

## ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU

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### **Abstract:**

*Flora Nwapa was the first woman writing in English to publish her novel and the first woman in Africa to have had a work of fiction published in London. She has written novels and short stories. Nwapa is the first female writer of West Africa who focused on the predicament of the African woman. Flora Nwapa deals with the five primary themes of motherhood, childlessness, marriage, female economic independence, and the reinvention of the Igbo woman. All her works are women oriented and her women characters emerge as an example of self-assertive and highly individualized African women.*

**Key Words:** Motherhood, woman, predicament, childlessness, marriage, self-assertive

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The earliest writing about the people of Africa were by their white colonizers. Therefore, the blacks were portrayed as an inferior race. The women writers in Africa came little late on the literary scene because of they lack education and in the works by African male writers, women are mostly presented as marginalized figures. In this regard it is important to examine whether the women have subverted the long-lasting stereotypes of women or accepted them as given. Flora Nwapa is an important author as she was the first woman writing in English. The novel is taken for this study is Efuru written by Flora Nwapa. This study aims to give a critical perspective and the changing notions of motherhood. Therefore, it becomes interesting to examine Flora Nwapa from the margins to see how she recasts these issues in her works.

Nwapa writes about the community of Igbo. In the works by male writers, women are mostly presented as marginalized figures. The stereotypes of women, prevalent in the male authored fictions confine them to the traditionally accepted social roles of mother, wife, mistress and beloved. Here this novel is explored with a view of understanding and analyzing the concept of motherhood in African society.

In the literary, critical and cultural political discourses the term mother has been used not just in the sense of biological motherhood but also for denoting several other significations as in motherland, mother tongue, mothering etc. In African Literature Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta are the two women writers deals with women's role as wife and mother. They give every detail of day today life of their women characters as daughter, lover, wife and mother. Their characters do not reject their commitments, but they exercise over their choices.

Flora Nwapa's first novel Efuru was published in the year of 1966 and she became the first African woman whose novel was published in English. This novel deals with the world of women, all the central characters and secondary characters are women. The novel begins when



Efuru and Adizua meet each other during a festival where young men and women look for a suitable match and at the later stage we came to know about the ceremony of the second burial. Through this the mother-child relationship is the basis of the kinship network and it also forms the nucleus of the family. In this novel Efuru misses her mother, her mother died when she was very young. So, the search for a mother or a motherly figure is are of the important aspects of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Efuru is dating Adizua, and one day her cousin Nwashike sees her returning home quite late at night. When he reports this to his father, he said that ‘if her mother were alive, she would have known how to handle her’. Actually, she didn’t get the motherly love which may be the reason behind her constant search for a mother figure. Efurus life story tells of a daughters search for a lost mother. The story starts with her decision to leave her fathers house and get married, when she is on the verge of entering adult life and concludes with her return to her father’s house years later as a divorced woman. When she marries Adizua, she looks forward to get the love she is searching from her mother-in-law. But she is more open, frank and close to her mother in law’s sister, Ajanupu. Ajanupu becomes the motherly figure for her and she trusts very much in her.

In the later development of the novel, Uhamiri, the woman of the lake, chooses Efuru to be one of her worshippers. In this way Efuru’s search for a mother end and she becomes a devoted worshipper of Uhamiri, who rather than being an object of male desire, becomes a symbol of freedom and independence for women. Through this novel gives an emphasis on the mother daughter relationships as the means of keeping alive the traditions and customs by passing them down through the female line from one generation to another.

In Efuru there is an elaborate description of various rites and ritual’s related to women. One of them is circumcision. It is a necessity for the safe delivery of a baby and that the pain of the operation is ‘what every woman undergoes’ (p.12). In some other rites the fertility rites are important. When Efuru fails to become pregnant; post-natal ceremonies were performed and purification rites appear when her daughter dies infancy.

When Efuru fail to conceive after a fairly good time passed after her marriage to Adizua, the neighbours talk about her. To quote from the novel.

‘They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman, since, according to them, two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not produce. (Efuru p.23).

When there was gossip on this matter, she also starts believing that only motherhood can confirm her identity as a woman. But after that Efuru become pregnant and her mother-in-law thanks God saying that “my daughter is not barren after all. My enemies will no longer rejoice. God thank you.” (ibid, p.28).

When Adizua deserts her for another woman she returns to her father’s house and eventually gets married to Gilbert. They are happy and looks together at various places but the society was not happy and people accuses them for showing off of their togetherness. And when Efuru could not conceive for a long time in that marriage, people are bound to talk again.

‘The important thing is that nothing has happened since that happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful.’ (ibid, 171)

When Efuru fails to conceive after her second marriage with Adizua she is considered as a barren. Efuru was searching for a motherly figure who can replace her biological mother. Then she plays a role of mother of Ogea, he calls her ‘mother’. Efuru does not approve of sacrificing one’s life for one’s husband. She symbolizes a positive image of female power and leadership. She is closely related to the traditions and customs of the society but at the same time she has the courage to stand alone to oppose and go against the customs she doesn’t approve of.

In the life of Efuru the role of motherhood is important in the first marriage and the role of wifehood is important after the second marriage. She tired from both of these roles and trying to prove her wrong and inferior to the males. Efuru rejects both the traditionally and socially accepted roles of wife and mother in favour of an autonomous ‘self’. Efuru is a traditional woman and accept roles given to a woman but she believes in economic independence.

Efuru is a story of development of a woman. At the end of the novel, Efuru has grown from dependence for her identity on the conventional female roles of wife and mother into a self-authenticating woman. She does not find her fulfillment in either of the conventional roles that define African womanhood, neither in the glory of motherhood, nor in wifehood. She comes out of the traditional roles to establish an independent identity. Which likes the goddess figure, instead of being an object of male desire, is more of a symbol of freedom and independence for women.

Efuru represents the cultural constructions of motherhood in traditional African society in the changing context of post-colonial setting. In short Efuru is a good example of ‘constructed’ motherhood. Motherhood has a central place in the fictional world of Nwapa. But there is steady change in the attitude of the novelist. Flora Nwapa glorifies motherhood, but her protagonist obsessed with it. Economic freedom is of more importance and all her protagonists are quite independent. The main characters are the women who take change of their lives and go on even after being abandoned by the men. They initially accept the traditional roles assigned to them, but they also maintain their identity as an individual. And once they feel that the social customs are demanding a little too much from them. They don’t hesitate to go ahead to fulfil their desires, even though it might be against the accepted norms.

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