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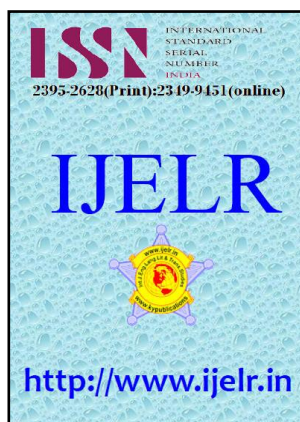
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REVIVAL OF USABLE PAST: USE OF MYTH AND FOLKTALES IN SELECTED WORKS OF
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ABSTRACT



In Africa, there is lot of importance given to tradition. They view man's life as an organic growth and decay- similar to the analogy of seasons. Thus the passage of time gives a unique character for a group that would embrace the events of the past in future. The process of reformulating a story into frames with patterns woven from both memory and telling is of significance in the works of black women writers. These women writers present oral tradition as an integral part of their works. This is especially true for the West African women writers of the first generation. The women writers from West Africa use myth as a linguistic mediator between spirit and self. These writers weave the cultural construct of gender in the imaginative texts where women take the roles of 'tellers' and narrate the stories through myths and folktales.

The present paper explores the strategies of collective discourse used by West African women writers like Flora Nwapa to transform the text into a spirit realm by making use of oral traditions. The use of lullabies and praise songs as structural events of language in her novels render a rhythmic quality to the novels. Ancestors and goddesses are a part of these stories that are the primal mythic source for Nwapa. Flora Nwapa uses rituals within the text to draw attention to the cultural patterns that frame the ways of telling these stories.

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In traditional African society, a man's life is regarded as an organic growing and dying according to the analogy of seasons. Thus the passage of time gives a unique character for a group that would embrace the events of the past in future. Songs and tales form an integral part of women's lives in Africa as they offer routes into various complex realities and challenges they face in the society. These tales and songs are told by a storyteller or a performer to express both joy and suffering. Jane Marcus says that the written texts of women writers can be linked to the oral traditions of women storytellers and singers:

"History is preserved not in the art object but in the tradition of making the art object....It is eaten, it is worn; culture consists in passing on the technique of its making. Stories are made to be told, and songs

to be sung. In the singing and the telling, they are changed.... Transformation, rather than permanence, is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women's lives."ⁱ

African women are participating actively in opening the doors for new stories and redefining the traditional roles assigned to them. There has been a paradigm shift in the representation of African women as they are becoming an increasing vocal force in the literary world. The epic tales of jungle safaris and human rights repression paved a new path for the contemporary literature in Africa and this has also influenced the women writing in Africa.

Researches in the field of African oral tradition have documented the active participation of women at both professional and non-professional levels such as crafting, storytelling and transmission of most forms of oral literature. "Ngambika" which is a Tshiluba phrase meaning 'help me balance this load' sets the tone for the complexity of issues involved in the study of African women writers. The term "Ngambika" is crucial to the discussion of women in African literature as it argues for a fairshare and balance that the African women seek for.

Contemporary research on verbal art and oral literature in Africa reveal that West African texts not only represent a space in which individuals play various roles in society forming power relations but also act as knowledge providers. The Igbo communities in Nigeria use folktales (akuko-ala- "the tales of the land" and akuko-ifo- "the tales of imagination") as a powerful form of artistic expression. West African orature has been created over centuries when people had to interact with one another in the form of dialogues and also in social negotiations when there was no written word.

There is a vast difference between the West and Africa in terms of Visual Art. In the West, Visual art is one that we see in the museums and galleries but for the Africans, art is what we see exhibited. For example- A traveller going through a Yoruba town in West Nigeria can witness some really good art on the carved posts or carved doors. In the West, the art is not only exhibited but also preserved as they believe in recorded memory. But in Africa, it is only linear memory where the individuals preserve their culture by transmitting it to the next generation in the form of orature.

Women in West Africa often use their artistic skills to document their daily lives and entertain people in their societies. They are the transmitters of knowledge who play a vital role in West Africa's oral literary heritage. Many songs and narratives are used to mark the important occasions of life like birth, naming ceremony, marriage and other areas of social interaction that are important contexts in which women function. On these occasions, the performances are usually targeted towards strengthening the bonds among members of a group, enhance their religious or associative relationships and reassert the sanctity of leadership.

In West African societies, the oral history and orature are interrelated. While oral history records the daily events, orature deals with the interpretation of this experience. Hence they together weave a pattern into the historicity of women in Africa. Most of these experiences are later written and recorded by the first generation of West African women writers like Flora Nwapa. Women use language that is not only limited to rituals but also involves verbal exchanges surrounded by dialogic rules. Therefore, women employ numerous West African proverbs that focus on speech and describe the personality of the individual with an indirect reference to the society. Language serves as a medium in the social discourse and hence literary texts became an important tool for these women to express their recordings of society.

It is therefore important to examine the relationship between orature and contemporary African literature as these writings give a deeper perspective into the oral art that helped shape societies in Africa despite the advent of modernization. This influence of tradition and orature is there on most of West African women writers who themselves testify the influence of their foremother's orature on their works. Nigerian women writer Buchi Emecheta said that she was very much influenced by her grandmother's stories and that she learnt storytelling skills from her. Even Flora Nwapa acknowledged her foremothers for their influence on her when she was young. She also stated that the idea of her stories for both *Efuru* and *Idu* are taken from her mother. Women writers use songs and lullabies as a part of their writings.

Apart from the songs sung on various occasions, the West African "lullabies" form an important segment in orature. For example, a mother singing a lullaby for her child may create a 'text' that has a message not for the little one but for the society around. She tries to express her sorrows and hard conditions of life through her song depicting a 'cultural context'. Even at the time of death, women have prayers and songs of lament which they consider will liberate the living and the dead from the burden of death.

Flora Nwapa is the first woman novelist and the first African woman writer to publish a novel in English. With the publication of *Efuru* in 1966, she changed the prevailing male perspective of women in Africa. Her novels encompass a wide spectrum of exploring the oral tradition and folk idiom that enhances generational continuity. Nwapa tells that she "writes stories about women because these stories are familiar to her.... It's left to the critics to say if I write for the women of Nigeria or if I write for all African women. I think of the story and I think of how best to write the story".ⁱⁱ Nwapa writes these stories for the future generations to present before them a traditional society that embodies the culture and spirit of her tribe.

Flora Nwapa uses proverbs to show the significance of speech form in her novels. For example, in *Efuru* the dilemma of female circumcision is brought out by Nwapa with the help of proverbs that the practitioner uses who comes there to help Efuru. She says: "The pain disappears like hunger". This incident also shows how traditions are passed on from one generation to the other. Nwapa employs this technique of songs and stories even to reveal the deeper human emotions like the theme of motherhood as a prerequisite for womanhood. The songs and chorus introduced in her novels reflect a cyclic pattern of life and death. In *Idu*, her second novel, Nwapa uses dialogue to show the bond between village women. Women meet at various places like the market and lake to share their experiences of their community. In this context, Adiewere's illness and Idu's childlessness and her choice of death all form a life-death cycle. This anticipates the sequence of events that lead from the everyday formalities to the choice of Idu's death to go against the conventions of society.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa enforces the concept of selfhood even through her minor characters. Ajanapu is talkative and boring but the strength of her character lies in her power of speech. She criticizes the western education system and the ill effects of the system on young men and women in Nigeria. She proves that it is not knowledge but wisdom that is essential for a person to define selfhood for an African woman. Efuru later on tries to define her selfhood and becomes the worshipper of Uhamiri. The Woman of the Lake symbolises her spirit of independence and self-fulfillment. The myth of Uhamiri is at the centre of the novel. Efuru's development is also defined by her relationship with Uhamiri. Nwapa treats this myth different from that of her male counterparts Soyinka and Amadi. Efuru's experience as the worshipper of Uhamiri signifies her physical separation and mental development.

In her novel *Never Again*, Nwapa records the changes that took place during the Nigerian Civil war with regards to women who handled relationships with utmost care during crisis. The stories of women during war portray the manner in which women navigate the delicate waters of family life, and life of society in general. The narrative of the novel *Never Again* is from the point of view of a woman who moves from one place to another during the Civil war. While Nwapa presents the importance of women during war, Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Destination Biafra* presents a new heroine in African woman. She seems to question the concept of womanhood through oppressive spirit in Debbie. She joins the army against the wishes of her parents. Unlike Debbie, Kate is not directly involved in the war activities, but she gains first-hand experience about the war. In *Never Again*, Nwapa chooses the religious source and water deity Uhamiri for recovery. The Lake Goddess in terms of divine presence and power is directed towards the protection of Ugwuta.

Flora Nwapa's 'oral literature' has set stage for many of her contemporary women writers to define the African reality. Ancestors and goddesses are a part of these stories that are the primal mythic source for Nwapa. She uses rituals within the text to draw attention to the cultural patterns that frame ways of telling these stories. These oral traditions function as transmitters of knowledge. Grandmothers who are located at the centre of this debate act as transmitters. This knowledge is positive and the children learn something new from the stories they listen to every night. Flora Nwapa carved a niche for herself by realising her potential to educate women around her at various levels through her experiences of society. Though the new woman is

not entirely different from the traditional woman, she is aggressive and assertive apart from being sensible and intelligent. Nwapa has been rightly called the Doyenne of African literature for her indomitable spirit and unflinching efforts to preserve the rich oral traditions.

ⁱ Gay Wilentz. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press. 1992. P xxv

ⁱⁱ Chuks Iloegbunam. *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Edited by Marie Umeh, Africa World Press.

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