

CULTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY IN FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU*

Idriss Garba MUSA,

Department of English & Literary Studies, Bingham University, Karu, Nigeria

Idris-musa.garba@binghamuni.edu.ng

&

Stephen Ayok SHARON,

School of Basic Studies, Bingham University, Karu, Nigeria

Stephen.ayok@binghamuni.edu.ng

Abstract

*Patriarchal stereotypes have long been entrenched in literary and cultural narratives, often relegating women to subordinate roles defined by societal expectations. These stereotypes not only reflect but also reinforce male-dominated structures, shaping perceptions of gender roles in various cultural contexts. The paper examines how Nwapa dismantles patriarchal stereotypes in *Efuru*, offering a nuanced portrayal of African womanhood that transcends traditional narratives. The study embraces feminist theory, specifically mentioning intersectionality. The study looks at Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. The findings reveal that the social system in which women are imprisoned leads them to believe they are truly incapable of doing anything that goes beyond the perception prescribed by the system. The system oppresses women in different ways and prevents them from being independent. However, since women are born warriors, they constantly fight for recognition. In conclusion, the study unveils how women are independent because of the way they perceive things and do not wait for a man to be significant. They are illustrated as hard workers who are financially independent, adding something to their defiance of patriarchy.*

Keywords: *Africa, Feminism, Intersectionality, Marginalization, Patriarchy.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal stereotypes have long been entrenched in literary and cultural narratives, often relegating women to subordinate roles defined by societal expectations. These stereotypes not only reflect but also reinforce male-dominated structures, shaping perceptions of gender roles in various cultural contexts. In African literature, such dynamics are particularly compelling, as the interplay between traditions, colonial influences, and modernity offers fertile ground for examining gender relations. Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* (1966) stands out as a groundbreaking work that challenges these patriarchal norms. As the first novel published by an African woman in English, *Efuru* centers on the life of its eponymous protagonist, who defies conventional gender expectations by asserting her independence and rejecting the societal emphasis on motherhood and male validation. Through *Efuru*'s story, Nwapa critiques the limitations imposed on women and illuminates their resilience in the face of patriarchal oppression. This paper explores how Nwapa dismantles patriarchal stereotypes in *Efuru*, offering a nuanced portrayal of African womanhood that transcends traditional narratives.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The feminist theoretical framework for examining patriarchal stereotypes in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* involves deconstructing societal constructs that marginalize women within traditional African settings. Feminist theory, rooted in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and later African feminist scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchy in shaping women's roles and identities. In *Efuru*, Nwapa critiques the restrictive gender norms that define womanhood through marriage, childbearing, and submission to male authority. Through a feminist lens, *Efuru*'s resistance to these stereotypes becomes a subversive act that challenges the expectations placed upon her. Despite being childless—a condition often stigmatized in her society—*Efuru* asserts her agency, achieving financial independence and embodying qualities of leadership and wisdom. Her association with Uhamiri, the goddess of wealth and fertility, underscores the spiritual and cultural significance of feminine power outside patriarchal structures.

This framework also recognizes the intersectionality of African feminist discourse, which prioritizes the unique struggles of African women within their cultural and historical contexts. By portraying *Efuru* as a complex and autonomous figure, Nwapa dismantles patriarchal stereotypes and redefines African womanhood, offering a powerful critique of gender inequality.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is text based as it analyzed Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* with the aim of exploring thematic concerns on patriarchal stereotypes. The study depends on critical works, journal articles, books reviews and online materials.

4. SYNOPSIS OF FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU*

Efuru, a young woman in her early twenties falls in love with Adizua who is too poor to pay her bride price. Because of the love she has for him, she elopes with Adizua. Efuru's father becomes mad and sends some hefty and intelligent men to go to Adizua's house to fetch Efuru. On getting there, they discover that Efuru would be happier cohabiting with her new found love and the delegation goes back to convince Efuru's father to let her be.

In the beginning of her first marriage, she has a very beautiful and happy marriage blessed with a child but suddenly, the husband begins to keep her at arm's length. Efuru makes consistent efforts to get along with her husband but to no avail. Not quite long, Adizua elopes with another woman and this marks the beginning of Efuru's travails.

While her husband is still away, her only child takes ill and dies. Efuru buries the child without her husband at the funeral. In order to save her face from shame and humiliation, she leaves for her father's house and later remarries another man called Gilbert Eneberi who treats her not better than Adizua. Unable to give her new husband a child, Efuru marries another woman for him after he has already taken one for himself but this does not make him treat her any better. At last, Gilbert leaves her in the same manner Adizua did without attending Efuru's father's funeral. When Gilbert finally reappears, he accuses his wife who is now sick of adultery. Fortunately, Ajanupu, the sister of Adizua's mother, takes Efuru to a hospital where she is treated and cured of her illness. When she comes back from the hospital, she leaves once again to her father's house and devotes her time serving the lake goddess, Uhamiri, who is like a mirror of herself. "Uhamiri gives her worshipers wealth and beauty but few children." The story concludes with Efuru choosing to live on her terms, challenging societal norms and redefining success and fulfillment as a woman in her culture.

5. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

5.1. Cultural Intersectionality

In Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru*, culture is used as a reflection on the women's life. This beautiful novel describes the youth, marriage, and motherhood, mental and personal epiphany

of a young woman of contemporary Nigerian. Efuru, the protagonist of the novel, is a manifestation as it talks about the ability of the women to be leader and reformist in her community. Efuru is a beautiful woman who is admired by the community for her business acumen as a trader, for integrity and her admirable qualities. Despite her admirable qualities, she cannot seem to sustain satisfactory relationships with men. (Allan 45) relates her experience to that of African American women as they try to navigate both cultural and gendered expectations in male dominated society. Indeed, in the heroine's community, the pattern of culture is shaped by a great interest in reproduction. This interest becomes the community's way of life as it expresses the actual experience through which it is lived. Particularly in terms of how societal norms shapes women's roles and expectations in both personal and public spheres (Amadi 72). While man is granted all favors and privileges, the woman evolves as his ultimate subordinate. Besides, the idea that the responsibility of childlessness lies on the woman defines a hierarchical class interest that feeds male/female social relationship. As a consequence, the natural assumption that a woman may be unproductive shifts into the cultural reality to strengthen the ideology of the society she lives in. If culture is seen as a mode of life gathered under the form of practices and identity as a dynamic and slow process of construction of this mode of life, then among the Igbo people, these practices occupy a central place insofar as they determine the community's life as a whole (Acholonu 87).

Acholonu asserts that the Igbo community demands more from a woman than it does from a man. Her destiny is shaped by the cultural vision of the community as typical of group behavior and habits that characterize individual behavior (87). In the novel, culture expects women to be submissive to men, we can see this in chapter one.

‘it’s late, Efuru, where are you coming from’?

One of her cousins asked her as she was opening the gate of the compound. ‘Don’t you see the moon’?

Is that the reason why you should come home late?
(Nwapa, 2)

This conversation between Efuru and her cousin highlights the societal expectation that as a woman Efuru should obey domestic duties and remain at home and also seek permission from her father, male guidance, or husband before going out.

5.2. Intersectionality in Familial Spaces

Another important issue in the novel is the theme of marriage, the joy of motherhood is the fortune that comes from marriage; hence, it is considered a fruitful one. In a pure African setting, an unproductive marriage is as useless as morning dew. From a traditional perception, a woman without a man cannot procreate. A girl's life is essentially a marriage preparation. Mothers lose no time in reminding their daughters that certain types of behavior cannot be tolerated by them. In her natal home, the bride has seen how her father's or brother's new bride behaved. "She remembers the advise her mother and other relatives gave her. She knows that her great objective in life is marriage; that a woman's glory is her children, and that to have children she must have a husband. This is a chance she cannot afford to miss" (53). *These intersecting layers of gender, and tradition are what complicate women's agency and identity (Davis 74).*

It appears from the above quotation that the cultural significance of marriage does not only lie in the social identity it provides the newly married woman with respect for herself and pride for her family. Motherhood brings an important change in a woman's status, a change from a mistress who simply attracts and allures to a mother who shares the dignity of her husband and who has increased the lineage membership. Children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against dependence in old age (57). Amadiume points out that Efuru's choice towards the end of the book shows that all this beliefs can be challenged and redefined (108).

Consequently, procreation is a determining factor in a marriage because it fosters understanding and cohesion within the couple while it assures the social integration of the woman. Ajanupu rightly points this out when Efuru is double-minded whether to leave Adizua's house after the latter deserts their household and does not come back even after the death of their child:

My daughter ... Adizua has treated you badly and you have borne it admirably. If your daughter was alive, one would have said don't go, stay for your daughter's sake. But Ogonim is no more and one does not know how to persuade you to stay. But I say, stay. I have no reason whatever for asking you to stay, but stay. (88)

The double point of Ajanupu's advice she asks the heroine to leave while at the same time she wants her to stay is the expression of a mother's attachment to her children; hence, an indication that motherhood is essential for a woman and that children occupy a central position

within the family. Bronfenbrenner mentioned that Efuru's problems and experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple social systems, including family, culture, and societal norms (191). They constitute its foundation as they can influence its destiny. For in the words of Ajanupu, the only thing that can compel Efuru to stay despite Adizua's ill behavior is her daughter. But since she no longer lives, there is no reason for her to stay. It is however a bad thing for a woman not to bear a child in her marriage. Not having children is not considered "one of the numerous accidents of nature, rather it is regarded as a failure." (165).

Moreover, Nwapa depicts Efuru as a woman who struggles to bear children. In her first year of marriage Efuru did not bear any child and in Igbo community or in any other conservative society motherhood is related to womanhood. That is, women must bear children simply because it empowers them, and for those who cannot fulfil this achievement they are seen as men. This is reflected in the narrative by saying "...two men do not live together. For them, Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce" (24). For the Nigerian society women should bear children. Efuru herself is obsessed with the idea of being a mother. She is scared of not being able to carry her children. Moreover, her mother had only her, and as a result she cannot stop wondering if she is going to be like her, and this is shown in the following quotation:

Efuru was very worried in the second year of her marriage. 'My mother had only me, 'she said one night to herself. 'My father told me so and also she found it difficult to become pregnant. Am I going to be like my mother? But if I'm going to be like her, then I too will have a daughter like her. But what if that is denied to me? What if that also is denied to me? What will I do? Oh, what will I do?' she wept (24)

Hence, the blame is on the woman, as if it were intentional. This is what sets up the conflict in *Efuru*. Efuru is seen in her first husband's house, leaving the marriage after her only daughter dies, and not solely because her husband refuses to come home. If Ogonim does not die, no matter what trouble Efuru might be going through, she will always consider the fact of having a child in such a marriage. Efuru's second marriage also not being productive reveals the biggest catastrophe in this story. The society has a way of despising such a woman. She is called a witch and is afterward hated. But Efuru's case is different, only that she faces many foes like Omirima, who later accuses her of adultery out of hatred. Had she given birth to a living child, changing husbands like clothes would have been improbable. Efuru is depressed,

and her consoling herself about not being barren shows how desperate she is about being given the title of a mother. “But, thank god, my womb carried a baby for nine months. Thank god I had this baby, and she was a normal baby. It would have been dreadful if I had been denied the joy of motherhood”. (165)

Consequently, it is the pressure from society that makes the urge to have a child so strong. Regardless of the pain women go through during a child’s birth and the nurturing stage, the joy of giving them a motherly title is what matters. For instance, Nkoyeni during her child’s delivery can no longer take the pain because she feels it is over, but the moment she is reminded of the doom that accompanies barrenness, she quickly changes her mind and she comports herself instantly. Flora Nwapa uses *Efuru* to explicate the major importance of marriage and why it might stop working along the line.

5.3. Entrepreneurial and Economic Empowerment

As the novel progresses over time, the women seem more and more liberated and happy with choices they make even though the community may not be completely satisfied. The women also recognize that happiness comes from within which is a result of the religious belief and self-empowerment that begin to take more control among the women (523). The search of female characters for self-healing and happiness in a world in which they encounter and overcome innumerable traditional, cultural, political, and emotional roadblocks continue in the novel. The protagonist Efuru possess individual thoughts and choices. She displays individual choices. She does not try to be under the will of others. This is evident from the beginning of the novel. Efuru is depicted as a strong, beautiful, young black woman, who goes against her father and family’s will just in order to marry her poor beloved one. Comparing to the traditional Igbo women, Efuru incorporates strength and courage. This is clearly revealed in the beginning of the novel “she was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself.” (7). Efuru is special in her way of thinking, she represents freedom, but most importantly she does not value what people might say or think about her. Efuru is also represented as a woman who respects the traditions of her community, she does not rebel against her culture, yet she likes to do things the way she wants them to be done. For instance, at the beginning her husband could not pay the dowry, Efuru worked hard just in order to fulfil the tradition and to be able to afford the dowry to her family. It might seem controversial, but Efuru pictures the independent African woman par excellence.

In the novel, Nwapa portrays Efuru as a hardworking woman. She is financially independent; consequently, she is able to support herself but from the novel we learn that she even helps her first husband (she helped him to pay the dowry). That is, Efuru is not only a woman who has enough income, it goes deeper than that, she loves work and that makes her special. Through the story, she is represented as a woman who is really diligent in her work. In the novel it says: “But what pleased Gilbert’s mother most was the fact that since her son had married Efuru things had moved well for him. Any trade she put her hand to was profitable”. (136).

When it comes to work Efuru’s reputation is beyond reproach. She is known as being very productive and her capacities in trade are remarkable. Nwapa portrays her as a woman who is not afraid of work.

“She is a good woman. I have heard so much about her. She will look after you. Her hands make money. Anything she touches is money. If she begins to sell pepper in the market, she will make money out of it. If in salt, money will flow in; I say marry her”. (125)

At the end of the novel, Efuru decides to take care of herself; in other words, she abandons the common role that is given to women and starts to accept her destiny. By choosing to follow the goddess of the lake “Uhamiri”, Efuru goes beyond the role that is imposed on her. She demonstrates her inner development and she chooses to be completed by herself and not by any other human being. Efuru reflects in a way or another, an independent woman who does not stick at the same unnecessary point. Moreover, she strongly refuses to go back to her second husband because he accused her of adultery which she has never done. Consequently, she feels humiliated and disappointed, and she concludes that to find inner peace and happiness she only needs herself. As the following description proves:

“Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as women beauty and wealth but she had no child”. (221)

Efuru’s dream reflects her inner and veritable personality. That is, she is a woman who is endlessly beautiful and rich, but above all this, she is a woman who is happy despite the fact

she will never experience motherhood again. Efuru's life is worth to be lived since she has finally found a sense of her existence.

5.4. Representation of Patriarchy

For centuries women have been subjected to several kinds of mistreatment. They are given the name of the weak sex because for many their physical strength is not comparable to men's power. Through centuries, many philosophers and sociologists tried to explain why women are always put in an inferior position. After several analyses, they concluded that the social system in which women are imprisoned leads them to believe they are truly incapable of doing anything that goes beyond the perception prescribed by the system. This social structure is referred to as patriarchy.

Patriarchy as previously mentioned is a social system where men have endless considerations in terms of power, social status, and privileges. This same system is said to discriminate against women's control over their lives. Africa, the richest continent in terms of tradition, uses patriarchy as an ideology and institution. It oppresses women in different ways and it prevents them from being independent. However, women are not doomed to let their lives be insignificant. They are born warriors; as a result, they constantly fight to gain some recognition. One of their best weapons against this unfair system is literature. Many female writers have pointed out patriarchy, and at the same time they gave women a chance to be truly represented as what they really are, that is combatants.

Gender inequality is one of the major issues in *Efuru*. Flora pointed men's superiority and the image that society wants to reflect in them. In *Efuru*, the writer focus on representing the different oppression that women have to face in their respective societies, and shade light on how strong and courageous African women are, especially when the concern is related to their ability to change their lives into better. The work examines the different ways that African women use to liberate themselves from the inevitable injustice of patriarchy, and it focuses also on how women turn their immanence into Perfection, Amouzu argues that the way Efuru challenged the gender norm demonstrate how womanist ideologies can empower female characters to asserts agency despite societal constraints, Afrinotes also states that the experiences of Efuru over her journey in life makes her the strong woman she is because of the limitations women are facing in her society. Ardant believes that Efuru's defiance of conventional gender roles takes her to the reclamation of indigenous African feminist thought.

The research investigates the representation of women as essential and transcendent subjects in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. The aim of the work is to show that Nwapa fights for the same causes, and she is not afraid of the reality of the Nigerian society. She does not hesitate to propel women into independence, and she strongly agrees to fact that, when women's injustice becomes normal, women's rebellion is a necessity. The stereotypical insinuations of Nigerian male authors of the woman as weak and therefore has no say in matters affecting her, is eroded in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. *Efuru* as a female character is well developed to meet the challenges inherent in men-dominated society. She is an epitome of courage and symbol of change. A leading light, as it were, to women who are satisfied with the responsibilities of minding the homes, procreation and farming. *Efuru*, as a character, has shown that men are after all are not the bosses that culture and tradition bequeathed on them. From Adizua to Enebere and Nwosu, the major male characters, it is observed all failed in performing even the natural responsibility of husbanding and farming. Their wives in most cases became the providers, which as a way play down on the negative notion that women are weak. They engaged in farming, trading and the likes to keep the home going. *Efuru* is so enterprising and resourceful that she even paid her own bride-price. This is against the tradition and culture of the society.

Efuru is a reformer and becomes an agent of change by changing the rules that are suitable for her own purposes. As Adizua cannot pay the bride wealth, *Efuru* moves to Adizua's house in order to become his wife without either her father's agreement or knowledge. As is suggested by the proverb, quoted in the novel, "However good a suitor or might be, he was never given a bride for nothing" (191). Bruneau argues that this is how patriarchy and capitalism intersect to reinforce making money out women's happiness. *Efuru* informs the readers that self-development and growth is possible within the cultural boundaries. Marrying Adizua, she goes against the expectations of her society, as she confronts both gendered and cultural oppressions that are compounded by race and class (Bowleg 1271).

6. CONCLUSION

This research has allowed us to explore and to analyze the image of women in the works of an African writer, Flora Nwapa. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), the protagonist female character is represented as being simple with no intellectual level, but she challenges patriarchy with her strong and brave personality. In a Nigerian society where men are represented as the alpha, women have rarely the ability to be self-reliant. In *Efuru*, women are independent because of the way they perceive things. They do not wait for a man to be important and

significant. They are illustrated as hard workers who are financially independent, and this adds something to their defiance of patriarchy. Other female characters are on the contrary represented as weak and dependent. They see that a man is a priority; as a result, they find themselves tied to patriarchy. Ajanupu is the only woman who is not afraid to show her devotion and loyalty to every decision that Efuru makes. She is a traditionalist but at the same time she promotes change and independence. The study demonstrates that men in a patriarchal society are given all the rights to be cowards and selfish. In the novel, men are irresponsible; they live their families, wives and children without a hint of culpability. However, at the end of the novel, Flora Nwapa shows her optimism towards women's choice to be free and independent.

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