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EXPLORING AND DEPLORING TRADITION TO REDRESS AND REDEFINE INDIVIDUAL DESIRES
IN FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU*

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Abstract :Traditionally, women's life has been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, cultures and countries by establishing values, norms, gender perception and idealism that prescribes unequal means, methods and routes to achieve the so called wholeness for women. It is uniformly believed that motherhood and wifehood are the two crowns of womanhood, and man has defined it in unequivocal terms. Flora Nwapa, an African writer breaks the above mentioned ideology in her novel *Efuru* which explores the agency of African women in reclaiming their bodies and identities and throws light on the culture of the Igbo people, especially in relation to women. Nwapa writes about women and their lives, issues, and concerns within a traditional Igbo culture radically affected by British colonialism. As she explores and analyzes many of the characteristics of her tribal group in the novel, she posits the women's desires for change, choice, and acceptance within a society in which they wish to participate fully as human beings not just in the roles traditionally allowed them—as workers, wives, and mothers. Instead, they wish greater freedom than traditional Igbo customs allow in the domestic and public realms. The paper aims to focus on how culture, tradition and society link a woman's ability to conceive her womanhood.

Keywords: gender, culture, choice, society.

The self-assertive and self reliant aspect of the woman's role in Africa has only become visible due to the collective efforts of African women writers. Many of the works of African women writers are demonstrative of the various identities women assume in the extended society. The female characters in their works are portrayed as multidimensional agents who no longer remain marginal to the plot. One such writer is Flora Nwapa. Flora Nwapa was a Nigerian author who has been called the mother of modern African literature. She was the forerunner to a generation of African women writers, and was also acknowledged as the first African woman novelist to be published in the English language in Britain. Nwapa is also known for her governmental work in reconstruction after the Biafran war; in particular she worked with orphans and refugees who were displaced during the war. Furthermore, she published African literature and promoted women in African society. She achieved international recognition, with her first novel *Efuru* published in 1966. While never considering herself a feminist, she is best known for recreating life and traditions from an Igbo woman's viewpoint. Women in Nwapa's novels portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the periphery. They explore, deplore, subvert and redress the status quo within their fiction.

The world of Flora Nwapa's first novel *Efuru* reflects patriarchy. It is a world bounded on a value system which is conducive to man's pleasure and self- realization. In the male dominated world where patriarchy is respected, women have no option to assert themselves but to obey and follow their husband. Women in certain tribal society become property to be inherited by the survivors' sons and brothers after the death of their husbands. And women have no choice nor likes and dislikes to follow the tradition.

In African masculine society a girl is not treated on par with boy. Even the death of Ogonim, Efuru's daughter is not regretted. People welcome and prefer the birth of boy to a girl. Efuru's father is more worried about the affairs than Efuru's personal safety. When Efuru eventually runs to a 'nobody' who cannot even pay her bride - price, her cousins are not worried about her personal comfort. They only think of the 'shame' which her action will bring to the family. In *Efuru*, woman is portrayed merely as a sex object to satisfy man's desire and taste. Efuru is subjected to having a bath in contrast to circumcision in man, only to denigrate woman, to make her potentially weak. The 'bath' is used as a metaphor to show that woman is inferior to man biologically speaking. In general, woman in the patriarchy of Flora Nwapa's novels is a second-grade citizen. Though an elder, she is not allowed to break kola nut in the presence of men. She kneels down to drink in the presence of men, and treated as unclean animal when menstruating.

Women are so internalized with traditional patriarchy, described by Kate Millet 'ideology of male supremacy' that they become their own enemy. Women despise themselves. So effective is their internalization of the society -fabricated disesteem that they meekly accept their position and are totally submissive. They are not treated as their companions and life - partners on par with men. Nwapa seems to have a different stance in *Efuru* against the established traditional norms of the society. There is the quest of women for selfhood and uniform treatment as men in a patriarchy in *Efuru*. Women are rebellious and try to be assertive in *Efuru*. In *Efuru*, a woman tells her husband on his face that the child she carries is not his, and when the child grew up she was going to give her to the real father. In the robbery episode in *Efuru*, involving Nwabata and her husband Nwosu, Nwabata ridicules the concept of male supremacy.

In the Igbo community the choosing of a husband or a wife is a lengthy process which involves the entire extended family. Therefore, Efuru's elopement is vehemently opposed by her family and the community. She chooses her man without her father's consent and lives with him even before the bride price is paid. Efuru breaks the tradition, but she is confident that she would earn and pay the bride-price. Nwapa, in *Efuru* presents individual desires conflicting with tradition. Efuru goes against age old customs and does not bother about what people say. Efuru participates in decision making in her family and in a male dominated society. Though Efuru has violated many a time the customs of her community, and she upholds its values and coherence.

Nwapa also highlights the importance of the extended family system like multiple mothering and kinship. In traditional society children belong also to the whole community, Efuru after the death of her only child takes care of brother and sisters of Ogea, her maid, and the children of her confidante Ajanupu. She tells stories to children in her compound. She treats the other villagers as if they are part of her extended family. She is the human counterpart of Uhamiri, the lake Goddess: "Even as the lake's blue waters help the people to prosperity, Efuru help people to win a little happiness in spite of everything"(Nwapa 123).When the community is in trouble, she helps them in her own way. She supports her self-pitying mother-in-law Ossai, long after the unfaithful Adizua deserts her; she continues to subsidize the ill-fated parents of her maid Ogea even when they no longer deserve it; and she takes an old woman to the hospital for treatment. Though Nwapa upholds the social institution of marriage, she is critical about Efuru's marriage with Adizua and later with Gilbert. For in both the cases Efuru suffers because she is a woman.

Nwapa also exposes the evils of African traditional marriage system. Since the primary purpose of the Igbo marriage is to raise a family and women's greatest glory is child bearing and rearing. The childless Efuru could neither be what society expects of her nor could she fulfill her desire within that context. It is not just marriage, procreation is also important for the society. The society believes in fruitful marriage and procreation for lineage. Efuru's sense of inadequacy is revealed in her relationship with her two husbands. Although she is kind, beautiful, hard-working and a good wife, she is deserted by one husband and after being accused of adultery, she leaves the other one.

Uchendu states that motherhood changes woman's relation to her husband as well to society: "Motherhood brings an important change in woman's status, a change from a mistress who simply attracts and allures to a mother who shares in the dignity of her husband and who has increased the lineage membership." While Nwapa advocates the preservation of a successful marital relationship, she shows through Efuru's unsuccessful marriage that Efuru could also be useful to the community. She chooses to follow Uhamiri, whose

role corresponds with Efuru's desire to be alone and independent. Nwapa presents African woman both as traditional and progressive. Efuru without protest follows traditional practices such as circumcision and does not oppose polygamy, traditional attitude to infertility. But as a strong, independent and free-spirited woman she flouts patriarchal authority by marrying Adizua without bride-price. Efuru is more a reformer than a rebel: she is an agent of change in the sense that she meddles with tradition to her advantage.

Efuru realizes that she has exhausted all of the regular cultural traditions expected of her as a woman and must find an alternative outlet to survive. Therefore, Efuru is allowed to have a dream about the woman of the lake, Uhamiri. Uhamiri was worshipped by all, men and women; however, the narrator reconstructs the view to give Efuru and women other options. Efuru informs us that Uhamiri "smiled at me and asked me to come in. I went in [to her house under the water] . . . Then she showed me all her riches" (Nwapa 146). Later, Efuru realizes that the woman of the lake does not have children and concludes, "she cannot give me children, because she has not got children herself" (165). The narrator has given Efuru a way out of the traditional role of women by ascribing to her the qualities of a follower of the woman of the lake. The diction she "asked" me to come in and "I went" shows a choice was made by Efuru. There is give and take between the two women, which indicate an acceptance of reasoning based on logic rather than the intuition that usually did their reasoning for women. Finally Efuru was able to sleep peacefully.

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