



Pursuit of Individuality in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract:

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is a perfect reflection of the values of the Igbo society that is made in accordance to the man's pleasure and happiness. The privileges of African men have resulted in erasure of identities and subjectivity of women. African women writers have used rhetorical and performative techniques to recreate the cultural oblivion in an effort to correct the injustice and assert their individuality. But throughout the process, a number of cultural norms, such as their maternal roles, serve as constant roadblocks to force them back into their expected positions as inferior beings. As a result, in the narratives of both the racial colonialists and the early male-authored African literature, African women were seen through a bio-essential lens. The women writers of Africa have comprehensively addressed this rooted construction that subordinates and marginalises black women by illustrating empowered black women who reject and challenge the chauvinist gender stereotypes and social roles established by the patriarchal society modelled after the colonising culture.

Key Words: Individuality, Identity, gender stereotype, patriarchy

The study of women in general, and African women in particular, has made numerous and varied contributions to our understanding of African reality. It has shown the significance of women, not just as passive breeders but also as economic actors, creative forces behind new ideas, and allies in the fight against injustice. The fundamental techniques of feminist literary criticism argue that historically, women were portrayed in literature as objects perceived from a male perspective, challenging the male-centric viewpoint of authors. Therefore, gender norms in society that value males more than females and disregard women's experiences are to blame for women's inferior status to men. Flora Nwapa presents a picturesque of African Igbo society which has traits of anti-feminism.

To begin with, women are given a lower status. A woman at the funeral of Efuru's daughter is not as sad as she would have been had this been a boy's funeral. 'A girl is something, though we would have preferred a boy,' she weeps (p.87). Their preference is clear when they thank Nwosu by wishing that his wife should give birth to a baby boy. Society essentially recreates a woman's physical attributes to suit a man's taste and sexual vulnerability Efuru undergoes clitoridectomy, which is described in the novel as having a "bath." The assumption that it will increase childbearing is the apparent justification for this inhumane procedure. The society discussed in the novel clearly knows that circumcision increases man's coital ability and clitoridectomy reduces female sexuality. The patriarchal tendency to denigrate the woman in order to justifiably dominate and recreate her in accordance with men's taste is encapsulated in the use of the metaphor "having a bath" for the ritual "castration" of the woman. In any case, she is 'washed' to make her more 'appealing to men's eyes'.

As for marriage, the woman has no right that the patriarchy must respect. As soon as she's paid the bride price, she becomes her husband's property. Even if she is physically, mentally, and morally stronger than her husband, whatever physical or mental strength lies within her, she must be submissive to her husband.

The novels are filled with traits of rebellion against the status quo. There are many characteristics of rebellion against the established norms in these novels. They feature the quest of women for selfhood almost as much as they celebrate the supremacy of men in a patriarchy.

In Efuru, where women's yearning for selfhood is more visible, rebellious traits are even more deeply ingrained. In front of her husband, when he doubts, a lady confesses that the kid she is carrying is not his and she intended to give the child to the real father when it was an adult. The response of a woman who hears about this statement reveals the utterance's shattering impact on the patriarchal system: 'This is an abomination. What is wrong with these children nowadays' (p. 64). Nwabata makes fun of the idea of male domination and the associated macho valour in the robbery story involving her and her husband by describing how Nwosu slept soundly as burglars plundered their home. She concludes with a biting sarcasm:

"It was then that my lord and master came out with his knife. Kill me, I said to him. I am the thief. He fooled around and went and sat down outside the gate. That's the man who is my husband. Women are nothing. He, my husband, was asleep when thieves came to the house. But I am only a woman. What can a woman do?" (p. 224)

The hurtful words "Women are nothing, I am only a woman.", are even more mocking because Nwabata, not her husband, is the one who keeps the most valuable item in their home—the money they have borrowed from Efuru. In fact, she does it against her husband's wishes because he gripes about how annoying women are which Nwabata tells, 'nearly lost his temper for I disturbed his sleep.' (p.224)

Men are blamed to get girls pregnant but at the same time it is concluded that its women's sexual appetite that let it happen. As a result, girls are seen as unworthy of getting educated. Men are merely called irresponsible. Adizua and Gillbert both deserts Efuru at a juncture of life when she believes that she has discovered herself. But she is not like Adizua's conservative mother who waits for her playboy husband. She gives time to Adizua and Gillbert and then quits.

Efuru is a non-conformist from beginning. She is a beautiful daughter of a rich father but she marries a poor man who cannot even pay the very important- 'bride price'. Later she never asks her husband to pay it but earns it and pays it on her own. Before her marriage she enjoys late hours against her father's wish and after marriage when she was asked to follow her husband to the farm, she denies it. She loves trading and does it with passion. She does not even follow the 'bath ceremony' for months as instructed by her mother-in-law, keeping aside the thought of 'what people would say'. Her thirst for independence and selfhood is clear in her actions. She stands strong against Adizua's uncle's contention that a woman cannot make any decision and influence actions by men even if those men were her sons (p, 21). The desire for freedom is further enhanced by the stature of Uhamiri, the woman of lake.

Probably it is the place where Efuru found solace even after people's continuous taunt of worshipping Uhamiri never bless anyone with a son. That probably gave Efuru a satisfaction as Uhamiri blesses woman with beauty and wealth and she does not use it to seduce any man to get a son. She keeps it as her own thing. It must have given her a sense of individuality and freedom.

Flora Nwapa thus creates a rebellious woman through her character Efuru. Who does not submit to the norms of society but keeps her point firmly. Her life although is affected by patriarchy but she does not give up on her pursuit of individuality, throughout the novel. Her character may help in enlightening others and bring about the required change in the Igbo society that Nwapa presents.

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