Womanist Aesthetics in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

By

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to investigate the constructive representation of the African woman in Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*. This study through a close reading examines Nwapa’s *Efuru* from the womanist theoretical framework, postulated by Chikwenye Ogunyemi. Womanism is understood as an ideology of African women, deeply rooted in the well-being of the community and acknowledges women’s natural contribution to society. This standpoint pays distinctive attention to the critical appraisal of a literary text and bestows a meaningful, cultural context for women, which projects them in leading roles and liberate them from the dominant and long enduring shadow of male dominance. Using the novel of Nwapa, the paper shows that the womanism found in Nwapa’s worldview is point d’arrivée of womanist discourse in African literature. Finally, the paper reveals that the application of womanism in Nwapa’s case, is appropriate and ingenious to underscore and analyze how an African woman writer presents the negative experiences of her protagonist, Efuru, who declines to be oppressed by men, society, and culture. The womanist approach is decisive to the understanding of Nwapa’s creativity, for the comprehension of her novel in projecting African literature to the fore and her sensibilities as Womanist of reckon.

Keywords: Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Close reading, Efuru, Flora Nwapa, Womanism/womanist,

Introduction
Flora Nwapa is a pioneer African female writer who blazed the trail in portraying the womanist principles and African cultures in her literary
creations. We acknowledge Nwapa’s endeavours on behalf of women, as her novel, *Efuru* (1966) marks out a new beginning for African women writers and becomes the necessary starting point of criticism of African Women’s writings. She accomplished this by constructing women as the principal characters in her novels. To this end, she obliges us to take a fresh look at women in African society, by re-envisioning the future of African women and renegotiating the patriarchal spaces she is reduced to in African literature.

Nwapa believes that African women are articulate, possess strength, independence and competence to perform well in any sphere of life. In this connection, she constructs positive images of African women and how they develop themselves in the patriarchal society and their contributions to the development of their society, which were played down or neglected in the works of the male writers.

Nwapa’s interest in the exploration of women’s concerns stems from the negative depiction of the African woman. The fictional representation of women were constructed by male writers from the beginning, because society was male centred and controlled by patriarchy for a long time. A great number of male writers scripted patriarchal focused stories, by placing men at the centre of notable stories as well as in their literary canons; while women were out rightly degraded or reduced to second class beings in literary creations. This brought about stereotypes, biases, one sided appeal, negative representation and condemnation of woman to the advantage of men.

In response to the undesirable and negative representation of female characters in the African novels, writers like Nwapa in their literary creations set out to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. African women have fought to liberate themselves from patriarchal oppression and subjectivity, by depicting a positive image of
women in their fiction. Unlike their male colleagues who make women marginal in their writings, women writers make women play significant roles in their works. African women writers have confronted the current situation by empowering women through literature. They have done this by casting the female character not as controlled and underprivileged but as ingenious and strong-willed. These female writers with their realistic representation of the female situation have unquestionably displayed more tangible unanimity with women than the so-called feminists, as they have followed the high ideals of womanism in their portrayal of the necessities of women and to correct sexist injustices against women as weak and subservient, by substituting it with women’s strength, competence and courage.

Literature is regarded as a reflection of the happenings in the society. Thus, imaginary works play enormous roles in the idea of the societal events and experiences. Flora Nwapa’s Efuru represents literary engagement and is unconceivable outside a social milieu, ethnic groups and of an era. Similarly, the artist too belongs to the society and contributes to the aesthetic advancement of the society through his/her work. To this end, Wellek and Warren asserts that: “Literature is an expression of the society” (79). For Ikechukwu Orjinta, “literatures exist only in a social milieu, as part and parcel of a given culture. One could interpret a literary work within the context of race, milieu and moment. Race refers to the human population the involved milieu applies to the socio-political or cultural setting. World literature depends on the society” (85).

Nwapa is one of the most influential voices of our time, in her novel, Efuru, she tells the story of an independent and strong-minded woman who struggles to prove herself in an African society, particularly an Ibo society, before the arrival of the Europeans. Nwapa in Efuru, deals with the circumstances of women in her traditional Igbo society with importance on their estimated roles as wives and mothers within the community. The
novel clearly depicts women who regain consciousness and improve their material and psychological disposition in spite of intense difficulties posed to them from the male centred society.

This study gains significance as it shed more light on how Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, is rooted in the ideology of womanism, a model which is shaped by feminine concerns and experiences of the black woman. To be sure, womanism as a conception, applauds the principles of black life and at the same time gives a well-adjusted illustration of black womanhood and gendered struggles, as well as in the freedom and independence of women. Employing the approach of womanism, Nwapa’s novel points African women in a new direction by urging all marginalized women to collaborate in creating their own paradigm, which derives from their own social reality and mirrors their cultural independence and veracity. The work too offers a close reading and in-depth analysis of *Efuru* which leads to a rational and practical analysis of the novel. A significant benefit of close reading, as an interpretative method lies in the possibility of the objectivity reading of a text.

**Conceptual Thrust**

It is worthy to note that the prominence of women’s writings is relatively new and a number of critical perspectives have been employed to explicate the sundry works written by women to understand the richness and complexities depicted in their works. This paper employs womanist theory to articulate the concerns of women as illuminated in *Efuru*.

Womanism as a term was coined by the American scholar Alice Walker which highlights the level of oppression black women face. Womanism in the context of this study should be considered as a variant of African feminism, such as motherism, stiwanism, negofeminism and the like. In a wider sense, feminism refers to autonomy, equality and ambitions of women and how the depiction of their wellbeing and privileges are
recognized. Feminism is thus, a collective term used for all concepts that address the social equality between men and women. On its part, womanism is all-inclusive and in this sense, it stands for the emancipation and wellbeing of women and the total liberation of all African and coloured people on the African continent and those in the Diaspora—woman, man and child. Thus, it underscores the central idea of the survival of both males and females and collaboration and complementarity as necessary to Black or African feminism.

As Barbara Omolade points out, "black feminism is sometimes referred to as woman-ism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community’s efforts to achieve equity and liberty" (qtd in Collins 10). Ogunyemi, declares that “the ultimate difference between the feminist and the womanist is thus what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed” (69).

Alice Walker offers a broad definition of womanism thus:

Womanist is to Feminist as Purple is to Lavender. A black feminist or feminist of colour. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility... and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist... (xi - xii)

Womanism has a number of definitions and explanations. At its broadest definition, as Alice Walker makes known, lies in it is a universalist ideology for all women, regardless of colour. It is worthy to note that since Walker’s first use of womanism, the term has advanced to enclose diverse, and often
contrasting, interpretations of notions such as feminism, men, and Blackness. In this connection, the Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi has provided her brand of the interpretation of womanism. She sees in the womanist vision a response to the crucial question of how to justifiably share power among the races and between the genders. Although her notion differs from Alice Walker’s definition, yet there are some overlaps between the two ideologies. In connection with Walker’s definition which pays attention to blackness and womanhood, Ogunyemi is of the view that Black womanism is a perspective that applaud Black principles and an unbiased depiction of the black woman.

Margaret Drabble sees womanism as cross-cultural and asserts that:

The many-sided goal of womanism is geared towards a gender free Pan Africanism – the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women. This is a different goal to the idea of a separatist, idyllic existence away from…men’s world that preoccupies the white writer (qtd in Allan, 7).

For her part, Patricia Hill Collins establishes the womanist idea of “commitment to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female as a recurrent theme among black women intellectuals” (qtd in Allan, 8). As a further source, she inaugurates womanist connections with womanists from Anna Julia to June Jordan whose “words and actions resonate with a strikingly similar theme of oneness of all human life” (8). Ogunyemi aptly articulates the focus of womanism in the following words:

Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and
will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (qtd in Maduka, 14).

To come rightly to the appeal of womanism, we shall focus on some germane points that will point us in the right direction of this study and clarify the positions of Alice Walker’s Womanism against Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s African Womanism. Ogunyemi sees in womanism a "black feminist or feminist of colour committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (qtd in Arndt 711). However, Alice Walker in her delineation of womanism focuses on sexual issues and incorporates racial, cultural and political considerations. According to Alice Walker, a Womanist is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker xi). From this declaration, Walker makes clear that Black Feminism is not contrasting race liberation and that womanists are not separatists except periodically for health and are "traditionally universalists" (Walker xi)

In a manifest way then, Womanism as a theory, thus, confronts patriarchal position that sees the female gender as weak and subservient, replacing it with women’s strength, ability, audacity, courage, sense of obligation and awareness. We must not lose sight of the fact that, the variety of womanism introduced by Alice Walker, deals with racial matters and sees it as a theory that takes into consideration the black culture, myths, experiences and their spiritual life which is the focal point of womanism. It is interesting to note that Ogunyemi detaches herself from African-American brand of womanism. A quote here will do us good: “It is necessary to reiterate that the womanist praxis in Africa has never totally identified with all the original Walkerian precepts. An important point of departure is the African obsession to have children"(qtd in Arndt 712).

Clearly, Ogunyemi’s womanism differs somewhat from Alice walker’s in terms that Ogunyemi rejects the lesbian love because of the,
“African...silence or intolerance of lesbianism” (qtd in Arndt 712). Furthermore, African womanism is constructed on social problems and concerned with the development of black women’s identity in their patriarchal society. Ogunyemi contends that Black womanism is a “philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced womanhood. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a brother or a sister or a father or a mother to the other” (Ogunyemi 72).

For the purposes of this study, we shall employ Ogunyemi’s womanist theory as the framework for a womanist analysis of Efuru, since Ogunyemi’s beliefs of the female aesthetics matches the womanist ideology of Nwapa. Ogunyemi’s womanism is geared towards the specific needs of African people and accommodates men, women and children. It focuses on resistance to all forms of patriarchal behaviour and the belief that women can live their lives the way they want to and be accountable for their own livings and future. The female novel as a protest novel against patriarchy shows the inequalities and abuses inflicted on women by patriarchal traditions and the ultimate portrayal of the independent woman. Nwapa’s Efuru exhibits the features of Ogunyemi womanism; hence the most appropriate approach to trace and explain the exploitation of the protagonist of the novel, Efuru and how she becomes as a symbol of independence in her society. The exploration of Nwaps’s novel avows the dynamic role she played as a womanist model in redefining and reaffirming the identity of the African woman. It likewise reveals her accent of the quest for independence and power of the African woman.

**Womanist Analysis In Efuru**

Flora Nwapa’s novel Efuru is enriched with womanist features. The paper highlights the most salient attributes of womanism which the archetypal African female character, Efuru exhibits. Since this work is a womanist analysis, it focuses majorly on the roles of Efuru, the female protagonist in
the novel, in connection with her self-perception, as well as societal awareness of her as a woman. At first glance, Efuru appears to be the oppressed entity with little power, but Nwapa’s unfolding characterization of Efuru reveals her as multi-dimensional with diverse roles as a woman throughout the novel.

The Igbo patriarchal society which Nwapa depicts in her novel has a strict system of behavioural practices according to gender. These practices strappingly limits the independence of the woman and help to underpin the notion that Igbo men are superior to the women of their society. It is worthy to note that the Igbos have been conditioned to associate weakness with the state of being female, but interestingly, women are socialized to function in prevailing positions in their society, in terms of their authority and power.

The protagonist, Efuru we encounter at the opening of the novel is a determined woman who rebels against tradition, by deciding on the one hand to marry her first husband, Adizua, the man of her choice without the permission of her father and on the other hand to a man who is unable pay her dowry. When Adizua, confesses to Efuru that he does not have the money to pay the dowry. She resolves that they are “going to proclaim themselves married” (7) in spite of all odds. Implicated here is the fact that Efuru undermined traditional conventions by effecting her inborn tenacity.

The main action of Efuru, we must remember, centres on her rejection of the tradition of mandatory marriage and on the freedom of choice of spouse. Critics will not failed to point out that, Efuru’s womanism stands out because she is able to get a man of her own choosing and refused to bow to patriarchal demands of parental choice.

Later on in the novel, the readers are made to see that the marriage collapses due to Adizua’s dishonest and irresponsible behaviour which is inherited. It is traced to Adizua’s father marriage to his wife, Ossai. The novel informs
us that “as a woman was married in our days. He (Adizua’s father) paid his bride price in full and performed all the customs of our people” (59). Like his father, Adizua also abandoned Efuru, his wife. In tracing the reckless acts of father and son, attention will be drawn to the aspect of reversion from a great moral posture to immorality. It becomes a choice of Adizua to part ways with his wife. And in this choice lies the worst possible alternative for a man like Adizua who is shallow at his very existence and without the wisdom and wealth of Efuru which he depends on. For the novel tells us that “It was Efuru who was the brain behind the business” (36) of their survival.

Similarly, Efuru’s second marriage Gilbert also failed. However, as an affectual woman, Efuru does not dwell on her unfortunate situation, she seeks other sources of happiness by taking her destiny into her hands. She thus redefined herself, gained independence and became wealthy and prosperous as a worthy and contributory member of the society to the amazement of the members of her society.

Efuru in marriage, undergoes the crucial problem of childlessness in which the members of her society consider her as a man while living with Adizua. The narrative intimates us about their thoughts: “two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce” (23). Her barren nature leads Adizua to abandon her for another woman. Even when their child dies, he refuses to visit her, leaving her to endure the pain alone (93-94). As a man he fails to share in the burden of the death of their child.

Apparently, Efuru is not one to submit to such degradation, she demonstrated the strength of character and intense independent spirit throughout the course of her adult life. As a womanist, she does not define herself by marriage or by just being an appendage of her husband, but validated that she had an identity of her own. So when her husband initially
left for Ndoni with another woman. She felt her position as first wife threatened. This prompts Efuru to comment thus “…I want to keep my position as the first wife, for it is my right.” (53). Thus, Efuru remains and refused to be brought under complete dominance of a man. She subdues her hard experiences to become a successful woman in a patriarchal system.

In the case of her second marriage to Gilbert, it is a woman who asserts thus: “We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage should be fruitful. Of what use is it if is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband hicks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive?” (171). Gilbert, seeing that Efuru is unfertile, blames her for her condition and goes ahead to accuse her of adultery:

Efuru, my wife, the gods are angry with you because you are guilty of adultery, and unless you confess, you will die. So you should confess to me and live. I won't ostracise you, you will still be my wife, and I won't allow anybody to molest you.
So confess and live. (274-275)

We must not forget, too, that when Efuru’s father dies, Gilbert, refrained from attending the burial ceremony (259). The hallmark of this situation lies in the fact that Gilbert brings home the child he has from another woman without taking time to psychologically prepare his wife, Efuru (Kouadio 179).

Interestingly, Efuru did not suffer only from the subjugation of her husbands but also agonizes from cultural practices as female circumcision, which the narrative maintains is "a cultural and traditional sexual-oriented prescription supposed to define woman's identity” (10). A dwindling and narrowing effect is evident when we reflect that these are some of the impediments that an African woman must encounter so as to attain the repute, respect and obligation of womanhood. It is inevitable what she had to go through, but as a woman who believes in her cultural norms, she
willing goes through this rite of passage which marks a significant transition in a human life in the interest of her society.

In spite of all her travails, Efuru, continues her life as an independent woman of character. Efuru moves out of disenchantment by challenging the deceit of her two husbands and confronting responsibilities between males and females particularly in marriage. She deduces that “marriage is like picking a parcel from numerous parcels. If you are lucky, you pick up a valuable one” (96). In her estimation then, marriage is not a bed of roses, it is not as pleasant as expected but fraught with difficulties to contend with. In Efuru, Nwapa seems to have been unrelenting in creating a character who navigates her way pass any hazard or obstacle in her gendered society. Mention has to be made that Efuru averred her “dowry must be paid. I must see that this is done” (10). This not only marks her out as a woman of strong conviction, but shows her resolve on observance to cultural directives that identifies her as a woman of integrity, who knows that her status as a married woman, was truly safeguarded after her bride price had been paid. It must be borne in mind too, that Efuru displays dexterity, strength and maturity in handling concerns of male supremacy. When her husband started to attacks her, for coming home late from the dance of a member of her age group who was “performing the ceremony of the second burial of her father and so they went to dance with her” (29); She aptly settles for peace by singing this song; “My dear husband, don’t kill me. Listen to me first before you pass judgement...” (30). Thus, Efuru achieves peaceful coexistence through her negotiating skills.

There is also a touch of the notion of “fruitfulness” in marriage, which is given attention to in the novel. By applying a contextual implication to an African context, this is a signifier to the value of being married. In African cultures, procreation is one of the vital aims of marriage. Thus Efuru lay there thinking of it: “Is this happening to me or someone I know? Is that baby mine or somebody else? Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I
am a woman after all? Perhaps I am dreaming. I shall soon wake up and discover that it is not real” (31). This is evident that infertility in their marriage is not her problem since she can deliver off a baby, which proves the nature of her motherhood.

In presenting to the readers the character of Efuru, the novel discloses that she is a brilliant woman, who is very successful in her trading. She stands out tall unlike other men in her society who are not able to achieve her feat. The men lack the skill and ingenuity of trading. We are informed that: “Adizua was not good at trading it was Efuru who was the brain behind business” (36). In the presentation of the character, Efuru, she is identified with wealth and connects with others in sparing enough money for other people’s needs. To complete the picture, the novel informs us that she always assisted Ogea’s parents with money, in the case of doctor Uzaru, she pays him help sick people particularly Nwosu and Nwabata a woman who has a bad leg. The point to be observed, of course, is that Efuru aids everyone in her community without exclusions. The hallmark of her devotion and attitude is her being a competent and resourceful inhabitant of society, who effects roles that even man cannot carry out.

As the novel makes clear, Efuru is not the only female trader; there are a number of other women in the novel whose “hands make money” (37). This is significant not only in the delineation of the character of Efuru, but points to the fact that all women can be financially dependent, if they chose to be, instead of depending on men who would constantly oppress them simply for being able to provide for them.

**Conclusion**
In the light of the foregoing, this paper explored the positive representation of the African woman in Flora Nwapa’s novel, *Efuru*. This study through a close reading and in-depth analysis appraised Nwapa’s *Efuru* utilizing the African womanist theory of Chikwenye Ogunyemi, as a worthwhile and
practical method of analysis. The study illuminates certain features of Womanism reflected in \textit{Efuru} to explore the deep meaning of the African woman experience. The analyses of Nwapa’s novel affirms the vital role the writer has played in redefining and reasserting the identity of the African woman. Employing the novel of Nwapa, the paper revealed that the variety of womanism found in Nwapa’s literary creation is deep-rooted to the well-being of the women and recognises their natural contribution to society. Finally, the paper discloses that the application of womanism in Nwapa’s case, is apt and pivotal to the understanding of her creativity by projecting African literature to the fore, and her sensibilities as a womanist in her own right.

\textbf{Works Cited}


