The Complex Interplay of Womanhood and Motherhood in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract

Flora Nwapa's first novel *Efuru* is a narrative about the trope of motherhood and barrenness which serve as a correlative factor in defining the worth of a woman and used as a means to define womanhood and her status in Igbo society. The thematic concerns of her novels also revolve around domestic issues and the predicament of the female gender in Igbo society. Nwapa further shows how these serve as inhibitions in the growth of a woman belonging to the Igbo community and the African society at large. From being described as "a remarkable woman", we can see the stark shift in the perception of the protagonist, Efuru by those around her because she is barren. In the novel, Nwapa writes against the idea that a woman needs to have a husband and a child to assert her own identity through the character of Efuru. She tries to dismiss the one-dimensional way of depicting women as only wives and mothers within the boundaries of domesticity. The paper attempts to explore the underlying problems that come with the accepted tradition of obligatory motherhood in the Igbo society and how Nwapa advocates for the eradication of gender constructs by portraying Efuru as a symbol of empowerment and transcendence and as a basis for resistance against the images of women as only mothers and wives.

Keywords: Empowerment; Identity; Motherhood; Patriarchy; Womanhood.

Flora Nwapa, the first African female author writing in English, occupies a special position in the history of African literature that she has been hailed as the "mother of modern African literature". The journey of Nwapa as a successful black woman writer is a narrative of discrimination and marginalization. Even though race and gender interact in her life, Nwapa never submits and surrenders herself to the hegemony of western pub-

lishing houses. In order to publish her books, she established Tana Press Limited, her own publishing company in 1977, with the help of which she could publish and distribute books written by women writers. The dehumanizing experiences that Nwapa encounters in her life become the driving force that helps her write authentically about women. Her novel *Efuru* (1966) is an attempt to negate and counter the lopsided and misrepresentation of women by male writers. As a writer, Nwapa feels that male writers were not doing justice in their representation of women especially in terms of depicting their industriousness, their ability and worth as a human being. Through the protagonist Efuru, Nwapa introduces to her readers the image of a woman who is representative of the enterprising and independent woman. In the novel, Efuru is depicted as a capable, proficient and intelligent woman who can compete with men, and she even excels men. By virtue of her own self and ability as a woman, she deconstructs the stereotypical image of the feeble black woman.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa depicts the prejudice and inhibitions faced by a black woman in patriarchal African society. She asserts the identity of the dignified female protagonist, Efuru, who is resilient and resourceful with or without the presence of a male figure in her life. Nwapa's distinctive feature as a writer lies perhaps in her depictions of women as capable, proficient and intelligent women who are survivors by virtue of their own power. Nwapa places Efuru at the helm of the novel and through Efuru she depicts the prejudice and inhibitions faced by a black woman in a traditionally patriarchal society. She wrote with a gendered vision towards stimulating a new black female consciousness which was a much welcome diversion from the status quo. In fact, her writings, born out of an effort to write about women in a positive attitude, are a realistic manifestation of the African society with all its prejudices.

Efuru, an eponymous novel, is the story of a young woman called Efuru, a remarkable woman who is not blessed with children or a good husband. Through the character of Efuru, Nwapa attempts to provide an analysis, and portrays how the identity of a woman is intricately linked to motherhood and how the two terms work synonymously as identifiers of a woman's position in society. Efuru's life is deemed as a disappointment by the members of her village as she not only loses her child but also is deserted by her first and second husband. However, in the beginning of the novel, Nwapa introduces Efuru to the readers as a unique woman: "Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself." (Nwapa 1). She is also portrayed as an independent woman who defies her father and

marries Adizua, her first husband, without the bride price as Adizua's family cannot afford the marriage. She involves herself in decision making and business. In traditional African society, woman is considered as incapable of doing business. But, to everybody's dismay, Efuru emerges as a prosperous businesswoman. Without the help and support of a man, she manages her business and supports her family. What Efuru does is a daring action people of her society think a woman cannot do. Furthermore, when her first husband Adizua's farm does not yield sustainable profit, it is Efuru who rises to find a solution by taking up trading and at the same time juggling domestic chores. Efuru's efficacy and trading skills overshadow her first husband Adizua and even her second husband, Gilbert. Efuru's life takes a detrimental turn as she learns that she is not blessed with motherhood. She is stigmatized because of her inability to bear children. Despite the obvious accomplishments of Efuru as a woman, she is not the cause of envy for the women around her because of her barrenness. She later on becomes the target of gossip that people of her own society like Omirima "comment(s) spitefully" on her barrenness and even go to the extent of wrongfully accusing Efuru of committing adultery that her second husband Gilbert foolishly believes it as well.

In traditional African society, while analyzing the image of a prosperous and successful woman, strong emphasis has always been laid on the fertility of women and their ability to procreate and become mothers. In addition, society has also guaranteed men the ownership of women by birth and marriage. Before marriage, a woman belongs to her father and after her marriage, she belongs to her husband upon which a woman's value is judged "in terms of producing offspring, preferably males" (Udenweze 2). The role of a woman as mother is paramount as the terms woman and motherhood are almost taken as synonyms. Motherhood is seen as an important function of a woman that she is made "to fulfill" and this notion is profoundly depicted in *Efuru*. Cultural or traditional representation of women is portrayed within a framework where their identity is defined in terms of the supposed markers or identifiers created by the society that they are a part of, and in the case of Efuru, her identity and purpose is strongly linked with notions of marriage, fertility and motherhood.

In twentieth century African society, Cherryl Walker observes that the concept of motherhood in Africa

> … is through the sacredness of her calling in the home and the strong maternal instincts born in every true woman that we shall find the more she rises to the full development of her nature, the

better will she take her position in the destinies of the world and the country of which she is part. (Walker 418)

The permeation of motherhood in defining a woman's position in society is quite evident in Walker's observation on African society. Motherhood lies at the core of a woman's identity and it is seen as a marker of whether a woman serves her destined position in the society that she is a part of. Walker goes on to question whether the appeal to motherhood ought to be seen "as evidence of misguided sentimentality, or false (patriarchal) consciousness" (418). Moreover, it has often been argued by radical feminists that motherhood is simply a tool of patriarchal oppression and the acceptance of it as a definitive marker of a woman's identity and purpose was indicative of submission to patriarchal values and masculine domination of the female body.

The pertinence of motherhood as a means to define a woman's worth is further reflected in the story of Efuru as she is perceived by the society as a woman who is a lesser woman because of her inability to procreate. As opposed to the initial perception of Efuru by the people around her, including her husband and mother-in-law, Efuru is left to be an outcast and ostracized from her society. While, in the beginning of the novel, Nwapa provides various instances of Efuru being enterprising and adept in skills of trading and where she takes it upon herself to provide the means to pay for her own dowry, we see that her dexterity and efficacy are pushed to negligence upon the news of her barrenness.

"Feminine mystique", a term coined by Betty Friedan in 1963, is defined as a means "to describe the idealization of the feminine woman whose self-definition is based exclusively on her role as wife and mother" (E Wallace 216). The predicament of Efuru finds resonance with the term in the way that the ideal image of a woman in the Igbo society was to be a wife and then become a mother. Perhaps, the only hindrance that lay before Efuru towards becoming an ideal woman was attaining motherhood, which would solidify her position in the society that she is a part of. Nwapa's portrayal of Efuru expresses the need to undermine such social constructs of the idea of the feminine or womanhood. Only the overturn of this oppressive construct of the feminine mystique would allow for women to embrace themselves and find "true fulfillment". This is presumably an idea that Nwapa wishes to propagate by building the character of Efuru as an accomplished but barren woman- a woman who is not a wife or mother, yet a dignified woman who functions to subvert such presumptions of what a woman ought to fulfill in society.

Efuru, no doubt, is a victim of such social constructs of female identity where the prominence of being a mother and a woman's fertility triumphs over the efficacy and ability of a woman. Female identity and motherhood are strongly intertwined and often women who are not mothers are seen as failed women who do not conform to the idea of normal feminine women within patriarchy. Motherhood is then seen as a natural yet obligatory role for a woman to be accepted as a feminine woman because of what the accepted notion of woman's status in society is- "The biological ability to bear children, in other words, a woman's fertility, lies at the root of a mother's status and identity… To be a woman then is to bear children." (E.Walker 77-78). The role of motherhood has been romanticized and idealized in society and women are expected to aspire to fulfill the mothering role with obedience.

Nwapa goes on to show the shallowness of "obligatory motherhood" in the text when the other characters equate Efuru to a man because she is barren- "To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce" (Nwapa 23). These lines serve as an indication of the intricate link between the notions of womanhood and motherhood in the Igbo society. Efuru who is biologically a woman ceases to identify as a woman merely because she is barren and is not a mother. Nwapa shows to the reader the shallow perceptions of the Igbo people who equate womanhood with motherhood. In stark contrast with the beginning of the novel, Efuru who was presented as a remarkable, distinguished woman who bragged about her physical beauty, is now deprived of the label of a woman and shunned by her own society. Efuru is thus, ostracized by her society because of her barrenness and is denied the privilege of individuality. Her first husband Adizua then seeks another wife because to him and the society, Efuru is a man. Efuru is given a new gender and labeled as a man, which is socially constructed with adherence to the notions of the patriarchal system against her biological gender that is, a woman.

Mineke Schipper discusses the disposition of gender in Africa and remarks that "Women's productive and reproductive capacity made them a social and economic resource" (Schipper 157). This has always been a pertinent issue even during pre-colonial Africa and still finds relevance in post-colonial African society as well. Taking this statement into account, it may be deduced that Efuru is neither a social nor an economic resource because of the absence of her reproductive capacity. If a woman's value or worth was the sum of her ability to reproduce, to become a wife and mother, it can be quite safe to assume that Efuru's value with regards to the dictates of her society is diminished or negligible. Furthermore, this

elucidates the impression that a woman who does not conform to the expected functions that she should perform and the deviation from it whether willingly or not, categorizes her as disordered and is subtly denied her womanhood and her identity at large.

Nevertheless, we see that Efuru refuses to succumb to such constructs of womanhood and instead, she finds solace through the worship of Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake. Efuru finds success and wealth even though she is without husband or child. She helps the people of Ogwuta when they are in need without condescension. She becomes economically independent which undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the process of emancipating and empowering herself. She makes a name for herself amongst the married men of her society as well and we see them recognizing her ability – "Her hands make money" (Nwapa 156). As the novel comes to an end, we see that Efuru once again dreams of Uhamiri:

> She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches… She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (Nwapa 281)

The description of Uhamiri could also be interpreted as a connotation for the type of woman Efuru has transformed into. Even though she is denied the joy of motherhood or the privilege of having a husband, Efuru still finds contentment. She has accomplished building her own identity through her efforts and success. As a worshipper of Uhamiri, she finds happiness in her womanhood even though she never attains motherhood. Perhaps this is Nwapa's way of showing how the equation or the affiliation of womanhood with motherhood can be subverted.

One of the important factors that Nwapa implements to enable the self-sustenance of Efuru is her economic independence. Efuru's ability to be economically independent plays a substantial role in her emancipation. She refuses to be tied down by the reins of domesticity and settle with the gender constructs of her society. She creates her own identity distanced from the affiliations of a mother and a wife. When Nwapa was asked for a message that she wishes to deliver to women, she stated that: "every woman, married or single, must have economic independence." (Umeh 28) Nwapa stands by the viewpoint that a woman should not be economically dependent on a man for survival. She asserts the need for economic independence for female empowerment and this is portrayed through the

character of Efuru. In the novel, Efuru achieved economic independence and emancipation thereby empowering herself. Through her character, Nwapa also explores the possibility of Black women's dream of a new nation where stereotypes cease to exist and women are emancipated and free to determine their own lives. Efuru may be a woman without a husband or a child but Efuru maintains her selfless nature committed to survival as a black woman who is fearless, courageous and daunting. Again, Efuru achieves all of these without the need to label herself as wife or mother.

The stigma of being a woman without a husband is still strongly felt in the Nigerian society at large alongside barrenness and fertility of women. Efuru is a character stigmatized on the grounds of both marriage and motherhood. In an interview with Marie Umeh, Nwapa says:

> There is this stigma on a woman who elects to be single. Mothers bring up their daughters telling them that they have to be married. In my own language we say, "No matter how beautiful one is, if she doesn't get married, she's nothing." (Umeh 27).

The need for a man to validate a woman's life is strongly prevalent in Nigerian culture. However, Nwapa believes that there is a need to change this outlook and allow for change towards female emancipation and freedom of choice on how a woman wishes to live her life. Nwapa is of the impression that it is the task of those who have received western education to break such restrictions and stereotypes. Hence, she feels that it is her obligation as a writer to write about what she sees in order to bring about a much-needed change in the construction of gender roles.

In the novel, Nwapa writes against the idea that a woman needs to have a husband and a child to assert her own identity. She tries to dismiss the one- dimensional way of depicting women as only wives and mothers within the boundaries of domesticity. With the character of Efuru, Nwapa brings to life the idea of a new woman, who without a husband or children of her own, is still empowered and respectable. She becomes a symbol of survival and empowerment and most importantly, she acts as the catalyst for the change that Nwapa wishes to promote. However, it is important to note that in the empowerment process, Nwapa does not dismiss the Igbo tradition and culture. One should keep in mind that Efuru has always complied with the dictates of the Igbo tradition which can be evidently seen in the way Efuru accepts the prevailing cultural traditions of her society with regards to dowry, polygamy, motherhood and religious practices. It can be said that Efuru's desire to attain motherhood,

shows a subtle acceptance of Igbo culture. She does not rebel against these notions but finds a way of survival and empowerment within the confines of traditional customs. Curbing or restricting women's role only one dimensionally to motherhood and equating it to womanhood is perhaps one of the strongest reasons that show a correlation, if not causation, to the ever-pressing need of women empowerment and the need to frame their own identity. With the "assertion of an authentic and independent Igbo feminist", Nwapa shows her readers the limitations and inequities of the patriarchal society and the "day-to-day struggles that such a character must confront" (Andrade 105). The bigger assertion here, is to show that fertility and motherhood are not obligatory roles of women nor are they markers of identity, and that a woman, outside of domesticity can still redefine herself far away from the stereotypical terms of wife and motherhood which are synonymous with women.

The image of women as mothers is seen as natural and accepted even in present times, but rarely questioned. Nwapa further seeks to subvert such false consciousness of the feminine mystique and socially constructed images of women to allow them to find emancipation and female identity just as Efuru builds her own identity though she does not ultimately experience the "joy of motherhood"; thereby implying that a woman's position in society

> "is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. (Mohanty 263)".

Nwapa's perusal into the complex dynamics of womanhood and motherhood raises multiple questions: a) is motherhood obligatory for happiness in a woman's life? b) is motherhood the only true purpose of a woman's life in society that she is made to fulfill? and c) is motherhood the only accepted identity that is destined for a married woman in society? And many more underlying questions linked with the concept of womanhood still lurk in the minds of the readers. Through the narration of the story of Efuru, one can see the complex interplay of womanhood and motherhood in the lives of Igbo women and the hindrance it poses on them On the whole, Nwapa succeeds in depicting the strength and capability of women who can dismantle patriarchy and assert the new identity of African women. As the novel concludes, the readers are left with the image of a new empowered woman through the protagonist Efuru, the progenitor of modern African woman.

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