opinion that men and women should be allowed to choose their life partners without any interference or indirect imposition. It is indicated in the novel that Ahamefuna went ahead and married Emylia. And unlike Amaechina's wife who is portrayed as a bad wife despite Okonem and his kinsmen's approval of her, Ahamefuna's wife, Emylia, even though she is not given any welcome, is portrayed as a good wife. She and her husband, Ahamefuna, are core example of a successful family throughout the episode. Ahamefuna and Emylia did not fall prey in the hands of Amaechina and his mother, Victoria, who were out to see that happen. Instead, Victoria, Amaechina and his wife died in their prime. It is ironical that Ahamefuna whom Amaechina fights to eliminate ends up becoming the person who finally buries him. The death of Amaechina marks triumph of the biological son over the adopted son in the family and in the society at large.

Conclusion

This study has contended and shown that the African writer as a member of his society deals with specific social issues of his times. With the study of the novel, *Dance of Horror*, attention is drawn to the topic of polygyny and conflict. Polygyny, as shown in the text discussed, is not embraced intentionally. Undoubtedly, cultural harassment and even psychological pressures compel men and women to go into a polygynous marriage. In effect, childlessness and son preference are two of the basic factors that spark off the idea of embracing polygyny in the Igbo traditional society. The study shows the conflicts of birth details, wife characters, son characters, behaviour, will, culture and choice of wife that emerge as a consequence of running a polygynous family. In addition, the study reveals that my-blood consciousness or the notion of the son not coming from the father's loins, apart from creating room for uneven distribution of the father's wealth between a biological son and an adopted son, it also gives room for hatred and envy between men of the same household.

In the discussion, it is demonstrated that trouble in polygynous family is not instigated by the husband character alone but also by his bad wives who battle over whose son should be the head of the family. From the fight for son superiority, it is revealed that birth detail serves either as a means of oppression or as a vehicle of security of men and women in the family and in the nation. In other words, on the one hand, it serves as a means of oppression of the adopted son and his mother whose stay in the family is shaky, and on the other hand, it serves as a vehicle of security of the biological son and his parents whose security and family name continuity are guaranteed.

While the study concludes that childlessness and 'son-less-ness' spark off the idea of polygyny, and polygyny generates crisis, the following lessons are learnt: Every man should depend on the Almighty God from whom a child comes, be it a boy or a girl; a husband and wife should exercise patient with each other and should not allow the pressures of societal culture and tradition to lead them into making wrong decisions in marriage. However, if a husband adopts a son that son should be treated fairly, no matter what happens.

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