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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Conflicts and Restrictions: Flora Nwapa's Visionary Exposé of Women's Struggles in Nigerian Marital Contexts**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates acclaimed Nigerian Author Flora Nwapa's nuanced literary portrayals of the challenges Nigerian women face within marital roles and relationships. Through textual analysis of characters and events across Nwapa's novels, short stories and folklore centered on women's experiences, the study illuminates critical perspectives on issues of patriarchy, lack of autonomy, rigid gender roles, and socioeconomic restrictions undermining women's agency and fulfillment. Core themes highlighted in Nwapa's subtle social commentary include anguish over infertility, hardships from prolonged spousal absence, emotional tolls of polygamy, lack of personal choice in partners, limited educational and career opportunities, economic dependence, and domestic violence. Her visionary work gives voice to Nigerian women's aspirations while exposing oppressive structures. Findings substantiate how Nwapa's rich depictions of women navigating complex marital terrain reveal an array of postcolonial and patriarchal impediments to female empowerment. Her literary portrayal of restrictions, conflicts and oppression compels critical examination of norms inhibiting women's advancement. By confronting gender-based inequities and envisioning transformative possibilities, Nwapa leads African women writers in catalyzing legal and sociocultural reforms to promote women's full flourishing.

**KEYWORDS**

African literature, Flora Nwapa, infertility, patriarchy, marriage.

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### **1. Introduction**

Africa has a long literary tradition, although very little of this literature was written down until the 20th century. In the absence of widespread literacy, African literature was primarily oral and passed from one generation to the next through memorization and recitation. Hence, much of the information we have as far as the question of tradition is concerned is largely held in doubt as the word of mouth can be thought of as an unreliable media for passing on information. In the process, facts are either changed quite radically or distorted so abhorrently depending on the talent and trustworthiness of the narrator or the source. Consequently, oral tradition is a poor record for the African literary tradition.

When the art of writing has become dominant and widespread, European languages were so extensively used in writing African literature owing to European colonization of the continent from the 16th century to the mid-20th century. During that period European languages supplanted African languages in government, education, business, and, to a great extent, in daily communication. By far the most widely used European language in African literature is English, followed by French and Portuguese, respectively. Works written in African languages and traditional oral texts went virtually unacknowledged until the late 20th century, but today they are receiving increased recognition. Many scholars prefer to speak of African literatures, rather than African literature, to emphasize the many different literary traditions the term encompasses.

This paper will focus specifically on the theme of marriage and women's issues in African literature, particularly fiction written by women authors like Flora Nwapa. The concept of marriage in African society will be examined as an important theme influenced by customs and traditions. The paper explores how African women writers portray the problems faced by women within marriage, including patriarchy, infertility, polygamy, lack of education, and financial dependence. Their writings shed light on the hardships endured by African women in a culture where strict gender roles dictate their status and opportunities. The present paper takes as its prominent objective the reveal of the most salient issues of oppression African women have been destined to undergo and how Nwapa managed to project them into a fairly realistic and convincing light.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

African women writers have brought critical feminist perspectives to literature, exposing unjust patriarchal structures that disempower women socially, economically, and politically across the continent. However, the contributions of pioneering female African authors highlighting women's issues surrounding marital roles have often been marginalized from mainstream literary discourse and analysis.

Within both indigenous cultures and colonial regimes, African women have faced deep oppression regarding marital expectations and exclusion from decisions shaping their personal destinies. Practices like child marriage, bride price payment, polygamy, female circumcision, domestic violence, sole male control of reproductive choices, and women's legal dependence have endured (Kolawole, 1997). Posited as central custodians of tradition even while denied public leadership influence, African women carry immense responsibility for family stability amidst rigid constraints on personal autonomy.

Acclaimed Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa illuminates the complex realities of Igbo women's existence through her trailblazing novels, short stories and folklore collections centered on female experiences in southeastern Nigerian culture. However, few studies holistically analyze Nwapa's multilayered literary portrayals of Nigerian women's aspirations, agency and identities with respect to marital roles and wifely duties. This paper helps fill critical gaps in understanding by investigating how Nwapa exposes problems women face under patriarchy through her subtle yet incisive social commentary. Examining Nwapa's rich depictions of women navigating marriage, duty and selfhood compels reexamination of assumptions that limit female empowerment in Africa and beyond.

### **1.2 The Portrayal of Marriage in African Literature**

When the art of writing has become dominant and widespread, European languages were so extensively used in writing African literature owing to European colonization of the continent from the 16th century to the mid-20th century. During that period European languages supplanted African languages in government, education, business, and, to a great extent, in daily communication. By far the most widely used European language in African literature is English, followed by French and Portuguese, respectively. Works written in African languages and traditional oral texts went virtually unacknowledged until the late 20th century, but today they are receiving increased recognition. Many scholars prefer to speak of African literatures, rather than African literature, to emphasize the many different literary traditions the term encompasses.

This survey covers only African literatures south of the Sahara. The literatures of North Africa are not included because North African cultures share greater affinities with the Arab world than with sub-Saharan peoples and cultures (for more information, see Arabic Literature). The literature of white South Africa is similarly excluded, as it is more closely linked with the European literary heritage.

Africa's cultural traditions are extremely diverse. Traditionally, art, music, and oral literature served to reinforce existing religious and social patterns. During the colonial period, some educated city dwellers rejected traditional African cultural activities in favor of Western cultural pursuits, but a cultural revival sprang up with the rise of African nationalism and independence in the mid-20th century. Arabic written literature has a long history in North Africa, while European-language literature has developed more recently. The governments of most African nations sponsor national dance and music groups, museums, and to a lesser degree, artists and writers.

Africans value education, and all governments see improving educational access and quality as essential to national economic and political development. Despite scarce financial resources, many countries have made noteworthy achievements in raising literacy rates in recent decades. Adult literacy rates of 70 percent or more are characteristic of East, Central, and southern Africa, except, notably, in Somalia, Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. Gains have been less impressive in West Africa: Many countries still have literacy rates below 60 percent, and the rates in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone are among the world's lowest. Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria are notable exceptions, with particularly high literacy rates.

To come to a closer look at African's traditions and practices we have to opt for a single theme to explore quite intensively to arrive at a comprehensive image. Many of African writers have examined the issue of marriage in their writings and have successfully presented the reader with a vivid picture of the tradition of marriage. It is stated by Ladele that colonialism and its after-effects pervade the male-dominated literary tradition in Africa. Within the complexities of these realities, it may be said that African women are doubly colonized, by Western colonialism and African patriarchy. Imprisoned then, by the authoritative phalluses which define her daily experiences and which seek to negate the authentic image of the African woman. (Ladele, 2009, 23).

In literary criticism, whenever African literature is mentioned, African male writers as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa thiongo, Camara Laye and others come to mind. These writers have been known for their masterpieces and novels that express African culture. The masterpieces respectively include; *Things Fall Apart*, *Weep not Child*, *The African Child*.

However, although African female writers have written several works, they are hardly known by most readers; since they are rarely given attention by critics. Kolawole contends that most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization of women. 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 such strong that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to her degree of adaptation to these roles; examples abound. (Kolawole, et al, 1997)

As writers, therefore, African women are compelled to negotiate new sites in which they can articulate more viable and acceptable self-images. Interestingly, there are some brilliant African women writers including; Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Mariam Ba, and Flora Nwapa. In their works, they have expressed and addressed issues and ideas of no less importance than those of their male counterparts. For example, Mariama Ba, was a Senegalese female writer who wrote, has contributed high quality novels, including *"So Long a Letter"* (1980) in which she projects the classical statement of the female condition in Africa. Bessie Head, born in South Africa in 1937, is one of the most prominent African woman writers. She wrote several novels and short stories. Buchi Emecheta is the best known Nigerian female writer, who emerged in postcolonial Africa.

In addition to being a personal relationship between two people, marriage is one of society's most important and basic institutions. Marriage and family serve as tools for ensuring social reproduction. Social reproduction includes providing food, clothing, and shelter for family members; raising and socializing children; and caring for the sick and elderly. In families and societies in which wealth, property, or a hereditary title is to be passed on from one generation to the next, inheritance and the production of legitimate heirs are a prime concern in marriage. However, in contemporary industrialized societies, marriage functions less as a social institution and more as a source of intimacy for the individuals involved.

Marriage is commonly defined as a partnership between two members of opposite sex known as husband and wife. However, scholars who study human culture and society disagree on whether marriage can be universally defined. The usual roles and responsibilities of the husband and wife include living together, having sexual relations only with one another, sharing economic resources, and being recognized as the parents of their children. However, unconventional forms of marriage that do not include these elements do exist. For example, scholars have studied several cultural groups in Africa and India in which husbands and wives do not live together. Instead, each spouse remains in his or her original home, and the husband is a "visitor" with sexual rights. Committed relationships between homosexuals (individuals with a sexual orientation toward people of the same sex) also challenge conventional definitions of marriage.

Debates over the definition of marriage illustrate its dual nature as both a public institution and a private, personal relationship. On the one hand, marriage involves an emotional and sexual relationship between particular human beings. At the same time, marriage is an institution that transcends the particular individuals involved in it and unites two families. In some cultures, marriage connects two families in a complicated set of property exchanges involving land, labor, and other resources. The extended family and society also share an interest in any children the couple may have. Furthermore, the legal and religious definitions of marriage and the laws that surround it usually represent the symbolic expression of core cultural norms (informal behavioral guidelines) and values.

## **2. Problems of the Instituting of Marriage**

It goes without saying that this institution is teeming with unpleasant realities across different communities and cultures. The concept of romantic love exists in all cultures but is usually not linked to marriage. Love is often portrayed as a dangerous emotion that can end in tragedy. Historically many people in Western societies have also been suspicious of marriages based on love, despite the glorification of love in songs and stories. Passion and romance would quickly fade, many people believed, leaving the couple with a lifetime of regret.

In some simple communities like that of African or even in Sudan marriage is not necessary be based on a romantic relationship. Romance is viewed to take hold after marriage the coming of children hence the building up of a family where couple will be so concerned to look after children. Brining of children will cement this relationship. Years before the rising of the new ideologies of marriage women would work with their husbands in farms to cater for the family in a harmonious companionship. However, in modern times a new ideology of marriage gradually took hold. It arose as the result of a variety of social and economic factors associated with the rise of modern society: the shift of work out of the home, the growth of urban living, and the spread of democratic ideals of equality and individual rights. Companionship and emotional satisfaction came to be seen as the criteria for successful marriage. The companionship model of marriage also results from demographic shifts—that is, changes in the characteristics of the population. As the average life span increased and people had fewer children than they had in the past, couples began to experience a prolonged period during which marriage continued without the presence of young children. Compatibility with one's partner became increasingly important.

### 3. Selecting a partner

Although practices vary from one culture to another, all societies have rules about who is eligible to marry whom, which individuals are forbidden to marry one another, and the process of selecting a mate. In most societies, the mate-selection process involves what social scientists call a marriage market. The husband and wife come together out of a wide range of possible partners. In many non-Western societies the parents, not the prospective marriage partners, do the "shopping." In Western societies social rules have gradually changed to permit more freedom of choice for the couple and a greater emphasis on love as the basis for marriage.

In many parts of Africa, traditional mate selection practices place heavy emphasis on building alliances between families and ensuring brides can contribute economically (Okonkwo, 2017). However, colonial influence and increasing urbanization have shifted attitudes towards love-based unions in some settings (Eze, 2022). These complex tensions shape the marital landscape female African authors portray in their works. Writers like Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga reveal the conflicts women face between their own romantic aspirations and familial pressures to marry for status and security (Nwankwo, 2015). By examining the diverse mate selection practices at play in Africa, we can better appreciate the nuances of marital experiences depicted in African literature. The tensions between traditional arranged marriages and modern love-based unions surface repeatedly as a core theme that female writers grapple with in their subtle portrayals of relationships (Okpewho, 2009).

### 4. African Women Writers and the View of Marriage

Flora Nwapa (1931-1993) is considered the forerunner of African female writing. Born in Nigeria during the colonial period, Nwapa channeled her own experiences as an educated woman into fiction that centered women's perspectives (Ogunyemi, 1980). Her works tackle patriarchal structures and probe the impacts of colonialism, while upholding pride in Igbo culture (Nwankwo, 2004).

The most renowned contemporary African woman writer almost devoted her works to the idea of empowerment of women and other marginalized sections of the society, is Flora Nwapa. She is the first African woman writer to publish her fiction in English. She is regarded as a pioneer among her counterparts with the publication of her first novel, *Efuru* in 1966. Her writings truly depict the society within the traditional and social contexts, a society that inclined to devalue women and question their feminine attributes and confine their role in life to bearing children.

Nwapa is highly concerned with things that matter and stick to showing them realistically. Her novels are rooted in humanitarian themes that deal with issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. Through her novels she expresses her deep concern about the agonies of women. While trying to register her disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal system, she keeps reminding women that the social condition of a society and its wrong nations can be gauged by the standing status of its women. She unceasingly encourages women to aim high by educating themselves, underlining her belief that education, economic independence, and self assertiveness are the important steps towards liberation since there is a strong correlation between women's education and their overall progress including their economic development.

Other trailblazing female African writers, both before and after Nwapa, have provided illuminating portraits of marriage. Buchi Emecheta wrote of the besieged Nigerian woman trapped between the indigenous patriarchy and imperial domination (Rueda, 2001). Mariama Bâ depicted a woman's profound agony in polygamous Senegalese society (Stratton, 1994). Tsitsi Dangarembga took on complications of Zimbabwean independence, including tense dynamics between educated urban couples (Ilo, 2016).

Key themes addressed by these authors in relation to marriage include the emotional impacts of polygamy (Emenyionu, 2004), conflicts between individual choice and family expectations for a bride (Krishnan, 2014), tensions arising from wives' financial dependence on husbands (Udumukwu, 2007), shifting gender power dynamics in wake of colonialism (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1992), and domestic violence rooted in male frustrations over lost status (Nwacha, 2015).

## **5. Patriarchal System**

African women are believed to have experienced hardships that have affected their lives in different ways. They are oppressed, suppressed, and considered as inferior to men, and can be looked down as second-class citizens. They are less education and have no equal opportunities in work. Hence little attention is paid to their stories and novels by male writers, critics and researchers. This fact is confirmed by Ladele who believes that in African literature today, including that of Nigeria, there seems to be an identity crisis for women as one perceives a disjuncture between the typical portrayals of women especially in male authored literatures. (Ladele, 2009, 73)

A central issue to the area in question that is patriarchy is that African women have lived within a dominant male culture that oppresses and devalues them. There has been a rift between the lived experiences and the oppressive identities imposed upon women by dominant male cultures. To investigate this problem further, the paper raises a crucial question which is: What are the African women's issues that have been addressed by Flora Nwapa?

African women writers like Flora Nwapa confront patriarchal social systems that inflict multiple forms of disadvantage upon women. Under many traditional patriarchal structures in Africa, women suffer from an overall devaluation and marginalization in society (Kolawole, 1997). Specific elements of women's oppression include:

**Lack of Educational Opportunities:** Traditional norms limit girls' access to education, restricting their economic prospects and personal development (Mikell, 1997).

**Legal and Social Restrictions of Rights:** Customary laws and norms deny women equal rights in areas like property ownership, inheritance, and divorce proceedings (Manuh, 1998).

**Imposition of Early Marriage:** The practice of child marriage and betrothal at birth rob girls of self-determination in selecting life partners (Ezeigbo, 1998).

**Pervasiveness of Domestic Violence:** Social tolerance of wife beating leaves many women trapped in relationships characterized by physical and emotional abuse (Emenyionu, 2004).

**Devaluation of Women's Contributions:** Social systems fail to recognize or reward the significant economic contributions of women through agricultural work, market trading, and household production (Nnaemeka, 1997).

Flora Nwapa brought the experiences of Nigerian women to life through subtle social commentary in her novels and stories. She confronted practices like polygamy and female circumcision while envisioning more possibilities for autonomy and fulfillment. This papers analyzes Nwapa's nuanced portrayals of...[key issues related to marriage/womanhood].

The revised focus ties the discussion of patriarchal oppression explicitly back to the scope Nwapa's own portrayal of women's issues in her fiction writing. Please let me know if this helps properly situate the analysis around investigating Nwapa's literature itself rather than remaining as a broad overview of women's status in Africa. I'm happy to clarify the transition in any other ways as well. Just aiming to hone in on analysis of Nwapa specifically.

By exposing the diverse mechanisms used to disempower women under patriarchy, African women writers like Nwapa could advocate for necessary legal reforms, educational access, rights protections, and changes in social attitudes. Nwapa's subtle social commentary shines light on rationalizations used to justify women's lower status while envisioning more empowering realities.

## **6. Highlighting the Issue**

According to reports by African Union and Toolkits, it is clearly stated that in many African communities' issues as child marriage and forced marriage is principally undertaken to reinforce family, clan and tribal connections. It is watched in the film *Difret*, at <http://www.difret.org> that in traditional Ethiopian practice, a man kidnaps, hides and rapes a girl and then, as the father of her unborn child, can claim marriage. Furthermore, Uphondo contended that in South Africa, there is a practice of abducting young girls and forcing them into marriage, often with the consent of their parents. (African Union et al, 2015)

Moreover, Ohrt stated that a traditional practice in rural Ghana, Benin and Togo involves sending a young virgin girl to a shrine as atonement for a crime committed by a family member, often a man. In addition, Parikh wrote that in Uganda and other African countries, parents, family and community leaders typically plan adolescents' marital relationships, leaving young people from traditional families without autonomy in this decision. Child marriage becomes a business transaction between families that

regulates and commodifies girls' and women's sexuality and reproduction. Even in some parts of the Sudan child marriage is also conducted to strengthen social relationships and possibly a young virgin girl who perhaps nor reached the age of adolescence be married to a man who is twenty or thirty years senior to her. Also, it is reported by Greene and et.als. that in Kenya, girls are subjected to FGM (female genital mutilation) at a very early age. This is because the more girls are educated the lower the chances of accepting to undergo the cut of FGM. Thus, contrarian members of the community devise ways of subjecting girls to FGM before they are mature and able to make informed decisions. As a result, girls are dropping out of school and opting for marriage thinking they will be treated as adult women.( Ohrt et al, 2011)

Previous studies as was reported by the UK group Young Lives reflect that in many communities the practices of early or forced marriage and FGM have strong cultural roots and a clear cultural logic, which suggests that some communities may not necessarily be very amenable to reform. This logic embodies two key elements. First, the families and kin group have a strong vested interest in the productive and reproductive capacity of women, articulated through the regulation by older generations of their sexuality and sexual conduct. Second, child marriage and circumcision are seen to ensure girls' social integration and thereby their protection and their moral and social development. (UK group Young Lives, 2013, 24)

## 7. Data Analysis

Nwapa, in her three novels, *Efuru*, **One is Enough and Women are Different**, attacks heartlessly the rules of her society that serve to subject women to the oppressive customs of African marriage. She describes the situation as completely horrible in the sense that an attempt to introduce progressive views in relation to this issue can be faced so fiercely by members of community. The pioneer will be held high in enmity. Consequently, breaking the links with such practices in a patriarchal society is not at all an easy affair. Nevertheless, Nwapa went on to make her call be overheard that African women's voices, dreams and aspirations have to be taken care of by the entire members of the enlightened community particularly the intellectuals.

Across the three novels, *Nwapa's* women protagonists are apparently discontented with their husbands. A noticeable tempo of complain and discomfort is easily observed right from the outset. Cases of divorce are of course common in such a milieu their shoes. Both *Efuru* and *Amaka* are compelled to have more than man. Hence, her stories revolve around marriage or its consequences. *Nwapa* shrewdly eposes and analyze the cases of her characters in a high sense of logical mode. The characters are shown to be suffering different ways.

*Efuru* falls victim to the honey words pronounced by her first husband. He tells her 'You know I will be the last person to do anything that will hurt you, my wife.'(E, 26) Soon after, he abandons her and escapes with another woman. The second husband is a strong and good-looking man called Gilbert. At first she thought that he was the right man, and would be better than her first husband. They continued to live happily for about six years. But they had no children, and began to look for options, to avoid being looked down by the community who is influenced by old traditions and conventions. Woman is always to be blamed for not having children. *Efuru* suggests that she should find a wife for Gilbert to keep her marriage and silence the gossipers.

However, Gilbert is not patient enough to wait for the result of *Efuru's* search. He decides to marry another woman, *Nkoyeni*. Gilbert's other side is revealed and his hidden personality is uncovered. He pretends to be a good and cooperative. But, he is not what he appears to be. He is absent for course of time, but also, in prison. To hide his shame, he tries to make troubles to avoid being asked by his wives, especially *Efuru*. He accuses her of adultery to hide the scandal of being in prison. Therefore, after proving her innocence, she deserts him for good and she says farewell him forever!

In *One is Enough*, *Nwapa* depicts the African women's obsession with getting married. *Amaka* struggles hard to get a man in a village society whose people are socialized by the constrained customs of their ancestors. *Amaka* experienced different kinds of love relations with her first suitor, *Isaac* who dies in a motor accident. The second man in *Amaka's* life to whom she is married to is *Abiora*. When he marries another a wife without telling her, *Amaka* decides to leave the house for his new wife. She goes to Lagos to start a new life and free herself from the pressures and stresses of her situation. She plans to forget about the ideal of "a one man woman". (OE, 7)

In *Women are Different*, *Nwapa* portrays the case of three key figures that holds the attention of the reader right from the beginning. They of course plagued by the same problem of the preceding ones marriage misfortune. These characters are: *Agnes*, *Rose*, and *Dora*. *Agnes* stands out quite conspicuously as a typical African woman who tolerates forced marriage with such indescribable stamina. Upon the first days of her marriage she could run household affairs moderately well. She did all house chores along fairly organized manner as though an old practitioner in the art. Undeniably, she has skillfully managed to do her work as a wife quite pleasantly.

Her skills and dedication as a brilliant housewife did nothing to protect her from having a broken family to the effect that tragically end up her pleasant marriage. *"One night Agnes returned home to see her step-mother in a most compromising position with her husband."*(WD, 59) This is quite enough to bring that promising marriage to an impasse. The same disastrous issue of marriage applies to Dora who marries Chris. She did everything in her power to please him. She carefully looks after the children and her business in his presences or during his absences. However, he abandons her and travels to European countries for study. There, he marries a German girl and forgets about Dora and his children for many years. *"She believed in him. She believed in Chris, and now he had betrayed her."*(WD,73)

Rose undergoes three abortive love relationships. At the outset, she is pathetically disregarded by her school boyfriend Earnest, who settles in London for a while in a scholarship where he meets an Irish girl and is forced to marry her because of her pregnancy. Accordingly, this incident has served to spoil his efforts in accomplishing his studies. He returns home to ask Rose to forgive him, promising that he will come back soon and complete their marriage procedures. *"This has taken me by surprise. It is a long time and it is not easy to say yes or no. Go back to London; let's have an open mind about your proposal. I shall be here," said Rose.*"(WD, 96) At the end, Rose discovers that Earnest is involved in trafficking trade with Agens' daughter, Zizi.

Rose once more falls victim to Mark's wicked set-up who marries her and stays for a few days after wedding. Cunningly, he gets hold of her money and leaves to America to pursue his postgraduate studies. He undertook that she will join him soon after settling in America. Sadly enough, she has come to know he was only deceitful. This unpleasant device of stealing her money spells the end of her happy marriage.

Rose befriends *Olu*, her third boyfriend as a businessman. She spends blissful times with him, and travels to different places in his company. Soon, he leaves her.

It appears that Nwapa is deeply unhappy with her community and its attitude in connection with the issue of marriage. Hence she comes to conclude very significantly that the society attaches much more importance to the bringing of children than the lofty sentimental relations such as love to be realized by marriage. Children are highly valued as a woman's source of dignity, fame and protection. The author tells the story of Amaka's aunt who bore seven children within seven years and marries her husband another young girl to avoid quarrelling. She consecrated her life to the care of her children. She managed to bring them up in a way that is commensurate with her dreams and aspirations, and marries all her daughters to rich men. On the other hand, *Amaka* is a different version of her mother and aunt's ideas. She believes in marriage with its emotional and cordial feelings more than having children without husbands.

*Nwapa* employs diverse critical techniques to assail all the disparaging or reproachful marriage customs of the society. In this respect she utilizes *Efuru* in her first novel and *Amaka* in *One is Enough* to stand aloof obstinately and distance themselves from those abhorrent traditions. A much more effective technique is both the title and the name of the major characters which helped to set the African drama in full swing. When *Efuru* marries without dowry, her father has sent a delegation of the youth and wise men of the village to bring *Efuru* back home twice. However, she refuses to come home, insisting that her option must be respected by her father and her society. Ironically, *Nwapa* reports the spokesman of the delegation who says to her: "But your husband must fulfill the customs of our people. It is important. Or enemies will laugh at us." (E, 9)

*Nwapa* projects *Efuru* into a rebellious light by confronting the customs and tradition of her society in getting married without obtaining her father's consent or demanding a dowry. This is made obvious in a conversation between *Adizua* and his mother: "... he told his mother that *Efuru* was his wife. 'I have no money for the dowry yet. *Efuru* herself understands this. We have agreed to be husband and wife and that is all matters..." (E, 8).

In *One is Enough* (1981) *Nwapa* manipulates her main protagonist to smash the social rules. In that *Amaka* moves to different places where her story will continue to take place, after the end of her marriage to *Abiora*. She craftily uses her beauty as a trap to ensnare and seduce young men for the sake of making contracts. To achieve that very wicked end she sleeps even with men. Now she has formed a pathological image towards her marriage after having undergone such multiple sad experiences with men in her society. She makes up her mind not to have husbands; for she has been disappointed in marriage. She wants to lead a free life without enslavement, stress, obligations or restrictions. She believes in having men but not husbands what the title implies; one marriage experience is enough in a woman's life.

In the face of a patriarchal society where women are oppressed in marriage, *Nwapa* tries to enlighten her female characters and make them respond in definite ways. In *Efuru*, *Efuru* operates in a way to demonstrate that the society's customs are wide of the mark by comparing and contrasting her to counterpart man she marries.

Nwapa's debut novel, *Efuru* (1966), resonated with African women readers and launched her career portraying the complex realities of Nigerian women's lives. Through the experiences of characters like Efuru and her friend Ogea, Nwapa examines struggles within the existing structure marriage. She probes the anguish of female characters unable to conceive, the loneliness resulting from husband's long absence, the stigma of failed unions, and the impacts of husbands taking additional wives (Chuku, G. (2003).

In works like Asiegbu, P. S. R. (2012), Nwapa further explores women's lack of autonomy in negotiating marital decisions, chronicling Idu's deep powerlessness when her uncle unilaterally arranges her marriage without consent. Through female characters across novels, short stories and folktales, Nwapa gives voice to Nigerian women's frustrations with strictly defined roles that stifle independence and self-actualization (Jell-Bahlsen, S. (2007).

By widening the analytical lens beyond one seminal novel to trace Nwapa's nuanced portrayals of marital challenges across her body of fiction writing, we can appreciate the breadth of her subtle yet piercing social commentary on Nigerian women's prescribed roles and restricted agency. Examining multiple texts penned over decades substantiates Nwapa's fundamental critiques of oppressive structures and envisioning of alternative possibilities.

On the one hand, *Efuru* is a star of attention and a gorgeous young girl; whose father is a prominent heroic man in the village who has brought stupendous reputation and honor to his people. In contrast, *Efuru* is married to a fairly poor man who has never had any identifiable social accomplishments as fame or receiving a title. Despite the evident social differences between *Efuru's* and *Adizua's* families, she is forced into accepting him as a husband.

Another constructive quality represented by *Efuru* is that, despite *Adizua's* bad deeds, *Efuru* exhibits immense attempts to make appearance and behave like a mild woman. In fact, she has not left a stone unturned to prove that he is still alive. After her long waiting, *Efuru* sadly decides to leave her absent husband's home. She says to herself: "... *Adizua is quite satisfied with this woman and does not want me anymore? Need I to say until he says: "Efuru I don't want you anymore. Return to your father's house, and when you marry again I shall come to my dowry?" ancestors forbid that I should wait for a man to drive me out of this house."* (E, 63).

Likewise in *Women are Different*, the example of *Efuru* who searches for her husband is replicated by Dora who travels to London, Germany searching for Chris. She is faced with the shocking and abortive reality that Chris lives with a German woman. When she faces him at the doors, he pretends that he does not know her. He sends her back to Nigeria.

Nwapa's message in the depiction of her female characters is to inspire them to take their rights and make their independent choices without following others' blindly. *Efuru* is characterized to spell out Nwapa's intension by talking to her mother-in-law: "*Leave that to me. I shall settle it myself*". (E, 8) Therefore, *Efuru* is portrayed as a confident African woman who is prepared to speak out about African women's issues. When her uncle criticizes her for coming home late she addresses him by saying: "*I don't care whom yet to tell.*" (E, 7)

*Efuru* stands out as a strong woman of the writer's choice. The author seeks to inculcate the message of love as an important and essential element in the life a married couple. It is believed for a marriage to last long a young lady has to look for a man who adores her more than she loves him. It is this which is thought to immune marriage against any future sad happenings. *Efuru* refuses to marry *Adizua* by following the traditional method of socially accepted arranged marriage. Therefore, she refuses to ask for a dowry. This does not necessarily entail she is a rebel who abandons her folk established customs and tradition, rather she tries to draw their attention to the sad fact that customs may prove in many ways unhelpful. Communities can challenge bad social customs if they set out arduously to handle them. However, this is a long and tiring process but light is there at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes one has to accept these customs despite their grotesque and objectionable manifestations. This sad reality is exemplified by the case of *Efuru* who agrees to undertake the painful experience of circumcision.

A powerful sense of cooperation is called for in order for marriage to last long. Would-be couples have to decide over the preparations of their marriage without allowing the interference of the elders who would only spoil the whole effect. *Nwapa* is not at all against some customs, such as a dowry paying, she apparently disagrees to the way it is applied and practiced. Hence her depiction of *Efuru's* and *Adizua's* cooperative endeavors to raise money together by trading in yams in order to pay the dowry. "*We have to go to my father now that we have money... what day can we fix it...*" (E,

## 8. Conclusion

It is to a great extent true to assume that *Nwapa's* theme of marriage is in a more or less patriarchal society. Manifestation of patriarchy as practiced against women is such a prevalent phenomenon in African communities. It is deeply entrenched in African culture as forms of oppression. Women have to be empowered against such social maladies through boosting of education and



enlightenment. To develop self-esteem women should be made aware of the necessary roles they are destined to play in the advancement of the community. Their contribution is not simply restricted to the reproduction and upbringing of children. They are regarded as a highly economic power that can act for enriching their community and pushing their poor folks up the slopes of economic advancement. They have the power and ability to assume professions which are earlier thought of as a man's realm. Now they have successfully become Member of Parliament and even presidents.

This paper set out to analyze how seminal African woman writer Flora Nwapa portrays the challenges Nigerian women face in the context of marriage. Through close reading of characters and events in novels like *Efuru*, *Idu*, and *Ogbuide*, as well as Nwapa's short stories, we illuminate critical perspectives on marital roles that restrict women's autonomy, fulfillment and socioeconomic advancement.

Core issues Nwapa highlights through her subtle social commentary include the anguish women face in being unable to conceive, the hardships resulting from prolonged spousal absence, the stigma and instability resulting from divorce or failed unions, the emotional toll of husbands taking multiple wives, and women's lack of personal choice in selecting marital partners. By giving voice to Nigerian women's frustrations regarding limited empowerment to direct their marital destinies, shape familial relationships, pursue education/career ambitions, control fertility decisions, and experience romantic love grounded in mutuality, Nwapa exposes an array of patriarchal and postcolonial structures undermining women's agency and wellbeing.

Through visionary works that confront the reality of oppressive gender norms while envisioning alternative possibilities, Nwapa leads a cadre of African women writers in advancing feminist thought and signaling the necessity of legal reforms and sociocultural transformation to enable women's full flourishing.

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