

MARRIAGE, TRADITION AND SUPERSTITION IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU.

Tambari, Ogbonanwii Dick
Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Nigeria.
tammysublime@yahoo.com

Abstract

Most often local belief systems in Africa have little or no place for the woman participation in communal development. For example in some cases the woman is literally an unspeaking subject in matters affecting her choice of husband. Any attempt by a woman to act in defiance to this position is considered an aberration and an attempt to usurp the exclusive authority of the man. To further put the woman in position of gender inequality, the man weaves such superstitious components around 'tradition' and 'cultures' as to perpetually exercise certain authority over her without a protest. This paper argues that Flora Nwapa's Efuru gives an insight into the plights of women in a society where men are the domineering force in the face of feminine revolutionary awareness and not as objects of pleasure to a man.

Introduction

The rapid development of feminine awareness in Nigerian literature in the 21st Century is not unconnected with the exposure and good western education which the female child has been privileged to have. With women education and exposure came the awareness to self-assertion, right of self-determination and self-reliance. Nigerian female writers have taken up the baton to ensure that issues bordering on gender as it affects women are well projected and discussed as part of the literary discourse. Nigerian women writers have been consistent and persistent in bringing to the fore the situations of women in typical African setting. Female characters are developed in line with their male counterparts so as to achieve heroism in their stories which has hitherto been a narrative preserver of the men. An example is Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones*. The instinct for freedom is inherent in every human being and animal alike. The responsibility of the African female author according to Maduka, "is to fight against the dehumanizing treatment meted out to her (the woman) by man in various African societies" (2). African female authors, like their counterparts in developed society, have taken up the challenge of ensuring that they are not only seen but equally heard on matters that affect the mental, psychological and social well-being of the woman. This is articulated in their response to, and on account of, the experiences of the female folks in men-dominated cultural society.

Marriage

The stereotypical insinuations of Nigerian male authors of the woman as weak and therefore has no say in matters affecting her, is eroded in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. *Efuru* as a female character is well developed to meet the challenges inherent in men-dominated society. She is an epitome of courage and symbol of change. A leading light, as it were, to women who are satisfied with the responsibilities of minding the homes, procreation and farming. *Efuru*, as a character, has shown that men are after all not the bosses that 'culture' and 'tradition' bequeathed on them. From Adizua to Enebere and Nwosu, the major male characters, it is observed all failed in performing even the natural responsibility of husbanding and farming. Their wives in most cases become the 'bosses' as a way of playing down on the negative notion that the woman is weak. They engaged in farming, trading and the likes to keep the home going. *Efuru* is so enterprising and resourceful that she even paid her own bride-price. This is against the tradition and culture of the society. Chinweizu in his well-articulated text entitled, *Anatomy of Female Power* asserts:

Because every man has as boss a wife or his mother or some other women in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men that rule the world. Thus contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss... (12).

This has laid to rest the age-long notion that the woman is weak and docile. Nwapa has developed a very strong-willed character in *Efuru* in order to challenge the masculine gender's claim of dominance and superiority, and being in control of everything including the running of the home. The gender difference most often echoes familiar scripts about 'male' and 'female' traits. In the words of Martha Chamalas, "they are often synonymous with masculine and feminine behaviours commonly regarded as stereotypes. Women are said to be nurturers, interested in children while men are risk-takers, more driven to competition than women, and more focused on acquiring resources- that is, more interested in money" (19). The above copiously quoted idea seems to be in contrast or some aspects do not go well with the character of *Efuru*, who is so resourceful and compete with even her male counterpart in trading. Yes, she is a nurturer, even without children of her own, yet she feeds many. She can as well be described as an 'asset' due to her enterprising nature with her "midas touch" in wealth acquisition. She rises above the limit set by 'tradition' for women in her culture. African culture portrays the woman as one who can be replaced. But when the same concept of replacement in marriage is on the side of woman, it is seen as a taboo. Men can be polygamists, but the same cannot be said of women. However, *Efuru* as a symbol of change, not only replaced Adizua, but also walked out of the life of Gilbert without a reprimand from the traditional custodians.

Despite her exploit materially, *Efuru* remains an unhappy character for the sole purpose that she does not fulfil the requirement demanded of her by the culture and tradition. She is childless. As a highly revered institution in traditional Africa, the purpose for marriage has been for procreation and companionship, as well as for one to be accorded respect in the society as a responsible individual. To this end, certain rites are performed in order for marriage to be binding such as wine-carrying, wealth-price payment, among others. Above all, for any marriage to be successful in certain African context, it must be blessed with children, especially males, else it is doomed. *Efuru*'s wealth-price was paid much later in order to legitimize her union with Adizua after the elopement, and by her. Nwashike Ogene re-echoes this when they came for the payment:

I thank you for coming this night.
I was angry when my daughter ran
away from my house ... To cut a long
story short, I am glad you have come.
Welcome. (23).

This is an abominable act in African tradition. In other word, marriage between two individuals is considered as purely family affairs and not that of the parties involved. Therefore the issue of elopement is completely unacceptable. Marriage in the African context is the true test of womanhood. Helen Chukwuma asserts, "the true test for female assertion is in the marriage institution and motherhood. It is in the home that the real fight for women identity and survival is waged" (31).

The issue of motherhood has remained an issue of great concern in and outside the academia, especially amongst the core feminists. The concept of 'mothering' differs from 'biological motherhood'. Adrienne Rich, as cited by Rosemarie Tong, had suggested that, "Men have convinced women that unless a woman is a mother she is not really a woman" (87). Efuru suffers the fate of childlessness after she lost an only child, Ogonim, while in Adizua's house, her first husband. Her marriage to Gilbert does not produce any child and this is not unconnected with Uhamiri's choice of her as the priestess and devotee. Uhamiri is the goddess of the lake and it is believed that she has great wealth but no children, and so her devotees are usually enriched materially but not with children. All the priestesses before Efuru died without children but were wealthy. In the words of the Dibia to Nwashike Ogene:

You are a great woman, Nwashike Ogene,
your daughter is a great woman. The goddess
of the lake has chosen her to be one of her
worshippers. It is a great honour. She is going
to protect you and shower riches on you. But
you must keep her laws. (153).

This is the myth, the superstition that revolves around the character, Efuru. Central to every claim and definition of feminism is the attempt by women to gain recognition through their projection by female writers, to show that women are not as docile and ineffective as they have been portrayed by the male writers. Nnolim in the article, "The Image of Woman in Nigerian Literature", asserts:

Nigerian male writers rarely paint
uplifting pictures of the women in their
fiction. If they are not depicted as docile
wives whose identities are recognized
through their husbands, they gain
identities through motherhood (166).

The emergence of Nigerian female writers is to right the wrongs done to the intimidated, neglected, humiliated and the relegated image of the female as a way of redeeming it. To this Nnolim comments:

Nwapa's novelistic debut started therefore
with a missionary zeal to present a corrected
view of African female image in our literature...

and to fight sexism, and the male chauvinists' picture of African woman in our literature (4-5).

The character of Efuru is a deliberate, well-developed and well-articulated one to counter the stereotypic image of the woman by the male writers as "weak and docile". Efuru marries whenever and whoever she wishes to marry, and leaves the marriage whenever it is no longer going in her favour. Eventually she returns to her father's house to prove that she has her life to live and to decide for herself and that she is not the weak being as painted by the male chauvinists. Ordinarily, it is an aberration in African tradition for a married woman to return to her father's house, especially when that woman had gone through two unsuccessful marriages. Efuru represents the feminine protest and a challenge to male chauvinism. This is also a challenge to the redefinition of woman as "an object of pleasure or an object of use" in the utilitarian approach to the concept of woman. This is seen to be "severely limiting the dignity of the woman and the need for her to grow to her full potential as a human being with intellect and free will" (934). Efuru proves beyond every iota of doubt that she possesses full potential of what could make her stand out as a being with "intellect and free will". But the African feminism, according to Chukwuma, "is not anti-male and motherhood" Hence, Efuru's desire to have a stable home and marriage.

Women authors have made immense contribution towards projecting the image of the woman and her identity. This is usually done through certain experiences and historical antecedents. To this Prudence Ellen states:

Women authors often relied on their female experience from which to articulate a theory of their own identity. Experiences in the household, in a small village, in marriage, in religious life, in nature, and in the court provided empirical and rational foundations for reflection on woman's identity (1065).

In Nigeria, this is simply the truth as most of the literary discourses on feminist ideology are almost always based on personal or collective experiences. A good example is Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* that runs almost like an autobiography.

Superstition

Fecundity in African tradition remains pivotal to the success of any marriage and the happiness of the woman. The tragedy in the life of Efuru is beyond redemption. The mystery of the goddess coupled with failed marriages are interrelated. Agundu, the dibia, who is the 'seer and fixer' of human tragedies in nature seems helpless when Efuru and Adizua visited him:

Something will go wrong. I can prevent it.
But I must be given time. I have seen it,
but not clearly yet. Our fathers will help
me ... I shall ask their aid ..., a day to the
appointed day, Efuru heard that the dibia
was dead. He died in his sleep (35).

The gods play prominent roles in the life of every man (woman inclusive) in Africa. This is mostly based on superstitions. It is believed that Adizua eloped with another woman because it runs in his blood. His father did the same thing to Efuru's mother-in-law. The

dibia died in his sleep because he wanted to challenge the supremacy of the goddess of the lake. Certain night-birds are ominous as expressed by Efuru in a dialogue with Gilbert:

I am turning back. Let day break...
I know the moon is shining. There are
witches on that tree. You can hear the
owls now. They are no owls, they are
witches (118).

The psychological devastation caused Efuru through desertion and abandonment by her two husbands, Adizua and Gilbert, raises the question of what could be responsible for such calamity. This brings to light the role of the supernatural and superstition. In Elechi Amadi's *Concubines*, each of the prospective suitors dies in mysterious circumstances for daring Ihuoma's spiritual husband, the water god, by proposing to her. Similar incidents also unfold in the love-life of Efuru with one fatality, the dibia, who attempts placating the goddess. Efuru's lots is desertion, abandonment and denial of child-bearing.

Conclusion

Suffice it to say that female characters in most feminist-based texts are growing, counter-attacking as it were, the stereotypic identity for which they have been projected and known over the decades, and are moving on to assert their positions in the male-dominated traditional settings which limit and inhibit their potentials. They have risen above their limitations in marriage, which has procreation as its central idea; risen above tradition in a male society, and have refused to be held back by the belief system. Efuru is a symbol of a redefined, regenerated and great social awareness amongst women of the developing society. A woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world of equality. To this Simone de Beauvoir asserts, "women have been reduced to the position of inferiority in a male-dominated society. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression..." (35). It is quite unfortunate that in some African societies, women have become an appendage to the men. Traditionally, the women are inferior by nature to men; the concept which Efuru, by her entrepreneurial acumen, has proved wrong. The Nigerian female authors have a duty to create greater awareness amongst the womenfolk for them to know what their rights are, and to exercise them for self-emancipation mentally, socially and psychologically from inhuman cultural practices in order to stem the tide of cultural inequality. It is only at this point that women would have been integrated to make input towards societal development without any inhibition.

Works Cited

- Allen, Prudence. S. *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*. London: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.
- Amadi, Elechi. *The Concubines*. London: Heinemann, 1966.

Beauvior, de Simone. *“The Second Sex: Introducing Women as Others”*

www.marxists.org/./Introduction.htm

Maduka, Chidi.T. “Feminism, Womanism and Motherism in African Literary Discourse”

<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/>

Chukwuma, Helen. “Women’s Quest For Rights: African Feminist Theory In Fiction”

<http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/archivespring>

Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought; A Comprehensive Introduction*. New York: Westview Press, 1989.

King, Katie. *Theory in its Feminist Travel Conversations in U.S Women’s Movements*.

Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993.