Amaka as a Contemporary Nigerian Woman in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough*

By

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Abstract

The stories of the Nigerian woman are replete with tunes of sorrow, subservience, subjugation, slavery, misery, relegation, thingification etc. Of course, these were the lenses from which patriarchal agents viewed her. Literature, as a creative industry, was once a male dominated terrain. The early literary productions in Nigeria were the works of Chinua Achebe *(Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, No Longer at Ease, A man of the People etc); Elechi Amadi (Concubine, Sunset in Biafra, Great Pond);* Cyprian Ekmensi *(Jagua Nana's Daughter)* and most of these works had portrayed womanhood in a bad light. Then, women are either relegated, objectified, tools of procreation, agents of fate, prostitutes or never-do-wells. This was negative posturing before the advent of Flora Nwapa, the first female novelist in the country. She launched her eponymous novel; *Efuru* in 1966 wherein she tells the woman's story from her standpoint. *Efuru* forms the turning point in the literary history of creative writing in Nigeria. The woman could tell "herstory" and debunked so many negative things said about her. It was, at this juncture, that Nwapa's daughters such as Buchi Emecheta, Tess Onwueme etc sprang up to defend the women cause. The women have moved forward and negated the negative portraiture of womanhood by male chauvinists. She is, now assertive, productive, entrepreneurial. It is within this scope that we project Amaka as a contemporary Nigerian woman as typified in Flora, Nwapa's *One is Enough*.

Keywords: Amaka, Contemporary Nigerian Woman, Patriarchy, Flora Nwapa, One is Enough

1.0 Introduction

The Nigerian society, since pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, has been highly patriarchal. Patriarchy presupposed the superiority of the man over the woman and the denomination of the society by male beings. Moreso, it is not only a state of affairs

indicating how men control social institutions, but an ideology, that is to say, a representation of the relationship between the individual, understood in terms of their gender. Nigeria, over the years, has paid much more attention to patriarchy than matriarchy.

According to Wellek and Warren: "Literature has usually arisen in close connexion with particular social institutions" (94). Literature as a commentary on social events has over the years, portrayed man in a dignified way but meanwhile portrayed the woman in a disparaged way. Early creative productions or writing done by Nigerian male authors have painted negative pictures of the woman. From *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe portrays the women as lacklustre, voiceless, timid, backbenchers, objects of procreation and weaklings or weaker sex. In the said novel, Okonkwo the protagonist cum tragic hero beats up his wife, Ojiugo in a week of peace, a sacrilege against feminity (the earth goddess) Okonkwo, a male Chauvinist full of vigour and energy, is a classical symbol of patriarchy who sees the women as weaklings. This inner feeling of himself as the powerful and the women as the powerless, propels him to desecrate feminity (the goddess).

> *Okonkwo knew she was not speaking the truth. He walked back to his Obi to wait for Ojiugo's return. And when she returned, he beat her up very heavily. In his anger, he had forgotten it was the week of peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm, pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for the fear of a goddess. (27; ch.4).*

Okonkwo's disdain for feminity drives him to desecrate the earth goddess. He has a bitter hatred for any being associated with womanhood.

In *Arrow of God*, Matefi, Ugoye and their likes are of no relevance to the socio-political and economic uplift of the society, but portrayed at best, as docile, timid, voiceless and passive agents that form part of a large patriarchal whole, which defines the male beings as against the female beings. The male beings are positive thinkers and subjects to be provoked.

However, Charles Nnolim, in his view on the image of the Nigerian woman considered the cause of the women's predicaments as her destiny since nature designs that for her ("The Unhappy Woman").

Though Nnolim perceives the woman as bound for failure, what informs his essay is the sheer patriarchal mentality. From another viewpoint, Helen Chukwuma counters and reacts against this negative portrayal of the woman by male authors and critics. According to her; "female character has emerged from her cocoon, basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder… The answer is simple; the emancipated female was not born then ("Positivism" 3).

The assertive woman who could have her destiny in her hands has just arrived to negate the views of men. Patriarchy upholds the reactions from the female camp against the fetters of men are a violation of the creation order. However, Chukwuma has proved the complementary role of the women at the time of creation; "Man and woman are created equal in essence and design. They are different and complementary with assigned rules… (*Women Writing 7*). In line with Chukwuma's argument, Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* reexamines the nuances between the physiological features of man and woman. In a related development, Chioma Opara lends her credence voice to the negative posturing of women in literary productions scripted by some male chauvinist writers. According to Opara; "clearly the lack of recognition accorded women in African literally scholarship is evidenced by such a peripheral status, which was assigned women by most male critics and writers" (1).

She goes further to posit that women are not only cast in a negative light, but those female writers were given scant attention by male critics. This active voice from the Garden of feminism stands tall as the proponent of gynandrism and femalism.

Elechi Amadi (who is a gymnandrist from Opara's evaluation), in the *Concubine*, extols Ihuoma, the heroine as a near-perfect human being but only to debase her later by characterizing her as an agent of fate ("femme fatale"). Ihuoma becomes the source of sorrow for the totality of Omokachi and especially for the relatives of Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme who meet their doom. Besides, Cyprian Ekwensi, in his writings, portrays contemporary women as prostitutes or whores. To demonstrate this, in *Jagua Nana's Daughter*, he portrays the women as commercial sex workers. In this same novel, he perceives the urban woman as a notorious prostitute who sells her body to earn a living. As pointed out, much earlier; these negative paintings of the women are steeped in male chauvinism and jealousy. But fortunately, there is a light of hope in Nigerian women for better leadership and socio-economic enhancement and advancement. According to Chukwuma: "Chinua Achebe admits this redemptive role of the Nigerian woman" ("Achebe" 138).

The turning point in Nigerian Literature was in 1966 when Flora Nneapa came up with her first novel, *Efuru*. In this respect, Charles Nnolim captures this historical moment:

> *Our female writers initially led by Flora Nwapa but now led by Buchi Emecheta, have formed their own "school", radical in orientation and feminist in contemporary literary parlance. Flora Nwapa launched this school with a tentative thesis: to redeem the disparaged and debased image of Nigerian women as depicted by Nigerian writers (Approaches 240).*

Nwapa, in the novel, portrays *Efuru* as an embodiment of beauty, industriousness, admiration, love, care and a fervent worshipper of Uhamiri. *Efuru* becomes the breadwinner in her two failed marriages. Ajanupu is the woman who demolishes the mountain of patriarchy. This is deduced from her duel against Gilbert which lands the latter in a hospital. By this singular act, the grips of patriarchy become loosened as the female being gets extricated.

> *Gilbert gave Ajanupu a slap which made her fall down. She got up and quickly as she was a strong woman, got hold of a mortar pestle and broke it on Gilbert's head. Blood filled Gilbert's eye (217; Ch. 16).*

Typical of a woman full of vigour and energy, Ajanupu, the defender of the defenceless, refuses to be subjected to patriarchal chains of domination. She liberates not only herself but the entire "womanhood". Nwapa insists that economic independence remains a potent tool for women liberation. To push this ideology further, she creates Amaka in *one is Enough* to champion this cause. Amaka says NO to the domestic violence meted out to her by her erstwhile husband, Obiora and forces her way through Lagos, where she becomes fulfilled. Moreso, in Amaka, we present the contemporary Nigerian woman as a rebuilder, renovator and a leader in any socio-political institution.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on liberal feminist principles or theory. Liberal feminism or mainstream feminism is one of the thrusts of feminism – a movement and political ideology – which focuses on achieving gender equality through political and legal reform within the framework of liberal democracy. Liberal feminism has its roots in 19th century first wave feminism that prioritized women's suffrage and access to education and that was associated with 19th century liberalism and progressivism.

However, feminist writers associated with liberal feminist theory include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Taylor, Elizabeth Cady Stantin and Gina Krog; second wave feminists, Betty Friedam, Gloria Steinem, Simone de Beavisr, and third wave feminist Rebecca Walker, the advocates agitate for affirmative action, disability rights, family women's health, immigration, media activism, welfare, etc.

2.0 A Biographical Note on Flora Nwapa

Flora Nwapa was born in 1931 and brought up at Oguta in the Eastern Region of Nigeria. She was educated at Crowther's Memorial Girls College (Elelenwa Girls Secondary School), Port Harcourt CMS Memorial Girls College, Lagos, University College, Ibadan and Edinburgh University. On her return to Nigeria, she was appointed a Woman Education Officer in Calabar and then went to Queen's College, Enugu to teach English and Geography. She was Assistant Registrar (Public Relations) at the East Central State during the Crisis. At the end of the war, she was appointed a member of the East Central State Executive Council and was for a time commissioner for Lands, Survey and Urban Development. She was the first woman novelist in Nigeria.

During the 1989/1990 Academic year, she was appointed a visiting professor in creative writing, Department of English, University of Maiduguri. Her published works include *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), *One Is Enough* (1981), *Women are Different* (`1986), *Never Again* (1975), *This is Lagos and other stories* (1971), *The Miracle kittens* (1980), *Journey to Space* (1980), and *Wives at War and other Stories* (1980).

3.0 Domestic Violence in *One Is Enough*

In our society, women have several troubled *waters* to navigate especially at their marital homes. These worries worsen when they could not produce children at the earliest hours of marriage. As to be expected, the society blames her, scolds and derides her (female being). Consequently, their husbands relegate and abandon them to other women. Anytime she endeavours to retain the "position" of wifehood under such circumstances, the husbands pummel or batter the female beings. To buttress this viewpoint, Amaka in Nwapa's *One Is Enough*, suffers a lot of injustice, maltreatment and callousness from her husband, Obiora in Onitsha. This is because she could not produce children to satisfy her societal demands. Amaka lives with Obiora for six years without any serious issues of contention. But the family begins to disintegrate and runs into turmoil when the issue of childbearing takes precedence or dominance over all other matters in family discussions or debates. Obiora's mother becomes torn in Amaka's flesh. To this end, Chukwuma notes that; "in a way, it is the women who lend an edge to the maltreatment and subjugation of their fellow women by man" *(Accents 51)* initially, despite Amaka's determination and

willingness to succumb to the dictates of a husband, her mother-in-law becomes a pest. She kept reminding Amaka of her "barrenness". Given this, she plays a supportive role in procuring another lady (wife) for Obiora, who later had two children without the consent of Amaka. Before now, Amaka purchases a Peugeot 504 saloon car to supplement her financial assistance to the family, all aiming at retaining her "wifehood" position in the household but these could not lighten her burden. Amaka, in her efforts to satisfy the demands of the society, goes to seek the help of a native doctor to "reawaken her womb". In this rural Onitsha setting, the desires of Amaka are not accomplished as she is neither pregnant nor admitted into the mainstream of her family.

Amaka and Obiora are persistently at loggerheads. In one of such situations, they fight when Amaka finds out her husband's "secret agenda" about a second wife who had already got two children. In an altercation, Obiora declares; "I am a man" (26; Ch. 3) which implies that for his gender's sake, his actions need not be interrogated. To affirm her feminity or female being, sexuality and self-pride, Amaka also declares; "I am a woman" (26; Ch. 3). This continues to the point where Obiora battles Amaka.

> *Amaka refused to give in, she could be stubborn, so he pressed on. Then to stop all arguments, to stop his wife lording it over him, he used brute force. Amaka was afraid that he was going to kill her. She raised the alarm, and by the time neighbours gathered… he begged neighbours to leave them alone (27;Ch. 3).*

By implication, womanhood or the female being is brutalised, victimised and almost annihilated for her gender's sake. In our societies, when men err, they are applauded, but when women do the same, they are derided and scolded. To this end, nobody sees Obiora's act as irresponsible but if it were perpetrated by Amaka, the world would have condemned her to that effect. The oppression of female beings did not stop at Amaka's brutal experiences, the same extends to other women in the novel. Amaka, on one of her visits to a hair dresser's, listens to a newly married female narrating how her husband beats her so mercilessly to the extent that she faints, Amaka advises:

> *He will do it again, then are beasts, so watch out… But the trouble with our men is their ego. They refuse to appreciate their wives… you husband will always show that he is a man and put you in your rightful place which is under his thumb (27; Ch. 3).*

The perpetual bullying of the women does not stop with the two instances highlighted here. Again, in one of the duels that Obiora batters defenseless Amaka, she seeks recourse

to a hammer and charges against Obiora… "She sprang up quickly and landed a heavy blow on her husband's chest with the hammer" (29; Ch.3). This incident becomes the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Amaka leaves her marital home and heads for Lagos for resettlement and a life of fulfilment and satisfaction.

4.0 Amaka: A Contemporary Nigerian Woman

A contemporary Nigerian woman is in sharp contrast to her sisters in traditional domains. She is a woman who acts and works her way through to breaking the barriers of patriarchal domination. She believes in the equality of human beings and frowns at the subjugation of "thingification of women". She is educated, assertive and more productive than her "foremothers". In earliest Nigerian writings, the likes of Chinua Achebe in his writings such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, has presented traditional women in the characters of the Ugoyes and Matefis. These women are relegated at the background and have no voice. Their traditional societies considered them as more mere flowers that are used to decorate or massage the ego of men or male chauvinists.

However, there was a shift or perception of the women in his later novel as he does in the depiction of Beatrice as educated and assertive who competes favourably in a male dominated world. He concedes to the postulation that women could perform better if entrusted with power. There is a need for power shift as contemporary Nigerian women who had the privilege of being in public service has formed better than, even, their male counterparts. In the world of social reality, the likes of Amina Mohammed and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala are perfect examples of contemporary Nigerian women.

Amaka is a prototype of a contemporary Nigerian woman and the protagonist heroine of the feminist novel, *Oneis Enough*. She is a negator of male chauvinism and a sharp contrast to Achebe's women in *TFA, AOG* and *No Longer…* Although Achebe retracts his steps in Nwanyibuife (Beatrice) at the *AHS* where he sees the possibility of a new Nigeria under the headship of the female beings. In this text, Amaka becomes the rule with which to measure the women of our time. She breaks the shackles of patriarchy, its domination and asserts herself. She is so determined, persevered, enthusiastic and courageous to unchain herself from subjugation and oppression orchestrated by patriarchy. Within the confines of marriage, women are incarcerated or imprisoned, she has no freedom and must depend financially on the men especially in traditional societies. Here, however, men shower women with praise names, such as; "consumers of wealth", "conservers of wealth"; all these aimed at ensuring their long stay in the cocoon.

Amaka's case becomes altogether a different one in *One Is Enough*. She is made to believe that women become only "complete" when they get their husbands. To uphold this, Amaka becomes interested in a relationship with Obiora. Although she does not succeed in the hands of her early suitors, she decides to live happily for six years at their matrimonial home, but trouble begins to loom when Amaka is accused of being "barren". Her mother-in-law exacerbates her plight by invariably reminding Amaka of her "inabilities". Amaka does everything possible to retain her wifehood at Obiora's home and to make him happy. It does not stop here, she rescues Obiora from being dismissed from his job and goes ahead to support the family financially with all these. Amaka is still ostracised from the family simply for her "bareness". Fights constantly ensue between husband and wife. Once Amaka discovers that Obiora has a woman clandestinely, who has produced children for him, and in her effort to question this, earns her devastating battering blows from the vicious Obiora.

As an educated and assertive female being, Amaka fights back at this point that Obiora pushes her to the wall-by using a hammer available to beat him. Typical of the daughter of Ajanupu (*Efuru*), she breaks the shackles of patriarchal denomination by abandoning her marriage. She leaves Obiora for Lagos where she makes her fortune. Ayo and Adaobi, sister and friend respectively make Amaka a real "Lagosian" by rendering assistance which enables her to feel at home. She registers her firm and begins to make supplies which earn her thousands of naira as profit. Amaka uses her BP "(bottom power)" to leverage on some men such as Alhaji and Father MacLeid to make ends meet. She prospers tremendously to the consternation of Adaobi and Mike. Within the two weeks of her stay in Lagos, she puts in place a telephone line at her home. Amaka rents a flat and procures acres of land to be developed later which she builds on as more contracts and fortune come her way. And to truly display this affluence, she joins the "(cash Madams)", a group of well-to-do women either "husbandless" or widows. To make up for her happiness, Amaka gets impregnated by Rev. MacLeid who fathered her twin boys. With this, Amaka becomes a fulfilled woman who has acquired wealth and got her children. Conversely, in the end, Amaka refuses to wed the father of her babies who gives her a pride of place in motherhood, despite her mother's persuasions. Amaka lives a life of fulfilment and accomplishment without a husband because "One is enough".

The whole story of *One is Enough* revolves around Amaka, the protagonist. It is a story of Amaka, who struggles to find an independent and fulfilling life in her own. Amaka is the protagonist in the novel. She is a strong and competent woman who is initially childless like *Efuru* and *Idu*, but very good at business. Amaka is an enterprising woman and also a teacher before the civil war. She prefers trading; Amaka is a replica of a contemporary

woman who has the expertise and skills in supplying timber, sand and food. Through Amaka, Flora Nwapa paints a picture of contemporary women's potentially, independence and industriousness. She repudiates her position in a traditional society as mere house wives and objects of sex and procreation. Amaka represents a contemporary woman who is fully in charge of her life and controls her own world.

5.0 Conclusion

Amaka, to a considerable extent, proves that marriage hinders the aspirations and visions of womanhood. She acquires wealth and then, gets a life of fulfillment and independence. This feeling of independence, assertiveness, empowerment and emancipation eludes the traditional women in the literary productions of Nigerian male authors such as *TFA, AOG*, *No Longer…*, Elechi Amadi in the *Concubine* etc. The Matefis, Ugoyes, Ihuomas are women who are negatively painted as never-do-wells. They are perpetually in servitude and captivity. They are sharp contrasts to modern Nigerian women such as Adah in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough* and Beatrice or Nwanyibiufe in Chimia Achebe's *Ant Hills Of The Savannah*. Amaka is an assertive woman who seeks comfort and a life of fulfillment which she finds later in life after crossing several hurdles.

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