

**FEMINISM IN FLORA NWAPA'S WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT AND THIS IS LAGOS AND OTHER STORIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigated and analyzed Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different and This is Lagos and other stories*. The researcher applied feminist and subjective reader-response theories to discuss the themes in Nwapa's selected works and how these features portray her as an extreme feminism. It also highlighted feminist, its history theories and proponents. At the end it was observed that Nwapa's feminist principles promoted self actualization through debauchery. She created characters whose quest for liberation destroyed African values without offering the necessary poetic justice to such characters. There was no opportunity for reconciliation or commitment to the survival and unity of men and women in marriage. The researcher suggested that emancipation could be achieved in a dignified manner.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Emancipation and Self actualization.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Feminist criticism argued that western civilization is patriarchal in structure and therefore should be reconstituted. After how centuries of struggle for the recognition of equal economic, socio-political and legal rights with men, feminist approach to literary criticism became formally inaugurated. This struggle found expression in such works as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the right of Women*, John Mill's. *The subjection of Women* Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth*

century, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of one's own*, Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Susan Gubar's, *The mad woman as in the Attic*.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a controversial treatise indicted men of tyranny and also stressed the imperatives of women's emancipation from inhibiting traditions. When the women she fought for in 1928 secured the rights to vote, the image and status of women began to wear a fascinating look. There emerged a new era which propelled a new kind of reflection and reconsideration of the significance of women in the growth of a society. Tremendous changes were recorded on the literary spheres. Women writers began to rival men in their numbers as social commentators, critics, poets novelists, play writers, and academics.

Flora Nwapa was the first to blaze the feminist trail in Nigeria, especially with the publication of *Efuru* and *Idu*. In these novels Nwapa attempts to correct the seemingly disparaged image of the African woman as presented in the works of African "sexist" writers like Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ekwensi in *People of the city* and *Jagua Nana*. These writers depict women as helpless and dependent either prostitutes or house wives destined in the word of Ogunyemi, to "carry yam and foo to men dealing with important matters". The feminist writers do not only protest against this type of disgusting image but also the marginalized role assigned to the female characters. They are always at the fringes of their community activities and never part of the decision-making process, even when their interests are at stake. In fact, little is seen, heard and talked about concerning them. They are either farming, fetching water or firewood; plaiting their hair, washing cooking utensils; being beaten by their fathers, brothers or husbands; bearing or rearing children; cooking food for their families or guests.

Nwapa writes to challenge the male writers and to create awareness of woman's, inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-confidence, her desire for gain and high social status [1]. In her novel *Efuru*, she creates a sophisticated female protagonist-beautiful, intelligent and rich; and presented men as dependent and weak-Adizua and Nwashike Ogene. Adizua could not offer the bride price, while Nwashike could not help to sanction Egwu's insubordination, for she went to live with Adizua her husband without respect for tradition. The women in Nwapa's later novels (*This is Lagos and other stories*, *Wives at War and Other Stories*, *Women are Different*, *One is Enough* etc) thrive, rule and control the market place of their world. Mothers are positioned as prime movers and sole agencies who exploit their traditional role and power to rule, control and marginalize their men. This paper seeks to investigate and analyze the themes in Nwapa's *this is Lagos and Other Stories and Women Are Different* [1].

### **Feminism: A conceptual approach**

Feminism could be described as the organized movement which supports and promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social issues. The feminist believe that women are oppressed simply because of their sex and they cite the ideology of patriarchy as reason for their belief [2]. It is an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. It can also be referred to as the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of their injustices.

Feminism is a range of political movement ideologies and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish and achieve equal political, economic, personal and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in

education and employment [3]. Feminist activists campaign for women's rights such as in contract, property and electoral franchise. They are also concerned with women's right to bodily integrity, autonomy and reproductive rights, while vehemently opposing domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. Much of feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. The men explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy.

The feminist movement produced an avalanche of feminist fiction and non-fiction, and created a new interest in women's writing. It also prompted a general reassessment of women's historical and academic contributions in response to the assertion that women's lives and contribution have been under represented as areas of scholarly interest [4]. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote out of the first works of feminist philosophy entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which called for equal education in 1792, and her daughter, Mary Shelley also became an author best known for her 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*.

Liberal feminism seeks individualistic equality of men and women through political and idea that total equality with men must be based on individual skill, expertise and proficiency. Alice Paul, Elizabeth Boyer and Judith Hole are the key proponents of this feminist ideology. It is pertinent to conclude that the objective of the African feminist theories is to demonstrate that in spite of serious patriarchal constraints, women still take significant initiatives and make remarkable achievement [5]. It is worthy of note that feminism as both a

a movement and ideology has enhanced in no small measure, the growth of African feminist have created a more lively consciousness about the significance of women in society.

### **Flora Nwapa: A Biography**

Florence Nwazuruahu Nkiru Nwapa was born in January 18, 1931 in Oguta, Imo state of Nigeria. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts Degree from University college, Ibadan in 1957. She also occupied many enviable position in government. She taught at the college and Universities around the world, including New York University of Harin. She died at the age of 62 in 1993.

Flora a novelist, publisher, short – story write is the first African woman to write and publish a novel in English. She offers her readers a fresh perspective on traditional West African culture and modern Nigeria by exploring a woman’s point of view. Her use of oral tradition and folk languages of village women reflects a commitment to create literature from those sources. Many of her works address the questions of tradition and transformation for women.

She creates women who succeed outside traditional women’s role of mother and wife. “No woman in Nwapa’s novels is a parasite that depends on men for sustenance. In *Idu* it is the man who has no inner resources, who borrows money constantly from his wife when the wife deserts him, “hanged himself from the thatched roof of his hut”. Her works includes *Efuru*, *Idu*, *Never Again*, *One is Enough*, *Women Are Different*, *This is Lagos and other stories*, *Wives at War and other stories*, *Cassava Song and Rice Song*, *Mammy Water and Journey to space* [6].

### **Themes in Women are Different**

Nwapa's *Women Are Different* embodies the new vision of women and their worldviews and feminist awakening. The author explores this novel consciousness by creating seeming radical female protagonist whose frenetic quests for liberation tend to subvert the tenets upon which African morals, culture and veritable ideas are established.

In the novel, Nwapa creates female protagonists who truly represent her vision of different women in a new era of female awakening; women who divorce their men at any slighted provocation, trade in their bodies as prostitutes, who refuse to marry, who say "I don't want children, to hell with men". Women who are free to do just as they please. The novel is divided into nine unequal chapters. This structural technique enables the reader grapple with the changes of an era- the growth and transition of women -Agnes, Rose, Dora and Comfort, from the age of unenlightenment, fantasies and limitations, to a period of awareness, realities and independence. From chapter one to three, the author presents the ordeals and anxieties surrounding a woman's determination to break away from the shackles of illiteracy and its several deformations. Thus we see the "three musketeers" (Rose, Agnes and Dora) struggling to pass their examination. While in school they were under the moral surveillance of Miss Hills. The life of these girls after school reflects these years. They really turned out to be greedy and undignified woman. The remaining six chapters show the life of the girls as women, fully grown adults. They have become free from Miss Hills control. They are now better informed about their rights and liberties, and are bent on exercising them without fear. Agnes marries Mr Egemba, bears him four children falls in love with Ayo Dele and divorces her husband. Dora marries Chris but divorces him after a

while. Rose refuses to marry after so many disappointments. Comfort marries because of money. Zizi (Elizabeth) becomes a drug pusher, a robber and prostitute. Chinwe becomes a professional prostitute, snatching women's husband to enrich herself [7].

The theme of marriage and divorce revolves around Nwapa's *Women Are Different*. Agnes finds herself in a marriage dilemma. She is truly in love with Sam, her boyfriend in school, but both cannot marry because of Mr Egemba a purported medical doctor who not only pays her fees but also caters for the need of the family. Agnes feels dissatisfied with the marriage and this sense of dissatisfaction reflects in her attire and facial expression during her wedding. Agnes later fell in love with Ayo Dele. But Ayo Dele is married with children. After a while Agnes divorces her husband so as to practice her freedom without restrictions:

*So Agnes left her husband in a most callous manner. He went to work as usual, and by the time he returned, Agnes had left with their four children. Agnes's father was heartbroken, and shortly afterwards, he died. (p.58)*

The question is, must women divorce their men in a bid to address marital problems? Dora's marriage to Chris begins on a romantic note, but suddenly things fell apart when Dora discovered that her husband who travelled abroad is living with a white lady in Hambury. She returns home and divorces him. A few days later, Tunde came into her life.

Gradually, Nwapa moves away from divorce to full time prostitution. Prostitution seems also to be her philosophy for woman's liberation from men and marriage inhibitions. Comfort refuses and accepts men based on their economic worth. Eventually she marries Dr Oyele, but

remained unfaithful while in marriage. Nwapa sees Comfort's promiscuity as a retaliatory measure against men's infidelity:

*When I was talking with a group of women the other day, one of them who has a Ph. D in History and is unmarried, agreed with us that the society was sick. She said very heatedly, "if husband run around with other wives, why should not their wives do the same"(p.100-101)*

In other words, Nwapa is saying here that wives should run around with other people's husbands in order to strike some sexual balance in marriage infidelity! Prostitution, rascality and wayward living dominate the life of other female characters in *Women Are Different*. Chinwe quits school, and records progress in business. Her mother, Dora, could not curtail her excesses. She marries, but the marriage hits the rock as Chinwe accuses her husband of infidelity. She divorces him and takes to hotel business an indirect form of prostitution:

*Rose learnt that Chinwe had left her husband and was engaged in beer-parlour business. This was hardly an ideal business for a woman who had left her husband. The business was a cover up for prostitution, and not even an angel would make it respectable (p.115).*

For Nwapa, prostitution is an act of revenge a way of getting back at men! It is therefore no surprise that Chinwe snatches away some body's husband through whom she build herself a house and opens a supermarket.



Zizi, on her part, waxes very strong in rascality. She attends night clubs, sleeps outside the house, joins a robbery gang and trades on illicit drugs between the age of fifteen and twenty. As a proof of the fact that she has engaged in armed robbery, Zizi appears the following morning in a Mercedes Benz and with Champagne to celebrate the car. Shortly afterwards, she is caught with Ernest trying to smuggle some hard drugs inside the airplane. When she regains her freedom from position custody she meets with Theo and both agree to marry on contract basis. The contract is that Zizi shall inherit his house in London and get away after that. Here, Nwapa did not only propose prostitution and rascality as her philosophies for women's emancipation but appears to suggest that marriage by contract would guarantee a woman's marital independence [8].

There is also theme of single parenting. Nwapa talks about Rose's inner preoccupations:

*"Rose started thinking of a one parent family".*

*Agnes and Dora were right when they told*

*her that she could get involved with a man,*

*be pregnant and be the mother of his child.*

*Why should she not relax and be pregnant? (p.87)*

Nwapa believes that single parenting given women the desired freedom.

Characters in **Women Are Different** are ever dynamic and constantly on the move. There is always a search motif which drives them to continue with their journey. All her characters dream of a blossoming marriage in a universe characterized by illusions and marriage. The female protagonists move endlessly for marital satisfaction, economic successes inter-twined in a bunch of complex relationships -

relationships soon marked by divorce, cheating, jilting and disappointment. Nwapa shows through this medium, the vicissitudes and inconsistencies which characterize marriage in African, especially in this era of female awakening and feminist consciousness. It shows how different the women of this age truly are – Rose, Agnes, Dora, Comfort, Chinwe and Zizi.

### **Themes in *This are Lagos and Other Stories*.**

Nwapa's *This is Lagos and Other Stories* embodies the burdens of women – their passivity docility and new radicalism in an age of feminist consciousness. The text ideally contains nine short stories that discuss issues revolving around women and their complex relationships with men but only four will be discussed. Themes of marriage and its characteristics flaws- infidelity, betrayal, hatred, rancor and divorce are explored in a first person, second person, and stream of consciousness narrative techniques. Flash back, dream, allusions and symbolic representation ideal all help to enhance the aesthetic flavor of the book.

“*The Traveler*” exemplified women's emotional stability and their ability to control, manipulate and dribble men by demonstrating some level of sexual maturity. Bisi fails to yield to Musa's many advances. She makes him burn with passion only to dismiss him in the end. Apart from her strength of character, Bisi is presented also as a sophisticated lady who is both educated and rich. This she does not seem to be moved by the alluring gifts from Musa. This economic independence is part of Nwapa's effort towards rebranding the seemingly disparaged African woman.

“*The Delinquent Adults*” is another short story that discusses the issue of cultural tradition and its harshness on vulnerable women. Using her Igbo sensibility as a case study, Nwapa exemplifies what becomes of a woman who prematurely loses her husband. The agony of such a

woman becomes rather unbearable when her late husband's possessions (including children are shared by members of his family). Ozoemena's husband, Chukwuma, has died in a fatal accident few days after the burial, Uzonwanne his younger brother surfaces, demanding his brother's money possessions and children:

*It is well my daughter: we shall settle that. That  
is not the main problem. How much did your husband  
leave in the bank? (p.75).*

This is Nwapa's way of exposing some of the things women go through when they lose their husband.

**'Jide's Stories'** also explores the theme of self - control on the side of women and their behavior towards men. Jide meets Rose at a night party in London and eventually marry. But no sooner Jide abandons his wife and returns to Nigeria to meet another woman, Maria. Rose writes to her husband even when she does not receive answers. She remains a calm and faithful wife. Here, Nwapa shows what the behavior of an ideal wife should be, when she finds herself in a family where the man is both a drunk and a womanizer.

In **"Child Thief"** childlessness remains the central theme because it constitutes the worst tyranny for married woman and it defiles any solution to date. Nwapa's depicts the trauma a woman faces when it dawns on her that she cannot have a child.

"In order to keep her marriage, she employs all kinds of deceit and finally resorts to stealing a baby from the hospital (Nwapa, p.94) Agnes, driven to desperation by her estrangement from her husband on account of childlessness, becomes a child thief. Agnes gives voice to

the despair of so many childless women who are pushed to the limits of their charity by society [9].

*You see, I made provision for the baby. I am not just an ordinary child thief. I wanted to have him as mine, not to sell him. 'You should have adopted one'.*

*I don't want to adopt a baby. I wanted to have a baby (p.64).*

Nwapa points out that too much pressure on women to produce children can push childless women over the edge. Agnes remain calm and in control of the situation even when the height of the action makes one to wonder if theft is more honorable than adoption [9].

### Conclusion

African feminist have contributed meaningfully to the growth of African nations. Their varied critical material, essay and books have also enriched African literature and given it a sense of balance. Feminist writes really tried in creating a woman's world in which women characters exist in their own right and not as mere appendages to a male world. The researcher believes in women's struggle for equality and parity with men in all fields of endeavor. She also supports full liberation and emancipation of women through education and economic independence. But she equally condemns all feminist effort aimed at destroying established values and morals.

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