



1984

# The Society and Woman's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels

Chidi Ikonne

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

## Recommended Citation

Ikonne, Chidi, The Society and Woman's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels, *Kunapipi*, 6(1), 1984.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss1/17>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## The Society and Woman's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels

### **Abstract**

The world of Flora Nwapa's first two novels — *Efuru* and *Idu* — is a near perfect mirror of the patriarchy in which the author grew up. It is a world founded on a value system which is conducive to man's pleasure and selfrealization. It is an ordered world where everyone knows one's place, and the worth of any woman is proportional to her ability (is it not really willingness?) to repress any impulse capable of challenging men's self- assigned superiority. It is a world of double standards. There is, therefore, a subtle tendency in the novels to frustrate women's attempt at selfassertion. The major means of this frustration is the socio-economic antifeminism of the patriarchy as mirrored in the novels.

# The Society and Woman's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels

## INTRODUCTION

The world of Flora Nwapa's first two novels — *Efuru* and *Idu* — is a near perfect mirror of the patriarchy in which the author grew up. It is a world founded on a value system which is conducive to man's pleasure and self-realization. It is an ordered world where everyone knows one's place, and the worth of any woman is proportional to her ability (is it not really willingness?) to repress any impulse capable of challenging men's self-assigned superiority. It is a world of double standards. There is, therefore, a subtle tendency in the novels to frustrate women's attempt at self-assertion. The major means of this frustration is the socio-economic anti-feminism of the patriarchy as mirrored in the novels.

## SOCIETAL NORMS

One of the most prosaic responses to a feminist approach to African Literature is that, in Africa, none of the sexes has any cause to complain since they are on a par with each other, and play complementary roles. There are, certainly, elements of truth in this claim. As in the past, Africa abounds today in women who are, to all intents and purposes, superior to many men. Women have always had autochthonous means of making their feelings felt by their menfolk. In Igboland, they can even, as Judith Van Allen rightly points out, act 'to force a resolution of their individual and collective grievances' through 'sitting on a man', boycotts and strikes.<sup>1</sup> Flora Nwapa herself does not tire of stressing the enviable position occupied by women in Oguta, the Igbo community mirrored in *Efuru* and *Idu*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, African cultures and civilizations are

replete with traits of anti-feminism. Thus in *Efuru* and *Idu* the woman, in spite of all the importance accorded to her,<sup>3</sup> is by no means the equal of her brother.

To begin with, a low value is set upon her person. A woman at the funeral of *Efuru*'s daughter does not regret *Ogonim*'s death as she would have regretted that of a boy. 'A girl is something, though we would have preferred a boy,' she weeps.<sup>4</sup> Even children reveal an awareness of this preference for boys when they thank *Nwosu* by wishing that his wife should 'give birth to a baby boy' (E, 128). In *Idu*, *Iyieniu* hospital is described as 'good' only because many pregnant 'women who have been there recently had baby boys'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, an expectant mother moves from a hospital near *Aba* to *Iyieniu* (a distance of about 110 miles) because of that fact (I, 78).

A woman's life counts for nothing as long as the prestige of the man and the integrity of the family — that corner-stone of the patriarchy — over which he presides, are intact. Thus a woman in *Idu* accepts the fact that she ought not to hit back when she is being beaten up by her husband (I, 3).<sup>6</sup> *Efuru*'s father is afraid of premarital sex and its consequent 'disgrace' when he hears about *Efuru*'s nocturnal outings. His mind does not go to his daughter'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 (E, 3).

A woman is more or less physically re-created by the society to meet the taste and sexual weakness of the man. Accordingly, *Efuru* is subjected to clitoridectomy which is portrayed in the novel as having a 'bath'. The apparent reason for this inhuman operation is the belief that it will enhance child-bearing (E, 10). It is, however, known that in the society reflected in the novel, people are aware of the fact that while circumcision increases a man's coital ability, clitoridectomy reduces female sexuality. It is safe, therefore, to suspect that in encouraging the operation, the male-centric society is only trying to bring the woman to the level at which the man, with his inferior sexual disposition, can cope with his wife. The use of the metaphor 'having a bath' for the ritual 'castration' of the woman encapsulates the usual tendency in a patriarchy to denigrate the woman in order to justifiably dominate and re-create her in accordance with men's taste. One wonders how her clitoris makes her dirty. In any case, she is 'washed' to make her more 'appealing to [men's] eyes' (E, 14). This is also true of the over-feeding to which she is subjected. She is simply fattened, like a turkey for Christmas, to meet men's taste in a society where plumpness and heavy buttocks on broad

hips are important features of feminine beauty and, by extension, invaluable aphrodisiac.

As for marriage, the woman has no right that the patriarchy must respect. She becomes the property of her husband as soon as he pays her bride-price. Whatever her physical and mental strength, she must submit herself to her husband even if she is physically, mentally and morally stronger than her 'lord and master'.<sup>7</sup> Thus in *Efuru* Gilbert's aunt who, as a child, was influential among her fellow-children (boys and girls) becomes 'as calm as a lamb' when she marries (E, 142). Like any other piece of unreasoning property, women can be inherited from fathers by their sons as *Efuru*'s father 'inherited all the wives of [his] father' (E, 22), and from brothers by their brothers as *Ishiodu* was to inherit *Idu* from *Adiewere*. A woman's personal taste does not count. She is just like a wash-basin in a man's house. A man, consequently, boasts to a woman, in *Idu*, that he has 'three like her in [his] house' (I, 182). The extent to which women themselves have internalized this value system which regards them as mere objects to be acquired by any man according to the size of his pocket is demonstrated by their repeated assertion that 'it is only a bad woman who wants to have a man all to herself'.

This, in spite of the incontestable superiority of women to men in matters coital. Witness what Masters and Johnson say about this superiority in their study 'Orgasm, Anatomy of the Female':

If a female who is capable of having regular orgasms is properly stimulated within a short period after her first climax, she will, in most instances, be capable of having a second, third, fourth, and even fifth and sixth orgasm before she is fully satiated. As contrasted with the male's usual inability to have more than one orgasm in a short period, many females especially when clitorally stimulated, can regularly have five or six full orgasms within a matter of minutes.<sup>8</sup>

One, therefore, wonders why a man, whose sexuality (in terms of duration and frequency of coitus) is inferior to a woman's, should want every woman in his harem, and beyond, all to himself while the woman is denied monopoly of her sexmate.

Perhaps the belief is that the woman, purportedly masochist by nature, can endure the annoying pain of her husband's sexual inadequacy — an inadequacy which is further compounded by the multiple coital demands of a polygamous situation. After all, *Efuru*'s mother-in-law waited ten years while her husband continued to enjoy himself with other women. *Efuru*'s willingness to bear the burden of her husband's truancy for a while makes her 'a woman among women' (E, 107). Born masochists,

women 'do not feel sorrows as keenly as men do', Ajanupu tells us in *Efuru* (E, 89).

A victim of a double standard, a woman is not expected to look outside for the satisfaction of her sexual needs; for an extra-marital affair is acceptable only when it is engaged in by a man. A woman, in *Efuru*, is therefore shocked to learn that there is an adulteress in the society: 'You mean that she was committing adultery in her husband's house? Oh, our poor ancestors are wronged no wonder things are not smooth for us' (E, 65). A false rumour that *Efuru* has had an extra-marital affair nearly turns the world upside-down. Gilbert, in spite of his own guilt, is upset. He is ready to cast the first stone. Even Omirima who suggests the rehabilitation of Gilbert's 'bastard' nearly sentences *Efuru* to death. *Idu* is not exempt from this double standard. Obiaku, in that novel, is said to have become mad because 'she snatched the husband of one [other] woman' (I, 40).

The excuse for all this damnation of the woman is, often, morality. But, as Rennie Macandrew rightly points out,

down the ages, for political and selfish reasons, men have preferred to keep women in ignorance. The double standard of morality suits men well, for it permits, in a young man, pre-marriage sex experience, and, in the older man, extra-marital adventures, both of which are denied to a woman. The strict sexual morality laid down for women by men is not on account of any ideals on the part of the masculine sex, but simply because most men loathe the idea that the woman to whom they are engaged or married may find the former paramour a more expert exponent of love's art than themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Although the woman's surest access route to the man's heart is often his stomach,<sup>10</sup> a wife's continued occupancy of a place in her husband's heart depends on her ability to bear children — especially boys. Non-arrival of babies is blamed on the woman. Her husband is never considered responsible for the lack. Even in the case of Adiewere and his second wife which could have led to Adiewere's being suspected of impotence, the narrator, faithful to her model society, contrives to get *Idu* pregnant by Adiewere, after an embarrassingly long period of childless marriage. The resemblance of the boy to Adiewere is emphasized almost *ad nauseam* (I, 150). The young woman's claim that Adiewere is impotent is thus invalidated.

Such is the premium put on the bearing of children — especially boys — that, in *Efuru*, Omirina who, under normal circumstances, would oppose a marriage because of her impression of the prospective bride's

parents, recommends an unknown woman as a bride only because she bears a male child: 'A woman who gave birth to such a boy should be married. You don't know tomorrow. Nkoyeni won't be barren of course — she is pregnant already. But nobody knows whether she is going to have a girl or a boy. She might take the footsteps of her mother who had girls and a boy' (E, 248). In any case, no childless wife has any right to look beautiful. Efurur's non-conformity to this norm attracts a gossip's fury: 'Nonsense, I must see Eneberi's [Efurur's husband's] mother. A woman, a wife for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time, and not fulfil the important function she is made to fulfil [i.e. bearing children]' (E, 172).

In general, women in the patriarchy of Flora Nwapa's novels are second-class citizens. They are not allowed to break kola nuts in the presence of a man even if the man is much younger than they. They kneel down to drink wine in the presence of men (E, 23). They are treated as unclean animals when they are menstruating (E, 24). Sending them to school is regarded as a 'waste' even though the usefulness of sending children to school is recognized (E, 242). They are always considered guilty, even though they are very obviously innocent. Idu must, therefore, ask for forgiveness whether or not she is in the wrong. Her husband is categorical: 'If I refuse your food, either for a just or for an unjust cause, you are expected to ask for forgiveness by giving me a present' (I, 175). Idu, of course, accepts his claim; she apologizes with 'a whole piece of eight yards of gorge' (I, 175).

Women have so internalized the value system of the patriarchy and what Kate Millett describes as its 'ideology of male supremacy'<sup>11</sup> that they have become their own greatest enemy. 'Having internalized,' as Millett rightly points out, 'the disesteem in which they are held, women despise both themselves and each other.'<sup>12</sup> This accounts for the shock which Nwasobi and Uzoechi, in *Idu*, experience when they hear of a pregnant woman who rests while her husband cooks for himself (I, 197). It also accounts for Omirima's anger, in *Efurur*, on hearing that Efurur and her husband have gone to the stream together (E, 174). So effective is their internalization of the society-fabricated 'disesteem' that they insist that the woman must recognize her place and humbly stay there. She must in all things — social, political, economic, cultural, etc. etc. — be under, and *not* beside, her husband because they are not 'companions' (E, 174).

## QUEST FOR SELFHOOD

It would be easy to fault Flora Nwapa for the self-debasement of her women characters whose only *raison d'être* seems to be to gratify the male ego. This, however, would be unfair since, from all indications, Nwapa never intended to write feminist tracts. Any value judgement on them, therefore, should not use feminist aesthetics as a frame of reference. This, however, is not to suggest that there are no elements of sexual revolution in *Efuru* and *Idu*. On the contrary, the novels contain several traits of rebellion against the established norms. They feature the quest of women for selfhood almost as much as they celebrate the supremacy of men in a patriarchy.

In *Idu* a husband is blamed for his wife's being a prostitute. Ojiugo wants a baby and boldly leaves her impotent husband when she discovers that she is carrying another man's baby. The rebellion here consists in the fact that Ojiugo elects to leave her matrimonial home even though she can safely stay and have her baby in her husband's house. Amarajeme, her husband, is very anxious to have a child, and the society countenances a rejected husband's claim on a child born out of wedlock as long as the mother's bride-price has not been repaid to, and accepted by, the rejected husband. *Idu's* refusal to scrape her hair when her husband dies is not a rebellion *per se*, since she refuses because she knows that she will soon join him beyond the grave. Yet she does challenge the patriarchy. By her death, she defies the societal norm which would have made her, against her will, her brother-in-law Ishiodu's wife. By rejecting life, she implicitly rejects the projection of children as the only thing a woman wants from life. She dies deliberately with a baby in her womb. Despite her great love for her son, Ijoma, and the premium put on male children in the society, she does not hesitate to leave her only and beloved son in the custody of the irresponsible Ishiodu and his frivolous wife, Ogbenyanu. She wants love — a feeling which is neither recognized nor encouraged in a society where marriages are arranged, where a widow is required by tradition to marry her late husband's brother irrespective of her personal feeling and taste, where a man and his wife are not expected to be seen together.

Traits of rebellion are even more firmly entrenched in *Efuru* where women's quest for selfhood is more obvious. A woman tells her husband 'in his face that the child' she carries is not his. 'That when the child grew

up she was going to give her to the real father' (E, 64). The shattering impact of this utterance in the patriarchal set-up is implicit in the reaction of a woman who hears about it: 'This is an abomination. What is wrong with these children nowadays' (E, 64-5). In the robbery episode involving Nwabata and her husband, Nwabata ridicules the concept of male supremacy and its attendant masculine valour in her account of how Nwosu slept innocently while thieves ransacked their house. She concludes with a biting sarcasm:

It was then that my *lord and master* came out with his knife. Kill me, I said to him. I am the thief. He fooled around and went and sat down outside the gate. That's the man who is my husband. *Women are nothing*. He, my husband, was asleep when thieves came to the house. *But I am only a woman. What can a woman do?* (E, 224. My italics)

The sting of the sentences, 'Women are nothing.... I am only a woman. What can a woman do?' is felt more when it is realized that Nwabata, and *not* her husband, saves the most valuable thing in their house — the money they have borrowed from Efurú. In fact, she does it against the will of her husband who complains about women being troublesome and, to use Nwabata's words, 'nearly lost his temper for I disturbed his sleep' (E, 224).

Men are blamed for girls getting pregnant and being forced to marry before they have finished school, and disappointment is expressed at this situation. This seeks to negate the concept of girls being unworthy of the money and time spent on their education because of their excessive sexual appetite (E, 242-3). Men are presented as irresponsible. Adizua deserts Efurú. Gilbert has a child with another woman and cannot attend the funeral of his father-in-law as he is in jail. Contrary to the concept of women as masochists whose main source of pleasure is suffering,<sup>13</sup> Efurú's patience is not inexhaustible. Unlike Adizua's conservative mother who waits indefinitely for a playboy husband, she gives her husbands — Adizua and Gilbert — time to mend their ways and quits. It is significant that a woman critic faults Nwapa for letting Efurú leave an adulterous husband who falsely accuses her of adultery. She wishes Nwapa had used that episode as 'a demonstration of man's [woman's?] capacity for suffering and endurance'.<sup>14</sup>

Efurú has the makings of a non-conformist. It is obviously because of this that such critics as Femi Ojo-Ade regard her as a 'cantankerous' woman who is farther away from 'tradition' than 'her literary sister, Idu'.<sup>15</sup> Although she is a beautiful daughter of a great man, she shocks

the community by marrying a man who cannot even pay her bride-price. When she 'saw that he was unable to pay anything, she told him not to bother about the dowry. They were going to proclaim themselves married and that was that' (E, 1). When the dowry is eventually paid, it is by dint of her 'hard work' (E, 110). In other words, she, more or less, pays her own bride-price together with the fine imposed on Adizua for taking her, in the first place, without paying a bride-price (E, 22). As an unmarried girl, she engages in nocturnal escapades and keeps late hours in defiance of her father, and contrary to the dictates of filial obedience which takes precedence over love in a patriarchy like the one in which she lives. Self-willed, she chooses her own occupation. 'Efuru refused to go to the farm with her husband.' She wants to be a trader (E, 5).<sup>16</sup> Although she submits herself to the 'bath'-taking ceremony, she stays only one month and does not yield to her mother-in-law's appeal to continue for at least another month because of 'what people would say'. Her reply to this appeal reveals her penchant for independence: 'Never mind what people would say' (E, 15).

Efuru is the decision-maker in their family in a society where a family must be presided over by a man. The non-conformity of this situation stands out in sharp relief against Adizua's uncle's contention that a woman cannot make any decision and influence actions by men even if those men were her sons (E, 21).

The image of the woman as a being capable of independence is further enhanced by the stature of Uhamiri (the Woman of the Lake). Although it is not clear why she does not live with Okita, 'the owner of the Great River', to whom she is supposed to be married (E, 255), her life is none the less enviable and a possible model for a self-respecting feminist. Wealthy and independent, she is revered and worshipped by men (E, 255-6) and women:

She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (E, 281)

Her beauty is neither for the seduction of men nor for the gratification of the male ego. Satisfied with, and at home in, the company of her fellow-women, she does not subject herself to male supremacy and its corollary, sexual exploitation. Nor is she obsessed with child-bearing.

## FLORA NWAPA'S ART VERSUS THE QUEST FOR SELFHOOD

With Uhamiri and the other elements discussed above, Flora Nwapa's novels are potential feminist documents. The only fly in the ointment is that they barely go beyond the exposition of the impact of patriarchy on the woman's selfhood. The concomitant criticism and revolutionary stance, important factors in feminist aesthetics, are lacking. Women's selfhood appreciates only in proportion as male supremacy depreciates. But in Nwapa's novels male supremacy is intact from beginning to end. Consequently, women's individual quests for selfhood are invariably unsuccessful. The author of *Efuru* and *Idu* may well be 'a social writer and a strong fighter for women's freedom and interest' as Aloysius Ibeahuchi suggests.<sup>17</sup> Her exposition of the second-class citizenship of women, in *Efuru* and *Idu*, may move fair-minded readers to pity. Her mode of 'fighting' in the two novels, however, is by no means feminist. Certainly, gestures, like Ajanupu's when she gives Gilbert a blow on the head with the 'mortar pestle' for accusing Efuru of adultery (E, 275-6), are symbolic of feminist revolt. Such gestures, however, are too few and ill-developed to transform the novels from mere expositions of women's experience in men's world into feminist statements.

As a matter of fact, some of the otherwise far-reaching gestures are rendered irrelevant by their very development. Efuru's and Adizua's challenge to the traditional marriage institution is neutralized by the fact that the young couple never 'felt really married' (E, 23) until the bride-price was paid. Efuru's stature as a rebel is weakened by the suggestion that, thanks to her relationship with Uhamiri, she is not an ordinary woman. Indeed, she is made a pathetic victim of what is presented as her ill-advised non-conformism.

The source of Idu's desire to have a baby girl, instead of the much valued baby boy, is by no feminist standard inspiring. 'She had wanted to have a girl.... A girl was very useful to her mother. She would help with the house when her mother went to the market' (I, 79). The attack on double standards with particular reference to prostitution is weakened by the repeated condemnation of prostitution when women engage in it:

But whatever you say, prostitution is not good for our women. (I, 38)

Prostitution is bad for our women.... Our Woman of the Lake frowns at it, and that's why prostitutes of our town never profit by it. (I, 39)

It [prostitution] is foreign to our women. It should be left to women of other lands, not our women. (I, 41)

The Woman of the Lake hated prostitution, she forbade it. If any of the women ignored the Woman of the Lake she gave them two to three years in which to repent, that is, to come home and get married like any respectable woman. If after this period the person did not repent, something dreadful would happen to her. She would either become mad or contract a very bad disease of which she would die. (I, 120)

The demonstration of the unfairness of the societal attitude towards extramarital affairs is vitiated by the implicit suggestion that women are constitutionally ill-equipped for an affair outside of wedlock. Thus Obiaku becomes mad because 'she snatched the husband of one [other] woman' (I, 40). Ojiugo, the woman who engaged in an extramarital affair and got pregnant, '«died» the day her husband died [because of her boldness]. The day Amarajeme died, that was the day she «died»' (I, 216).

Whatever is achieved by the portrayal of relatively defiant and self-dependent women is depreciated by the parallel indication that a woman without her husband is nothing. Idu's taking her own life after her husband's death confirms this idea.

Where the inability of a married couple to have a baby is in question, there is never any doubt as to who is responsible. The woman is almost invariably presented as the source of the problem, this being proven by having the husband get his other wife or another woman pregnant at a point in time. Witness the lives of Idu, Efuru and their husbands. The only exception to this trend is the marriage of Ojiugo and Amarajeme where the reader's suspicion that Amarajeme is impotent is confirmed by Ojiugo's unequivocal denunciation. But even here, as if to apologize for the non-conformist presentation of such a problem, Ojiugo's behaviour is allowed to be condemned as that of a 'faithless wife' (I, 127).

## CONCLUSION

According to John Stuart Mill, 'most of what women produced when they began to write was but sycophancy to male attitude and ego'.<sup>18</sup> While situations in *Efuru* and *Idu* constitute a strong temptation to lump Flora Nwapa with such women writers, it would be grossly unfair to view Nwapa's novels as a conscious attempt to cater to the self-aggrandizement of the male ego. Equally unfair would be the suggestion that women's ambivalence towards the traditional societal norms, in *Efuru* and *Idu*, is a function of Flora Nwapa's own inability to subdue her

innate attachment to the society in which she grew up, and thus maintain an adequate aesthetic distance between herself and her characters.

A sociologist almost to a fault, Flora Nwapa is only trying to document, albeit in a fictional form, the way it was in a particular Igbo community at a particular point in time. Her characters' penchant for conformity derives not from the novelist's ideological stance, but from the dictates of her art. The rebellion of women who dare go against the norms of the society is not designed to be a feminist ploy. It is merely used to highlight the impact of socialization on the woman's selfhood.

## NOTES

1. Judith Van Allen, 'Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, VI, ii (1972), 171.
2. Witness, for instance, her interview with Lee Nichols in 'Conversations with African Writers', 17, *Voice of America*.
3. V.U. Ola, for instance, speaks of how Efurú's and Idu's 'lives demonstrate the amount of freedom, respect and influence a woman can wield in the home and outside the home within the Ibo traditional set-up'. 'Flora Nwapa and the Art of the Novel' (unpublished), 3-Day Symposium and Workshop on African Literature, University of Calabar, 20-23 May 1981, p.7.
4. Flora Nwapa, *Efurú* (London: Heinemann, 1966), p.87. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p.78. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. See also p.70.
7. Flora Nwapa's phrase, *Efurú*, p.224.
8. Quoted in Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970), p.117.
9. *Encyclopedia of Modern Sex & Love Techniques* (No. Hollywood, California: Wilshire Book Company, 1971), p.41.
10. Efurú cooks for Gilbert before they get married.
11. Millett, p.62.
12. *Ibid.*, p.55.
13. Sigmund Freud sees the 'lust for pain' as an attribute of femininity, a concept which 'can be supported on biological and constitutional grounds'. Quoted in Millett, p.195.
14. Ola, p.13.
15. 'Female Writers, Male Critics: Criticism, Chauvinism, Cynicism ... and Commitment' (unpublished), University of Ife, p.9.
16. The rebellion here is not in the matter, but in the manner of choice.
17. 'Nwakuche — Novelist with Concern for Women', *Daily Times*, 3 July 1982, p.7, col.7.
18. Kate Millett's paraphrase. Millett, p.139.