



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**AFRICAN WOMEN'S QUEST FOR MOTHERHOOD IN FLORA NWAPA'S
NOVELS EFURU AND IDU**Ms. Swati Mohite^{1*}, Dr. Pradnya Vijay Ghorpade²¹(Research Student, Shivaji University, Kolhapur (MS) India)²(Professor & Head, Dept. of English, K.R.P. Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Islampur (MS) India)Email: swatimohite412@gmail.comDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2023.10215>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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The African classical tradition finds its development in African novel as African novels deals with variety of themes such as art, religion, apartheid, culture, tradition, ironies of life, colonial and post-colonial realities etc. African and Caribbean writing often celebrates black womanhood in a move towards a specifically African feminism. Mother is a person who nurtures and protects. African Literature in all ages celebrates motherhood and gives prime focus to motherhood in women's life. Flora Nwapa, the Mother of female African Literature in English also treats motherhood as her main theme. Nwapa through her works portrays Igbo culture and Igbo Tradition. The lead characters in *Efuru* and *Idu* log for motherhood in their life and suffer in life because of it. Though successful in life in all other aspects they are considered incomplete because they are barren. Both the works deals with Motherhood and marriage as its prime focus and suffering of a woman and her quest for selfhood in the family and in society at large.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Patriarchy, Barrenness, Culture, Tradition, Marriage, Igbo Etc.*



INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that countries like India, Australia, and Africa have a painful, devastating experience and history of colonization in common. This has changed their life socially, economically, culturally and to some extent religiously. When we study postcolonial literature, it is very evident that we find the impact of colonization on this literature. We can find in common the concepts like racism, suppression, cultural dominance, inequality etc. we can say that post-colonial literature is a result of or reflection of the dilemma resulted from the colonization as diaspora and displacement takes a huge quantum of postcolonial works.

The tradition of writing novels emerged in western parts of Africa that is Ghana and Nigeria. African novels in English are mainly the result of colonization, process of urbanization and introduction of European education system. In Africa aesthetics plays an important role in the lives of its natives. African's never separated art from teaching and they made optimum use of beauty of art to convey important information and truth to the society. In 1950's and 1960's at the time of social turbulence African novel got its momentum. This was the period when nationalist movements boomed in and challenged the practice of colonization. The colonizer unwillingly accepted to grant political independence to natives but denied economic and cultural independence.

This resulted in up heal of new African society elite to encourage themselves in artistic forms which were borrowed from west but were inspired by local tradition. African writers in their

novels tell to educate and entertain in the way that is understandable to natives. The novels are like stories which leave the readers spellbound with their narrative beauty and also give pleasure to writers of educating the society. African novel shares a lot of similarities with African oral tradition.

The early African writers were striving for their true identity. The identity was destroyed by colonial and imperialistic history. They believed in the fact that literature will help native Africans to relate to their identity and at the same time will work as cathartic agent to the feelings of the Africans of agitation and suppression. They used literature as a tool to encourage and motivate the native Africans.

Ujwala Mali and Dr Pradnya Ghorpade in *Quest for Identity in Bessie Head's Novel Maru* rightly point out that -

“Due to oppression by colonial powers, African people were forced to quest their identity. They had to suffer because of their colour, race and physis. The experiences of these people were painful and full of tragedy. These painful and tragic experiences of the Africans forced them to struggle for independence and quest for their own identity.” (P 25)

Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta modified the world's understanding of Nigerian culture and tradition. Their works focused and introduced the feminist perspective in Nigerian and African literature. Their works deliberately talks about the marriage, condition and position of women in the society, impact of culture and tradition on women, life in villages and cities. While doing so, these writers



focus on feminist perspective of all the mentioned aspects. Women's lives in a specified culture are shaped by not only their biological condition but also by social, material, religious conditions of the society, from which they belong. Their lives are controlled by the predetermined cultural norms of the patriarchal society.

Flora Nwapa is a renowned Nigerian author, who is known for her quest as a forerunner to a generation of African women writers & is considered as mother of modern African literature. She was first of many women who made an attempt to break up the boy's club, which was the African literary community of the age. She is the first African woman to publish a novel. Nwapa's novels proved as an intervention in African literary culture. Women were always portrayed from male point of view and were treated secondary. She made her novels, a way to think of African femininity beyond the idea of victimization.

Nwapa was not happy with portrayal of women as merely prostitutes and unhappy wives in the works of contemporary male writers. Writing novels on her own gave her liberty to re-fashion African femininity through complex and multi-faceted characters.

Arndt, Susan in her *The Dynamics of African Feminism* states that Flora Nwapa's literary oeuvre demonstrates that a writer's feminist orientation is by no means static, but may undergo changes. While *Efuru* and *Idu* are still reformist African-feminist novels, all her later texts are of transformative character. Moreover, while *Efuru* and *Idu* consider polygamy rather uncritically, after having had bad

experiences with polygamy herself, Nwapa denounces it most sharply in her later texts, such as, for example, *One is Enough*.

Flora Nwapa's works mainly speak about empowerment of women and other deprived in the society. All the leading characters in her novels are female, who are modern, confident, courageous & rebellious. Her novels talk about Igbo culture & Igbo life. Quest for identity is one of the prominent themes in Nwapa's works. In Igbo culture, it is believed that having child is very important for a woman to have say in the society and in the family and live life with pride and hence we see that the major characters in her novels strive for motherhood. These novels depict the maltreatment given to female compared to male for infertility. Flora Nwapa's novels developed with time, her women in later novels seem more liberated, firm and happy with their choices whether society is happy or not. These women understand on their own that happiness lies within. In their journey of life they encounter many cultural, social, political, economical and emotional roadblocks.

EFURU'S QUEST FOR MOTHERHOOD

Flora Nwapa's first novel *Efuru* (1966) portrays Igbo life and Igbo culture, especially reflection of woman's life in the specific cultural setup. In *Efuru* she presents a beautiful, young and intelligent girl, Efuru who is the protagonist of the novel. She is representation of the ability and capability of a woman as a leader and reformist in her community. She is a lady who is admired by everyone around for her intelligence and trading skills. She is praised in the society for her nature and admirable skills but in



spite of this she is not able to sustain in personal life. She is unsuccessful in maintaining cordial and blissful relationship with men.

The novel talks about the life story of Efuru, her struggle and her development as a role model and catalyst of change in her own culture and society. Efuru as a female character is well developed to meet the challenges laid down by male-dominated society. Efuru is portrayed as epitome of courage and symbol of change. She is an independent girl; who makes her choices on her own. The novel opens with Efuru's meet with her husband in a festival. She chooses her husband on her own, unlike others. Nigerian culture believed in polygamy. Marriages are generally arranged after young woman's consent after which she is introduced to grooms family and also the man is introduced to girl's family. Before the marriage is fixed certain things are tested as character of a girl, her family background. In few cases marriages are fixed even in childhood through family negotiation. All these decisions are taken by both the families and elders in the family but in case of Efuru, she chooses her husband against her families wish. This shows how Efuru is different from other women.

From the beginning of her married life with Adizua, she gives importance to her beloved husband. She supports her husband in all possible ways. Efuru, desperately logs for a child and tries all possible remedies to conceive but fails. She agonizes over her childlessness but doesn't lose hope. Efuru is overjoyed with the news of her pregnancy. After obeying all the instructions, she and Adizua have a baby girl. After realizing that her social stigma of

barren woman is over, she exclaims, "Is it really true that I have heard a baby that I am a woman after all?" (P31) Adizua named their daughter as Ogonim, but Efuru's happiness doesn't last long as her daughter dies of ill health. Again she starts her plight of barrenness. Adizua goes on missing like his father.

Efuru is a good trader and is happy with her husband. This happiness is very short lived as she is unable to bear child. Death of Efuru's daughter clearly indicates the end of her marriage with Adizua, as there is no bond between them. She tries to search for another husband with her relatives. Her father insists her to come back to his house. Efuru is married for second time with Eneberri. In her second marriage also she is not able to have equilibrium with her husband as she won't have child. She spends many sleepless and restless nights because of her infertility. Childlessness is considered as a failure in Igbo culture and as a result of this Efuru considers herself as a failure, despite of all the other qualities for which is admired in the society.

She leaves her second husband and starts living alone. In order to put an end to her agony she decides to worship Uhamiri. Uhamiri is the Goddess of lake. Efuru stops wasting her energy on the thoughts of child and marriage and starts to prosper in trade as other devotees of Uhamiri. She realizes the fact that she herself can make or unmake her happiness. Nwapa tries to indicate and highlight in one sense that Nigerian women are handicapped due to cultural, patriarchal and motherhood limitations.

EFURU'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Nwapa tries to indicate that Efuru like any other woman has to believe in herself and needs to control



her life. Nwapa herself believed that, "Marriage is not the end of this world and that there are a hundred and one other things to make you happy apart from marriage and children." Portrayal of Efuru's character by Nwapa is truly revolutionary as does not completely neglect the tradition but at the same time is not enslaved by the tradition. Through Efuru's character, Nwapa enforces that if a woman is willing to challenge the roles socially advised and wants to act independently she should follow her heart. Efuru tries to help and heal others. She follows the path of Uhamiri to resist patriarchal oppression and identity stagnation. Through the development of Efuru's character, Nwapa represents that Efuru's journey leads her to knowledge that triggers her progression.

Efuru's character evolves in the due course of time. In the initial phase family, marriage is the center of her life but with the time she abandons these roles and becomes the worshiper of Uhamiri, the Goddess of lake, by the myth of Uhamiri at the core of the novel, Efuru's evolution is determined by her relationship with the deity.

Efuru correlates the myth of the woman of lake, the goddess of water, "of an ancient matriarchal religion, who is associated female industriousness and prosperity." Uhamiri chooses her followers who are prominently female and favors them with success in trade and prosperity. She bestows woman with beauty and wealth but not with children as she herself won't had children. Uhamiri is a childless goddess who is wise, beautiful and wealthy as Efuru is. Efuru gets independence, though she is not a mother, a primary role of a woman in the community. The myth of Uhamiri challenges the

ideology of motherhood. Efuru is not only beautiful and wealthy but even happy as well though, "she has never experienced the joys of motherhood."

IDU'S QUEST FOR MOTHERHOOD

If we consider another novel by Nwapa that is *Idu* (1970), it also highlights motherhood and revolves around the same. The novel opens with the conversation at the steam, which is supposed to represent healing. It starts with the conversation about Idu's pregnancy. Through the conversation between the two women, we understand the background of Idu's mother that her mother conceived children very late after her marriage but she was not barren. Through the same conversation, we learn about the economic condition of Idu and Adiwere.

The traditional concept of motherhood is explored through the conversation between the two women. Traditional belief expects that all the married couples must have children. People in the village will start talking about and asking the same if there are no signs of pregnancy at the end of the first year of marriage. Idu and Adiwere are married for three years but there are no signs of pregnancy. People are not saying that Idu is not a good woman but believe that if she can't have child then she should allow her husband to marry another wife. Her willingness to share her husband to marry another woman to have children in the family will make her a good woman. For Igbo woman, children play an important role in marriage and family.

On Idu's insistence, Adiwere takes second wife; Adiwere treats his second wife more as a child and not as a wife. Idu unexpectedly announces her



pregnancy; the village rejoices and blesses the couple. As Idu is pregnant Adiwere's second wife leaves the house. Idu's son is born on an eclipse day and hence she considers it as bad omen. Two years pass and she shows no signs of pregnancy so she insists her husband again to take second wife so that she can have privilege of more children.

After four years Idu becomes pregnant, but this happiness is very short lived as Adiwere dies suddenly. Idu doesn't weep after his death but follows the religious processes. Idu decides to follow her husband; she rejects life and dies in order to be with her beloved husband.

Another couple introduced in the novel is Amarjeme and Ojiugo who also suffers from the same plight of childlessness. Ojiugo is Idu's childhood friend. Even after six years of marriage they are childless. In order to fulfill her desire of motherhood, Ojiugo leaves her husband and starts living with her husband's friend as she understands that her husband Amarjeme is sterile. Ojiugo gives birth to a son on learning this Amarjeme is delighted at the same time heartbroken and blames him for their childlessness. Amarjeme hangs himself and dies. On learning this, Ojiugo dies on that same day from heartbreak for her first beloved husband.

CONCLUSION

Through this study we can see that in both the novels *Efuru* and *Idu* Nwapa deals with concept of motherhood and treats this as an important element in the novel. If we analyze the texts closely though the concept of motherhood plays major role in the development of novel, the way Nwapa has put forth the concept is different. Both *Efuru* and *Idu* have

blissful marriages and are happy with their husband. The only reason that makes them unhappy and unsatisfied in the relation is that both of them are childless and long for motherhood. They try all the possible ways to conceive, to be a good woman in the society are ready to allow their husband to marry other woman in order to have children in the family. Both deliver children but couldn't enjoy the bliss of motherhood.

As both the novels progress the way Nwapa molds the character development is different. *Efuru* evolves as a strong woman who stops logging for marriage, husband and children. She starts worshipping goddess of lake and starts trading. With the blessings of Uhamiri, she becomes a successful woman and helps others in all the possible ways she can. She develops as a strong woman serves as a guiding light for the society. If we see the life of Idu, it's exactly opposite of what *Efuru* makes out of her life. Idu and Adiwere are also good traders and belong to a prosperous family, but this plight of barrenness controls her married life. She is not able to come out of it, she suffers in her life, and even she is not that cordial with her own son due to superstitions.

If we see, the treatment Nwapa has given to her leading characters *Efuru* develops as a woman, trader in the course of novel and becomes an admirable lady and is happy, as she realizes the fact that she is the only person who can make herself happy. If we see the development of Idu then her life revolves around only one thing that is children, because of which she couldn't think of anything and at the end dies in love of her husband.

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