

Literature and Gender: Women as Victims of Tradition and Culture in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough*

ANGELA FOLAHAN EGELE

Abstract

Flora Nwapa writes about women and their concerns, within a traditional Igbo culture. As she explores and analyzes many of the characteristics of her tribal group, she posits the women's desires for change, choice, and acceptance within a society in which they wish to participate fully as human beings, not just in the roles traditionally allowed them-as wives and mothers. The women in Nwapa's novels speak to the needs of both collective and individual female identities within their culture. They seek love and respect from the community and acceptance of the choices they make. Therefore, this study examines the neglect, subjugation, and oppression suffered by African women because of barrenness in marriage, by considering Flora Nwapa's female characters in *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981). This study used qualitative research method. In depth characterization and plot analysis was used to explore the different messages the novels portray. As findings, this study reveals that women have the capacity to become architects of their own destinies, as well as blossom in society. In light of the findings, this study recommends that women should always speak out against oppression and unfair victimization. In conclusion, this study authenticates that the African woman is an individual in her own rights besides being a wife and mother.

Keywords: Culture, Barrenness, Choices, Oppression, Patriarchy.

Introduction

In Africa and elsewhere, most societies are patriarchal in essence and these societies are crippled by many impediments which contribute to their tragic underdevelopment. This situation has been a topical issue for the entire world since the end of the Second World War. It is a fact that from the family circle to the public sphere, women suffer many hardships, simply because they are considered inferior to men. Akoete Amouzou reiterates that: "In most traditions and especially in Africa, women are devalued and considered "second-class citizens" (3). Also, Simone de Beauvoir states that "women are constructed by men as passive and inconsequential

objects" (11). Similarly, Theodora Ezeigbo upholds that the oppression of women "has resulted in the perpetuation of female self-effacement and self-erasure, which have insidiously demeaned womanhood for a longtime" (26). Feminist writers have, over the years, portrayed patriarchy as the major and real source of female exploitation and subjugation, and have highlighted the concept in their creative works. Certain practices in the various cultural milieus, which not only demean women, but also debar them from having a say in the daily affairs of the society, are also exposed in several novels by African writers. To advance the above discourse, this study interrogates some oppressive forces that marginalize women in traditional African societies.

FloraNwapa

Florence NwanzuruahuNkiruNwapa was born on the 13th of January 1931. She is (in the literary tradition) a Nigerian author who has been called the mother of modern African literature. She was the forerunner to a generation of African women writers, and was also acknowledged as the first African woman novelist to be published in the English language. She achieved international recognition with her first novel, *Efuru* published in 1966. While never considering herself a feminist, she was best known for recreating life and traditions from an Igbo woman's viewpoint. Flora Nwapa made history as Nigeria's first published female novelist in English, with an impressive collection of novels, short stories, and books for children. Her most notable novels include: *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), and *One is Enough* (1981). She established her own publishing company, Flora Nwapa Books Ltd, and backed it up with a printing press, Tana Press Ltd, which was an act of great courage. She restored dignity to African women by her special mission in this publishing venture, because women writers in Africa were criticized and underestimated by critics and publishers. Nwapa who lived a fulfilled and eventful life, died on the 16th of October 1993.

Thematic Preoccupations of Flora Nwapa's Novels

Flora Nwapa is one, out of many female African authors, who succeeds in portraying women in the setting prescribed for them by tradition. She gives the picture of the roles the society has outlined for the feminine gender through the experiences of the female characters. Nwapa through her writings, exposes the life of the traditional African woman. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi identifies two main roles women play in society: "the role of the wife and the role of a mother" (26). Nwapa focuses on these roles by concentrating on the negative experiences of the patriarchal system. As

a woman, Nwapa writes from the point-of-view of women. Naturally, she has sympathy for women, because of the patriarchal tradition which has eaten deep into the traditional society. Her novels contain sociological information that gives her readers background information about long-standing traditional cultural habits that discriminate against women and makes them unappreciated and unloved. Nwapa focuses on things that really matter and stick to showing things realistically. Her novels are rooted in humanitarian themes exploring issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. Ernest Emenyonu states that "while trying to register her disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal system, she also reminds her readers that the social condition of a society or a nation could be appraised by the standing status of its women". (8).

Tradition and the African Woman

The main purpose of marriage in Africa is to bear children, to build a family and to propagate life. Through marriage and child rearing, the parents are remembered by their children when they die. Emenyonu says that, "a childless marriage is a source of disappointment and it is a major determinant of marital conflicts, broken homes, divorce, as well as an incentive for going into polygamy by the aggrieved husband" (16-17). Africans attach much importance to children and inheritance. The philosophy of marriage emphasizes procreation more than even the relationship between the couple. The woman is expected to bear children within the first two years of marriage. Ebele Okpala and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh state that "infertility in any African marriage is the woman's fault and the women themselves have been made to believe so even without any medical proof" (4). Ultimately, a childless mother is regarded as a failure. Similarly, Benjamin Spoke reaffirms that in most African societies "a woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God" (39). In addition, Buchi Emecheta posits that in Africa "A woman would be forgiven everything as long as she produced children" (28). Ideally, in a traditional African society, a barren woman is treated with disrespect and disdain. She is seen as a woman cursed of God, and indeed, as Florence Orabueze puts it that women are:

expected to give birth to children immediately after marriage, or marry another wife or wives for her husband. It is preferable that she does that because if she wastes time, two consequences may follow from that. He may either marry another woman with or without her consent or get a concubine who will bear children for him, he has to take one of these measures to restore his ego and prove his manhood. (144)

Apart from this, many unsavoury names like "he-woman, evil woman and witch are

attached to a barren woman" (107). Thousands of innocent women are tagged barren in Africa, without medical proof.

The Theme of Childlessness in *Efuru*

Efuru focuses on the life of an Igbo woman, living in Eastern Nigeria in the early twentieth century, whose name also serves as the title of the novel. Exceptionally beautiful, intelligent, generous, hardworking, and possessing a knack for effortlessly making money, *Efuru* is a woman envied and admired by both women and men. Nevertheless, the background of *Efuru* is set at a time when high premium was placed on child-bearing. The heroine (*Efuru*) is tagged a failure because she is barren. In Africa, a marriage cannot sail smoothly without children to show for it; that is why childlessness is the most intimidating problem a married woman can face. That is why *Efuru*, the protagonist is sad:

Efuru went home that night with a heavy heart. It was not the thought of a second wife for Gilbert that made her heart so heavy. It was the fact that she was considered barren. It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure. (165)

The above shows the great premium that the society puts on childbearing. For example, *Efuru*'s friends ask her rhetorically: "What is money? Can a bag of money go for an errand for you? Can a bag of money look after you in your old age? Can a bag of money mourn when you are dead?" (37). Throughout her struggles, *Efuru* lives up to her reputation as an extraordinary woman. She refuses to sink into bitterness, rarely shows anger, and remains incredibly generous with friends and neighbours, her inlaws, and those who are dependent upon her for financial, emotional, and material support.

Obligatory motherhood is the downfall for *Efuru*, based on cultural concepts. Her traditional community expects and demands that she becomes a mother. Approximately two years after her marriage to Adizua, she is concerned about her state; she says to herself, "I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood" (24). Interestingly, *Efuru*, who has ignored courtship and marital traditions, by paying her own bride price, and arranging her own marriage, shows concern to obey cultural traditions about motherhood. This portrayal of *Efuru* sets the stage for subsequent developments in her life. She has difficulty conceiving, and then, when success comes on the heels of consulting a diviner/herbalist, her first husband leaves her to live with another woman, and then her child dies after less than

two years of life. The family makes preparations for Ogonim's burial, but Adizua fails to attend his daughter's funeral. According to Efuru, the death of her daughter is a sure indicator that her marriage to Adizua is over; there is no bond between them.

After waiting more than the accepted period of time to move on with her life, Efuru marries again, but this marriage too is plagued by childlessness. Women in the community express their feelings because Efuru and Gilbert are happy but Efuru is not pregnant. They exclaim, "We are not going to eat happy marriage, marriage must be fruitful" (137). Recognizing that her husband would want children, she willingly accepts into her household a son her husband had borne with another woman in a different village. She also accepts a young woman as her co-wife, and when this marriage fails, she arranges for her husband to take a third woman in marriage. Despite Efuru's sacrifices, her second marriage collapses. These acts of selflessness and magnanimity, however, do not prevent Efuru from suffering the effects of childlessness in a society that believes that children are more valuable than the marriage institution itself. Efuru laments: "I have ended where I began in my father's house. The difference is that now my father is dead" (220). The disappointments and pain of Efuru's life continue as her father dies, and Gilbert (her second husband) does not attend the funeral, just as Efuru's first husband did not attend the funeral of their daughter. Messages are sent to Gilbert, but he does not show up for the burial. More than a month passes and there is still no message from him. It is considered a sign of "disgrace" and Efuru thinks of killing herself (204). Efuru confides in Ajanupu without any medical examination, she concludes "I want my husband to have children, I am barren" (180). Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Awowa in Arna Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Agnes in Nwapa's *This is Lagos and Other Stories*, Ije in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, amongst others, are victims of childlessness. Ifeoma Okoye calls for re-examination of the female image, suggesting that the man could also be the guilty party in a childless marriage. In her novel, *Behind the Clouds*, she portrays the traditional attitudes to childlessness in African marriages and exposes the implication. For example, Beatrice, Ije's old school friend slept with a false prophet (Apostle Joseph) according to her:

My infidelity has saved my marriage for my husband was on the verge of sending me away and taking a new wife. If my marriage breaks down now at least I have a child who will look after me in old age. A childless woman in our society does not realize the extent of her handicap until she grows old. (61-62)

Due to estrangement from the society, infidelity which is debasing, which desecrates the sanctity of marriage, which cannot be condoned, no matter the degree on which it

is exercised; is boldly depicted as a virtue and a saviour of marriage. In Africa, women do unimaginable things in marriage just to have children of their own, because tradition and society have no place for barren women. Similarly, Agnes in Flora Nwapa's *This is Lagos and Other Stories*, driven to desperation, becomes a child thief. In order to keep her marriage, she employs all kinds of deceit and finally resorts to stealing a baby from the hospital. In the same vein, Emenyonu, laments:

Speak me to all barren women, she admonished as I strained my ears to hear her faint and dwindling voice. Speak me to all mothers who have only one child in a land and among a people where the value of a woman depends upon her capacity to fill her husband's house with children. Speak me to all who have a daughter as an only child speak me to all women who forfeited the love and respect of their husbands because they could not fill the dreams of multiple sons to inherit the men when they have joined the ancestors. (1)

The agony and desperation of a childless woman knows no bounds in the African society.

Resilience and Self-actualization in *One is Enough*

As in Nwapa's previous novel, *Efuru*, marriage and children are at the center of the conflicts, but the outcomes are quite different and revealing in *One is Enough*. The major character, Amaka, is a new, self-styled woman who quickly and easily negotiates a lifestyle that suits her. Amaka is presented as a caring, thoughtful, ambitious, and determined young woman who, at sixteen, wants to be married and is "going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and desire and cherish, and children to crown the marriage" (1). After several relationships, courtships, and disappointments, she eventually meets Obiora when he transfers home from the North to work as an Executive Officer in one of the Ministries. He is described as "quiet and gentle" (12). Obiora makes the proper preparations with Amaka's family and his family. The two marry in a church after a six-month courtship and after completing the traditional ceremonies. Now Amaka has achieved one of her two major goals, to get married. Thus, becoming a mother was next on her agenda.

Six years later Amaka and Obiora still do not have children, and conflict emerges—a clash of traditional values and contemporary values about motherhood. Motherhood is one of the most important issues in the novel. Because of the influence of Christianity and education on the younger generation, several views of motherhood emerge, and they do not agree. Amaka listens to and evaluates many points of view about motherhood. In school, "the good missionaries had emphasized

chastity, marriage, and the home. On the other side, her mother tells her to go ahead and have male friends who could help her get pregnant. Her mother states, "your children will take care of you in your old age. You will be very lonely then if you don't have children. As a mother, you are fulfilled" (11). It is evident that Amaka and her mother have different ideas about how to live life, and it is clear that Western education has complicated the situation for Amaka. In addition, the views of Amaka's aunt about motherhood are similar to her mother's. She tells Amaka that marriage is not as important as children, "A marriage is no marriage without children. Have your children, be able to look after them, and you will be respected" (8). Here the emphasis is on children, motherhood and respect, with motherhood being the ultimate goal. Amaka's aunt sees marriage as mostly an avenue for producing children. She explains that she did not like her husband when she married him, but had seven children by him and then decided she did not want to sleep with him anymore. She had accomplished her mission, motherhood. She then finds a second wife for her husband and focuses on her business. Amaka's relationship with her husband disintegrates, and she leaves the marital home after discovering Obiora's infidelity, fatherhood, and secret (second) marriage. To complicate matters, Obiora's mother insists "Obiora must have an heir because all his brothers and sisters have an heir" (12). As a result, rather than staying with her unfaithful husband, she leaves him for Lagos and starts a new life.

Amaka's search for self-fulfillment continues after she leaves Obiora and moves to Lagos. While Amaka is adjusting to life in Lagos, she meets Father McLaid, a priest, and develops an intimate relationship with him, and the relationship produces twin boys. She is quite surprised to learn that she is pregnant because she thought she was barren; however, she is very happy. Amaka finds her sense of independence and self-worth as a woman in Lagos. She becomes a contractor, and through these contracts, she is able to become financially secure and rents her own apartment, buy a car, build a house in her hometown, and divorce her husband legally and traditionally. These steps represent freedom and opportunities for Amaka. Further, her freedom to live the single life allows her the opportunity to date Father McLaid, who unwittingly helps Amaka to achieve her most desired goal-motherhood. Ultimately, Amaka breaks the barriers of culture and religion for the sole reason of realizing her person and motive. Amaka also decides she does not want to, and will not, marry Father McLaid just because she has children by him, even though he wants to marry her to save his moral reputation with the public. Amaka's words express her freedom:

As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost

impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me..... No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos. (127)

Mary Mears says that "Self-preservation and identity are the key factors in Amaka's decision to remain a single mother" (80). Her difficult journey from a single woman to a married, childless woman, to an unmarried mother who is a successful businesswoman, shows that a woman can achieve her goals and find personal happiness within society. She represents independence for women within an evolving post-colonial society.

Conclusion

Flora Nwapa projects the image of a "new African woman", in *Efuru* and *One is Enough*. The protagonists in both novels rebel against the established traditional norms, heralding the dawn of female emancipation. Her first heroic female character, Efuru, is a daring, defiant, self-reliant and self-assertive woman, possessing a high level of intelligence, competence, and integrity of character. She is an embodiment of every feminine virtue and grace. In spite of her tedious sufferings, her will and determination are unbroken. She is an icon of the new and awakened African woman. Nwapa portrays the triumph of Efuru as a worshipper of Uhamiri, the lake goddess. Hence, the narrative can be marked as the tragedy and triumph of a 'New African Woman'. Similarly, *One is Enough* manifests the womanist consciousness in the unraveling of the protagonist. She presents her as a strong and individualized woman who emerges successfully from all the burdens of tradition and culture. Nwapa portrays her heroine as decisive in stepping beyond the institution of marriage when it proves to be an insurmountable barrier to her self-actualization. Through her, Nwapa refutes the erroneous belief that a woman is nothing without a husband.

Various forms of traditional beliefs and customs are practised in Africa. Most of these customs and traditions control and suffocate women. These traditional beliefs subject women to different forms of oppression and suppression. The supremacy of motherhood over the sacredness and joy of marriage, has really impacted negatively in the lives of barren women in Africa. In this time and age, Africans must re-evaluate and eradicate these customs that oppress women. If this is done, Africa will pave way for inclusive development and national harmony.

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