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Uhamiri Deity and Women: A Study of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*

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Abstract

Research has shown that, amongst the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, there is still a strong committal to traditional religious belief in spite of the over one hundred and fifty years of Christianity in the region (Onuh, 1996 and Asoga, 2008). In this regard therefore, it is not surprising that Flora Nwapa presents the Igbo people as having strong beliefs in the activities of deities and spirits in her novels, *Efuru* and *Idu*. The female deity, Uhamiri, is depicted in these novels as participating in the day to day activities of the people in the community especially, in the lives of women characters. And since this supernatural goddess is able to participate in the day to day activities of women, she is able to inflict pains through acts of oppression on her subordinate mortals. It is to address this seemingly unlikely but crucial aspect of relationship between female characters and a female deity, that this study pre-occupies itself.

Introduction

The belief in deities and spirits is a very important part of most African traditional religious systems. Amongst the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, there seems to exist a general belief that there is a supreme God (Chukwu) however, the Odinani, the traditional ancient Igbo religion, is believed to have both monotheistic and pantheistic attributes whereby, a single God is believed to be the source of all things while a pantheon of spirits exist within the Odinani hierarchy. However, due to contemporary Christian revivalist movements, efforts have been made to demolish existing shrines but according to (Kalu, 2003) the “embattled gods of Igboland, merely retreated and refused to surrender... .” Okonkwo (2011) also believes that the gods have “demonstrated in the recent past that they are very much alive, resilient and active operating as it were, in a latent manner.” These claims indicate that many of the deities of Igboland are still in existence and therefore, constitute a part of the communities’ cultural and religious life. Little wonder then, that they should be represented in the literature of the region. These supernatural gods and goddesses play significant roles in the lives of the people who believe in them. In some parts of Igboland for instance, members of the communities are picked as human representatives of the deities or spirits. The representatives of the spirits or deities are feared and revered as the situation requires that the representatives would fear the real deity or spirit. Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *Idu* naturally, portray the influences that the Uhamiri deity has on the lives of the principal characters in the two novels under study.

Theoretical Framework

There are different schools of thought with regards to literary criticism. However, each strand of criticism upholds certain tenets that its proponents think will best analyse literature. For the purpose of this paper, the theory of New Historicism seems the most apt critical theory given the fact that Odinani’s pantheistic attributes are debatable in contemporary discourses. The New Historicist theory is based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the cultural history of the author and the history of the critic. Furthermore, the Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer’s times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer’s times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts colour the critic’s own conclusion.

Definition of Deity

The term deity has been defined variously by researchers however, its roots can be traced to Latin words *deus*, *divus* and *deitas* and Greek word *dios*. These terms connote the essentials of a god with the notion of “a god or goddess” (Knight, 2009). In the *Myth Encyclopaedia*, the term refers to “a god or goddess, a supernatural being who influences human life.” Also, Onwubiko (1991: 61) states that deities are “the spirits that are known by names, localized, enshrined and regularly worshipped, community, kindred or family gods.” By these definitions, Nwapa’s text under study shall be examined accordingly.

Review of Relevant Literature

A lot has been written on the theme of women's aggression towards other women in African literature (Tarabishi, 1988, Nkereuwem 1997, Mohammed, 2004), however, deities and goddesses who are female elements of society also inflict unwarranted punishments on female characters just like their human characters.

Works by Flora Nwapa, Africa's first published female novelist are not new to literary researchers across the globe. Her *Efuru* is special because it occupies a foremost position in the minds of academics and students of African literature being the first text to erupt from the bowels of a woman and that marked the beginning of the dismantling of the shackles of male dominance in the African literary arena. From that moment, women began to re-think their God given abilities and other talents. There are critical essays, reviews and seminar presentations on the works of Flora Nwapa, highlighting the theme of victimization, though focus has always been on inter or intra gender victimization/oppression of women by men or women by women respectively. *Efuru* and *Idu* abound with instances of the oppressive behaviours of women figures or goddesses towards other women however, in her critique of Nwapa's novels; Caroline Ifeka in "The World of Women" observes that the goddess, Uhamiri, denies fertility to her devotees, but showers prosperity in business on them. This paper will show that Uhamiri's denial of fertility is oppressive though her magnanimity in business is acknowledged.

Uhamiri's activities have similarly come under study in a comparative appraisal of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and Nwapa's *Efuru* by Eustace Palmer (1972). Palmer observes that *Efuru*, having been chosen by the goddess of the lake as one of her worshippers, will be rich, will not have a successful marriage and will not have children. He then concludes by observing that "Efuru ends where she began - in her father's house, except that her father is now dead. She is childless, husbandless, fatherless - quite alone" (pp. 56 - 8). It will be shown that *Efuru*'s condition as correctly described by Palmer is made possible by Uhamiri's evil qualities and the victimisation of women.

Also on the image of the goddess Uhamiri, Chikwenye Okonyo Ogunyemi (1988) in her study, "Women and Nigerian Literature", refers to the goddess Uhamiri as the "mentor and an example to victimized womankind" (pp. 61 - 2).

Ogunyemi glorifies the image of the river goddess Uhamiri, but to say that she represents an "example to victimized womankind" is contrary to the findings in this study. This paper demonstrates that rather than the liberator posture she is made to assume by Ogunyemi, the goddess is actually the victimiser of womankind.

In *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, Oladele Taiwo (1984) observes that the novelist presents Uhamiri as an "Omnipresent goddess who directs the affairs of man... endowed with enormous mysterious super-natural powers" (p. 56). Here, Taiwo has correctly described the position and powers of the river goddess, Uhamiri. In addition, however, it will be shown that this omnipresent goddess fails to provide the much needed succour to her worshippers living within the "Shackles imposed by society in favour of men" (Ibid).

Femi Ojo - Ade (1993) in "Female writers, male Critics", observes that the lives of both Efuru and Idu are surrounded by contradictions and ironies. In addition, he posits that these two characters (Efuru and Idu) are quintessence of African women whose lives revolve around some inexplicable insistence on certain traditional values within the patriarchal society. This study will show that such contradictions and ironies exist in the lives of Efuru and Idu because of the activities of Uhamiri, the river goddess. (158).

The Uhamiri Deity and Victimization of Women in Efuru and Idu

It is obvious that Nwapa preoccupies herself with the theme of barrenness because the Igbos, look upon a barren woman as bad luck in any family. Uhamiri is the goddess of fertility; both agricultural and procreation. It is believed that she chooses whom to bless with abundance in farm produce and children. When she denies her blessings, her victims suffer untold hardship and humiliation in the case of the fruit of the womb. The misery and humiliation that Efuru and Idu suffer, as a result of Uhamiri's refusal to bless them with children, is seen as the punishment that Uhamiri metes out indirectly to them.

In this regard therefore, Efuru's inability to bear more children after Ogonim's death is an intentional affliction by Uhamiri so that Efuru will become her worshiper. The result of her inability to have children becomes a catalyst that Omirima hinges on when she suggests that Efuru should marry her housemaid, Ogea for Adizua, her husband. This suggestion brings Efuru great unhappiness and repeatedly, she calls on the water goddess to bless her womb.

Although Efuru is said to be a good, kind, loving, beautiful and wealthy woman, Omirima contends that "good but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go on errands for us" (163). In other words, she sees Efuru only in relation to her inability to procreate.

Also, on the occasion of Efuru's strange illness, and in spite of the numerous *dibias* (medicine men) consulted, when her condition does not improve, Omirima alleges adultery; and that Efuru can only get well if she confesses to this sin. Surprisingly, Gilbert believes Omirima and he pleads with Efuru to confess her sins or face death. Efuru is aggrieved and disappointed in her husband. As soon as she became able, Efuru left Gilbert for good. This separation is brought about by Omirima. Her hatred of Efuru coupled with all the miseries and unhappiness that Efuru had to leave with, are tied to the fact that Efuru is denied fruits of the womb by Uhamiri and thus, remained childless.

The role of Uhamiri suggests that she is a woman, though not of the mortal form. Her role and participation in the lives of living women makes her important in this study because she is indeed oppressive towards women. It is also important to note that the river goddess occupies a position that is not comparable to any human's because, she is a goddess and as such, her oppression is expected to carry far reaching consequences since she is in a position to know the future. It is in this light that Oladele Taiwo (1984) refers to her as "an omnipresent god who directs the affairs of man. She is endowed with enormous mysterious supernatural powers" (p. 56). In order to fully understand the travails of Efuru who has been described by most as good, it is important to

view her sufferings, frustration, misery and indeed victimization at the hands of other women as the makings and design of the super human river goddess.

The river goddess, in her scheming, chooses Efurū to be one of her adept worshippers from the very beginning though she (Efurū) has been unaware of it. Like her late mother, Efurū discovers the similarities between her own dreams of Uhamiri and those of her mother's after a discussion with her father, Nwashike Ogene on the issue. Efurū's mother had died pre-maturely and as a result, could not play the object of destruction in the hands of Uhamiri. It is Efurū that has to pay for it. Like her mother, Efurū is to bear just one child. This is the making of Uhamiri because she herself is said to be barren. As a barren goddess she is unwilling to grant children to those women who ask for them because she loves riches not children. Surprisingly, it is the boisterous Omirima who makes this clear to Amede when Efurū does not become pregnant. She blames Efurū's childlessness on her acceptance to worship Uhamiri when she says: "your daughter-in-law must be a foolish woman to go into that..." (p. 162). In addition, Omirima goes on to enumerate the women who have joined in the worshipping of Uhamiri as all barren women "How many women in this town who worship Uhamiri have children? Answer me Amede, how many?"(p. 162).

This is a pointer to the fact that Uhamiri deprives women of the joys of motherhood. Additionally, it reveals that Uhamiri, understands the primary role of a woman, as mother, in a patriarchal society. By her understanding also, she exploits these women spiritually to worship her without reservations; while she, on the other hand, deprives and victimises them. Furthermore, as a barren goddess herself, Uhamiri ensures that her worshippers do not sleep with their husbands on "Orie days" (Orie days are days set aside for the worship of Uhamiri) amongst other restrictions. Such rules are deliberate and are meant to keep the women from having children because motherhood and priestess-hood cannot go together. And apart from this, Uhamiri who is aware of the importance that patriarchy attaches to procreation should have blessed her worshippers with children. This is not to be because the goddess is a victimiser of women. She is not even concerned with the welfare of her adept worshippers like Efurū, who has been insulted and subjected to untold misery by other women as a result of her inability to have children. Also of importance is the picture of a demented worshipper of Uhamiri, which Efurū recollects through reminiscence. The woman is said to have shouted at the top of her voice only to break into a pathetic song employing Uhamiri to have mercy "Uhamiri please, Uhamiri please, Uhamiri the goddess please... please" (p. 147). The woman's plea is for freedom from Uhamiri's bondage but, the oppressive goddess, does not grant favours as the woman is said to have remained cross legged on the floor for days "Singing and swaying from side to side; sometimes she would get up, take hold of one part of the thatched roof and shake it vigorously. She was truly possessed." (p. 148)

Finally, it is only at the end of the novel, that Efurū, realises the origin of all her suffering and humiliations to have emanated from the water goddess, Uhamiri, because, only then does she realise that supernatural forces have been in play in her troubles "it is the will of our gods and my *chi* that such a misfortune should befall me." (p. 220). Having realized this about her life, Efurū

then questions why women devote their lives to the worship of Uhamiri when she does not provide any succour to her worshippers - "she had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?" (p. 221).

The answer lies in the fact that the women worshippers of Uhamiri are under the spell of the oppressive goddess and as such, are not in the position, to question their followership of the deity. The goddess on her own part picks on these women and then, ensures that they become barren because, she figures that her worshippers cannot combine motherhood with their roles as priestesses. It is in her denial of motherhood, that Uhamiri becomes oppressive to mortal women who exist within a society that believes in procreation.

Like in *Efuru* the activities of Uhamiri, or our lady of the lake, as she is referred to in *Idu* can be said to be oppressive. Whereas Uhamiri distorts Efuru's life because she is a devotee Taiwo 1984, Idu actually suffers victimization "because of her over-emphasis on children" (p. 56)

Idu is victimised by Uhamiri because after the birth of her son Ijeoma, she does not feel absolute fulfilment as a mother because of the desire to have many more successive births since the society expects that of her. When the desired pregnancy is not forth-coming, Idu encouraged her husband Adiewere to marry a new wife. However, this marriage does not last long and Idu starts to negotiate for another wife on behalf of her husband for fear of being called evil by other women like, Onyemuru. Before the second marriage however, Idu discovers that she herself, is pregnant. This pregnancy makes both Adiewere and Idu very happy though for a brief period because Adiewere suddenly dies of a mysterious disease.

Consequently, Idu sees no use out-living him and she dies after eating a "good" meal. Idu's death is therefore a direct punishment, from the lady of the lake since the entire novel revolves around the indispensability of children; Idu should not have died with the pregnancy that she so desperately prayed for. It is this over-insistence on children, as Taiwo observes, that claims her life. Similarly, the manner of Idu's death suggests a supernatural intervention because it is too sudden and unconvincing to be real though Ernest Emenyonu (1975) argues that "among the Igbo, the love between two individuals can be such that one can die without the other." (p. 29). In this case, Uhamiri is responsible for Idu's death because of the pregnancy. The goddess sees her pregnancy as a threat/ obstacle on Idu's path that is likely to hinder her from a committed course of worship. Just like Uhamiri in *Efuru*, the lady of the lake understands the patriarchal expectations of a woman and being a barren goddess herself, she will not grant children to those women who desire them. And, for those women who over-emphasize and insist on children, the lady of the lake punishes. This unfortunately, is the fate that befalls Idu.

Conclusion

The patriarchal society that Nwapa writes about is the kind of society that has a strong affinity to kinship and as such, fecundity is a highly regarded binding factor in marriages. When a woman is unable to bring forth fruits of the womb, other members of the community especially, women, often deride and victimise the affected woman. The misery and humiliation that such women often endure are better imagined. Uhamiri is a female goddess and because she participates in the

day to day lives of the community she is able to victimise when she does not grant her followers the blessings that she alone is able to give. Consequently, for the simple reason that Uhamiri is herself barren, she becomes vindictive and would not grant motherhood to her subordinate women worshipers. As an unaccomplished goddess, she finds ways to make the lives of women unpleasant; this is seen in the characters of Efuru and Idu. That she grants wealth to her adept worshipers is not enough for as Omirima states, "...but riches cannot go on errands for us." Women desire children to run errands for them but Uhamiri denies them and as rightly lamented by Efuru in the end, why indeed, do women continue to worship her.

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