



Exploring 'Womanism' as a Niche for Voices and Expressions of Black Women in the Select Novels of Flora Nwapa

Jaishree Jha

Ph. D. Research Scholar, University Department of English, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand



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Abstract

The term 'womanism' acknowledges women's natural contribution to society. The term is inclusive and not exclusive like feminism which treated the experiences, struggles and fights of 'third world women' as the 'other'. A new term 'womanism' came up to highlight the struggles and experiences of black women, who used it in a way to distinguish themselves from the mainstream feminists. This viewpoint pays distinctive attention to the critical study of literary texts and confers a meaningful, cultural concept for women, which presents them in leading roles and emancipate them from the dominant and long-lasting shadow of male dominance. The first internationally admired black African female novelist- Flora Nwapa has been recognized for re-creating the Igbo culture through her oeuvre. She believes that women possess power and capability. In an interview with Marie Umeh, Nwapa appreciates women and their abilities- "When I do write about women in Nigeria in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about women because there are many women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent and very, very industrious." (Ebele Chizea). This research paper aims to show how portrayal of women by Nwapa in her novels has so far contributed in redefining the roles of women in society. The paper through a close reading of select works of Nwapa aims to reveal that the application of womanism in her work is ingenious to underscore and scrutinize how an African woman writer highlights the experiences of her characters who refuses to be suppressed by men, society and culture.

Keywords: black women, struggles, experiences, nwapa

Introduction

The term 'womanism' has been introduced and popularized by Alice Walker as a reaction to the perceived limitations of feminism. In a letter published in New York Times Magazine, Walker says: "Feminism (all colors) definitely teaches women they are capable, one reason for its universal appeal. In addition to this womanist tradition assumes, because of our experiences during slavery that black women already "are" capable..." (Walker, The Black Women's Story). She also affirms that a womanist is universalist: "Also a woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/ or non-sexually.

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose).

Womanism focuses on the importance of inclusivity by discussing the expressions of women who are occupying many marginalized identities. Womanists refuses to adopt any ideological pattern that is restricted and narrow. Thus, the term womanism recognizes the intersectionality of class, gender and race, reaffirming that the emancipation of all women is contingent upon tackling systemic oppression in its myriad forms. This ideology posits that real empowerment comes not just from individual accomplishments but from collective action.

The literary work of Nwapa sets lesson to boost the women to stand for their own identity. Womanist



responses are informed by the various aspects of living life in a suppressive society. Nwapa has projected women at the center of the narrative. Her women characters help us in realizing that it is women's responsibility to reconstruct woman's identity. The female characters in her fiction blatantly confronts the issues of gender and the distribution of patriarchal structure. She moves her female characters from passive, domestic, helpless victims or objects of desire to a state of authority and empowerment. One can easily notice that throughout her texts, Nwapa reflects an increased participation of women in the workforce and expanded equality. Her female characters accept themselves as new women, different from the stereotypical images chalked down by the patriarchal structure. In a way, Nwapa's characters subverts the demeaning myths being spun by the chauvinist society about women by offering depictions of women that are resilient and multifaceted.

Understanding the Essence of Womanism

Discussion

a) Women are Different

The novel focuses on the three female characters; namely Dora, Rose and Agnes. These three characters develop strong friendship bonds with each other at their school. Their problems and adventures are communicated to the readers in such a manner as to interrogate the patriarchy and sexism in Nigeria and certainly to raise awareness and question marks in the minds. The writer gives us the opportunity of having an insight into Nigerian society culture and gender patterns.

For instance, it is explained in this novel that father of Agnes has married another woman and Agnes is sent to a boarding school until her father and step-mother find someone to marry her. Her family manages to find an old affluent man as a husband for her. Although Agnes shows her reluctance in this marriage, she fails to resist her father's pressure and finally marries in the end. Her reluctance is articulated through the following passage:

She was under pressure to get married to someone she did not like. He was much older than herself- no he was as old as her father... she knew her own mind, she was determined

to be in school and take the Cambridge School Certificate examination before she married". (Nwapa 1992: 22)

Let us take into consideration the problem of another character- Dora. After being trained as a nurse, she marries a man called Chris. But, her husband does not make any attempt to go to any higher educational institutions. He wants to get rich but is not willing to do anything to get rich. He indulges himself in taking bribes and doesn't do anything to develop his intellect. Meanwhile, his wife, Dora works as a nurse under not so favorable conditions in a hospital. The Chief Nursing Officer of the hospital where Dora works makes her work more difficult. Although she is a woman, she reinforces the stereotypes about her own gender, which often stems from cultural conditioning. She is of the opinion that "women could do either of two things; be a wife and stay at home or be a nurse and work in the hospitals full time" (Nwapa 1992: 68).

Despite such challenges, Dora manages to open a bakery business and convinces Chris to assist her. But, he gets bothered and thinks that it is not manly to work for his wife. In his parochial eyes, he is the real breadwinner in the family and master of Dora. Dora make efforts to make him feel comfortable by saying him that it is a partnership, where she would do the donkey work. But these things don't work well. He has other plans to execute and Dora helps him innocently in this. With her help, he goes abroad, and Dora witnesses the coup of the year 1966 with her children. Thus, in their marriage, the reversal of the gender roles can be observed as it is the wife who is the breadwinner and the head of the family in practice. Her husband escapes from his liabilities by selling clandestinely one of their houses. After this jolting event, Dora goes to seek legal help for the first time. Mostly, the field of Law and Administration had been the men's field and women were not expected to enter easily into these areas in the 1960's of Nigeria. An ordinary woman turns into an extrovert in the absence of her husband, or in Nwapa's own words more "outward".

Towards the end of the novel, when all the female characters come together and discuss their choices, they reveal their satisfaction with few of them but not all of them. Dora and Agnes accept their failed



nuptial promises. Rose, who never gets married in the novel advises her friends that “whatever we do, we must not impose our will on our children... we have to make allowances for all that happened when we were young children and now” (111). She acknowledges that the coming generations have their own set of beliefs and rules just as their parents or ancestors had, and undoubtedly experimenting with ways of life just as their previous generations have experimented. Nwapa’s strong and resilient “Igbo heroines pull from both the traditional and Western cultures and create a new world in which social values, attitudes, and their contradictions can be evaluated from various angles” (Berrian, “In Memoriam” 998).

This work of fiction by Nwapa serves as a testament to the resilience of women who dare to go against rooted conventions. It also serves as a reminder of the fact that liberation arises from the recognition of one’s identity as a human being and economic independence is merely one facet of empowerment.

b) One is Enough

This novel presents the struggles of a childless woman through the character of Amaka. Amaka has been portrayed as a competent woman, who struggles for self-fulfillment after facing humiliation by her family for not giving birth to a child. The societal focus on motherhood often makes it difficult for a woman to live with dignity. Infertility of a woman is a social plague that leads to stress and breakdown of married life of Amaka and her husband- Obiora.

The novel shows the vulnerable condition of an industrious woman who is stricken by childlessness in a society where child bearing by women is considered as the most valuable objective in marriage. Moreover, when husband of Amaka marries another woman secretly, she faces great emotional stress. She feels jolted by the infidelity and rash behavior of her husband. When Amaka reminds him about her support to him in every walk of life, he obdurately replies:

“You are being senseless... How many mouths were we feeding? You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you are childless. You would not raise your voice in this house if you were sensible. You should go about your business quietly and

not offend anyone because if you do, one would be tempted to give you one or two home truths” (Nwapa, 1981, p.56).

These harsh words uttered by her husband aggravates her pain. She feels devastated when her husband says to her, “but let me warn you that if you step out of this house in protest when my wife and my two sons arrive, you stay out forever. You must not come back.” (Nwapa, 1981. p.25).

After such devastating events, Amaka decides to live her life in her own terms by being completely independent. She breaks off from her marital status which exploited and oppressed her. She boldly expresses that she misconceived marriage by saying that-

“I thought erroneously at first that marriage involved two people. I thought the emphasis was on this unique relationship of man and woman that children did not even matter. I was wrong. A childless marriage cannot last in Nigeria of today. So, if a wife is unable to have children by her husband, she should leave and try elsewhere” (Nwapa, 1981. p.34.)

Later in the novel, Amaka comes to Lagos. The first man whom she encounters here is Alhaji. She amuses him to achieve her objectives. Her cordial relations with Alhaji are just to get contracts; there is no clarity about their intimacy. She engages in sex with him only for compensating him for giving her contracts and through them she can turn out to be economically stable and secured. Nwapa doesn’t glorify or vilify her female characters. She just presents fair images of women. Thus, Amaka’s attraction towards Alhaji is rooted in the fundamental human desire for stability and security. At the same time, a catholic priest also comes in her life. He falls deeply in love with Amaka. She gets pregnant with child by seducing the priest and thus shows the whole society that she is not sterile. But she prefers to stay unmarried and spurns the marriage proposal of the priest. Although, it is shown in the novel that her feelings vacillate from loneliness to frustration, she remains firm in her decision not to remarry. In the opinion of Ezeigbo: “One is Enough is Nwapa’s forthright encouragement of childless women to look for other ways of living a self-fulfilled and profitable life” (Ezeigbo 1998). The words spoken by Amaka reflect her autonomy and freedom:



“As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me ... No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos.” (Nwapa 1981, 127)

Most societies even today essentialize motherhood for female and show indignant attitudes towards the childless women. Through the words of Amaka, Nwapa motivates childless woman who has been stripped of their agency by the social construction of infertility. Through the positive portrayal of Amaka’s resilience, Nwapa attacks the very notion of motherhood deeply ingrained in our society. A woman should not be deemed defective and incomplete just because of her sterility. It should never be imposed upon a woman as a duty and measure of her honor. Amaka’s blatant reaction to the prejudiced culture of her society clearly highlights the writer’s standpoint that childless women should learn to be self-assertive, resilient in or outside marriage.

Conclusion

The above discussed novels of Nwapa advocates for women’s right to self-determination and the pursuit of identity beyond prescribed roles. Both these works of fiction remain relevant in contemporary debates of gender, identity, and actual empowerment, making Nwapa a prominent figure in African literature and the exploration of women’s pursuit for identity. She empowers her women characters to break free from regressive gender roles and parochial societal attitudes. All her female characters succeed through ambition, boldness and unwavering will to survive. Despite multiples challenges, Nwapa’s characters

decides to take their destinies in their own hands. The writer however does not encourage women to act like men to gain and hold positions of power and leadership. Through her novels, Nwapa affirms that womanism is expansive which need collaborative efforts to take down institutional barriers that certainly perpetuates inequality. (Words- 2511)

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