



THE PLIGHT OF BARRENNESS TO QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE JOURNEY OF A WOMAN IN THE NOVEL OF FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU.

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Abstract

Childlessness has major emotional and social implications for affected persons, especially in settings where fertility is highly valued. Childlessness is a terrible situation in most African matrimonial homes because of the social importance places on procreation in the African worldview. Flora Nwapa, in exploring the experiences of the Nigerian woman reflects this theme. Flora Nwapa's first novel Efuru portrays this occurrence as Efuru, the heroine struggles with infertility. Flora Nwapa wants to present a woman who undergoes this trauma in her novels through the central characters. The culture survives depend on the peoples capacity to learn and transmit it to succeeding generations. Igbo culture includes the various customs, practices and traditions of the people. It comprises ancient practices as well as modern concepts added into the Igbo culture either through evolution or outside influences.

Key Words: Childlessness, Plight, Infertility, Humiliation, Igbo culture, Economic independence, Quest, Identity.

The culture survives depend on the peoples capacity to learn and transmit it to succeeding generations. Igbo culture includes the various customs, practices and traditions of the people. It comprises ancient practices as well as modern concepts added into the Igbo culture either through evolution or outside influences. Offspring's are given prime concern in every culture. But it is given pseudo priority in African Culture and woman is subjected to maltreatment for infertility than man.

The novel Efuru is a portrayal of life in Igbo culture; especially it is a reflection on the women's life. This beautiful novel describes the

youth, marriage, and motherhood, mental and personal epiphany of a young woman of contemporary Nigerian. Efuru, the protagonist of the novel, is a manifestation as it talks about the ability of the women to be leader and reformist in her community. Efuru is a beautiful woman who is admired by the community for her business acumen as a trader, for integrity and her admirable qualities. Despite her admirable qualities, she can not seem to sustain satisfactory relationships with men. The novel tells the story of an in dependent minded woman Efuru, who later becomes a role model and catalyst of change in her own society.

As Nwapa's novels progressed over time, her women seem more and more liberated and happy with choices they make even though the community may not be completely satisfied. The women also recognize that happiness comes from within. The search of female characters for self-healing and happiness in a world in which they encounter and overcome innumerable traditional, cultural, political, and emotional roadblocks continue in the novels of Flora Nwapa.

Flora Nwapa's heroines possess individual thoughts and choices. Efuru displays individual choices. She does not try to be under other's will. This is evident from the beginning of the novel. She chooses husband of her own choice. The novel Efuru begins with the main protagonist Efuru meets her first husband, Adizua, after the festival in which young people are supposed to select their sexual partners Efuru's self-chosen marriage has much in common with the protagonist's marriage in Ibo.

Young Efuru, and others like her contemporaries, prepare for the customary

duties of womanhood she was frequently harassed by her father and a male cousin while she was dating Adizua. "There is no doubt that both men drove her into elopement before the bride price was paid on her head". Efuru is a reformer and becomes an agent of change by changing the rules that are suitable for her own purposes. As Adizua cannot pay the bride wealth, Efuru moves to Adizua's house in order to become his wife without either her father's agreement or knowledge. As is suggested by the proverb, quoted in the novel, "However good a suitor or might be, he was never given a bride for nothing" (Efuru: 191). Efuru informs the readers that self-development and growth is possible within the cultural boundaries. Marrying Adizua, she goes against the expectations of her society. She therefore is flouting the marriage conventions of her society. Efuru and Adizua resemble the couple in the Ibo. Similar to the *handsome stranger* Adizua is handsome but nobody, who is like his family is not known" (Efuru: 7).

From the beginning of her marital life, Efuru gives importance to her beloved husband Adizua. She always supports her husband in many ways especially in the financial matter and also emotional circumstances. Efuru long for begets children. After Efuru and Adizua try many times to conceive a child but fails. Efuru did not despair. She Says, "I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood,' she often said to herself" (Efuru: 24).

After Efuru and Adizua try many times to conceive a child, they seek traditional avenues to help the situation as to seek remedy to the problem. Efuru's main preoccupation is with childlessness and the disastrous effect this has on marital life in a rural African setting. This is a powerful subject, which, if imaginatively handled, can result in great literature. Nwapa's main preoccupation is with childlessness and the disastrous effect on material life in Igbo culture.

Efuru agonizes over her childlessness but does not lose hope. Adizua disappears like his father but never returns. This shows how different Efuru is from other women in her society. As Njokustates, "Barrenness as a mark of failure on the part of the woman rather than as an incident

of nature. When she finally has a baby girl, Ogonim, Nwapa achieves her first of three spectacular creations of women's freedom in the novel as the self arrives at an unqualified intensity of emotion and thought" (Njoku: 114).

Efuru gets pregnant. She feels ecstatic on that news. After obeying the instructions, she and Adizua have a baby girl. Still not believing that her social stigma as a barren woman is finally over, exclaims, "Is it really true that I have heard a baby that I am a woman after all?" (Efuru: 31). Although Efuru blessed with a baby girl, her baby is in a quiet and unobtrusive manner. Adizua named his daughter as Ogonim. Ogonim acts like any normal child for two years, she plays with her babysitter, Ogea and other children. But Efuru's happiness does not sustain longer time. Ogonim soon died of her ill health. Again she starts facing childlessness mourning. Besides her childless agony, the waywardness of the husband, irresponsibility, she failed to keep the marital bond with Adizua. On this aspect Nwapa depicts,"At this time Adizua was missing many meals. He would return from the market, have his bath and disappear. Efuru would wait for him and when he did not return, she would go to bed very sad. At midnight, Adizua would come back and knock; Efuru would get up quickly and open the door. 'Have you returned my husband?" (Efuru: 50).

The growth of Efuru is an in-depth study of womanhood. Her development occurs both in physical as well as psychological spheres where she looks for self-actualization. Efuru begins her journey by accepting the traditional roles that define the woman's identity and gradually moves towards ways of defining a sense of self. But finally, she stands on her own and keeps her individuality outside the experiences of wifehood and motherhood. Sabine Jell- Bahlsen in the paper Flora Nwapa and Uhammiri/Ogbuide, the Lake Goddess: *An Evolving Relationship* (1998), "In Efuru Nwapa focuses on the extraordinary woman and on her abilities, interests, and desires that may, at times, conflict with the confines and norms of tradition, the laws of the land..." (Bahlsen: 90).

Efuru's patience couldn't be tired she wants to enjoy life. She does not want merely to exist. She wants to live and use the world to her

advantage. This shows how different Efuru is from other women in her society. The death of her daughter is a sure indicator that her marriage to Adizua is over; there is no bond between them. She searches for husband with the help of her paternal relatives Agbor, Ndoni, Akiri and Ogwu but her attempt and lengthy wait futile. After Efuru takes her father's advice, she returns from her mother-in-law home. She is still young and may wish to marry again. She will not be able to entertain suitors while still living in her marital home. Efuru ends where she begins, in her father's house. Unsuccessful in her quest, Efuru returns to her father's home, since she has no meaningful existence in her matrimonial home without a husband. Efuru is married second time with Eneberi. She and even with her second husband, her equilibrium is still in question since she has no child. She loses many nights of sleep worrying about her infertility. Childlessness is seen as a failure in her society and Efuru sees herself as a failure, despite all the other admirable qualities she has as she is in a society which views children as possession rather than money. Efuru says, "What is money? Can a bag of money go for an errand for you? Can a bag of money look after you in your old age? Can a bag of money mourn you when you when you are dead? A child is more valuable than money, so our fathers said." (Efuru: 37).

Now again she leaves her second husband. She wants to live on her own. She want to put an end her agony by accepting the Lake Goddess, Uhamiri. Efuru achieves psychological balance only when a compensatory dream of Uhamiri, the Lake Goddess, who has no children herself, intervenes to restore her balance. Uhamiri is a mirror image of Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) who also doesn't provide children for the descendents. Emecheta creates the image of Nnu Ego parallel to Nwapa's Uhamiri in Efuru to adapt and extend the latter's subverting notion of motherhood. Infertility seems to be psychological ammunition, conscious or unconscious, against the traditional belief that women cannot do much for themselves. Since the spiritual night that Efuru accepted her destiny, she ceases to dream of Uhamiri.

She (Efuru) stops wasting energy longing for a child who is not about to come. Above all, she

begins to prosper in her trade like all devotees of Uhamiri. Efuru adopts all the children of the clan and arranges story-telling sessions for them on moonlight nights. She has realized that she alone can make and unmake her own happiness. Efuru finally finds fulfillment in herself. As in other of her novels, Nwapa problematizes the Western verses traditional opposition by having the characters expose the inconsistencies in their culture within self, rather than having one character represent a particular position.

Nwapa's findings seem to indicate that, in one sense, women of Nigerian have been handicapped because of the limiting effects of patriarchy, tradition and motherhood. In another sense, the same women, perhaps unwittingly, have contributed to their situation by fostering traditions and attitudes which are inimical to their development and humanity Progress in society today seems to demand that both factors be taken into account, and that women be reinstated in private and in public spheres as responsible and fully functional humans.

Flora Nwapa also points to the fact that Efuru, like any woman, she has to assert herself and control her life. Nwapa believes herself, "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. Hence, According to Apena, "Nwapa's sense of pragmatism and determination to succeed is demonstrated in the women's strategies enabled modern women to gain economic power and independence; they did not necessarily ensure emotional stability".

Nwapa's primary aim, therefore, is the restoration of the dignity of the African woman and the appreciation of her true nature, her role, and her contribution to her society – which were played down or neglected in the works of the male writers. She accommodates the childless, husbandless, motherless, the educated and the distinguished women who can help to reconstruct their community.

Efuru is by means a revolutionary because she does not completely neglect tradition and neither is she enslaved by it. Whenever traditional stipulations get hold of her personality, she scoops out of them to adopt alternative means to express her individuality.

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