

RECONCEPTUALIZING GENDER IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE : THE DYNAMICS OF WOMANIST IDEOLOGY IN FLORANWAPA'S FICTION.

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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 war. Whether at the first international conference on women in Mexico in 1975, the second one in Copenhagen in 1980, the Nairobi forward-looking Convention in 1985, the Beijing Conference in 1995 or the various efforts of the United Nations since 1970, the issue has been how to fashion out practical means for women to participate in and contribute meaningfully to the scheme of events around them. 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. In most traditions and especially in Africa, women are devalued and considered "second-class citizens". In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1952) states that women are constructed by men as passive and inconsequential objects. For Ezeigbo, "this has resulted in the perpetuation of female self-effacement and self-erasure which have insidiously demeaned womanhood for a long time (1999 : 26)". With male Writers in Nigeria "women are presented..... as tragic heroines unable to speak from their subaltern position " (Kolawole, 1998 : 228).

The aim of this paper is to show how Flora Nwapa's fiction has so far contributed to a redefinition of the female gender and a counteridentification to men's voices in literature, a fight to initiate change in the minds of her people in order to restore women's images and dignity as mothers and wives and promote collaboration and complementarity among the sexes in Nigeria and more generally in Africa.

Sex biologically defines individuals and classifies

them into two social categories. Gender attaches cultural roles to this classification of people into sexual categories. The difference between the male and the female is first based on biological characteristics and attributes of the two sexes. But the centrality of the biological or physical factors is rejected by many scholars. For this group of scholars "gender is constructed along psychological, cultural and social lines" (Ezeigbo, 1999 : 25). Feminist studies are especially characterized by the subversion of biological determinism and the privileging of social factors. Thus, gender theories trace the varied identities of women to psychological, historical and cultural factors prevalent in the society. Gender has therefore become the social identity of the individual due to his or her sexual category and constitutes a serious problem in a society dominated by patriarchy.

Patriarchy is that form of social organization in which males exercise power and thus create for females an inferior status. In all societies, "men have traditionally been the subject of history" as Adeola James puts it (*In Their Own Voices*, 1990 ; 3). The distinct gender differentiation often creates women's marginalization. In Nigeria for example, the national anthem calls all compatriots to "serve their FATHERLAND", consequently excluding all the valuable women from all spheres of nation building.

With society being dominated by men who make the rules, this leads to the production of macho values which stifle women's images as positive contributors to the development of their society. Nigerian male writers in general have been the mouthpiece of their society. The way they treat their female characters reflects the disdainful, indifferent or at times cruel manners in which women are regarded in Nigerian society. For Ebele Eko, these writers "invariably cast all women in the strict sexist

roles of mothers and wives, submissive to the norms and regulations that restrict them ” (1986 : 211). Prior to the publication of Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966), the female portraiture by men was restricted to a kind of idealization, rigid conventionality, stereotyping and a superficiality that left to be desired. In fact women were made peripheral. It is what Charles Nnolim (1989) described as “The appealing image of the Nigerian woman” (59). For him, in the works of Achebe, Ekwensi and Amadi, women are largely stereotyped as “helpless, dependent, brutalized, disparaged...prostitutes or concubines or good time girls” (1989 : 59). Ekwensi’s female character Jagua Nana (*Jagua Nana*, 1961), Amadi’s Ihuoma (*The Concubine* ; 1966) and Soyinka’s Simi (*The Interpreters* : 1965) all have very negative images.

Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria’s well-known male writers also mirrored this reality of patriarchy in his works. The man is made the subject of the narratives ; he is significant and dominates. Because he is invariably always a central character women and children whose significance lies in their dependence on him are much less fully realized. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1998) contends that “Generally, African women are presented as a subaltern group in the margin of society, docile, and accepting the multiple levels of subjugation gracefully” (223).

This state of affairs is identified in Chinua Achebe’s fiction. In his *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s image strikes the reader right from the beginning :

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody (3).

This “wonderful” and awe-inspiring image of Okonkwo permeates all the book. That is why “his wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear... and so did the little children” (09). Okonkwo has been a great man ; and he has shown it from the

great barns he always had and the courageous actions he has always taken. It is in demonstration of this courage that, Okonkwo beheaded the white man’s messenger. This action is committed in the logic of his philosophy, because, manliness in the eyes of these people also includes demonstrating great force, the lack of which would be similar to womanhood. Okonkwo can never allow himself to be mistaken for a woman ; and he is always clear about that.

“Let’s not reason like cowards”, said Okonkwo.

“If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do ? Do I shut my eyes ? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are pouring filth over us and Okeke pretends not to see”. Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. “ This was a womanly clan”, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland (p.113).

Okonkwo’s society in this novel is patriarchal ; that is why men dominate. This character’s radicalism is displayed at all levels, even towards his wives and children. And we are informed that he “ruled his household with a heavy hand” (09) because, for him,

no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. He was like that man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foo-foo. (37)

As it appears from the foregoing, Achebe’s male characters are very important individuals. And only men have comfortable room in his narrative. The following extract from *Things Fall Apart* shows how distinct gender differentiation creates women’s marginalisation. It is about the six title men who have been imprisoned after the destruction of the church by the villagers and who have been liberated after the villagers have paid a fine.

As they made their way to the village, the six men met women and children going to the stream with

their water pots. But the men wore such heavy and fearsome looks that *the women and the children did not say "no? or welcome to them, but edged out of the way to let them pass. In the village, little groups of men joined them until they became a sizeable company* (140 ; my emphasis).

Women in this extract are lumped together with children because it is generally accepted that they are unimportant creatures who have nothing significant to contribute to nation building.

Nwapa's creative sense must have been gingered by the realization that it is women's responsibility to reconstruct woman and recreate her image. Her fiction seems to be a cry against that degraded position of Nigerian literature. This courageous and positive reaction by woman is an attempt to reconstruct the female image in contemporary Nigerian fiction and aims to re-present women and their realities. In her fiction, Nwapa creates a seemingly decent society for women. It is a society respectful of its women. She openly confronts the issues of gender and the distribution of power by the patriarchal society. She moves her female characters from the innocent and helpless position to a state of self-empowerment and authority throughout her texts.

It is a fact that, her female characters accept themselves as women, but new women, different from the stereotypes with negative images that the reader is familiar with in male-authored texts. With her ground-breaking novel *Efuru* (1966), Flora Nwapa has been a pathfinder to the few modern-educated women in Nigeria. She has identified the need to be the voice, the consciousness and the center of consciousness of her gender. What one feels is that Nwapa adopted a self-repossession strategy, proceeding to an awareness-raising. She tries to interrogate, and at times to subvert the demeaning myths being spun by the patriarchal society about women.

For Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) "the woman writer has two responsibilities : first to tell about being a woman ; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective". Nigerian female writers in general address issues such as the

second-class status of girls at birth, early marriages, the plight of widows [as is shown by Nwapa in her *This is Lagos* (1971)], single parenthood, brideprice paying [as is shown by Buchi Emecheta in her *The Bride Price* (1976)], religious prescriptions (for example the Bible and the Koran categorize woman as a helpmate to man), the lack of self-confidence and formal education, illiteracy, polygamy, discrimination in most facets of social and public life, low economic status, etc.

Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* is the story of a very strong woman, resilient, beautiful and morally upright. In the description of this remarkable woman, Nwapa subverts the stereotypical portrayal of woman by most male writers. With *Efuru*, Nwapa has inscribed the feminine principle in Nigerian, nay African literature. She expresses the need to recast the gender realities and eschew women's self-hatred and male subjugation, in order to establish a gender balance. The gender concept, as it permeates Nigerian literature, is being reconstructed. Her other novels are strong tools of self-realisation through literature. In all her novels, it is no more the male, but the female character who is the center of concern and she dominates the plot. This is a challenge to the old order.

Flora Nwapa's description of *Efuru* seems to be a reaction against what can be seen as the relegation of women to the background (Adozo, 1998 ; 162). Nwapa tried to set the records right by creating women who tower above others, and even above their husbands. With her fiction she has re-created and re-presented women to reflect the changing realities of African women. Whether in *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), *Never Again* (1975), *One is Enough* (1981), and *Women are Different* (1986), the writer projects women at the center of the narrative. In her first novel *Efuru*, *Efuru's* status is as high as that of a man of achievements in Achebe's novels, for example. About her, we are told :

Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself. (1)

In this novel, *Efuru* is presented as beautiful, commanding, intelligent, sensitive, affecting subtly men in spite of themselves. As a woman, she loves

men ; but she maintains a pride in herself as she strives to be financially independent by pursuing her business career. For Efurū, life entails confronting the challenges of existence in a world where gender constraints one to a second-class citizenship. Efurū has all good qualities and her strong individuality permeates all the novel. The woman was courageous, faced most of her problems with success, and, was consequently always happy. "Many people envied her husband and women were jealous of her beauty" (29). Efurū was "a good woman who had good words for everybody. A good woman who greeted you twenty times if she saw you twenty times a day. A woman with a clean heart, and who respects her elders" (94). Efurū is central to the story and celebrates her female nature, her female charm and female economic power. She is a successful woman in trade and is well-endowed as a woman physically and intellectually. A character informs us :

I heard so much about her... Her hands make money. Anything she touches is money. If she begins to sell pepper in the market, she will make money out of it. If in salt, money will flow in (156).

Efurū is not an ordinary woman. She is good. Nwapa creates this character, surely to talk to Achebe's Okonkwo and Ezeulu, since Nwapa declared that she has been greatly influenced by Achebe through his fiction (Ezeigbo, 1998 : 657). The female protagonist subverts the existing moral codes or social values. That is how Nwapa reconceptualizes gender in her fiction.

Like the character Efurū in the novel *Efurū*, Idu in the novel *Idu* is presented as the picture of a perfect woman, an ideal wife, industrious, kind-hearted and loving. She is also a friendly and hospitable woman who is loved and respected by everyone in her community. Idu is the prop on which everyone depends and we see her as the one constantly making decisions, carrying them out and attending to a large proportion to the demands of the business enterprise jointly owned by her and her husband Adiewere. Thus, she makes herself an exceptional female figure. The narrator makes this striking comment :

In spite of her illness, Idu carried on with her trade as usual. Her husband begged her not, but she was not the

type to stay at home and do nothing. Although she had not had the experience of pregnancy before, and she was not having a particularly easy pregnancy, her husband was surprised to see how well she looked. She was the subject of conversation of the town. She looked more and more beautiful, and wherever she went, men and women admired her (69).

Idu calls into question the issue of women's role in the community in terms of the emphasis on childbearing and childlessness. Sociologist Ada Mere (1984) states that in most African societies "when after marriage, procreation does not happen, that woman has failed an essential life goal". But, whether in the case of Efurū, or Idu, childlessness does not constitute a serious drawback to these female protagonists.

In Nwapa's *One is Enough*, the main character Amaka is a strong and competent woman, very good at business. Her childlessness does not prevent her from fulfilling her objectives. Her struggle for self-image began when she was engaged in the fight that brought her husband Obiora and his mother to hospital. After having been sent out of the home by her husband's mother, Amaka the protagonist wanted to restore self-esteem at all cost. She moved to Lagos where she found an environment appropriate to foster her desires. Her will to find self-realization as a single woman and her desire for dignity through economic success become the centre of her life's goal. In Lagos, her life details her rise to power as she turns her skill to gain business contracts. Nwapa is thus re-presenting woman as a very active and formidable human being who contributes to the making of her life. Amaka happily succeeds in both personal and professional life as a powerful and independent woman.

Nwapa's stories come to us as a natural account of women's lives, with female images which seem not to be conventional as in male-authored texts. That is precisely why Nwapa does not see woman as a godfigure. For example, when Amaka (the protagonist in *One is Enough*) came to Lagos, she decided to protest against the patriarchal society. The first man she met was the Alhaji, and they lived together. She gave him sex and he gave her contracts.

At the same time she met a Reverend Father, Father Mclaid (Izu) and bore him male twins. But she refused to marry him despite the priest's appeal and readiness to quit priesthood. Amaka's decision was that,

She was not going to be involved again with men. She had had enough. She had not come to Lagos to be a whore. She had come to look for identity (45).

Amaka has chosen to punish the wrong persons ; and we are informed that " Izu (The Reverend Father) was crying" (74). In an interview with Gay Wilentz, Nwapa had this to say :

Well, it is Amaka's story and is her story.

There are many people who do this in our society. If the evils are relevant to the stories I am telling, I will include them. It does not mean I approve of it.

Nwapa does not believe a woman should be passive or voiceless. The female characters in her fiction do not exist only for services they provide inside the home for their husbands and children. They count in significant matters affecting community or national life. By so doing, Nwapa proceeds to a redefinition of the female gender. She creates thus new spaces and a voice for women. At the same time she is initiating a new tradition in Nigerian literature. As Efuru in the novel *Efuru*, Amaka in *One is Enough* is presented as a very distinguished and respectful woman, right from the beginning of the novel. The narrator reports :

Amaka went on with her business in Onitcha, supplying timber, sand and food. She was a contractor, one of the numerous female contractors who had sprung up during and at the end of the war. Before the war, she had been a teacher. At the end of the war, because she took part in the "attack trade ", she rediscovered herself (04).

In *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is Enough*, the female protagonists do not depend on their husbands for their daily livelihood. Rather, they are the main

breadwinners of their families. In these novels Nwapa is very affirmative and very celebrative of women's power. Efuru, Idu and Amaka reject all subordinate positions of women and gain independence from men. This shows an expression of a need to break the long-prevailing traditions, beliefs and customs that keep women down.

Discourses of war often rank women and children together as the vulnerable groups. We see this in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). When war breaks in a male-dominated context, the problems of femininity increase. But as we said earlier, Nwapa's female characters are individuals who count in all significant matters affecting community or national development. In her *Never Again*, the female character Kate seems to be a vital source of hope for the regeneration of society. Women in this novel devote their energy to countering the forces of destruction such as hunger and starvation. Kate informs us :

I was determined not to see my children suffer. I would sell all I had to feed them if I had to. They were not going to be hungry (25).

Here, women's roles transcend the domestic and reproductive. On her part, Madam Agafa's reaction at a meeting is reported thus :

"I am a woman. I am not afraid of any vandal. I am going to fight with my mortar pistol ". She turned in the direction of the women : isn't that what you said I should say ? "

" Yes, yes ", filled the air.

"...I am a woman. But I am not going to be evacuated. Have you heard ? We women are solidly behind our men. Our children will be with us. ...My five children will be with me "

(12)

From this extract it is clear that Nwapa does not produce her story from a radical feminist stand. In fact feminism identifies with a man-hating ideology. In feminism, there is the idea of rebellion against the male sex. It shows fearlessness, political awareness and a drive for equality, and has been presented by many scholars as offensive. For Ogunyemi (1996) " feminism appears more rhetorical, polemical, and individualistic in its

thrust” ; (119). For Ezeigbo (199) “feminism posits that women should have equal rights and chances with men in every aspect of human experience : political, legal, economic, social, etc. (30). It is an analysis of women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it. Feminism has negative connotations and all black women writers particularly, are preoccupied by this. To adapt their fight to the particularities of their race, black women in their great majority collit themselves rather to womanism which is a black outgrowth of feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between women, men and children and wants to see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. Womanism is communal in its orientation and goes beyond the husband and wife situation. It is an ideology in which the destiny of distressed peoples can be urgently discussed in a meaningful context to avert disaster, not just to talk abstractly. Like all black feminists who see white feminists as separatists, popularly referred to as lesbians, Alice Walker (1983) sees the womanist as one “ committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” : XI). Like Alice Walker who considers that womanism is a more relevant concept that upholds the respect for the family unit by Africans both on the continent and the diaspora, Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) rejects any man-hating ideology considers it as un-African Womanism thinks that men and women should make harmony their mutual concern ; and this harmony should be in the home and in the society at large.

It is true that Nwapa’s criticism of sexism as a deterrent to national progress appears to be a feminist stand ; because as Maggie Humm (1986) observed, “women become feminist by becoming conscious and criticizing the power of symbols and the ideology of culture” (41). But Nwapa’s ideology is identified to African feminism, another term for womanism. Her fiction shows the true nature of woman, her role, and her contribution to the development of her society, which were played down or neglected in the works of the male writers. Nwapa’s major concern for improving the quality of her community, not just women’s lives, marks her politics. Genuinely democratic, her ideology is integrative rather than solely woman-centered. One can say that she does not see the problem of her country Nigeria as solely gender-specific.

In Flora Nwapa’s novel *Never Again*, the central

issue is the role of women as mother in a society devastated by war, a patriarchal preoccupations we said earlier. Nwapa chooses a war situation to demonstrate the mutual dependency of the sexes ; because war is another situation in which survival takes precedence over custom. Men and women easily become partners when it aids their survival. In *Never Again*, women are not the main actors on the war fronts, but their actions are determinant :

They make uniforms for the soldiers, they cooked for the soldiers and gave expensive presents to the officers. And they organized the women who proyed every Wednesday for Biafra (07).

The writer’s conviction is that with collaborative efforts from men and women, the war can be won. It is said that “ there are a group of men and women who are dedicated to the cause of Biafra ” (18). Nwapa considers the contribution of every individual as determinant. Kate’s aunt (an old woman) informs us : “We dare Nigerians to come. I am old, but I am going to kill one with my pistol before they kill me” (43). Even her very old husband declared : “I am an old man...I am not going to leave my fatherland ” (44).

Though Nwapa always empowers her female characters, giving them authority, her women always express a need for men’s complementarity. Though Efuru has been very strong and very successful, she has always longed for a suitable husband. Idu was more fortunate, and lived a very romantic life with her husband. That is why she saw her life as useless at the latter’s death and died consequently. The following complaint presents the kind of relationship that existed between Idu and her husband before the latter’s death :

Mother, I will not weep. That is not what we agreed. Adiewere and I planned things together. We did not plan this. We did not plan that he would leave me today and go to the land of the dead. Who will I live with ? Who will be my husband ? The father of my only son ? Who will talk to me at night ? ... I am going with my husband. Both of us will go there, to the land of the dead. (210)

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And we are informed that Idu really died. (217-18).

In *One is Enough, Women are Different* (1986) and others, women seem to be in search of appropriate men in order to live a comfortable and complete life and grow fully. This ideology which does not exclude one sex from the discourse is a fundamental aspect of Nwapa's fiction. True, Nwapa's fiction focuses on women primarily. But every female character's destiny is seemingly linked to that of a man and vice versa. This ideology is the basic principle that sustains womanism in literature. For the womanist, the vital unity of the people evolving a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women is better than a "debilitating and devastating political struggle for women's liberation, independence, and equality against men, to prove a feminist point" (Ogunyemi, 1996 : 121).

To conclude this analysis, I would say that contrary to male writers, Nwapa projects female characters in her fiction to show that women's voices should not be muffled voices of a group of subaltern, but ideological voices. She was reformist in her tendencies. *Efuru*, Idu, Amaka, Kate, Madam Agafa, Rose, Agnes, Dora and others in Nwapa's major novels are very remarkable women, strong, competent, ambitious, courageous, hardworking and successful in their various activities. Because many are economically independent, they are also self-reliant, rejecting all subjugation and male oppression, and protesting against the second position of their gender. The writer uses this strategy in her fiction to show the importance of collaboration and complementarity among the sexes and to prove thus a womanist point. Gayle Greene (1991) remarked, "to write about women's issues is not necessarily to address them from a feminist perspective". (:02). Nwapa moves towards the creation neither of man's world nor a woman's, but human world. In her fiction we see a "new" woman

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