

## **Socio-Cultural Values Versus Women Liberation in Nigerian Prose: A Study of Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different***

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigated and analyzed Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different* to explore liberated women and their perception on socio-cultural values in Nigerian societies. Using content analytic approach of qualitative research method, the study examined various methods by which some women in the contemporary society achieve their emancipation. At the end of the study, it was observed that feminist principles promoted self-actualization through debauchery. Some female characters seem to destroy African values in the quest for liberation. There was no chance for reconciliation or commitment to the survival and unity of men and women in marriage. The study applied the theory of motherism, which advocates love, tolerance and mutual co-operation for the sexes instead of violent confrontation, in analyzing the text. It concluded that liberation could be achieved in a dignified manner. It recommended that the plight of women should be readdressed in a more rational and logical way.

### **Introduction**

With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a controversial treatise that indicted men of tyranny and also stressed the imperatives of women emancipation from inhibiting traditions; a new era which propelled a new kind of reflection and reconsideration of the significance of women emerged in African traditional societies. Tremendous changes were recorded on the literary spheres. Women writers began to rival men in their numbers as critics, poets, novelists and playwrights. In Nigeria, Flora Nwapa blazed the feminist trail with the publication of *Efuru* and *Idu*. She attempts in these novels to correct the seemingly disparaged image of the African women as presented in the works of African 'sexist' writers. She protests against the marginalized roles assigned to female characters. She notes in her essay;

I tried to debunk the erroneous concept that husband is the lord and master and that the woman is nothing but his property. I tried to debunk the notion that the woman is dependent on her husband...unlike African male writers, I could overlook neither the safeguards with which custom surrounds the woman in her community nor the weight of women's opinions. (93)

Nwapa as well as other African female writers create sophisticated female protagonists and present men as dependent and weak. They create highly assertive female characters in a society peopled by mostly weak, grossly irresponsible, non-enterprising, lazy, emasculated foolish and insane men. African feminists have however created a more lively consciousness about the significance of women in society. Their fictional and critical writing have also enriched African

literature. They really tried in creating a woman's world in which women characters exist in their own right and not as mere appendages to a male world (Banyinwa-Horne, 1986). There is no doubt that generally women are better off today than they were at the beginning of this century. While we eulogize the African feminist writers for their achievements, it is also very important to pin-point some of their excesses, which should be avoided for women's struggles to retain its justification. A lot of scholars have over the years focused their attention on the need for African women to be emancipated. Not much has been discussed on the means by which some of these women achieve their perceived liberation. The concept of women emancipation is a welcome idea and therefore should be derived in a dignified manner – through education, economic empowerment or a dint of hard work instead of conquering the men by sleeping around. Flouting of the established moral values should not be the ideal approach to women liberation. Is it proper for prostitution, adultery, divorce and loose lifestyle to be portrayed as revenge to men's marital infidelity? This paper therefore examines Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different* to expose how some women achieve their emancipation through dubious, drug-trafficking and home-breaking doctrines and give adequate recommendations.

### **Liberated Women in Nwapa's *Women Are Different*: Techniques and Implications**

Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different* embodies the new vision of women and their worldviews, especially in an age of feminist consciousness, female awakening or what is technically referred to as formalism by the 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist critics. It is an indictment, so to speak, of patriarchy and its attendant female oppression and brutality. The author explores this novel consciousness by creating seemingly radical female protagonists whose frenetic quests for liberation tend to subvert the tenets upon which African morals, culture and veritable ideals are established. In other words, she imbues her female protagonists with such excessive individualism and autonomy that can be said to parallel those of the Western Libertarian and Anarchy feminists. These feminists strive to liberate women from all forms of oppression, using all available means or techniques. Nwapa, therefore, appears to project themes ranging from divorce, adultery, prostitution and single parenting, all of which form her philosophy of women liberation in post-colonial Nigeria. Apart from her thematic preoccupations, her dominant styles and techniques, diction, narrative points of view, characterization, setting and locale etc, also deserve a careful study, as they function to project Nwapa's extreme feminist ideology.

Nwapa's response to the problem of women in Nigeria appears rather aggressive. In order to disprove the erroneous notion that women are weak, dependent, and hopeless without a husband, she creates different women; women who are not really concerned about courtesy or morality, break social norms, customs and tradition with impunity. These women – Chinwe, Zizi, Rose et cetera, offer suitable answers to the author's questions:

... Why these women become assertive and aggressive only after they have been brutalized or betrayed by their men.... Are there no women in Africa today who can hold their own without waiting to be brutalized or betrayed? Are there no women in Africa today who can say: To hell with men and marriage. I don't want to have children. I want to be free to do just as I please. (530)

*Women Are Different* is a perfect answer to these questions. In this novel, Nwapa creates female protagonists who truly represent her vision of different women in a new era of female

awakening; women who divorce their men at any slightest provocation, trade in their bodies as prostitutes, who refuse to marry, who say “I don’t want children, to hell with men”; women who are free to do just as they please.

The novel is divided into nine unequal chapters. This structural technique enables the reader grapple with the changes of an era – the growth and transition of women – Agnes, Rose, Dora, Comfort and so on, from the age of unenlightenment, fantasies and limitations, to a period of awareness, realities and independence. From chapter one to three, the author presents the ordeals and anxieties surrounding a woman’s determination to break away from the shackles of illiteracy and its several deformations. Thus we see the “three musketeers” (Rose, Agnes and Dora) struggling to pass their examination. When they eventually gained admission into Archdeacon Crowthers Memorial Girls’ School, Elelenwa (ACMGS), they find themselves confined, checkmated and emotionally suppressed. They barely expressed their deep feelings for the opposite sex because of strict moral surveillance. Miss Hill’s strong moral discipline serves as the super-ego which regulates and suppresses the girl’s excessive libido. In other words, the school (ACMGS) functions as a metaphor for women’s subjugation. It is a microcosm for female enslavement in an age of academic, economic, marital and cultural limitations.

The period of writing the Senior Secondary School Examination announces the preparation of the country’s independence from British colonialism. Nwapa uses this comparison as a technique to depict the freedom of women from inhibiting social norms. But the fact that Nigerians are not yet mature for the independence they scramble for is a pointer to the truth that Nwapa’s women are not mature to handle the independence they appear to fantasize from their first day in school. Now that they are about to leave the school, now that the long awaited liberty bangs on their door, what will become of their dreams and aspirations? Are they truly prepared for the sudden independence? Miss Hill’s agitation during Mazi Mbonu Ojike’s visit to ACMGS articulates the concern, fear of the writer about Nigerian independence on the one hand and women’s liberation on the other:

As the next three years passed, Miss Hill saw the girls God entrusted in her care preparing to face the adult world. Their secondary education was coming to an end. What kind of children are they going to be? Were they going to be greedy and undignified in manner? What kind of women would they be? ... there had been more and more talk about self – rule and even independence. (40)

The life of these girls after school reflects these fears. They really turned out to be greedy and undignified women. The remaining six chapters show the life of the girls as women, fully grown adults. They have become free from Miss Hill’s control. They have become conscious and enlightened. They are now better informed about their rights and liberties, and are bent on exercising them without fear. Agnes marries Mr. Egemba, bears him four children, falls in love with Ayo Dele and divorces her husband. Dora marries Chris but divorces him after a while. Rose refuses to marry after so many disappointments. Comfort marries because of money. Zizi (Elizabeth) becomes a drug pusher, a robber and prostitute. Chinwe becomes a professional prostitute, snatching women’s husbands to enrich herself.

The theme of marriage and divorce occupies a centre stage in Nwapa’s *Women Are Different*. Agnes finds herself in a marriage dilemma. She is truly in love with Sam, her boy-friend in

school, but both cannot marry because of Mr. Egemba – a purported medical doctor who not only pays her fees but also caters for the needs of the family. Apart from the fact that Mr. Egemba is old enough to be Agnes' father, he is also Agnes' step-mother's lover. As a matter of fact, Agnes' marriage is solely pre-determined by the active connivance of her step-mother and another woman who posed as Agnes' family relation:

I endorse what Cecilia is doing. The sooner she gets her out of the way, the better for her. She sought my advice, and I gave it to her. Marry her off as soon as possibly, so she will be busy with her own family and won't bother you with yours.... (52)

Agnes feels dissatisfied with the marriage and this sense of dissatisfaction reflects in her attire and facial expressions during her wedding. Agnes finds a new lover while in her matrimonial home. Ayo Dele her new found lover is married with children. Both engage in sexual relations. After a while, Agnes divorces her husband so as to practice her freedom without restrictions:

So Agnes left her husband in a most callous manner. He went to work as usual, and by the time he returned, Agnes had left with their four children. Agnes' father was heartbroken, and shortly afterwards, he died. (58)

The question is, must women divorce their men in a bid to address marital problems? Why must Agnes commit adultery all in the name of asserting her individualism? What will become of her children whose interest she did not consider before taking her decision? Is single parenting an ideal solution to marriage instabilities? These and a lot more are some of the questions that require objective answers.

Dora's marriage to Chris, her school boyfriend, begins on a romantic note. Both share things in common. They do business together, eat together and share physical and emotional intimacy. However, things started to fall apart when Chris travels to London with the financial aid of the wife who has become a successful business woman. Dora later discovers that Chris is living with a white lady in Hamburg. She returns home and quickly divorces him according to native customs:

A month after her return from London and Hamburg, she went to Chris home, got hold of his old relatives and divorced him by native law and custom. A few days afterwards, Tunde came into her life. (78)

Divorce seems therefore to be the most veritable approach to marriage challenges. One begins to wonder if it is solving or creating more problems, for the characters still wander about in search of marital satisfaction, even after abandoning their enemy-husbands.

Rose's marriage with Mark is not a palatable one. After losing contact with Ernest, her true love and school friend, she finds herself trying to put up with her loneliness. Impatiently, she marries Mark who jilts her for an Irish woman.

Ernest shows up eventually, but then things are no longer the same. Rose has already hooked up with another man (Olu) having divorced Mark.

Rose saw herself thinking of Olu. She tried not to be too involved, she tried not to be emotional, but it was difficult. She had to learn this. She must learn. She must

be like Comfort who sailed in from one relationship to the other without being the worse for it. (138)

Thus finding no true emotional satisfaction in one man, Rose wanders from one relationship to the other – Ernest, Mark, Olu and so on.

Gradually, the author moves away from divorce, adultery or what she calls sailing through from one relationship to the other, to full time prostitution. Prostitution seems also to be the philosophy for woman's liberation from men and marriage inhibitions. Comfort refuses and accepts men based on their economic worth. After playing around with men of seemingly low financial status, she meets with Dr. Oyele, and marries him for his wealth. She makes love with younger and appealing men while bearing the name Oyele's wife. Nwapa sees Comfort's promiscuity retaliatory measure against men's marital infidelity:

When I was talking with a group of women the other day, one of them, who has a doctorate degree in history and is unmarried, agreed with us that the society was sick. She said very heatedly, "if husbands run around with other wives, why should not their wives do the same" (100 - 101)

In other words, wives should run around with other people's husbands in order to strike some sexual balance in marriage infidelity! Prostitution, rascality and wayward living dominate the life of other female characters in *Women Are Different*. Chinwe quits school, and records progress in business. Her mother, Dora, could not curtail her excesses. She marries, but the marriage hits the rock as Chinwe accuses her husband of infidelity. She divorces him and takes to hotel business – an indirect form of prostitution:

Rose learnt that Chinwe had left her husband and was engaged in beer parlour business. This was hardly an ideal business for a woman who had left her husband ... The business was a cover up for prostitution, and not even an angel would make it respectable. (115)

From then onwards, Chinwe leaves the reader with no doubt about her disposition to the game of prostitution which she carefully learnt from her mother, Dora:

Chinwe has learnt a lot from her mother's problems. What she is doing is reacting to them. What Chinwe is trying to say is this ... "I am going to have my own back. No man is going to hold me ransom ... in short what she is doing is an act of revenge". (116)

For these women prostitution is an act of revenge – a way of getting back at men! It is therefore no surprise that Chinwe snatches away somebody's husband through whom she build herself a house and opens a supermarket. Zizi on her part waxes very strong in rascality. She attends night clubs, sleeps outside the house, joins a robbery gang and trades on illicit drugs between the age of fifteen and twenty. She submits her body willingly in exchange for contracts worth millions. Recounting or rather lamenting over her daughter's excessive radicalism, Agnes makes the following submission:

When Elizabeth was eighteen, I was knocked up by a police man in the early hours of the morning. A criminal whom the police knew was an armed robber was

seen with my daughter just before a robbery. I pleaded with the policeman, but he refused to let her go until I offered him one thousand naira bribe. (121)

As a proof of the fact that she has engaged in armed-robbery, Zizi appears the following morning in a Mercedes Benz and with Champagne to toast the car. Shortly afterwards, she is caught with Ernest trying to smuggle some hard drugs inside the airplane. When she regains her freedom from prison custody, she meets with Theo and both agree to marry on contract basis. Theo's parents have pressurized him so much that he merely wanted to avoid their nagging. He finds Zizi and negotiates with her. Both are to marry each other based on the terms that Zizi shall inherit his house in London and get away after that. This they eventually achieved:

Theo then met Zizi in London. She was in protective custody, liked her and proposed to her. She accepted him. Then Theo told her his conditions for the marriage. To begin with, he did not want to marry anyone. He was too young and he wanted to play around. If Elizabeth could leave him alone, not bother him in any way after the marriage, the London flat which his parents would give him, would be her own. Elizabeth agreed, and so the wedding ceremony was performed. (129)

This appears to suggest that marriage by contract would go a long way to guarantee a woman's marital independence. This calls for some re-examinations. Single parenting, which was partly mentioned in our previous discussions, also deserves a close critical attention. Nwapa talks about this theme (single-parenting) when she tells us about Rose's inner preoccupations:

Rose started thinking of a one parent family. Agnes and Dora were right when they told her that she could get involved with a man, be pregnant and be the mother of his child. Why should she not relax and be pregnant? (87)

One therefore wonders if these women understand the implications of their feminist philosophy. First, single parenting breeds children who can only qualify for bastards. It exposes them to various dangers because the job of raising children is overwhelming when it is done only by an individual. It thus requires the active collaboration of both parents to raise responsible children in the society. Zizi and Chinwe took to prostitution, drug peddling and armed robbery because there was no father to monitor and control their excessive delinquencies. More importantly, single parenting results in prostitution. It gives a woman the desired freedom to sail from one relationship to the other, become pregnant for a man and take responsibility for the child without recourse to bride price and/or customary rites. This feminist ideology by all standards shows no respect for our socio-cultural values, and therefore should be heavily censored.

Nwapa evolves divergent techniques in an effort to bring her seemingly scandalous philosophies to limelight. The general plotting of the novel – its language or diction, characterization, setting, symbol and so on, have semantic impacts. She adopts also the stream of consciousness technique, a third-person narrative point of view, the picaresque tradition and/or search motif, and a subtle pattern of poetic justice. For instance, Zizi is sent to prison while Agnes is ousted from Ayo Dele's house.

Linguistically, Nwapa's choice of words is simple. It obeys the simple sentence structural pattern of English Language – subject, verb object, adjunct, adverb (SVOAA) etc. This style makes it easy for an average reader to grapple with both texts, context and content of the novel. However



she embellishes her simplicity with verbal phrases laden with meanings outside the surface. In page twenty-two for example, she uses the following words:

Comfort made nothing out of it. Dora and Rose were a bit shaken. Agnes was in tears. She went patiently to Miss Hill and begged her not to give her a bad report. That will be the end of me and my schooling, she said. (24)

The words of the sentence do not require a dictionary for interpretation, but such terms as “made nothing out of it” and “was in tears” are phrasal verbs which require some efforts to be understood. The essence of Nwapa’s linguistic simplicity is to encourage wide readership. The author wants to cover a large spectrum of audience, especially women in Africa. To further accommodate the unenlightened audience, Nwapa makes use of Pidgin, Igbo and Yoruba languages. She code-mixes and code-switches in order to bring her art to bear. Comfort, the village girl, uses pidgin language to interact with the “three musketeers” in their first day of admission to ACMGS:

I know you, not you three I see for Port Harcourt last year when we do the exam? So una pass too? Me I pass too. But my friend no pass, im fail. And Im papa send am to Enitona High School ... Na bad school. Na so so Bele the girls day carry when the m go Enitoma. I sorry for my friend. Ego carry Belle too. (4)

Characters in *Women Are Different* are ever dynamic and constantly on the move. The female protagonists move endlessly for marital satisfaction, economic successes and sexual love autonomy, only to find themselves inter-twined in a bunch of complex relationships - relationships soon marked by divorce, cheating, jilting and disappointment. Nwapa shows through this medium, the vicissitudes and inconsistencies which characterize marriage in Nigeria, especially in this era of female awakening and feminist consciousness. It shows how different the women of this age truly are – Rose, Agnes, Dora, Comfort, Chinwe and Zizi.

The narration of the story from the omniscient point of view does not allow the reader judge the character based on the three cardinal critical parameters - what the character does, what he says about himself and what other characters say concerning him. There is an excessive infusion of personal feelings and subjectivities as the reader merely hears the voice of the author instead of the actions and personal speeches of the characters. This however, does not negate the fact that a writer should be free to agree or disagree with his society, but in doing so, such a writer must stay detached and unstained by his personal prejudice. He should be objective enough to allow his audience see his points, agree or disagree with them. Let us consider the following:

But Chinwe was not consoled. Her husband had already brought in a seventeen year old girl to her matrimonial home and she had moved out. But she said she would rather die than live with him. (111)

From the above illustration, it is understandable that the narrator is subjective. She makes the reader see misdeeds meted out on Chinwe in her own words, not the actions and words of the characters. One only hears the voice of the narrator, not the characters. The time and geographical settings of the novel are transient. The time setting depicts three periods in Nigerian history pre-independence, independence and post-independence. The development of the characters also follows some specified time frames: the period when the characters are in secondary school, with Miss Hill and Miss Blackhouse as their schoolmistresses. The period of

their examination/graduation which is a symbol of women independence and liberty. And the period after school, when they become married, own business centers and work in offices. These three periods symbolize both women and national changes/or growth and Nwapa interweaves them to achieve her creative goal:

Before war was declared on July of 1967, Dora had completed her four-roomed bungalow. When the war was declared, she had furnished it and began to stock it with food. When Biafra over-ran the Mid-West, she evacuated all her baking equipment from Aba, and set up her baking in Okporo. (74)

Like the time setting, the geographical setting and locale of the novel are transient: Archdeacon Crowder Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS), Elelenwa, then Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Aba, Enugu, London etc. All these tend to depict the on-going changes within the African society which the writer attempts to depict.

## **Conclusion**

According to Nnamani Amuluche-Greg "Any ideology that suggests separativeness and divisiveness destroys the uniqueness of womanhood" (221). It is obvious that power is tilted in favour of men in African cultural milieu. The women's position traditionally as a second class citizen is not in doubt. A male child is preferred. A girl child is constantly reminded to comport herself well and is limited in her desire to explore her environment. At the national level a woman does not enjoy the right and privileges of a citizen on equal basis with her male counterparts especially in terms of appointments to various political positions. For instance, how many female Governors, Vice Chancellors or Senators do we have in Nigeria? These point to the oppression of women by men. The men in the novel also are not saints and as such have flaws but that should not be enough reason for some women to go morally berserk. For instance, Zizi, the daughter of Agnes is into full-time prostitution in a brothel, snatching people's husbands at the age of eighteen. She trades in dangerous drugs as though it is the only panacea to her broken home. As if these are not enough, she also engages in contract marriage with Theo. Chinwe after divorcing her man, marries a married man. She eventually divorces him after taking a lot of his fortunes. And to lend an authorial credence to this scandalous behavior, Nwapa declares.

Chinwe had done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mothers own. Her generation was telling men that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They are saying that women have options. (119)

What qualifies as 'fruitful' or 'full' here still remains a puzzle when women who are supposed to be the custodians of virtue and role models to their posterity, have translated into veritable vanguards of corruption. Literature above all things educates, moralize and transform through beauty. When these goals are carefully and consistently pursued by our female writers, the society would be better informed and transformed for the good of all mankind. The paper recommends that African feminists should chart a feminist course in line with the theory of motherism that aims mainly to unite men and women, not stiring acrimony and divorce amongst them.



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