

## The Concept of Marriage as Represented in Flora Nwapa's Novels

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the postcolonial African woman's issues addressed by Flora Nwapa in her three selected novels: *Efuru (1966)*, *One is Enough (1981)*, and *Women are Different (1986)*. Mainly, the paper aims at investigating the concept of African women marriage as an important issue that is influenced by customs and traditions, both past and present and Nwapa how intends to create awareness in women by appealing to them realistically, thoughtfully, and emotionally through her writings to find suitable solutions. The paper came out with findings that the most prominent issues that face African women are: patriarchy, marriage, infertility, polygamy, female education, and financially independent woman. Since women's roles are largely dictated by cultural expectations, hence, marriage can be one of the root causes to African women's suffering.

**Key words:** *patriarchy, marriage, infertility.*

### المستخلص :

تعرض هذه الورقة قضايا المرأة الافريقية في الفترة ما بعد الاستعمار, في ثلاثة من روايات الكاتبة النيجيرية فلورا نوبا و هي: إيفورو (1966), واحد يكفي (1981), و النساء مختلفات (1986). وجدير بالذكر ان هذه الورقة تهدف الى بحث مفهوم الزواج لدى المرأة الافريقية كقضية تسيطر فيها العادات والتقاليد على واقع المرأة في الماضي والحاضر و التي تعرضها نوبا و محاولتها في خلق الوعي في اوساط النساء من خلال مناشدتهن بطريقة واقعية و فكرية و عاطفية لايجاد الحلول المناسبة لها. وكذلك من اجل اعداد البعد الاجتماعي والثقافي للمرأة الافريقية. وتوصلت هذه الورقة الى ان الزواج والعقم و تعدد الزوجات و تعليم المرأة و استغلالها مادياً هي اهم القضايا التي تواجه المرأة الافريقية. و مجمل القول ان مفهوم الزواج هو اساس المشكلة في واقع المرأة الافريقية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** - سيطرة مفهوم المجتمع الذكوري ، الزواج ، العقم

### INTRODUCTION :

It is stated by Ladele that colonialism and its after-effects pervade the male-dominated literary tradition in Africa. Within the complexities of these realities, it may be said that African woman are doubly colonized, by Western colonialism and African patriarchy. Imprisoned then, by the authoritative phalluses which define her daily experiences and which seek to negate the authentic image of the African woman. (Ladele , 2009 , 23).

In literary criticism, whenever African literature is mentioned, African male

writers as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa thiongo, Camara Laye and others come to mind. These writers have been known for their masterpieces and novels that express African culture. The masterpieces respectively include; Things Fall Apart, Weep not Child, The African Child.

However, although African female writers have written several works, they are hardly known by most readers; since they are rarely given attention by critics. Kolawole contends that most male writers in the early phase of African

literature encouraged the marginalization of women. Chukukere confirms that the ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother. Fonchingong supports this notion by saying that social values are such strong that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to her degree of adaptation to these roles; examples abound. (Kolawole, etl al,1997)

As writers, therefore, African women are compelled to negotiate new sites in which they can articulate more viable and acceptable self-images. Interestingly, there are some brilliant African women writers including; Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Mariam Ba, and Flora Nwapa. In their works, they have expressed and addressed issues and ideas of no less importance than those of their male counterparts. For example, Mariama Ba, was a Senegalese female writer who wrote, has contributed high quality novels, including “So Long a Letter” (1980) in which she projects the classical statement of the female condition in Africa. Bessie Head, born in South Africa in 1937, is one of the most prominent African woman writers. She wrote several novels and short stories. Buchi Emecheta is the best known Nigerian female writer, who emerged in postcolonial Africa.

The most renowned contemporary African woman writer almost devoted her works to the idea of empowerment of women and other marginalized sections of the society, is Flora Nwapa. She is the first African woman writer to publish her fiction in English. She is regarded as a pioneer among her counterparts with the publication of her first novel, *Efuru* in 1966. Her writings

truly depict the society within the traditional and social contexts, a society that inclined to devalue women and question their feminine attributes and confine their role in life to bearing children.

Nwapa is highly concerned with things that matter and stick to showing them realistically. Her novels are rooted in humanitarian themes that deal with issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. Through her novels she expresses her deep concern about the agonies of women. While trying to register her disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal system, she keeps reminding women that the social condition of a society and its wrong nations can be gauged by the standing status of its women. She unceasingly encourages women to aim high by educating themselves, underlining her belief that education, economic independence, and self assertiveness are the important steps towards liberation since there is a strong correlation between women’s education and their overall progress including their economic development.

### 1. Statement of the Problem

African women are believed to have experienced hardships that have affected their lives in different ways. They are oppressed, suppressed, and considered as inferior to men, and can be looked down as second-class citizens. They are less education and have no equal opportunities in work. Hence little attention is paid to their stories and novels by male writers, critics and researchers. This fact is confirmed by Ladele who believes that in African literature today, including that of

Nigeria, there seems to be an identity crisis for women as one perceives a disjuncture between the typical portrayal of women especially in male authored literatures. (Ladele,2009,73)

## 2. Research Questions

African women have lived within a dominant male culture that oppresses and devalues them. There has been disjuncture between the lived experiences and the oppressive identities foisted upon women by dominant male cultures. To investigate this problem further, the paper raises a crucial question which is:

- What are the African women's issues that have been addressed by Flora Nwapa?

## 3. Objectives of the Research

- Reveal some women's issues as intended by Nwapa, and suggest possible implications.

## 4. Methodology

A qualitative descriptive research method and African feminism philosophy were used to explore the socio-cultural perceptions of African women.

## 5. Literature Review

In African Union Reports and Toolkits, it is stated that in many African societies, child marriage and forced marriage serve to cement family, clan and tribal connections. It is watched in the film *Difret*, at <http://www.difret.org> that in traditional Ethiopian practice, a man kidnaps, hides and rapes a girl and then, as the father of her unborn child, can claim marriage. Furthermore, Uphondo contended that in South Africa, there is a practice of abducting young girls and forcing them into marriage, often with the consent of their parents. (African Union et al,2015)

Moreover, Ohrt stated that a traditional practice in rural Ghana, Benin and Togo involves sending a young virgin girl to a shrine as atonement for a crime committed by a family member, often a man. In addition, Parikh wrote that in Uganda and other African countries, parents, family and community leaders typically plan adolescents' marital relationships, leaving young people from traditional families without autonomy in this decision. Child marriage becomes a business transaction between families that regulates and commodifies girls' and women's sexuality and reproduction. Also, it is reported by Greene and et.als. that in Kenya, girls are subjected to FGM at a very early age. This is because the more girls are educated the lower the chances of accepting to undergo the cut of FGM. Thus, contrarian members of the community devise ways of subjecting girls to FGM before they are mature and able to make informed decisions. As a result, girls are dropping out of school and opting for marriage thinking they will be treated as adult women.( Ohrt et al, 2011)

The previous studies as was reported by the UK group Young Lives reflect that in many communities the practices of early or forced marriage and FGM have strong cultural roots and a clear cultural logic, which suggests that some communities may not necessarily be very amenable to reform. This logic embodies two key elements. First, the families and kin group have a strong vested interest in the productive and reproductive capacity of women, articulated through the regulation by older generations of their sexuality and sexual conduct. Second, child marriage and circumcision are seen to ensure

girls' social integration and thereby their protection and their moral and social development. (UK group Young Lives,2013,24)

### 6. Data Analysis

In her three novels, *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Women are Different*; Nwapa tries to break the rules of her societies and free her fellow women from the oppressive custom of African marriage. It is said that if one wants to make enemy, one should try to change something in the society. Therefore, breaking the customs and traditions of society is not an easy step even if it is for goodness, especially in a patriarchal society. However, the message that Nwapa wants to convey is: African women's voices should be heard and their aspirations have to be met.

Nwapa's main characters in her three novels seem to be unhappy with their husbands. Both Efuru and Amaka are obligated to have more than man. Hence, her stories revolve around marriage or its consequences. The characters are shown to be suffering different ways. After exposing their cases Nwapa seem to suggest that each of them can behave according to the options that are available.

In *Efuru*, Efuru is deceived by her two husbands. The first husband, Adizua, tells her: **"You know I will be the last person to do anything that will hurt you, my wife."**(E, 26) Soon after, he abandons her and escapes with another woman. The second husband is a strong and good-looking man called Gilbert. At first she thought that he was the right man, and would be better than her first husband. They continued to live happily for about six years. But they had no children, and began to look for options, to avoid being looked down by the

community who is influenced by old traditions and conventions. Woman is always to be blamed for not having children. Efuru suggests that she should find a wife for Gilbert to keep her marriage and silence the gossipers.

However, Gilbert is not patient enough to wait for the result of Efuru's search. He decides to marry another woman, Nkoyeni. Gilbert's other side is revealed and his hidden personality is uncovered. He pretends to be a good and cooperative. But, he is not what he appears to be. He is absent for course of time, but also, in prison. To hide his shame, he tries to make troubles to avoid being asked by his wives, especially Efuru. He accuses her of adultery to hide the scandal of being in prison. Therefore, after proving her innocence, she deserts him for good and she says farewell to him forever!

In *One is Enough*, Nwapa depicts the African women's obsession with getting married. Amaka struggle hard to get a man in a village society whose people are socialized by the constrained customs of their ancestors. Amaka experienced different kinds of love relations with her first suitor, Isaac who dies in a motor accident. The second man in Amaka's life to whom she is married to is Abiora. When he marries another a wife without telling her, Amaka decides to leave the house for his new wife. She goes to Lagos to start a new life and free herself from the pressures and stresses of her situation. She plans to forget about the ideal of **"a one man woman"**. (OE, 7)

In *Women are Different*, Nwapa presents three main characters who are suffering from marriage conditions. These characters are: Agnes, Rose, and Dora. Agnes provides an example for African

woman who endures forced marriage. When she gets married, Agnes is able to run her household very well. She organizes her house work in a proper way, does the cooking, washing, and cleaning. Indeed, she carried out all that is required of a good wife to do at her house.

However, Agnes' marriage does not last for long. **“One night Agnes returned home to see her step-mother in a most compromising position with her husband.”**(WD, 59) This incident signals the end of Agnes' sad marriage. The issue of marriage is also presented through Dora who marries Chris. She gives him everything he asks for. She carefully looks after the children and her business in his presences or during his absences. However, he abandons her and travels to European countries for study. There, he marries a German girl and forgets about Dora and his children for many years. **“She believed in him. She believed in Chris, and now he had betrayed her.”**(WD,73)

Rose experiences three unsuccessful love relationships. Firstly, she is ignored by her school boyfriend Earnest, who leaves to London for study but he meets an Irish girl and is forced to marry her because of her pregnancy. Consequently, his marriage prevents him from continuing his studies. He returns home to ask Rose to forgive him, promising that he will come back soon and complete their marriage procedures. **“This has taken me by surprise. It is a long time and it is not easy to say yes or no. Go back to London; let's have an open mind about your proposal. I shall be here,” said Rose.**”(WD, 96) At the end, Rose discovers that Earnest involves in trafficking trade with Agens' daughter, Zizi.

Rose is deceived once again by Mark who marries her and stays with her for a few days. Then, after taking her money, he leaves to America for university study. He promised that he will arrange for her to join him soon after settling in America. In the end, she discovers that Mark is a liar. He uses her as a means to an end. He took her money.

Rose meets Olu, her third boyfriend as a businessman. She spends joyful time with him, and travels to different places in his company. Soon, he deserts her.

Nwapa is apparently dissatisfied with her community and its attitude to the question of marriage. In reaction, Nwapa underlines and stresses the fact that the society values of having children is more important than having a husband. Children are considered as woman's source of dignity, fame and protection. The author tells the story of Amaka's aunt who bore seven children within seven years and marries her husband another young girl to avoid quarrelling. She turned her attention to looking after her children. She succeeded in bringing them up well, and worries all her daughters to rich men. However, Amaka is the opposite of her mother and aunt's ideas. She believes in marriage more than having children without husbands.

To criticize some destructive marriage customs of the society, Nwapa employs Efuru in her first novel and Amaka in *One is Enough* to break away from those tradition. In Efuru, which is both the title and the name of the major character of the novel, Nwapa sets the scene for African marriage drama. When Efuru marries without dowry, her father has sent a delegation of the youth and wise men of the village to bring Efuru back home twice. However, she refuses to come home, and her choice must be

respected by her father and her society. Ironically, Nwapa reports the spokesman of the delegation who says to her: **“But your husband must fulfill the customs of our people. It is important. Or enemies will laugh at us.”** (E, 9)

Nwapa makes Efuru act against the customs and tradition of her society by getting married without obtaining her father’s consent or demanding a dowry. This is made obvious in a conversation between Adizua and his mother: **“... he told his mother that Efuru was his wife. ‘ I have no money for the dowry yet. Efuru herself understands this. We have agreed to be husband and wife and that is all matters...”** (E, 8).

In *One is Enough* (1981) Nwapa also employs her main character to break the social rules. Nwapa makes Amaka move to different places where her story will continue to take place, after the end of her marriage to Abiora. She uses her beauty to seduce men for the sake of making contracts. Not only does she seduce men in making contract but also she makes love with various men for the same purpose. She decides not to have husbands; for she has been disappointed in marriage. She wants to lead a free life without enslavement, stress, obligations or restrictions. She believes in having men but not husbands what the title implies; one marriage experience is enough in a woman’s life.

In the face of a patriarchal society where women are oppressed in marriage, Nwapa tries to enlighten her female characters and make them react in certain ways. In *Efuru*, Efuru is projected to prove that society's customs are wrong by comparing and contrasting her to the man she marries. On the one hand, Efuru is a very beautiful girl; her father is a well-known brave man in the

village who has brought fame and honor to his people. On the other hand, Efuru is married to a poor man who has never attained fame or received a title. Despite the social differences between Efuru’s and Adizua's families, she is forced marries him.

Another positive quality exemplified by Efuru is that, despite Adizua's bad deeds, Efuru tries her best to make appearance and behave like a gentle woman. In fact, she has continued her search for him in different places to confirm that he is still alive. After her long waiting, Efuru decides to leave her absent husband’s home. She says to herself: **“... Adizua is quite satisfied with this woman and does not want me anymore? Need I to say until he says: “Efuru I don’t want you anymore. Return to your father’s house, and when you marry again I shall come to my dowry?” ancestors forbid that I should wait for a man to drive me out of this house.”**(E, 63).

Not only in Efuru, but also in *Women are Different*; Like Efuru who searches for her husband, Dora travels to London, Germany searching for Chris. She is faced with the shocking truth that Chris lives with a German woman. When she faces him at the doors, he pretends that he does not know her. He sends her back to Nigeria.

Through the portrayal of her female characters, Nwapa intends to inspire women to take their rights and make their independent choices without following others’ blindly. Efuru is characterized to articulate Nwapa's intension by talking to her mother-in-law: **“Leave that to me. I shall settle it myself”**. (E, 8) Therefore, Efuru is portrayed as a confident African woman who is prepared to speak out about African women's issues. When her uncle

criticizes her for coming home late she addresses him by saying: **“I don’t care whom yet to tell.”** (E, 7)

Efuru is characterized to be a strong woman of the writer's choice. The author seems to imply that the importance of love is essential to the life a married couple. However, it always advisable for a woman to marry a man who loves her more than she loves him; this is the only guarantee for any marriage to last for long. Efuru refuses to marry Adizua by following the practice of arranged marriage. Therefore, she refuses to demand a dowry. This does not mean that she does not believe in her people’s customs; rather she tries to show them that customs may sometimes become destructive. People can do their best to change the out mode social customs, though this cannot be done overnight. Sometimes one has to follow these customs, this is why Efuru agrees to be circumcised without any objection despite the great pains it causes.

Nwapa calls for cooperation would be in marriage between a husband and a wife. The couples are required to exchange their views about the marriage preparations without interference from the community’s members. Nwapa is not against some customs, such as a dowry paying, she refuses the way but the way it is applied and practiced. Hence her depiction of Efuru’s and Adizua’s combined endeavors to collect money together by trading in yams in order to pay the dowry. **“We have to go to my father now that we have money... what day can we fix it...”**(E, 21)

## 7. Conclusion

One can safely conclude Nwapa’s theme of marriage in patriarchal society: despite the widespread oppression against women is practiced, particularly in relation to culture, women themselves have to be empowered through information and education to protect their human rights. Women should be educated through various means to valorize themselves and to develop self esteem; information about the functions of the female body has to be disseminated and positive images about the reproductive role of women must be projected; the community need to be educated about the contribution of women towards the development of the community and the nation; the image of the girl child should valorized through education, including religious teachings; adopt legislation which will allow women to inherit property, including land, in order to allow them to be economically self-sufficient.

## 8. Recommendations

African Females authors are highly concerned with the African women’s issues. Nwapa tries to reveal the women’s problems in literary works where she creates her characters as they encounters with daily life problems. She depicts it as well as proposing some solutions to those dilemmas through her writings. For they are women, they are the right individuals who express their sameness in truthful manner. Hence, it is recommended that they should be given more attention by reading their novels in order to be placed in their right position within the realm of literature.

**Abbreviations:** *Efuru*: E\_\_\_\_*One is Enough*: OE\_\_\_\_*Women are Different*: WD

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