



A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SUPERNATURAL SYMBOLISM IN MICHAEL IGWEBUIKE NWAESEI'S *THE TRAGEDY OF ADATA*.

Ben-Fred Ohia¹ and Ndubuisi Davidson Ogbuagu²

¹Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria.

Email: ben-fred.ohia@ust.edu.ng, benfredohia911@gmail.com; Tel.: +2347062947849

²Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria.

Email: ndubuisi.ogbuagu@ust.edu.ng; Tel.: +2348037421063

Cite this article:

Ben-Fred Ohia, Ndubuisi Davidson Ogbuagu (2026), A Semiotic Analysis of Supernatural Symbolism in Michael Igwebuike Nwaesei's *The Tragedy of Adata*. International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics 9(1), 13-20. DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-OLWFRMDA

Manuscript History

Received: 9 Feb 2026

Accepted: 11 Mar 2026

Published: 27 Mar 2026

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ABSTRACT: *Symbolism as a notion is essential for understanding how supernatural forces operate in the realm of literature as representations of broader cultural values, including ancestral power, moral authority and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. This paper explores symbolism as a metaphor in Michael Igwebuike Nwaesei's The Tragedy of Adata. It interrogates how the supernatural forces act as "potent symbols" that transcend their literal presence in Anioma community influencing the customs and culture and these affect individual lives such as that of Adata, the most beautiful girl in Anioma. Relying on Victor Turner's Theory of Symbolism which highlights the crucial roles of symbols, the paper explores and interrogates the embodiments of natural forces, showcasing the complexity of human existence and the world's mysteries. The paper concludes that through the symbol of the Tamanaka river goddess, the novel portrays a community in a web of bondage. And by examining the symbolism of supernatural forces in the novel, one can appreciate how the novel not only entertains but also educates, transmits cultural norms and strengthens social bonds, ultimately enriching the collective identity of the Anioma people.*

KEYWORDS: Symbolism, Metaphor, Supernatural Forces, African Literature, Social Bonds.



INTRODUCTION

There are many symbols in Michael Igwebuike Nwaesei's *The Tragedy of Adata* which include the following: the dark smoke/clouds, the white clothes, stained white clothe, the python, the tree, Tamanaka, stream, night, garden, staff, snake, and Adata. Symbols could be words, objects, signs, animals, trees, rivers and characters which are used in their representative capacity rather than what they seem to be. Since literature refracts, critiques, and constructs society, the custom and tradition of the people can actually be made known through signs and symbols in a literary piece. This also posits that there is inter-connectivity between man and his habitat.

Semiotic is arguably an area or aspect of linguistic or language analysis which deals with the study of signs, signalling systems and symbols and how they are used in effective communication. Signs and symbols remain linguistic systems that are used for information dissemination and assimilation as is evident in Nwaesei's *The Tragedy of Adata*.

Signs in the Novel

Of the symbols listed above, "staff", "night", "broken pot", "lightening and thunder", "the fall" and "the capsised basket" are all signs in *The Tragedy of Adata*. The author explains: "lightening, once again, broke the clouds into pieces. The next strike of thunder brought Adata back to reality. Daylight began to dim in her eyes, and thick clouds continued to form" (Nwaesei 5). This statement in the novel portends danger for Adata as "she tripped and fell down. Her basket capsised, and her clothes were thrown along the bush path" (Nwaesei 6). Nkechi, Adata's mother also received the sign of the danger faced by her daughter through a fall of which she broke her water pot. "Nkechi carried a water pot and headed towards the kitchen. Suddenly she tripped, fell, and her water pot broke into pieces" (Nwaesei 6). Nkechi's daughter, Udonwa left the kitchen area on hearing the fall, breakage and the scream of her mother ran to help her out of the ugly situation. This was a sign of the imminent danger in the family:

"Mama, sorry, what happened?" Udonwa asked. Udonwa tried to get her mother to stand up, but her mother knelt on one knee and called on her ancestors. She raised her hands towards the sky and begged for mercy for this strange fall. "What is this, my creator?" Nkechi asked. "What sign is this please? I am like a dog. I have no head to carry the load". (Nwaesei 6-7).

Another sign, is evident in the novel, is lightning and thunder at the Tamanaka River when Adata violated the village custom by visiting the river on a wrong day. The cloud was beautiful and bright with white and blue colours but turned dark with streaming. This signifies the presence of the goddess at the river. This is accompanied by a whistle of elation caused by the sudden clash of the river wind. All these are signs of loneliness, and this portends a great danger. "She stopped washing her clothes, looked around the stream, and soon became aware that she was being watched. She was no longer alone at the stream" (Nwaesei 4). This is also juxtaposed with the fall of the staff of the chief priest; it was such a strange experience the chief priest expresses arrogant pride of security in his staff. The staff is a symbol of authority, and the fall is a sign of evil omen in Anioma community. He speaks in the novel:

Your highness, something strange has been happening in my chambers lately. My staff, which is always kept at the top of my headrest, keeps falling to the ground; it happened twice



yesterday and once this morning as I was about to leave my chambers. I have tried to investigate the meaning of the sign, but nothing so far. I am worried because anything that concerns my staff is sacred and serious (Nwaesei 185).

As a symbol of authority, it is not normal for a staff to continually fall from the original position. It is believed in natural science that an object is at a position of rest until external force is applied. For the chief, the falling of the staff is not ordinary, it is an ominous sign.

The raving stream water is another sign. 'Our attention is drawn to the quotation: "the stream water revved up in anger, looking for the victim of its appetite" (Nwaesei 6). This is a sign of nature reacting because certain laws of the land have been violated it represents the anthropomorphic realization of the goddess's wrath. It is not normal for the stream to have a sudden increase in its current, but the goddess has to influence nature to signal the presence of an intruder. The chief priest, Nkechi and her daughter, Adata, through their actions, further prove to the readers that the message of the gods can actually be understood via environmental reactions the staff is an indexical sign of the Chief Priest's spiritual authority. When the staff falls, his spiritual hegemony is literally and symbolically destabilized.

The "long night" is a sign of abnormality. Night is a natural phenomenon, but it is no longer normal anytime it is described as being long. It could connote fear, discomfort, hunger, inability to sleep, and so on. The author uses "long night" to describe a scene that involved Adata and her husband, Udo the Prince of Anioma in their panicky mood during Adata's test of virginity. It is believed by Anioma people that the spirits of the land normally come out to carry out their own activities, especially at certain places that human beings are not allowed to go to on certain days. In addition, the cool breeze is a sign that announces the presence of the goddess of the land, who is in the form of a snake. This incident happened because the law of the land has been violated.

The question then is that of understanding the implication of the motivated nature of the sign for the synchronic view and, by implication, apprehending how that implication assures our understanding of the symbolism in *The Tragedy of Adata*. This varies with Saussurean arbitrariness as enunciated by Jonathan Culler. According to Jonathan Culler, "the fact that there is no natural link between signified and signifier implies that there is no essential unchangeable core in the sign. This makes it possible for any aspect of meaning or sound to change" (281). This lends credence to the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the signs of the supernatural forces in the novel. What this means is that since there is no natural core in the signs, the imminent alterations in the signifier occur in relation to other signifiers within a context. Udumukwu notes, "Because there is no national core that binds each user to an origin, he assimilates and appropriates his sense of the linguistic reality in order to produce new sets of meaning" (298). Paul Cabley and Liza Jansz refer to the synchronic view as the linguistic turn in which "experience and identity become discursive constructs and objectivity is evacuated in favour of exaggerated notions of performativity, fictionality, relativism, and intercommensurability" (36).

The word "sign" is 20th Century old French "signe", latin "signum". In the words of MacArthur, "a sign is something that conveys meaning, such as an object, token, mark, image, movement, gesture, sound, event, pattern, and the like" (855). It is clear that a sign is one of the task elements of semiotics. The three basic elements are the sign, object and interpreter. A sign or representation represents in the broadest possible sense of "represent".



It is something interpretable as saying something about something. It is not necessarily symbolic, linguistic or artificial. However, this paper adopts Peirce's model that allows for indexical signs – signs physically caused by their object (e.g., smoke is an index of fire; a falling staff is an index of a goddess's wrath).

Symbolism in the Novel

'A symbol is a sign that denotes its object solely by virtue of the fact that it will be interpreted to do so. The symbol consists of a natural or conventional or logical rule, norm, or habit – a habit that lacks (or has shed) dependence on the symbolic signs having a resemblance or real connection to the denoted object. A symbol is something that represents something else, such as a drawing of a heart pierced by an arrow (standing for romantic love)' (Atkin 2008. p.309). Symbols arise from association; in this instance, the heart has traumatically been regarded as the seat of emotion and especially of love (as opposed to the head, the seat of reason), while the arrow indicates being stricken or wounded (especially by cupid, the Roman God of love).

An object, concept or word which is not limited to a single meaning could be interpreted to be a symbol. Individual characters are symbolic in literature. Ohia (2023) speaks of Beatrice in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* as a symbol in this way:

"Beatrice symbolises the class of uneducated women who know their rights in society and thus cannot be used as a weapon. She does not see herself as being deficient in any way because of her sex" (p.37)

Symbol is one of the areas or aspects of semiotic studies or semiotics. On the other hand, it could be a literary device which uses words, people, marks, locations, abstract ideas, or concepts to represent something beyond the literal meaning. There is a symbiotic relationship between symbols, what they signify, mean or represent and the meaning which they convey to the communicators or interlocutors. When the sender and receiver understand the representation of symbols used to encode a particular message or information, then communication could be said to be effective. In contrast, when participants fail to understand the symbols as used, then there is a likelihood of an occurrence of miscommunication which engenders conflicts, rancour and suspicion.

This scenario played out in *The Tragedy of Adata* as the people of Anioma did not understand the signs and symbols put across by the gods of the land. This tends to create tremendous conflict and confusion in the land. According to Abrams and Harpham, "a symbol is anything which signifies something in this sense; words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies something or suggests a range of reference beyond itself" (p.320).

Within the realms of literature, three types of symbolism are identified as religious, romantic and emotional symbolism. Religious symbolism traces back to the earliest human civilisations; romantic symbolism has pervaded wide swathes of world literature. Worthy of note is the use of religious and emotional symbolism by Michael Igwebuike Nwaesei in his novel, *The Tragedy of Adata*. There is a combination of the divine/spiritual and physical signs and symbols in the novel, as there are elements of shrine, sacred tree, priest and gods.



In order to place some symbols in proper cultural contexts, this makes their meanings much more obvious and easy to comprehend. This, therefore, will reinforce meaning and facilitate effective communication between the participants in the communication value chain. Tchertov posits that “humans are special not only because they are closer in this sphere of signs and symbols but also because they are involved both in the semiosphere of culture and in the sphere of natural processes at the signal-index level of semiosis” (p.10)

The white clothes in *The Tragedy of Adata* are symbols of purity and innocence. The only way to prove that Adata has not been deflowered by any man is that the white clothes must be stained with blood after the first sexual intercourse. This was the case of Adata, as she stayed awake all through the night wondering what could have been responsible for her white clothes not being stained. The author captured it thus:

Udo sat on the edge of the bed allowing the women to do their traditional duties as they went straight for the white clothes on the bed. Omu's face tightened when she picked up the white clothes. She examined it and looked at Udo to confirm if they had copulated. Udo nodded.... there was no blood on the white clothes, which meant the obvious: Adata was not a virgin (Nwaesei, 122).

Adata's misfortune is attributed to the encounter she had with the snake (the goddess) at the stream; the goddess never wanted Adata to be the next queen of Anioma. Consequently, it began as an invisible force that made the white clothes not be stained with blood. The snake is a symbol of a bad omen in the life of Adata and is a clog in the wheel of her progress. “The cloud over the Anioma kingdom has taken a different shape. The first tragedy has just struck” (Nwaesei, 123). The cloud here is interpreted to mean the spiritual atmosphere of the land. At this point, the incident that happened between Adata and Udo has thrown the people of the land into confusion. There are mixed feelings as to whether or not Adata was a virgin. The news about the uncertainty of Adata's virginity spread abroad. It costs the Anioma people to wonder why the Prince will marry someone who is not a virgin. This is against the custom and tradition of the land.

At such a time when tension was very high in the community, the author takes us to another scene that describes the position of Udo. “Since Udo sat with his mother, Queen Agbonzele, in the garden, overlooking the kola nut plantation at the back of the palace. He stood his ground in the continuation of his marriage to Adata” (Nwaesei 46). A garden has its natural beauty and sight attraction. But the garden in the novel symbolises serenity, tranquility and comfort. It is a place of calm and comfort; it is also a place to escape from the worries of life. Prince Udo is normally around in this garden of the kola nut plantation. An average man usually finds a place and a time where he can think, especially when confronted with a challenge of life. Prince Udo sees that garden as a place where he cross-examines the examiners surrounding him and makes decisions. Recall that it was in the same garden that Prince Udo took a decision to continue with his marriage to Adata despite the controversies surrounding Adata's virginity. The white cloth is an indexical sign of virginity (blood indicates the physical act). The goddess intercepts this semiotic process, creating a “false sign” (a clean cloth despite actual virginity). This is semiotic warfare.

For the chief priest, the falling of the staff is not ordinary; it is a sign of danger. The staff itself symbolises authority. There must be something responsible for the fall. The incidence of the fall shows that the gods of the land are not happy. To the gods, the only way to prove



their anger is to make the staff of the chief priest fall. Having known the implication that the chief priest was left with no option than to offer sacrifices to the gods. The author in a separate manner recounts the terrible dream that Adata had. "In the dream, the snake that she saw at the river appears to her again. The snake began to pursue her. She ran and screamed for help. Due to her protruding stomach, she could not run quickly enough. In the dream, she suddenly ran into a web that held her hostage as the snake approached" (p.187). The snake is the symbol of the Tamanaka goddess and represents bondage to both Adata and Anioma kingdom. Recall that Adata was pregnant when the snake appeared to her. The snake as bondage brings fear, anywhere there is bondage, fear is inevitable. To prove that Adata is in bondage, the spirit of that snake makes her to be in constant fear but Adata did not disclose the encounter she had with the snake to anyone; neither the one at the river nor the one in the dream. The snake is no longer just a physical symbol; it becomes a psychological mechanism of "bondage" and terror.

Adata had received signs and symbols of death from the spirits. Her battle with the unseen forces seems to know no end. In the story, a day has been set aside to celebrate the new yam festival as the custom of Anioma demands. Adata was not interested to go for the occasion, but the continual insistence of her husband made her to accompany him to the occasion. As the occasion started, tragedy struck. The locally made gun flew off Nwafe's hand, exploded and the cannon headed straight to Adata and killed her. "The deadly cannon that came out of the local made gun headed straight in the direction of Princess Adata, who was walking elegantly through the crowd accompanied by her aides and sister as she waved to the crowd. ...Adata screamed and fell. She had been struck by the canon from the gun" (p.205).

Every effort to bring Adata back to life proved abortive. The tragedy that happened to Adata made people know that it is not ordinary given the circumstances that surround it. For instance, why didn't the gun explode before Adata gets to the scene? Why must the mistake that will cause the gun to explode occur when Adata is close to the gun? All these happened because there is an invisible force that is militating against Adata's destiny. This is similar to the fate of Emelike in Amadi's *The Concubine* who died from the arrow shot meant for a lizard to be used in cure.

To really prove that this spirit was out to destroy Adata, it never reveals to anybody the offence that Adata committed. The spirit waited until Adata was killed before certain revelations began to surface. First, it was revealed that Adata was a virgin even though she did not bleed during her first sexual intercourse with her husband. Second, it was revealed that Adata visited the stream in Anioma on a day that was forbidden for people to go to the stream. All these are medicines after death. The above discussion confirms the statement of Prince Udo thus: "remember you did not ask the gods the cause of lack of blood the first night; if you had done that, we could have known the anger of the gods, and Adata would have been saved" (Nwaesei 237). They weaponise semiotic ambiguity to maintain absolute power.

Anioma kingdom seems to be a place where no one dares to question tradition and custom. Everything is accepted the way it is. Something was responsible for this. The author reveals thus: "fear of the unknown was a major force in the Anioma culture and tradition. That was why the gods had serious supernatural powers in the land" (Nwaesei 174). The supernatural power mentioned above only becomes effective when there is fear. Anytime anyone can take a bold step to question certain things that happen in the land in the name of tradition and



custom, the people will be liberated. But the questions are who will bell the cat? Who will take the lead?

The reaction of Prince Udo after the chief priest has revealed what was responsible for Adata's death was commendable. "He went straight for a huge cutlass knife that hung above the king's head. He yanked it off its holder and smashed the symbol of the Tamanaka god that also hung above the king's head" (Nwaesei 263). Udo sees the Anioma kingdom as being in bondage. He also sees the symbol of the Tamanaka god as being responsible for the bondage that the people are into. In the novel, the Tamanaka goddess is a symbol of bondage. The destruction of the symbol of Tamanaka suggests the liberation of Anioma kingdom from the powers that kept the people in bondage. Although the action of Udo to destroy Tamanaka god's symbol was seen as strange, it marks the beginning of a new era where certain customs and traditions of a land or people must be abolished. In addition to the symbols in the novels, the use of signs, signalling systems and symbols as vital means of communication (non-verbal) are subsumed in semiotics.

CONCLUSION

Symbols abound in *The Tragedy of Adata* and some of the symbols are culture-bound. By this, the symbols derive their meaning based on the cultural tastes or dislikes of the people or ethnic group. For instance, the bird, "owl" is perceived to symbolise wisdom in Western culture. This meaning or interpretation is not the same when applied to African cultures of the world where the owl represents evil. The perception of the bird in Africa is different as it is perceived to be an evil omen. The bird "owl" is not conceived as a bird of wisdom as enunciated by the Western tradition. Within the African (Nigerian) context or landscape, as presented in many African cultures, it is an evil omen represented and presented in the psyche of most Africans.

In writing, symbolism or the use of symbols could add emotional resonance to a story, add imagery, that is, add a visual element to complex themes, connect themes, define characters and conceal darker meaning. When tied together, all these could enhance meaning and effective communication. The effective use of symbols (symbolism) when properly harnessed, used and understood is a means of enhancing effective communication. According to Okoh, "in effective communication, then, the message sent by the speaker or writer and received exactly by the audience, addressee or the one concerned with decoding such a message (9). Semiotic elements, which convey meanings and transmit information aid effective communication. The semiotic elements sign, object and their interpretant are wholly linked to symbols and symbolisms which are being explored in this work as a metaphor in Michael Igwebuike Nwaesei's *The Tragedy of Adata*.

In most cases, as applied in this novel under review, signs and symbols are used interchangeably. Semiotics includes the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, metonymy, symbolism, signification and communication. These are various ways in which semiotics could manifest in linguistic or language analysis and communication. Tchertov helped on the "sign mediation of Human Activity and makes a distinction between two dimensions related to the object referencing with the non-coincidence of two information flows in human activity that are formed in subject-object and



inter-subject relations” (p.29). Symbolic interactionism holds that every object and action has a symbolic meaning and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate their interpretation of these meanings to others. A lot of these characteristics played out in the different interpretations of the symbolic items in the Anioma kingdom in the universe of *The Tragedy of Adata*. The use of signs, signalling systems and symbols was a vital means of communication and interaction in the novel. The age-long practice of the virginity test and practice of worship of the river goddess and the marriage system in Anioma are all embedded in symbolism which pervades the entire chapters of the novel.

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