

African Research Review

International Multi-Disciplinary Journal,

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

AFRREV Vol. 12 (2), Serial No 50, April, 2018: 79-86

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print) ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v12i2.8>

The Myth of Men's Supremacy in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it examines how a post-colonial female fictional narrative deconstructs the theory of men's supremacy over women no matter the fields of activities. Second, it shows how education empowers women to vie with their male counterparts and even top them in Sub Saharan African countries. Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian and the first Anglophone African woman writer in her novel, *Women are Different*, portrays female characters playing stronger roles that were formerly said to be men's prerogative. With the theory of post-colonial criticism, this paper posits that this committed Nigerian female writer shows concern for the misconception of the real and paramount role of the African woman in her community by restoring the real roles that African women play through empowerment. A qualitative descriptive research method and African feminism philosophy have been used to explore the reversal of roles in a man-dominated society.

Key Words: men's supremacy – Flora Nwapa – fiction – gender-based discrimination–empowerment.

Introduction

Colonialism has had a knock-on effect on the male-dominated literary tradition in Africa South of the Sahara (Ladele). In this wake, one can opine that African women are under the influence of both Western colonialism and African patriarchy. The authoritarian phalluses generally determine what must be the role of the woman folk in society and thus negate the genuine perception of the African woman in society. Kolawole contends that most male writers in the early phase of African literature fuelled the marginalization and stigmatization of women in society. 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 so strong that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to her degree of adaptation to the conventional roles

assigned to her. Indeed, from time immemorial, African men have been viewed as heads of the family, the breadwinners, the guardians of the family and women as subordinates, housekeepers, prolific child-bearers in fiction by African male writers.

Conversely, since the late twentieth century, some committed and gifted African women writers have been deconstructing such a misconception of the African woman's roles in both her nuclear family and in the public sphere. Unlike their male counterparts, African women writers portray stronger and empowered female characters. Shlltoot well points out the revolution regarding the gender bias in the African fiction when he writes: "There was growing awareness of the fact that African female characters were projected through the stereotyped way, and that a negative image was given by most male writers" (52), so, most of the African female/women writers have striven to write about women's sufferings in their own words. Indeed, writers like Amma Darko, Aminata Ba, Calixte Beyala, Flora Nwapa or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie adopt that trend in their writings. Amma Darko in *The Housemaid* is very harsh on men and even appears to be misandrous. The Nigerian female writer Flora Nwapa, a pioneer, typifies such creative African female writers through the publication of *Women are Different*.

Interestingly, Flora Nwapa, like many other female writers, does not consider herself as feminist in the way Western societies define the concept. In an interview by Umeh, Nwapa speaks her mind in this way: "I don't accept that I am an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows. I try to project the image of women positively" (27). Nwapa then wrong-foots male writers who belittle women or worse still depict women negatively in their writings. Indeed, Nwapa's novel published in 1986 tells the moving story of a group of three fighting empowered female characters – Dora, Rose, and Agnes – from their schooldays together through the trials and tribulations of their adult lives. Through the portrayal of those three female characters, Flora Nwapa crushes the myth of men's supremacy in society in that Dora, Rose, and Agnes endeavor to free themselves from their respective husband's financial domination by means of personal toil. This paper, hence, is an attempt to show how the female Nigerian postcolonial writer, Flora Nwapa, allots the key and prime role to the female characters in her community. How do female characters in the focus novel fight for their self-assertion?

African Women's Struggle for Self-Assertion in a Post-Colonial Novel

In very remote times, African women even though they were not in the position of power, were treated almost equally as men in terms of having access to wealth and resources; this indicates that African women have not been oppressed by culture. In this wake, Chukwuma opines that "Traditional societies in pre-colonial times had spheres of power and influence for women in closely-knit organizations that helped them maintain a voice" (1). But African women in post-colonial Africa appear to have lost the rights they used to have in society, the image and sacredness that represent their being and existence because of an overbearing patriarchal society. In patriarchy, women are "faced with all sorts of dehumanization ranging from deprivation, negligence, maltreatment, marginalization, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation and even isolation" (Cakpo-Chichi, Gbaguidi, & Djossou113). This situation is worsened by the hierarchical society introduced into the black continent under the cover of colonization. African women are now just seen not heard, they live in the shadow of men from their fathers' houses to their husbands' and are hence regarded as second class citizens.

Women have then no choice except search for ways and means to get rid of that harsh oppression. It is in the search for freedom from the male oppression and ill-treatments that the fight for their rights takes shape; and thus the coming into being of feminism. Feminism has been defined as "the woman's freedom to decide her own destiny, [...] freedom from society's oppression and restriction, freedom

to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action” (Cakpo-Chichi *etal*113). Chukwuma defines feminism as “a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human being” (9). *The Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary* also defines feminism as “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim”. Interestingly, some scholars have argued that feminism is not new to the African continent. They believe it has always existed but because there was no word to describe it linguistically, African women copied blindly what was in progress on other continents at the beginning of their struggle.

African women’s main challenge is to live in a society where both men and women could have mutually fruitful relationships both in the private and public spheres. Also, African feminists seek to keep intact the good in African tradition and adapt them to the changing needs of modernity by fighting the culture and traditions that are harmful to the welfare of women. They also aspire to help females/women in Africa to gain control over their sexuality in a patriarchal society, and to achieve this they point out the psychological and physical suffering that some African women undergo.

This study focuses on the way women struggle for their independence not from the historical or ideological point of view but rather from the literary studies perspective particularly from a woman authored novel. So the way that struggle has to be conducted should be one of women for women. That is why a literature from women’s point of view has emerged at a certain time. Consequently, in contemporary African literature, many female feminist writers have used their novels to praise female characters by giving them prominent roles to play. The unequal treatment of women in Africa leads some African writers to adopt feminist ideals in their works with the aim of sensitizing Africans about the need to treat women equally. This has led to the writing of novels like *Women are Different* by the Nigerian female writer, Flora Nwapa. Amouzou posits that “Nwapa does not believe a woman should be passive or voiceless. The female characters in her fiction do not exist only for services they provide inside the home for their husbands and children. They count in significant matters affecting community or national life; by so doing, Nwapa proceeds to a redefinition of the female gender” (101). Flora Nwapa and many other female writers empower their female characters, giving them authority, by making them take the lead and become even breadwinners in their families. In contrast and surprisingly to those who think that this leading position makes women disrespectful and misandrous, those empowered women always express a need for men’s complementarity. As a matter of fact, in *Women are Different*, when Dora’s bakery becomes successful and so big that she cannot handle things alone she asks her husband to join her to manage her bakery unit: “Chris, it is a partnership. You will be the Managing Director and everything. I will do the donkey work. I need someone I trust to keep the books and to have an eye on everything. Please see with me” (Nwapa 69-70). Clearly, Dora’s success does not go to her head. Instead, successful as the female character Dora is, she remains dutiful and respectful to her husband as a true conventional African woman. In other words, the female character Dora in Nwapa’s post-colonial novel resists any rebellion bid although she, as a financially empowered woman, has the golden opportunity to avenge the oppressed and marginalized women folk in a patriarchal marriage settlement of oppression and ‘imperialism’. Instead, she has adopted a self-effacing manner in favor of her spouse.

Sultana contends that patriarchy is the main hindrance to women’s blooming, and social progress in postcolonial literature. As the colonizer imposes things on indigenous people, the female character Agnes has been forced into marriage, thus being the victim of patriarchy; but she proves to be an excellent wife taking good care of her husband and their four children. She succeeds in her studies because her husband, rather arrogant and self-centered, allows her to carry on at the beginning: “Then she proceeded to read mathematics and geography on her own, at advanced level. It was at this time that she had to let her husband know that she was studying on her own, but she did not tell him the

nature of her studies. Her husband told her it was all right with him since she had given him four children and had nothing to complain about her” (Nwapa 58). The female character Agnes has understood that schooling is the powerful weapon to free herself from her husband’s domination, and motherhood does not deter her from achieving her dream.

The last female character Rose, on the other hand, wants a man by her side; she is even eager to have a child with a married man. She tries hard to have a relationship with Mark first but he ruins her financially; then with Olu, a married man. It is then obvious that the women in *Women are Different*, in spite of their ambition to succeed in life, want to set up a family and have children. How does Nwapa empower her female characters financially?

Agnes, Dora and Rose: Symbols of Struggle for Financial Empowerment

The plot in Flora Nwapa’s novel first published in 1986 evolves mainly around three fighting female characters: Agnes, Dora, and Rose. These three female characters, who follow their ideals and dreams, study at a missionary school and they are close friends. Shlltoot posits that “Nwapa believes that there is no better way than to empower a girl with education” (108). In this wake, Agnes, even though she has been forced into marriage, is aware that education is the key to her self-fulfillment, “she knew her own mind, she was determined to be in school and take the Cambridge School Certificate examination before she married” (Nwapa22). Agnes strongly believes that the only way to be free from all sort of oppression like the forced marriage she has undergone is to study hard so that she can have a good job: “Agnes had her plan she was a bit cold-blooded about it [...]. Unknown to her husband, she registered with Wolsey Hall in England for the Advanced General Certificate of Education examination” (Nwapa 56-57). The strong-minded female character Agnes is aware that the operative weapon against the domineering patriarchal system is schooling. She takes up the challenge of combining her schooling with motherhood even though her oppressive husband strives to level her down. In what sounds like a sermon, Agnes’ father debunks his son-in-law in that way:

She has had four children for you. She wants to read and improve herself and you say no. What kind of man are you? How much money do you give her as food money or pocket money? Has she ever complained to you? Has she ever quarrelled with you? Has she not been a good wife to you? If she wanted to have men, how would you know since you are away all day? Has she asked you to pay for the evening lessons? You should count yourself lucky and blessed to have a wife like my daughter (Nwapa58).

Seriously backed up by her father, Agnes has been able to enroll herself at a University for evening classes in Yaba and thus, achieving her dream of going to University and she can be viewed as a committed and ambitious woman. Agnes is the kind of woman who does not satisfy herself with the least, she wants the best for herself. Rightly and rightfully, the heterodiegetic narrator makes this point: “How many women of her age at the time thought of University education? Many of her class mates were content with nursing and teaching” (*Ibid.* 62). It is crystal clear that Agnes is a go-getter who has set her sight higher. As time goes by, the enterprising Agnes becomes wealthy with a good position at work and living in one of the posh residential areas of the city as pointed out below:

However, Agnes was lucky to secure a home in the famous GRA where those who had made it in the fifties and early sixties live. Agnes now had a car which of course went with the job. She had to get a driver for a short while before she learnt to drive. Another privilege was being invited to cocktail parties given by ministers (*Ibid.* 63-64).

Thus, the female character Agnes breaks the patriarchal rules and becomes a financially independent woman in a postcolonial era. Although she breaks with her husband she decides to keep the custody of their children and strives to pursue a successful career. She begins to work as an executive in a firm called John Levis Production and Research Bureau. And this job gives her many opportunities such as a good pay, a flat at Ikoyi, a car and an extensive travel opportunity in Nigeria. Being determined, she overcomes all the obstacles in her life in a patriarchal society. Eventually, Agnes does what she wants. She succeeds in becoming whom she wants, “Agnes had had her children and had gone to university. Agnes was her own mistress now. Agnes could do what she liked, and there was no one on earth going to stop her” (*Ibid.* 73). On the whole, as “patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate” (Ashcroft *et al* 2007: 93), Flora Nwapa, a post-colonial and feminist advocate, makes the character Agnes oppose such dominance.

Dora on her part works as a nurse under a chauvinist and a single man, Chief Nursing Officer, who believes that a woman cannot be a wife and a nurse at the same time. This is the perception of women in patriarchal societies. Indeed, in such societies women are confined in the house where they are compelled to domestic chores only. It is fortunate that Dora has other plans for herself. For instance, although she is a mother of five kids, she decides to go further and make a better life by setting up a bakery:

She bought the things she needed for the business, quit nursing and started baking cakes and making doughnuts. She sent them to be sold in the hospital and because they were good they were sold in no time. In a short time, people started placing orders for the cakes and doughnuts and the business began to grow. Soon Dora had to move to a [sic] new premises, because she could no longer use her own house she then started baking bread, and when that was too successful, she bought a van to transport her products (Nwapa 1992: 68).

Interestingly as Dora is convinced that her personal growth and blooming entails being self-sufficient, she resigns from the crushing nursing and sets up her own business. It is worth pointing out that the female character Dora is hard working and never spares her efforts, does the strenuous work, and makes her husband a partner in her thriving bakery unit. First reluctant and because he is so full of himself, Chris, Dora’s husband, joins his wife’s bakery unit only when he discovers that she is making much money. As the wife’s business thrives, “they bought a piece of land and started building a house in Chris’ home town. Dora worked and worked, made the money, while Chris spent the money [...]” (Nwapa 68). It appears that Chris’ hegemony (as a real imperialist) over his wife has made him direct the building of the family house to his home town although the money has been provided by the oppressed wife, the subordinate. Dora becomes so successful that Chris starts boasting about her and mocking his colleagues’ “illiterate” wives. Dora’s resounding success, in a hostile patriarchal environment, shows that African women can hold their own against men let alone outmatch them. With Dora and Chris’ marriage, the reversal of the conventional gender roles is observed since Dora, a female character, is the breadwinner and the head of the family in actual fact. Chris evades his responsibilities and only enjoys the wealth of his wife in addition to the bribes he takes in the discharge of his official duties. Eventually, as the evidence that he takes bribes is overwhelming, irrefutable, he takes to his heels to London abandoning his wife and children behind. Dora is not an ordinary woman and Chris’s absence makes her even more extroverted, or in Nwapa’s own words more “outward”.

The female character Rose, another fighting woman in Nwapa’s *Women are Different*, after Queen’s College, fails her university entrance test but fortunately sets about teaching in a girl’s school. Determined as she is, she later gains admission to the University of London and returns to her home country to be appointed as the “Woman Education Officer”. She gets married with Mark, and gives

naïvely to him all her savings so that he can further his studies in the United States, only to discover that he has dumped her. It appears that through toil and high spirit, the female character Rose has also reversed the order of things in a society dominated by men; in a nutshell, the hard-working female character stands out to be the sole provider of financial resources in her household. As a brave woman, Rose only keeps going forward, takes another job and after a few months of hard work, becomes a high executive in the ministry. Pointing out Rose's success, the omniscient narrator in Nwapa's novel under study says, "She was where she was at the right time. She moved to Ikoyi, had a large office and a secretary. If that was not success, what then was success?" (Nwapa 83) Undoubtedly and contrary to the women of their mothers' generation, these female characters Agnes, Dora, and Rose are more active because of their schooling and financial autonomy. One can notice some improvements in the social status of African women and this is shown through Chinwe, Dora's daughter.

As a matter of fact, Chinwe embodies the new generation of fighting African women. She refuses to resume school after the civil war:

Reluctantly, Chinwe returned to school. A year afterwards, she told her mother that she was through with school. She was more interested in doing business with her. She was so adamant about it that Dora let her stay. A year later she got married to a businessman. She was only twenty. Chinwe proved to be her mother's daughter. She was as industrious as her mother and she not only baked, she also went into full catering business. Her husband did importing and exporting business and in no time at all they were both well off (Nwapa 76)

Chinwe wants to be financially free from men's diktat by hook or by crook; in that vein, she even marries her second husband "because of his wealth" (Nwapa 116). In actual fact, the next generation to Dora's has loose morals in that "The girls give their bodies, their youth, and their vitality to the filthy sugar daddies" (*Idem*). Chinwe learns how to make trade from her mother and is able to skip from one opportunity to another. Shortly after she leaves her second husband, "she closed the beer-parlour and got herself a contract worth one million naira from the new military rulers" (Nwapa 118). For Chinwe and her likes, the means to gain their financial empowerment has no limit. Chinwe is eager to gain money, a lot of money and be rich. She even indulges in prostitution:

Shortly after Dora's visit, Rose learnt that Chinwe had left her husband and was engaged in beer-parlour business. This was hardly an ideal business for a young woman who had left her husband [...]. Any young girl who carried on that kind of business, was of course a prostitute. That was it. The business was a cover up for prostitution, and not even an angel would make it respectable (Nwapa 115).

Elizabeth, Agnes' daughter nicknamed Zizi, goes further than that in prostitution; the heterodiegetic narrator says this of Elizabeth: "Before Elizabeth was fifteen, she left home and lived with a woman known to be the proprietress of a brothel" (Nwapa 121). At eighteen, she befriends armed robbers, owns a Mercedes Benz. Zizi is the kind of woman who fears nothing. She becomes a drug peddler; she is caught and tried by the court of law in the United Kingdom. The new generation of women institutionalizes their search for financial empowerment regardless of moral values unlike their mothers. They go so far as to sell prohibited substances. Elizabeth gets married to a rich man for financial considerations like Chinwe with her second husband:

Theo met Zizi when 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 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 (Nwapa 129).

Since post-colonial studies have to do with “the impact of European imperialism upon world societies” (Ashcroft *et al.* 169), the next generation to Dora’s generation conquers several men in their nets simply because the term ‘imperialism’ suggests conquest, and because this generation also wants to reverse the trend of male domination prevalent in patriarchy. All that matters for these young female characters seems to be about financial empowerment and they long for economic success by taking financial advantage over the men who exploit them sexually.

Conclusion

The enterprising African woman of the new generation takes a stand and demands for the place they believe is due to them in this globalization era, and it is shown by the female characters in *Women are Different*. Thus, Flora Nwapa believes in the power of Nigerian/African women to change things as the female characters Dora, Rose, Agnes, and the others have done. Flora Nwapa has projected in her fiction new female characters deeply rooted in tradition but firmly open to modernity. She is a reformist in her ideas. Rose, Agnes, Dora and other female characters in the novels are very remarkable women, strong, competent, ambitious, courageous, hardworking and successful in their various activities and because they are economically independent, they are also self-reliant and reject all submission to male oppression due to their gender. The myth of men’s superiority in the household in the man-dominated society has crumbled like a house of cards in that female characters in Nwapa’s *Women are Different* dominate their male counterparts and at the same time make them partners in their undertaking. The writer uses this strategy in her fiction to show the importance of collaboration and complementarity among the genders. Nwapa aspires to the creation of a world neither dominated by men nor by women but a human world on an equal footing. The author’s conviction is that with collaborative efforts from both men and women, all will go right. Nwapa’s fiction focuses on women but every female character’s destiny seems to be linked to that of a man. The search for unity of the people, of spouses and living a life acceptable to both men and women is better than a devastating struggle for women’s liberation, independence, and equality against men. All in all, women in Flora Nwapa’s novel published in 1986 are really different in a male-controlled society where women are negatively portrayed.

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