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Mother of the House: Exploring Flora Nwapa's Efuru's Legacy

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Abstract

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) is a seminal work of African literature that explores themes of identity, culture, and womanhood in post-colonial Nigeria. This article examines Nwapa's portrayal of *Efuru*, a strong and independent protagonist navigating traditional Igbo society and modernity. We'll analyze the novel's representation of female empowerment, cultural heritage, and the complexities of Igbo womanhood, highlighting Nwapa's contributions to African feminist literature.

Keywords: Nwapa, African identity, womanhood

Introduction

African Literature refers to the body of traditional oral and written literatures in Afro-Asiatic and African languages together with the works written by Africans in European languages. It has a connotation and is also used to denote a particular set of objects. A given set of objects can either be displayed (individually named, or denoted), or it can be referred to a term that connotes it. Any given set of objects is either an evolving set or a non - evolving set, depending on whether the new members are added to it from time to time. It should be observed that an extensional definition cannot display or name all the members of an evolving set; it would therefore have to name an initial sub - set and then supply some decision procedure for determining the rest of the members of an evolving set.

The set membership by criteria of family resemblance is clearly of the sort where even an object which meets most of the criteria for inclusion could still be excluded by a minority of very weighty counter considerations. It is a pragmatic rather than a rigid or dogmatic approach. In the specific case of literatures, a non - evolving set would be the literatures of eras dead and gone, e.g., the literatures of Pharaohnic Egypt, classical Greece, ancient Rome, medieval Europe, Tang Dynasty China, Pre-Tokugawa Japan, Inca, Aztec and



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other Pre - Columbian America, and Pre - Colonial Africa. An evolving set would be any ongoing literature of the present day or era, or any literature so defined as to include an ongoing literature of the present day or era. This means, for instance, that whereas Tang Dynasty Chinese literature is a non - evolving set by itself. All the Chinese literature, including the literature of the Tang Dynasty and of China today, is an evolving set. To return to the practical matter at hand, that of determining what body of works constitute African literature, it should be clear by now that the concept of African literature, like the concept of other national or regional literatures, is one whose denotation is an evolving set.

The impact of colonization and rapid socio-economic change on gender is an important area of study. Even anthropologists (who were mostly male and white) assumed that women in traditional societies were more suppressed than in Western industrialised societies. It was naturally concluded that imposition of colonial rule brought about the emancipation of women, through the introduction of an enlightened European attitude to women.

The Victorians saw women in non-western societies as oppressed and servile creatures, beasts of burden, chattels who could be bought and sold and who eventually be liberated by Christianity and progress. With the development of anthropology in the first half of the 20th century the Victorian attitude gave way to what appeared to be a less biased view, but in fact reflecting a similar and more subversive one, as superficial scientific data was used to reinforce the bias. An oft quoted example is that of E.E. Evans-Pritchard who stated that “the adult primitive woman is above all a wife, whose life is centred in her home and family, and that “she has never heard of social equality” (54).

Women critics who have brought feminist insight into their study of African literature and who have like the woman writer been able to successfully evaluate the experiences of women as depicted in literature they have been singularly responsible for creating a forum which has brought the African woman writer out of the wraps. Carole Boyce Davies considers Loyd Brown as an exceptional male critic and his *Women Writers in Black Africa*, the most impressive work to date, because he identifies the woman's voice in African Literature. Bessie Head, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta are evaluated on the basis of their major contribution as writers and the fact that they have been ignored in critical studies has been corrected.

Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa (13 January 1931 – 16 October 1993), was Nigerian author who has been called the mother of modern African Literature. She is the forerunner to a generation of African women writers, and also acknowledged as the first African woman novelist to be published in the English language in Britain. She achieved



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international recognition, with her first novel *Efuru*, published in 1966 at the age of 30 years by Heinemann Educational Books. While never considering herself a feminist, she is best known for recreating life and traditions from an Igbo woman's viewpoint. Nwapa is also known for her governmental work in reconstruction after the Biafran War, in particular, she worked with orphans and refugees who were displaced during the war. Furthermore, she published African literature and promoted women in African society. She is one of the first African women publishers when she founded Tana Press in Nigeria in 1970.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is the story of tragedy and triumph of a young and beautiful woman, Efuru the only daughter of Nwashike Ogene, a distinguished and noble personality and his wife, a beautiful woman who took several titles herself. She is no less distinguished. Thus, Efuru not only comes from a distinguished family but herself is a remarkable woman as the novelist clearly states in the opening sentences of the novel. She has chosen a novel way of getting married. Efuru is a typical Igbo village girl, but highly individualistic. Born and brought up in a typical Igbo village, Efuru sums up in her character the best characteristics of African womanhood.

Efuru is meek and gentle, loving and generous and respectful to elders. She is an outstanding character, a popular figure everywhere, liked and loved by the entire village for her beauty, pleasing manners and speech. In the novel, people say to each other that one could not help liking Efuru after one had any close association with her. This courageous girl's odyssey in life starts with this challenging decision of hers to seek fulfilment for herself in her marriage with a man of her own choice.

Adizua was poor and in no way distinguished. But Efuru's love for Adizua gives her that defiant courage to take up her stand against the native custom, as in her view bride-price is only of secondary importance and living with the man of her choice is of primary importance. She earns and saves money and sets in motion the due processes of matrimonial negotiations and payment of the customary bride-price. Adizua's men visit Efuru's father, pay the bride-price and obtain his and his family's formal approval for her marriage. Unflinchingly standing up to face every fierce campaign of slander directed against her and Adizua, Efuru ultimately proves herself instrumental in bringing about a happy reconciliation between the two estranged families.

Adizua is a farmer and he naturally expect his wife to follow him in his work in the fields. Efuru blandly refuses to be a farmer for she knows that she has a talent for trade and it is in trade that she could make good money. Her refusal to go to work in the farm and her preference for trade prove once again the independence of mind and self-assertive choice of



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Efuru. Adizua is a wastrel and socially a 'nobody' being the son of an unsteady man who deserted his wife for another woman.

In every way Adizua proves himself unworthy of the honour of being the husband of this brave, beautiful and intelligent girl, Efuru. It must be one of the quirks of fate or blind love that Efuru chooses to be Adizua's wife for Adizua is not a match either for Efuru's intelligence, nobility of character or enterprise. She becomes a figure of sorrow in spite of outward success. She is racked by an inward grief which none of her obvious gifts could redress. Her marriage remains fruitless and she dreads the consequences of a tragically sterile life.

Barrenness is a curse, a slur on femininity, and a flaw in womanhood. To become a wife and mother of a number of children is the highest ideal and aspiration of every African woman. Marriage and consequent motherhood being the focal centre in a woman's traditional role in African society, an African woman feels herself fulfilled and contented only in the attainment of these twin goals.

A barren woman may be a contemptible creature, an affront to her community and an offence within the eye of God for tribal ethos cast the lady within the role of creative and protective force in life. These restrictive norms militated against the complete flowering of African womanhood and therefore the barren wife's life was miserable. The sole escape she has is to convert herself as a lover of Uhamiri, the gorgeous, merciful, and rich but barren Goddess of the Lake and wife of Okita the God of the River and live the pious and saintly lifetime of a recluse who has renounced all worldly or mundane pleasures.

Conclusion

Nwapa's *Efuru* may be a bold venture on the part of the young author seeking to strike out into a replacement, untrodden path of projecting the image of extremely smart and delightful female protagonist who wills her way with indomitable courage and stands her ground firmly when confronted with vehement and sometimes vitriolic social opposition and protest and an adverse fate. Efuru, the heroine, is that the embodiment of each feminine virtue and beauty. With courage and grim determination, she pursues the trail of her own choice and patiently and fortitude bears the sorrows that come her way.

Efuru shows by her life that she is not any escapist 'sissy' female who meekly surrenders herself to the dictates of tribal traditions, village gossip, envious scandal-mongering or threats of excommunication. Twice she marries and twice she is cheated of the happiness she sought in marriage and yet survives these shocks to achieve a better bliss in achieving integration and complete identity with the Goddess of the Lake,



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Uhamiri whom she worships, thereby transcending the earthly considerations of delight and happiness. Both male and feminine characters play their role during a significant way as wife, husband, father, mother, brothers and sisters etc. Thus, Nwapa's *Efuru* is that the first and most bold departure from traditional image of a characters in African literature.

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