

AN ARCHETYPAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FLORA NWAPA'S *IDU*

Dr. A. Ashmi, J. Janani & Felicit Beneta

Assistant Professor, Mar Gregorios College of Arts & Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Women in African literature were described only from a male perspective. In the narrative of African men, Women were portrayed as passive women who had no voice and accepted their status of subjugation. They were rarely depicted as strong, self-determining women worthy of self-respect. For these reasons, Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian women writer, wrote her first book, Efurú, in 1966 to explain the condition of underprivileged women in Igbo society. Nwapa's works raised awareness of the experiences of women by challenging gender norms and cultural practices that were imposed on them by her patriarchal Igbo community. Without delving too far into the feminist components, the current article investigates how Nwapa hopes to raise women's awareness through realistic, considerate, and emotive writing. Idu is a heroine-oriented novel. The protagonist faces adversities and emerges as an example of the self-assertive, self-determining, skilled, and highly individualized African woman. She tries to free herself from the constrictive old rules imposed by the patriarchal system stand in for and the burgeoning "New Woman" in African society. Nwapa portrays the "African Woman" as the embodiment of various traits, including being an African who is patient and long-suffering, hardworking, well-wishing, and distinguished. She also represents the universal woman fighting for independence and demanding her rightful place in society. Furthermore, this article also illuminates Nwapa's innovative writing style and the techniques she used to build her novel and critique the patriarchal customs of Nigeria that oppress women.

KEYWORDS: *Woman, New Woman, Patriarchal Society, Education, Liberation, Culture*

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INTRODUCTION

Flora Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa, known as Flora Nwapa, is the first black African woman writer to have published her debut novel *Efurú* (1966), internationally in English. She is referred as the "Mother of Modern African Literature" (5: *Women are Different*). Nwapa's writings paved the way for many changes through her first novel by portraying women's lives in her society. Nwapa wrote about women, constructing a world where women were actors and decision-makers. When she published her debut novel, it was considered the beginning of a women's literary revolution in Africa. However, when the novel was published, it was criticized for weak writing and an unrealistic story.

Though there were a lot of negative criticisms, the novel became an icon of Literature. *Idu* addresses the theme of barrenness in marriage, which the women in Igbo society find very upsetting. The plot investigates and questions prevalent ideas about motherhood, society's expectations, selflessness, and barrenness. It also includes Igbo life's emotional, social, economic, and political dimensions. Nwapa's protagonists are strong, independent, and nonconforming women. African women were portrayed as voiceless secondary characters who accepted their subjugation situation. Through her novel, she

broke the image of women as portrayed by male writers in their writings.

Flora Nwapa is the most renowned and contemporary women writer in Africa. Her novels bravely and reminiscently speak for women's empowerment in the patriarchal society. Her novels are based on distressing analyses of their society, where tradition and social environment tend to undervalue women and traditionally feminine traits, and women are compelled to endure unfair oppression and abuse. Western intellectuals assumed that men's writing was superior, whereas women's writing went unheard and unspoken. African women disputed this claim. Therefore, they had a quest to present a truthful portrayal of African women's lives as they exist. Irene D' Almeida in *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* states that:

Silence represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status" (1)

Women's Empowerment and Economic Independence in Idu

Idu is a heroine-oriented novel. She is an independent woman. The female protagonists of Nwapa's novels are known for their courage, determination, and physical beauty. But she gave more importance to women's empowerment and economic independence and gave a secondary position to motherhood. Catherine Acholonu, a supporter of Motherism, described that "Motherism is embedded in motherhood, a vital part of many African cultures". (qtd in 4: Remi Akujobi: Motherhood in African Literature and Culture)

Idu maintains her individuality and strong will from the novel's beginning, challenging her male-dominated and female-relegated society. She was a very young, assertive woman who followed only her choice. This stubborn nature of Efuru brings out the feminist vision in the novel. From the beginning of the novel, her distinctiveness and ability to successfully achieve her goals are depicted clearly. Idu's feminine emotions are not weaknesses. Instead, she maintained her womanhood through them while asserting her independence. Idu is depicted as a symbol of change. As a woman, she was not just satisfied with the responsibilities of caring for her home and farming but proved her abilities to be a decision-maker in all aspects.

So Idu is portrayed as highly industrious, supporting her husband and sustaining herself as an achiever. But she remained an unhappy woman as she did not fulfill the requirement expected of a woman by her culture and tradition. Catherine Acholonu states that "motherhood is at crossroads between negotiating and accepting culture so that her individual preferences are met". Efuru was determined to remain single, which marked her individuality as she could not bear any children. Her characteristics reflect a woman who can stand on her own, a sign of the womanist quest for the freedom of spirit in a woman.

Idu was determined to remain single, which marked her individuality as she could not bear any children. Her characteristics reflect a woman who can stand on her own, an indication of the womanist quest for the freedom of spirit in a woman. Idu, the protagonist, is a strong, lovely, kind, caring, responsible, and hardworking woman. She has a loyal husband who loves her sincerely. Even though she runs a very profitable business, she suffers from being barren, which, in Igbo society, is seen as a failure. Her close friends, admirers, and colleagues are unsure if it was a moral failing or a divine curse. But after being married for a while, she gave birth to a child on the day of an eclipse, which is considered a bad omen. After four years, Idu became pregnant. But before giving birth, her loving husband passes away mysteriously. After her husband's death, Idu developed mixed anxiety and depression, which she

attributes to the shock and weight of living without Adiewere. Her response is noteworthy:

Idu entered her house and went straight to the back. Her husband was lying face downward on the floor. She turned him over and called his name many times but could not reach him. He was already dead. She left him there, in the blood and filth. She said nothing to Anamadi. She went to Nwasobi's house. She sat down. Nwasobi brought kola, and they ate. "I have come to tell you that Adiewere is dead. I am going, are you coming with me?" The calmness of Idu made Nwasobi's blood run cold (p. 209)

Idu doesn't eat, sleep, or weep for an extended period as she is in a schizophrenic state. It is impossible to overstate the importance of love in this book. Idu and Adiewere lead a happy life. Adiewere appreciates Idu at every opportunity, They in fact, have quarreled only once, which is only at the end of the novel. This misunderstanding fervors up to the extent that Adiewere refuses to eat Idu's food for days and even raises his hand to beat her. Idu exclaims:

A human being like yourself will not beat me for nothing. It is not me you want to beat. Go and look for men like yourself to beat. It is here where I am that you have strength" (Nwapa, 1970, p. 168).

The only explanation for this bitter quarrel is that:

The men-folk lorded it over their womenfolk. Adiewere was merely making a fuss. All he had wanted was some petting from his wife it seemed. He was unable to hold anything concrete against Idu" (Nwapa, 1970, p. 174).

It makes sense that whatever makes these two lovers argue would be nearly unforgivable. Surprisingly, though, little to nothing is the root of this bitter dispute. This fight might have happened due to Idu's infertility, which Nwapa neglects to elaborate on. Instead of seeing her consciousness, we observe Ojiugo and Idu's artistic collaboration. This coupling becomes crucial to demonstrate that it is not always the woman's responsibility when no children are in a marriage.

Ojiugo later leaves her husband, Amarajeme, when she realizes she is pregnant with his friend's child. Thus, Ojiugo's childlessness is her husband's fault, and Idu's is her or her chi's? This makes one wonder why Idu gets pregnant only when her husband takes another wife or has an affair with another woman. In contrast, the community, especially women like Onyemuru, believes that if a man does not marry a second wife, the wife is not amenable to the solution and is viewed as a selfish and wrong person.

In *Idu*, Adiwere is against this tradition despite the stereotype that he is not. According to Nwapa, Adiwere is not, at heart, a polygamist. All he wants is one good wife and children (51). Idu encouraged Adiwere to take a second wife to have children and avoid being viewed as an evil woman by society to maintain community harmony. He pays attention to his second wife, but his heart is set on Idu. The pregnancy of Idu is quickly discovered, but the second wife disapproves of how Adiwere treats her. The second wife does not behave in a servile manner; she does not regard either Idu, the elder wife, or Adiwere, her husband. She won't allow Adiwere and Idu to treat her like a slave. Therefore, she says to Idu,

No, I don't want you or anybody to talk to me like that. I don't want you to. Why should you talk to me like that all the time? That's how Adiwere talks to me. . . . I have not come here as a maid but as a wife. What kind of married life is this? Did I beg your husband to marry me? Eh, did I beg him? Please leave me alone. I can go back to my mother's house." (48)

The second wife left the house without informing Idu and her husband. Idu explains to her friend Nwasobi that the second wife should have left the house by informing her husband. It has become a burden for Idu, as she had encouraged Adiwere to marry a second wife to dispel suspicions that she is self-centered. When the second wife's room, Adiwere finds that she has stolen some of her possessions and spreads the rumor that Adiwere is impotent, Ogunyemi says that:

Adiwere treated his second wife as a maid and not carrying out conjugal relations with her as a disruption of polygynous marriages, thus creating an embittered woman who spreads lies (158).

From the beginning of the novel Adiwere is ill. When he finally dies, Nwapa states that “he had died of poison.” But, it is unclear if this is what the people think or if it is true. Nwapa does not expound. This is how she explains it:

People gathered, and in no time, everybody knew that Adiwere, the husband of Idu, was dead, that he had died of poison. What else could it be if not poison? That’s not the way to die. One cannot return from the beach and die having one’s bath after vomiting and passing out blood. It is not natural (Nwapa, 1970, p. 209).

If he was poisoned, Nwapa could have narrated how he was dead; if not, she at least must have made it clear that the illness he had at the beginning of the novel is what ultimately led to his death. The readers should know the cause of Adiwere's death because it is an important event in the book.

CONCLUSION

It is, therefore, not surprising that the female characters in Idu find unconventional, alternate means to accomplish their objectives as the reader looks at their activities. Her unconventional decisions serve as an example of how women create and share their narratives. To Sum-up Idu is a compelling exploration of women’s tradition, of the sources of women’s strength, autonomy, and security in the traditional society of the different and contradictory strains in Igbo traditions. Nwapa disentangles the strands of Igbo custom, isolating what is patriarchal and what is anti-patriarchal, what is masculinist and what is feminist. .

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