THE SEMIOTICS OF DRESS IN ELECHI AMADI'S RURAL NOVELS

Obari Gomba[1*]

[1]University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria

*Corresponding Email: obarigomba@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Erekwi Clan features repeatedly in Elechi Amadi's writing. Of Amadi's four main works of fiction, three are set entirely in rural communities and they evoke deep cultural significations. The novels are The Concubine (1966), The Great Ponds (1969), and The Slave (1978). This paper examines how Amadi "casts" his characters in situations that reveal the significance of dresses and dressing in their lives. The paper examines the meanings that are embedded in the articles of clothing. To explicate the fashion signs in the texts, this paper rests its interpretation on the plinth of semiotics.

Keywords: Dress, Semiotics, Elechi Amadi, Nigerian Fiction

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the semiotics of clothes and clothing in three of Amadi's novels. While discussing the "cloth-signs" in the selected texts, the study aims to avoid esotericism, turgidity, and fixation on jargon: three pitfalls of modern theories. It understands that semiotics has been defined as "the science of signs" (Barry, 2000, p. 10), a simple definition that can raise convolutions that can keep us wrong-footed. This is because ever since the word "semiotics" gained prominence in literary discourse, the critical enterprise has unwittingly obfuscated it, rather than elucidated it. We can, however, turn to Abrams and Harpham (2012) for some clarity on semiotic poetics:

> […] a great diversity of human actions and productions – our bodily postures and gestures, the social rituals we perform, the kinds of clothes we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit, the objects we deal with – also convey common meanings to members who participate in a particular culture, and so can be analyzed as signs which function in diverse modes of signifying systems. (p. 358)

Meaning is inherent in all forms of human praxis. Life creates purveyors of meaning. For this study, the "semiotic concern" is to probe how things stand as signs of meaning, to discuss how messages are transmitted through – as Hawkes (1997) puts it – "the 'language' of gesture, posture, clothing, hairstyle, perfume, accent, social context etc over and above, under and beneath, even at cross-purposes with what words actually say" (p. 125). Note that Hawkes, like Abrams and Harpham, mentions clothing amongst other things. Although they all explain a semiotic perspective, the verity of their position is beyond any theoretical straight-jacket. Clothes are signs suffused with meanings - how we acquire them, how we use them, etc. These issues have a strong import in both life and literature. For example, Amadi's "rural novels"offer an exciting framework for discourse. The task is a modest one. It is to identify the "dress-highlights" as they occur at vital points in the novels. It is reading Amadi from the "angle of dress," in a very simple manner.

The term "Amadi's rural novels" refers, in this context, to the three novels without a tinge of urban life. They are The Concubine (1966), The Great Ponds (1969), and The Slave (1978). The novels are strong in their enunciation of non-urban Ikwerre society. Although Amadi's Estrangement (1986) also has its own "cloth-signs,"it does not fit into the paradigm of this study because it has urban elements. The "rural novels" depict characters and situations in rural Ikwerre society. They represent characters that live in a culture that places importance on clothing/dressing. Their possession and usage of clothes/dresses give the force of value to devotion and love, to anxious and critical moments, to loss and sorrow, to status and enhancement, to happiness and celebration, to conflict and/or war, to work, and to death.

The articles of dressing in the novels are wrappers, shirts, beads, amulets, spiral rings, etc. This paper will (a) simply examine how the uses of dressing feature in the important moments of some key characters in Amadi's rural novels; and (b) appraise the similarity of some "cloth-signs" in the novels.

The Semiotics of Dress in The Concubine

In *The Concubine*, the "angle of dress" marks all the key phases of Ihuoma's career. Ihuoma's devotion to her sick husband is, amongst other things, shown through the importance of dress. The narrator says: "She brought out a new wrapper, and cushioned his head" (p. 7). Ihuoma's action is significant. Her choice is not just any wrapper. It is a new wrapper, used as a sign of endearment. She could have used an old piece of cloth to cushion the head of her injured husband, but she is particular about her choice. She uses her wrapper to indicate the depth of her care for her husband. Her attention is total. She

is, therefore, glad that her efforts are not in vain. Thus, she uses her wrapper (weeks later) in another peculiar manner to enact her joy.

As Ihuoma's husband gets well, it becomes appropriate for her to cast off the shroud of fear, and she dances: "She clutched the free end of her wrapper with one hand and her waist vibrated rapidly" (p. 12). She is joyous because Emenike has recovered from the injuries he sustained in a fight with Madume. Her dance is not only graceful; it is artful. It is a show of finesse and gusto. Beyond Ihuoma's enjoy, the dance also makes a statement about her carriage: she believes in her ability as a good and spirited performer, and she employs a communal code in her dance ("she clutched the free end of her wrapper").

Ihuoma's joy is short-lived. Emenike falls ill again and dies of a heart attack. A year after Emenike's death, Ihuoma shows commitment to the second burial rites. She tells Nnadi: "you can be sure I shall spare no pains to bury my lord decently. I am even prepared to pawn my best wrappers, after all now that he is gone, for whom shall I dress? Whose admiration do I care for?" (p. 31). Clothes/wrappers occupy a high place in the worldview of the people. Therefore, Ihuoma's pledge is not a mere one. Some things are clear in her statement. If need be, she is willing to pawn her best wrappers to raise money for the rites. Her love and respect for her husband will make her stop at nothing to honour him. She says that the value she places on her wrappers is tied to her husband's admiration because a wife's fashion and glamour add to her spouse's prestige. She is, thus, willing to honour her dead spouse by pawning her best wrappers if necessary.

She has been clad in mourning clothes since the demise of her spouse. And she has worked very hard to make provision for her husband's second burial. She ensures that the rites are fully done. The narrator says: "The ceremony ended after eight days. Ihuoma was now expected to cast off her sackcloth and dress properly for the first time since her husband's death a year ago" (p. 34). Here, cultural propriety is at work. The timeline for the sackcloth is over. But the pain of bereavement cannot be removed as easily as sackcloth is removed.

Although she discards her sackcloth, her life remains altered. Even when her energy is restored by time, she lives primarily for the joy of her children. For instance, Ihuoma becomes absorbed by her interest in her child just when Ekwueme is arguing vehemently about the possibility of her dance in the Cloth House. The narrator says: "With the edge of her wrapper, she wiped the baby's sweating face and fondled her" (p.

81). Ekwueme, who has come as a subtle suitor, leaves because he understands the import of her action. The festivities of the Cloth House, as Ekwueme pushes it, would represent an opportunity for Ihuoma to make a new start and build a new amatory relationship that will erase the past. Her interest in her child(ren) is an extension of her interest in her late husband. By wiping the face of her child (with her wrapper) at that moment, she indicates that Ekwueme's advances have no hold on her.

After the death of Emenike, Madume renews his interest in Ihuoma. He suffers injury in the process, and Anyika attributes it to the spirits protecting Ihuoma. Sacrifices are done to ward off the spirits and protect Madume. He tells his wife; "I could almost feel the presence of the spirits around us. We had to run" (p. 67). Whereas he washes his hands and wipes them clean, to the extent that the wrapper functions as clothing as well as a hand-wipe, he is unable to stop his desire for Ihuoma. He only washes his hands and wipes them "with one corner of his wrapper" (p. 67). A few days later, Madume becomes foolhardy, and he fools around Ihuoma. He is blinded by a cobra. Gradually he begins to lose his mind, and he becomes a threat to his family. His wife, Wolu, decides to leave. But before she leaves her husband, she packs her valuable wrappers. And she ensures that her eldest daughter is well dressed. The narrator notes that "She collected some of her valuable wrappers and made them into a bundle. Then she beckoned quietly to her eldest daughter, and she whispered to her. Adanna went into the house, discarded her working wrapper and donned a better one" (p. 74). She is particular about her selection. She chooses what is important to her in her failing matrimony, what she cannot afford to leave behind. She is careful to dress her daughter to pretend that things are all right, to pretend that they are making a proper/orderly visit to their kinsmen. She and her daughter dress properly as they flee, and the manner of their clothing masks the crisis they are fleeing from. Except that she (the wife) returns the next day.

The next morning, Adiele sees "the bulky body of Madume swinging on a noose of his wrapper" (p. 76). Here, Madume uses his wrapper as an instrument of death. The wrapper that clothes his body, and wipes his hands, also becomes a noose. The tragic import of Madume's suicide reveals a bizarre dimension to the use of clothes. Of course, as earlier said, Wolu returns to mourn her husband, "clad in black wrapper" (p. 77) according to tradition. Ihuoma has been in this situation before. The sackcloth or black cloth is the cloth of sorrow and grief; its semiotics of bereavement occurs once again with a devastating tenor. It appears that as long as men continue to desire Ihuoma, in the novel, there will be recurring incidents of bereavement and sorrow amongst the people.

Ekwueme continues to “chase” Ihuoma after Madume’s death. He makes his love for Ihuoma known to his father (Wigwe) even though Ihuoma has refused to give in. On the day that Wigwe promises to see Ihuoma, Ekwueme becomes agitated. He decides to plead with Ihuoma before his father meets her: “He went back to his house, changed into his hunting wrapper, and made for Ihuoma’s farm” (p. 108). The hunting wrapper mentioned here is probably not the one torn by undergrowth some days back (p. 52). He changes his wrapper as an act of propriety – it will be improper for him to go tothe farm in his best wrapper. If he were visiting Ihuoma at home, he would have “tied a clean wrapper” and taken “some time”to comb “his hair” (p. 82). Lovebug has always driven Ekwueme to put up his best appearance when visiting Ihuoma, but the situation is different this time. Sadly, all his efforts fail. Ihuoma refuses to yield, even in the presence of his father. And Ekwueme becomes bound by his childhood betrothal to Ahurole.

As Ahurole prepares for marriage (to Ekwueme), her mother gives her a new wrapper (p. 96). And her father also buys a new wrapper for her (p. 90). Both gifts are intended to show her parents’ excitement about her prospects. So much attention is paid to her appearance by her parents. Thus, on the first visit of her suitor, the narrator says: “Her waist was heavily bedecked with large beads and a beautiful wrapper just failed to cover her knees. She also had beads at the knees and around her neck” (p. 119). The narrator also comments that with Ahurole’s “ojongo hair style and rare beads (Wonuma had sought the bottom of her chests) many a man envied the bridegroom” (p. 123). The objective is not to only beautify the bride; the bride’s family makes a status statement that has many implications. The family shows that their daughter is dear to them; that the family is not poor; that the family knows how to take care of its own; and that the family expects their daughter’s suitor to understand their daughter’s importance and treat her as such. The suitor’s company also pays particular attention to their own dresses on the occasion: “They were all neatly dressed in gay wrappers”(p. 123). Everyone in the suitor’s company adds to the suitor’s profile. It will be inappropriate for the suitor and his company to present themselves to their potential in-laws in a shabby manner. It will raise questions about the suitor’s capacity to provide for the bride/wife.

Soon after the pageantry of the marriage ceremony, the marriage proves to be full of bumps for Ekwueme and his wife. Ekwueme is often annoyed by his wife’s fits of crying: “his wife wiped one eye after the other with a corner of her wrapper”(p. 135). Ekwueme wonders why Ahurole is prone to crying even though she is neither hungry nor “lacking in wrappers”(p. 140). Ekwueme is upset because he believes that he has fulfilled his obligations to his wife. He has always provided food and clothing for his wife, and he

thus expects her to be happy. Neither food nor clothing could brighten his wife's emotional gloom. She soon ties up her "clothes into a bundle"(p. 143) and runs back to her parents in Omigwe. The pattern of her flight reminds one of Wolu's flight (earlier in the novel).

Like Wolu, Ekwueme's wife is careful to pack her clothes and flee with them. It is significant to note that when a woman packs her wrappers in that manner, she is ready to run from a matrimonial crisis. Like Wolu, Ekwueme's wife returns but she is unable to save her marriage. She returns but her relationship with Ekwueme does not improve. She attempts to make amends with the aid of a love potion. But her husband's health fails as a result: "Twice a day he bent over a pot full of boiling water and roots, covering himself up with wrapper" (p. 162). Some ailments are treated in that manner; it is a traditional remedy that involves a peculiar use of the wrapper. As Ekwueme's health worsens, she feels guilty and runs away once again. This time, too, her wrapper announces her flight: "Anyika thought it was a woman since it appearedto be dressed in a full wrapper. It was youthful judging from the pace. No woman would be about at such an hour unless she was running away" (p. 172). Her wrapper tells her gender and marital status.

Ihuoma takes centre stage as Ekwueme's health becomes the concern of the community. Ekwueme is brought home from the forest. The narrator notes: "His wrapper was in an even worse state. It was torn in several places and much stained" (p. 182). The state of his health is indicated by the state of his wrapper. He is completely unhinged, and his wrapper tells the story. As he begins to improve under the attention of Ihuoma and the medication of Anyika, his mother gives him "a clean wrapper" and he discards "the battered thing he had around him"(p. 186). This gift represents his mother's love and care; it also reveals that his health is improving.

Ekwueme's love for Ihuoma grows. But another problem ensues. Divination proves that Ihuoma is the wife of a river god, a sure femme fatale to her human lovers. Although Anyika advises that the Sea-King cannot be tamed, Agwoturumbe undertakes to tame the Sea-King. Agwoturumbe tells Ekwueme and his family that the Sea-king "is a dandy god and so [they] will all [have] to turn up in [their] best dresses"(p. 208) on the night of the sacrifice. Agwoturumbe believes that, besides the potency of his own spirituality, the people's clothing is a factor in the placation of a deity that is described as fashionable. To say that a vengeful deity can be "charmed" into kindness or forgiveness by the dresses of its suppliants is curious divination. The efficacy of the diviner's counsel is not proved because Ekwueme dies even before he or his people could appease "a dandy god" with a

human fashion statement. Death catches up with Ekwueme faster. And Omokachi is hit by another loss.

The Semiotics of Dress in The Great Ponds

Omokachi shares a common cultural backcloth with the communities in The Great Ponds. Like Omokachi, Chiolu and Aliakoro also belong to the Erekwi clan. As the novel opens, Chiolu and Aliakoro are on the verge of conflict because of fishing rights. The leader of Chiolu's expedition, Olumba, substitutes "a small black amulet" with a "bigger one"(p. 8). Amulets serve specific purposes. It is important that Olumba wears the one that suits his assignment. The narrator says:

> It was time to move. Olumba went into his room and strapped an amulet above the biceps muscles of his right arm. The charm was for fighting and it had cost him a lot of money. As they moved through the village, the other five men joined them. One look at Olumba, and the men realized they had a tough assignment. When Olumba wore that amulet round his upper arm, things were going to happen. (p.10)

Why is this amulet important? What makes Olumba's companions believe that things will happen because of the amulet? What indeed is the semiotics of the amulet? The narrator implies that Olumba's companions understand that things have happened on previous occasions when Olumba wore the amulet. Its worth (monetary cost) and significance (efficacy) are known to Olumba's companions because they understand the semiotics of the amulet. It provides spiritual fortification for its owner and its aura of protection impacts the psyche of others in the expedition. Olumba, as the leader of the team, is careful to use the amulet to a specific effect: to raise his own carriage and to also inspire confidence in his team as they go out to face danger. The expedition proves to be the beginning of fratricidal conflict.

On the first day of full hostilities, Wago the leopard-killer leads the warriors of Aliakoro to the disputed ponds. He comes fortified with an amulet: "He sat rigidly for some time and then proceeded to rub his head with an amulet he wore around his neck" (p. 33). Just like Olumba, Wago too fortifies himself with an amulet as he leads his people into conflict. Both sides really fight hard but Chiolu wins.

Chiolu plans a victory dance. It is an unusual dance. Dancers wear their battle dresses. It is a dance to celebrate the prowess of the warriors. Thus, the narrator describes the warriors: "The warriors were arriving one by one dressed as if for battle. The many tassels from their Ayori caps hung down to cover their faces almost completely, lending

them a mysterious and wicked look which frightened the women very much" (p. 44). The warriors stage a parade of might and valour. Their adornments are intentional; their fierce carriage is intentional. The more terrifying they appear, the more they demonstrate their capacity to protect their land. The women come out to watch the dance because it is celebratory, but they are frightened because they see (through the mien of the warriors) that war is a terrible affair.

Chiolu's victory dance turns out to be hasty. Aliakoro continues aggression with the aid of allies. The crisis escalates. At this point, the other communities in theErekwi clan decide to intervene. The members of the peace party under Elenduturn out in their "best wrappers"(p. 79). They are not dressed as warriors. This is to prove that though they are armed, they have not come to fight. They visit Aliakoro and Chiolu with the message of peace and they invite them to a peace summit in Isiali.

Eight days later, the Erekwi communities meet in Isiali to discuss and resolve the conflict. But it is their fashion that makes the loudest statement. The narrator observes:

> Curious crowds gathered near the large reception hall of Eze Iwai of Isiali staring at the visitors dressed as befitted their rank. It was difficult to imagine a more splendid display of costly clothing.Eze Wosu of Omokachi was perhaps the most richly dressed. The colours of his wrapper dazzled the eyes. One woman said: 'Eze Wosu's wrapper should provide enough bride price for four wives'. Massive rings of gold graced the Eze's ten fingers. His heavy flowing shirt with an inner lining of purple was made of that costly stuff known as Opukaba. It was a rare material found only in the treasure chests of those who had traded with the white men from across the roaring Abaji…. Eze Wosu's walking-stick was a real wonder. The gold head was so intricately worked that it defied description. The little boy who said the head resembled a vast collection of wrestling earthworms perhaps got farthest in describing it. Wosu's hat was tall and charcoal black. The eagle feather gracing it needed no explanation. (p. 83)

The narrator also observes that the warring Ezes, Eze Diali and Eze Okehi, are not as gorgeously dressed like the others. It will be bad judgment for them to be gorgeous when their communities are in crisis. However, each wears a "heavy ancient sword" as a sign of conflict. It is also a sign of their ancestral strength/might.

The Ezes of Erekwi are, however, meticulous in their handling of the crisis. Chiolu affirms its ownership of the Ponds of Wagaba and Olumba is forced to take an oath on behalf of his people. He is stripped to his loincloth as he swears before Ogbunabali. As the

narrator says: “Olumba stood before it naked but for a narrow strip of his loincloth. This was to make sure he carried no talismans or other charms that might fight the powers of the god” (p. 85). Why Olumba and not the Eze of Chiolu? Olumba is a communal hero on whose shoulders rest the victory of his people. Here, the leaders of Erekwi ensure that he swears an oath without any amulet or fortification. The leaders insist that Olumba should strip, to his loincloth, to protect the integrity of the oath and/or the arbitration.

After the orderly summit, they all leave the shrine. Everyone returns to his own homeafterward. It is revealed that the conferees have not travelled to Isiali in their ostentatious clothing. They have travelling clothes which they wear again, at the end of the summit. Their gorgeous attires are for ceremony. They are a people that dress to purpose. As the narrator says, “Their costly dresses were carefully folded and put into special caskets. Once in their travelling dresses, they headed for their various villages”(p. 86).

At this point, the focus ought to shift to Olumba who has to survive the oath to secure his people’s ownership of the ponds. But something else is in the air, and it soon shows it devastating force. Given that Olumba has sworn at the shrine of Ogbunabali, Wago the leopard-killer becomes bent on killing Olumba by all means, witchcraft inclusive. He reasons that if Olumba dies within the timeline of the oath, of whatever cause, Aliakoro will insist that Ogbunabali has killed him. But life has its own unpredictability: a terrible influenza epidemic hits the Erekwi clan, and it vitiates all the communities. The deaths that are caused by the disease reveal the place of clothing in the burial rites of the people.

The first death in Chiolu is Ihunda’s, Ochomma’s grandchild. “In the morning the corpse was washed, oiled and dressed for burial”(p. 150). Special attention is paid to the corpse before burial. It is not only cleaned; it is also dressed. A corpse does not go into the grave unwashed and undressed. It shows the respect the people have for their dead. In the belief system of these communities, birth and death are stages in a continuum that links the living and the dead. Thus, as Ihunda’s death shows, it is important to clean and clothe the dead for the next phase of existence. Ihunda’s death and burial trigger strange reactions from her grandmother. She foretells her own death, and she demands a good meal, a bath, and a new wrapper. The next morning, Ochomma (the oldest person in the village) is found dead. The strangeness of Ochomma’s action is not lost on her people. It is usual for bereaved persons to, in their grief, refuse food, bath, and new clothing. Ochomma does the opposite to the extent that she wills her own death into reality. Her funeral is different from her granddaughter’s. Her funeral is a

celebration. The narrator states: “Ochomma died very old. Usually, deaths like Ochomma’s were occasions for celebrations in the Erekwi clan. Apart from a few sensitive women and children, no one wept. Mourners… turned out in their best wrappers” (p. 151). The gorgeous wrappers are not worn to celebrate death, but to celebrate a life well-lived, a life of accomplishment and longevity.

More deaths follow Ochomma’s. Influenza is let loose among the people. But the people do not falter in their commitment to their dead relatives. They continue to “wash, dress and bury” their dead. They maintain their traditional burial rites, which may not have been safe, which may have exposed them more to the onslaught of the disease. In Chiolu, no home is spared the ravages of the influenza. Even Chiolu’s strong man, Olumba, falls ill. Only Wago of Aliakoro seems to be in a world of his own regardless of the many deaths around him. He continues his predatory moves:

> Suddenly a huge grey shape leaped out of a bush and made straight for Olumba. The man groaned as his assailant bore him to the ground. A few bounds brought Ikechi and the others to the spotted animal. ‘A leopard!’ Ikechi panted. He was afraid to use his matchet for fear of hurting Olumba whose body was entwined with that of the beast. With a terrible burst of energy and mad fury, Ikechi fell on the confused heap on the ground and held the neck of the animal in a vice-like grip. Meanwhile, Eziho and the other man sorted out the hind legs of the animal. There was a shriek as Eziho’s matchet found its mark. The animal relaxed its hold on Olumba and began to struggle free. Eziho’s matchet sank home for the second time. Mad with pain, the beast wrenched itself free and disappeared with two bounds leaving its skin behind. Ikechi stared at the magnificent leopard skin in his hand. (p. 189)

The “leopard” turns out to be Wago disguised in leopard skin. His disguise is so perfect that the witnesses are unable to notice at first that he is human.

It is terrible that Wago, who is famous for being a hunter of leopards, transforms himself into one to pursue his base plan. The man who kills leopards deploys the image of a leopard as his subterfuge. His well-plotted offensive against Olumba and Chiolu is foiled by chance. Wago is severely injured. After all, the leopard skin is not impenetrable. Wago commits suicide afterwards in the area of the disputed ponds. He plans his suicide to achieve a purpose: to culturally pollute the area and render it unusable. Nevertheless, his death comes as a relief to the influenza-ravaged and war-weary communities of the Erekwi clan.

The Semiotics of Dress in The Slave

The Erekwi clan features once again in Amadi's *The Slave*. The main setting is Aliji, although Isiali also has a serious significance. Olumati is the central character,but Enaa is the centre of attraction. When Olumati meets Enaa, he is convinced that her parents are "rich judging from the many coral beads hugging her waist, and the costly knee-length wrapper which just failed to cover the beautiful tattoo marks" (p. 4).

As in the case of Ahurole in *The Concubine*, Enaa's parents dress her as a projection of the family's status. Enaa carries the image of her family with her. Her gorgeous appearance puts the community on notice that her family is wealthy and capable of taking good care of her. Her clothing is also aimed at would-be suitors who are expected to see that Enaa's family expects a man of industry and/or affluence who will not be miserly with their daughter. When a family lavishes money on its daughter, they cause her to become a subject of conversation and attraction in the community. Of course, Enaa is due for *mgbede*, a rite to announce her puberty and to rest her before marriage. As the narrator says, "Older women who had gone through the process gave her useful advice on how to grind chalk, camwood and yellow dye, how to ensure that the large spiral brass rings did not hurt her ankles" (p. 35).

The dressing for *mgbede* is peculiar. Enaa is "painted all over with chalk," and she wears "a lot of beads and the narrow strips of cloth covering her front and behind [are] hardly necessary"(p. 59). She is desired by many persons. Olumati, Aso, and others. Even Minikwe, the Eze of Aliji, desires to marry Enaa for his son, Nyeche. Though Aleruchi (Olumati's sister) confirms Enaa's love for Olumati, the latter is unable to make a formal proposal. Olumati complains that he does not have the money to buy "heaps of costly wrapper and other gifts"(p. 66) for Enaa. And Aso (Olumati's foremost rival) boasts he could readily buy wrappers (p. 106). Wrappers are gifts of choice in this culture. A man, like Aso, who can buy wrappers and other gifts for a bride, has a better prospect than a man who cannot buy them. The people of Aliji understand too well that a suitor should have the material wherewithal to take care of his bride/wife.

Enaa becomes more adorable in mgbede. She seems "to have put on more beads and corals" which cover "half her thighs," and a little strip of cloth "holds the beads in place" (p. 86). Nyeche, at a time, observes the "rings of indigo round her breast" which emphasize "their pointedness"(p. 87). And her eyelashes are also "done up in indigo" which brings out "the sparkle in her eyes"(p. 87). But life in mgbede is not always easy. The very marks of beauty may cause discomfort: "Enaa was adjusting the cloth pad at her ankles to ease the pressure of the spiral rings," says the narrator(p. 107). And

loneliness too is a problem. A girl in mgbede only gets the company that comes to her, not always the company she wants. She cannot visit friends or witness events in the community. Thus, Enaa misses the wrestling match between Olumati and Aso.

The match is more than just sport. It carries an age-long family feud alongside rivalry over Enaa's love. Olumati is the pre-match underdog, pitched against a proven champion:

> Aso's outfit was magnificent. He had a broad antelope skin with three rows of bells. Over his wrapper, he wore a beautiful piece of cloth with red tassels hanging all round the edges. Dominating all was a magnificent mane of a white and black ram. He did not plait his hair but he had coloured combs stuck into it. A powerful talisman graced his right biceps. With his beard shaven, he looked like a woman at first glance. (p. 124)

On the surface, Aso portrays grandeur and accomplishment. He is careful to fortify himself with an appropriate talisman which adds to his confidence (even haughtiness). Contrast the elaborate picture of Aso with Olumati's poor adornment. The narrator notes that: "He was simply dressed in a wrapper and a coloured scarf to secure it. He had no beads or any decorations, much against his sister's wishes" (pp. 124-5). The appearance of both men is the story of two families: one is affluent and loves to flaunt it, the other is constantly pitched against odds. The scions of both families are locked in a contest that has the burden of history.

Olumati defeats Aso in the match. Aso has a bad fall and is deformed for all his "drama" and arrogance. This becomes a major lift for Olumati's profile. But he does not count on it to woo Enaa. Rather, he is driven by communal pride to wrestle Abaji the following year. The narrator describes Abaji as "gorgeously dressed and glistening in the evening sun…scarcely [looking] human"(p. 172, interpolation mine). Olumati goes, in a mourning dress, to meet Abaji. Compared to his previous match with Aso, Olumati is in a worse condition at this point. He is bereaved, broken and unfit for a contest. His attire indicates his poor state. The umpires, for propriety's sake, will not allow him to wrestle in his mourning cloth but they are unable to save him from his hubris. As the referees refuse him, and Abaji mocks him, he simply runs "mad." He runs home to wear his wrestling dress only to lose the match (and the profile he has got from beating Aso).

However, Olumati tries to put forth a serious appearance at Enaa's mgbede outing ceremony. He buys her "two good pieces of cloth" from the famous "waterside market of Chiolu" (p. 179). He buys some for himself too. He knows he has "to be well-dressed

for the occasion" (p. 179) as he knows he has to present gifts to Enaa who has been fond of him.

Enaa's outing proves to be exciting. But what stuns Olumati is not the elaborate beads and corals of Enaa, not the splendid dresses of the girls, not the grandeur of the Cloth House with its many costly wrappers. What stuns him is Wizo the Carver, his friend. Wizo is sitting in the fourth booth with relations and friends. Wizo is well-dressed in "a costly wrapper" and "a large shirt with buttons made of coral"(p. 180). Wizo's attire makes Olumati feel inferior. Wizo presents "no less than seven expensive pieces of cloth and a huge red coral" to Enaa(p. 181). Wizo receives deafening applause for his gifts. Wizo is Enaa's favoured suitor.

Wizo demonstrates his readiness and capacity by his adornment and by the quality and quantity of wrappers he presents to Enaa. His fashion statement and the gaiety or energy around him reveal that he is the preferred man. The narrator calls attention to the nature of their gifts: Olumati buys "two good pieces of cloth," and Wizo buys "no less than seven expensive pieces of cloth and a huge red coral." The person with a better material statement commands the applause of the community and positions himself in the reckoning of the people as a worthy suitor.
Olumati loses his bearing afterward. He leaves Aliji for the shrine of Amadioha in Isiali.

Conclusion

It is noticeable that there are similar dress-signs across the novels. In all three novels, the characters put clothes/dresses to use in ways that evoke a wide range of meanings, yet the signs overlap.

Clothing is primarily used for the concealment of nudity. The Erekwi society frowns upon indecent exposure. But other values have come to be associated with dressing. Bodily enhancement and status symbolism have become added values amongst several others. For instance, the women of the Erekwi clan wear beads to enhance/emphasize their waists. Nnenda is an example in *The Concubine* (p. 11). And Ahurole too. The narrator tells of Ahurole: "Tall and slim, she was always hoping to put on a little more flesh…. Her waist was heavily beaded. The beads made her hips and her behind a little fuller" (p. 95).

In *The Slave*, Enaa also seeks enhancement via clothing: "many coral beads hugging her waist, and the costly knee-length wrapper which just failed to cover the beautiful tattoo marks that were then in fashion"(p. 4). In fact, the entire *mgbede* programme is a process of enhancement for Enaa, a celebration of her maturity, a prelude to matrimony.

On the day of her outing, they dress “her hair in ojongo style and put on her many beads and corals”(p. 179).

The deployment of clothing as a fashion/status statement is not peculiar to women. Note the elaborate dressing of the Ezes at the peace summit in Isiali (*The Great Ponds*, p.83). The status symbolism of their clothing almost eclipses the significance of the summit. The obverse case is that of the two warring Ezes (Diali and Okehi): the conflict is marked on their dress style. Like Diali and Okehi, the conflict is also reflected on the clothing of the key warriors, Olumba and Wago, all through the novel. It begins with Olumba’s use of an amulet: a fusion of enhancement and fortification. It ends with Wago’s highly diabolical but “effective” leopard-disguise – a symbolism of terror.

The use of wrapper as a sign of devotion is evident in the novels. It has been noted that, in *The Concubine*, Ihuoma’s love and commitment to her sick husband can be deduced from how she uses her wrapper. She cushions Emenike’s head with a “new wrapper”(p. 7). And she is willing to “pawn [her] best wrappers”(p. 31) to fulfill Emenike’s second burial rites. Like Ihuoma, Nnadi’s love for Mgbachi is indicated with a “cloth-sign.” The narrator says: “Nnadi thought how lucky he was to have such a dutiful wife… he resolved to buy her a new wrapper”(p. 31). Ihuoma and Nnadi show devotion to their spouses through the use of the wrapper.

Parents also use the wrapper as a mark of love in *The Concubine*. Ahurole’s mother says to her: “I shall give you a new wrapper”(p. 96). And her father is very particular. He asks his wife: “Have you given Ahule the new wrapper I bought her?”(p. 99) Ahurole’s husband – Emenike - in his health crisis, also enjoys motherly love. “His mother gave him a clean wrapper” (p. 186).

As in *The Concubine*, the wrapper carries the index of love in *The Slave*. Enaa’s parents stop at nothing to make her mgbede successful. Olumati sees his inability to buy wrappers for Enaa as a major problem(p. 66). And Enaa also teases Aso on the same issue (p. 106). When Wizo the Carver wins Enaa’s hand, he presents “no less than seven expensive pieces of cloth and a huge red coral” to his bride(p. 181).

Besides being a show of love and commitment, Wizo’s gifts are marks of celebration and joy. Wrappers are engaged in diverse ways in moments of joy. Ihuoma (in The Concubine), for the joy of her husband’s momentary recovery, clutches “the free end of her wrapper” and dances (p. 12). Wakiri does the same thing in the same novel on page 45: “He got up and seizing one edge of his trailing wrapper danced very gracefully.” In

The Slave, a dancer makes an impression by "waving a flag consisting of a highly decorated wrapper tied to a bamboo pole"(p. 182). And Abaji's relatives throw wrappers on him on his victory over Olumati(p. 173).

Wigwe's party makes a happy statement with their "gay wrappers," on the day of Ekwueme's marriage, in The Concubine (p. 123). It is a gesture of support. It can be contrasted with the Okani family in *The Slave*. "Certain members of the Okani family dressed in new wrappers to market soon after Nyege's death" (p. 98). The Okanis celebrate the death of their perceived enemy with a dress-act to the displeasure of the community. The joy of the Okanis is a mark of their hatred for the deceased.

Joy and sorrow are two sides of a coin. A "dress-sign" can indicate sorrow as well. Ihuoma (pp. 34,36) and Wolu (p. 77) wear sackcloth as symbols of mourning in *The Concubine.* Olumati wears a sackcloth in *The Slave* (p. 173) to mourn the death of his sister. Ochomma's expression of sorrow is quite different in *The Great Ponds*. She takes a bath and wears a new wrapper(p. 150) on the death of her granddaughter. She prepares herself for her own death by that ironic gesture: "The next morning, Ochomma was dead," says the narrator. Ochomma dies of heartbreak, but she dies old. Mourners at her funeral "turned out in their best wrappers"(p. 151). It is customary in the Erekwi clan to mark the funeral of the aged in gay clothing. Ochomma is given a decent burial even in a time of war. Contrast this with Madume who deploys his wrapper to court death in an abominable way, and he is denied a decent burial, in *The Concubine*. He feels broken and dejected in the face of his travail. Sorrow drives him to hang himself with his own wrapper(p. 76). There is a frightening perspective in Madume's use of wrapper as an instrument of death. It shows to what extreme a "dress-sign" can go.

The range of "dress semiotics" in Amadi's novels is located in images and signs that are infinite to the extent of a reader's capability to interpret them.

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