

## Portrayal of the Igbo Society through Flora Nwapa's Female Characterization in *Efuru*

Maina Ouarodima, PhD & Bello Daudun Bada, Prof

Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

### \*Corresponding author

Maina Ouarodima

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**Abstract:** This paper is in the tradition of redressing the critical imbalance that has underestimated or even neglected African female writers by examining the message that Flora Nwapa, aesthetically, vehiculates through the characterization of her female characters in *Efuru*. The way Flora Nwapa is able to, creatively and aesthetically, portray her female characters to reflect her own socio cultural milieu and, often, her own personal experiences as a woman deserves a close attention. This is because African women writers, in general, and Flora Nwapa, in particular, are active agents of social change and as a result, they are able to publish novels with successful and enriching characterizations not only to reflect their socio cultural milieu but also to seek mutual understanding from the community and acceptance of the choices they make at a given period of time. Each and every female character, in *Efuru*, is carrying a particular message of the community to readers. Thanks to characterization, we are then able to understand the Igbo world views. For instance, characterization not only reveals the actions and reactions of the characters, but also it helps to 'measure' contextually the worth of the struggle of Flora Nwapa in liberating the women folk. Therefore, it is about understanding how women's literature expresses and shapes women's experiences and contributes to their feminist aesthetics.

**Keywords:** *Efuru*, Igbo women, characterization, Feminist Aesthetics.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore Flora Nwapa's characterization in *Efuru*. By characterization, we mean the creation, description and portrayal of a person represented in a work of art. While characterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character; a character, itself, can be defined as a textual being and its function within a plot is to carry out actions. [1:26] states five terms as necessary for the understanding of characterization. They are: The protagonist, a dynamic character, a static character, a round character and a flat character.

**The protagonist** is the main character of the novel...The world he [or she] creates for himself [or herself] may be great or small, palatable or detestable. However, his [or her] ability to sustain whatever happens to him [or her] qualifies him [or her] to bear the term protagonist.

**A dynamic character** is a character who changes according to the course of the events in the story...This may be the protagonist or any minor character who behaves like a Spartan. A Spartan does not give up struggling in the face of any danger.

**Static character** refers to a type of character whose life changes little or not at all in the course of the story.

**A round character** is found almost everywhere in the story to participate actively in everything as much as his

[or her] ability can carry him [or her]. He [or she] has no special alignment with any group in the story.

**Flat character** is the complete opposite to a round character but who has no propensity for an alignment.

Authors use many different types of characters to narrate their stories. Different types of characters fulfill different roles in the narrative process and with a little bit of analysis, in some works of literature, one can usually detect some or all of the types, listed in the above quotation. There is no doubt that a character can also be identified by category of sex, age, marital status... However, in the process of examining the characters in *Efuru*, we classify them into two main categories: major and minor. The major character is *Efuru*, herself, while the other characters who help her to develop the story are ranked minor. Moreover, in the research, we only focus on female characters such as *Efuru*, *Ajanupu*, *Ossai*, *Nwabata*, *Amede* and *Omirima* with *Efuru* as the center for all these stated characters.

Our choice for the above stated female characters is not simply because the novel is written by a woman but because most of the actions and roles are played by women. Also, after the description of each character, we, tentatively, try to bring out the message that the writer seems to convey through each of them.

### Characterization in *Efuru*

To understand characters, one has to focus on the physical appearance and the way the characters express themselves as well as the way the writer depicts them. Also, after the description of each character, we, tentatively, try to bring out the message that the writer seems to convey through each of them.

Thus, **Efuru** is the main character of the novel whose name the novel carries as a title. She is beautiful, as Omirima, the gossip, confesses to Amede: "Your daughter in law is beautiful" [2:163]. With regard to her beauty, one often goes as far to say that after one has seen Efuru, "one hisses when one sees one's wife" [2: 12]. What is more, Efuru is the daughter of a well-known and mighty man of valor, Washike Ogene. She is self-willed. No one can persuade her against what she wants to do. For instance, she marries Adizua, a man from an unknown family and as opposed to the society's basic requirement on marriage, without seeking permission from her father and without her husband paying the customary bride wealth. To bring her back to 'reason', her father, unsuccessfully, sends her two important missions.

However, after hardship and abandonment, Efuru quits her husband, Adizua, but this does not last for long because she contracted a second marriage with Eneberi, a convert baptized Gilbert. Here, too, her marriage is not successful because not only she fails to have a child but her sickness is said to have come from an adulterous action as Omirima says to Amede in these terms: "Your daughter in law will die. She is guilty of adultery" [2:215].

Efuru only enterprising but also charitable. She is able to raise money within a short period of time to give her husband, Adizua, for her bride wealth. It is also her industry that helps Gilbert, her second husband, to buy a canoe and build a house. She is also genuinely kind to other people and mostly modest. For instance, at the thank you visit paid to her by Nnoma's children, after she provides a modern car to their mother, she humbly replies: "I feel happy that I have made you and your mother happy. So please don't think I have done something very great" [2:132]. Moreover, she sends Okeke to a hospital when he was very ill. She also sends old Nnona to hospital for treatment.

Another noticeable characteristic of Efuru is her moral uprightness. Despite Adizua's irresponsibility to go out unannounced and most often to a woman; Efuru refuses to retaliate and remains devoted to him for a long time as she tries her best to draw him home. She is a very responsible woman and also patient, otherwise she wouldn't have supported her husband's full year of absence. If she wishes, she can easily go to any man to have sexual affair as her husband does, especially that she is a very elegant lady. Upon Adizua's abandonment, Nnona, the woman that Efuru sends to hospital for treatment, says to Efuru with an

uncompromising certitude: "Don't worry, my daughter. Keep cool. You are a beautiful woman, and good too. Husbands [men to a large extent] are difficult to get for only bad and ugly women, so don't worry" [2:123].

As far as the message is concerned and with regard to the fact that Efuru first marries Adizua without dowry paid and secondly she dismisses two important missions sent by her father to take her back home, we can deduce that Efuru is conveying Nwapa's vision that society is changing having been influenced by outside views and norms. This is materialized by the community voice in *Efuru* which says that: "Things are changing fast these days. These white men have imposed so much strain on our people" [2:11-12].

Another message that Nwapa expresses through *Efuru* is that even though Efuru is generous and kind generosity and kindness should never be at the expense of reason; that is the kindness of a woman should not force her to accept everything. For instance, in terms of marriage, a woman should give her utmost to preserve a happy marriage but a marriage which has gone sour and in which a woman is oppressed need not be tolerated. That is why, Efuru, despite her generosity and simplicity, when confronted with a choice between opportunity to tradition and self fulfilment, she rationalizes as follows: "I know I am capable of suffering for greater things. But to suffer for a truant husband, an irresponsible husband like Adizua is to debase suffering. My own suffering will be noble" [2:61-62].

Such a message seems to be a basic need for women in Igbo society because even in Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different*, such an issue is brought into light when she says that the society should recognize that women "have a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry and divorce their husband. Marriage is not the only way" [3:119].

An additional message that Nwapa conveys through Efuru is to prompt African women to be conscious of the roles they play in the society and redress distorted situations. That is why her characters are industrious, businesslike and economically independent. In most of her works, women are deeply involved in the economic life of the community, mainly as traders or farmers. Some of the characters tower above men in the extent of their business activities. For instance, men do not appear to have the energetic skill for trading. "Adizua was not good at trading. It was Efuru who was the brain behind the business" [2: 36]. Efuru is not the only trader; there are a number of other women in the novel whose hands make money [2]. Finally, just like in a typical Igbo community, Efuru gains tremendous respect because of her economic success. So, Nwapa leads us to cast a critical glance at the materialistic characteristic of the Igbo society in

which the wealthiest is the most respected. The next character is Ajanupu.

**Ajanupu** is Ossai's eldest sister. She is also an industrious woman, but she is more concerned about traditional knowledge relating to women's health and wellbeing. Because of her knowledge of the culture and tradition of her people, she is viewed as a reflection of the image of the traditional African woman. She loves Efuru as genuinely as her sister Ossai does. She is a good herbalist because she knows a great deal of the medical secrets of plants. For instance, she says that alligator pepper helps to prevent shyness in children. That is, certainly, why in the Igbo land, it is said that women pour a certain quantity of this pepper on the tongue of the newly born babies.

What is more, after Efuru has given birth to a child and Ajanupu has found her eating Ogbono soup with her mother in law, Ajanupu exclaims: "God forbid!... Ossai, ignorance will kill you one day. Why do you allow your daughter in law to eat ogbono soup? Don't you know that ogbono is not good for an expectant mother?" [2:28]. She left them after recommending many don'ts and do's. She is very pragmatic. Often, all that she wants is to achieve, successfully, what she wants to do without minding the method to achieve the aim. For instance, during the illness of Ogonim, Efuru's daughter, she combines European medicine (mentholetum) with native drugs (Kernel oil, leaves, alligator pepper...) and combines these two types of medicine with a prayer (calling on God and ancestors).

Ajanupu is also highly experienced in cultural and even spiritual matters. For instance, by just observing Efuru at a dance ceremony, she is able to know that Efuru is pregnant before Efuru, herself, recognizes it. In the novel, it is said that she "smelt" the pregnancy of Efuru [2:28]. When the child was born she acts as a midwife and she always provides traditional herbs anytime Efuru is ill. Ajanupu is identified as a strong woman who delivered seven of her children without assistance [2].

With regard to the message that she carries, Nwapa is critical of her, though she is the type of woman that her conservative society is in need of because she is a traditional woman with a good mastery of her traditional practices. As a mark of the profundity of her knowledge in traditional matters, she teaches other conservative women within her society.

Next to Ajanupu, Nwapa creates **Ossai** who is Adizua's mother, a sister to Ajanupu, and a mother in law to Efuru, the heroine of the novel. Ossai is a passive character or even better, a very patient sufferer. Despite the extent of love and faithfulness that she devoted to her husband when the latter abandons her, she still

remains a good wife. Even after her husband passes away, she refuses to marry out of self-pride.

Ossai is very indulgent. When her younger sister, Ajanupu, cries to her face that she was responsible of Adizua's bad conduct, in general, and in relation to Efuru, his wife, in particular, she simply keeps quiet. Also, she strongly believes in the power of the Dibia who serves as a communicator between the people and the invisible world. Nwapa depicts her to show that certain women are highly conservative and patient. This patience derives from traditional practices, beliefs and prejudices about the role and ability of women. She is a static character whose life does not change because she does not question the validity of her tradition.

In the novel, Nwapa exposes her lack of initiative. On many occasions, it is Ajanupu who instructs her on what to do. For instance, it is Ajanupu who tells her to look for her lost child. Upon the death of Ogonim, it is Ajanupu who advises her to send someone to call Adizua. Ajanupu is to inform her on things which, apparently, old women are expected to be familiar with: such as not to eat okra, ogbono and snails. In sum, she looks more of a mediocre who needs to be told everything. Her role, in the novel, can help the reader draw Adizua's background if we are to believe the African proverb that says: "A lion cub takes after its mother." Through her, Nwapa, certainly, reflects the suffering womanhood.

Our fourth character under discussion is **Nwabata**. She is Ogea's mother and the wife of Nwosu and a relative to Ossai. She is a house-wife and a farmer. Nwabata is the one (together with her husband) who gave Ogea to work for Efuru in exchange for ten pounds mortgage which is a kind of guaranty for a loan. Nwabata is described as ever on alert. While her husband, Nwosu, was deep asleep, thieves break into their house; she succeeds to tie the ten-pound loan she contracted from Efuru round her waist. Nwabata is very obedient woman as she says: "I didn't want any quarrel, I put my mouth in a bag and sewed it up. I don't want to be accused of being a 'male woman'" [2:104].

However she is silent, what we consider to be one of her positive traits is that she is realistic and strongly against what is morally wrong. For instance, as said earlier, though she and her husband pawn their first daughter, she stands against the pawning of the second daughter. Moreover, she reminds her husband that as they do not pay back the money they owe Efuru, it will be shameless of them to go to her again for another money. Nwabata is also a good observer in the process of social interactions. For instance, when one of Ajanupu's children comes in to greet everybody one after the other, she says to the latter that Ajanupu had given her good training [2].

Through Nwabata, Nwapa confirms to us that in the traditional Igbo society certain women have resorted to keeping silence either because they accept their conditions as normal or because they lack economic independence. So, though Nwabata is a traditional woman with discernment on moral issues, she does not question the male domination. She rationalizes: "I didn't want any quarrel, I put my mouth in a bag and sewed it up. I don't want to be accused of being a 'male woman'" [2:104].

The second to the last character under our discussion is **Amede**. She is Gilbert's mother and Efuru's latest mother in law. She is also a sister to Omirima, the poisonous tongue. She is a remarkably very difficult mother to please as Ajanupu puts in her attempt to remind Gilbert of the unpleasantness of his mother: "Your mother is difficult to please. She is going to give Efuru trouble. I am sorry to say it, but it is true" [2:134]. Amede is the one who, by the influence of the town gossip, Omirima, suggests that her daughter in law, Efuru, sees a dibia. This happens when she becomes impatient with Efuru for not becoming pregnant. But, she is very cautious and believes in the power of the dibia. To verify and confirm Omirima's allegation that Efuru is suffering the penalty of adultery, she first goes to a dibia before she tells her son. However, her information leads to the tragic end of Efuru's marriage with Gilbert.

So, through Amede, Nwapa exposes the interferences of in-laws in marital relationship, especially when marriage is proved to be unproductive, leading to the breaking up of the relationship. So, Nwapa wants to show us that women themselves contribute to worsening the situation of their fellow women through the archaic belief that infertility resides only in women.

Close to the above character is **Omirima** who is known as the town gossip. She is, surely, created to play the hypocritical side of the Igbo society. She is a traditionalist who finds no value in a marriage that is not productive. She is really known to be 'Madame Problems'. Even the little Ogea is very critical of her. Upon hearing her voice from a distance, Ogea says: "she is coming, the gossip...she has never in her life said anything good about anybody. I wonder who is going to be her next victim. Omirima is always running people down" [2:193].

What is more, when Omirima fails to prevent Gilbert from marrying Efuru, she aims to destroy the image of Efuru before her mother in law. Omirima is the first gossip to put into Amede's head the idea of another wife for Gilbert. Omirima talks to Amede in these terms: "your daughter in law is good, but she is

childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go errand for us" [2:163]. She is a real gossip who mostly succeeds in her plots. For instance, Amede believes in what she says and presses her son to marry another wife "whether he likes it or not" [2:162].

She is always running after rumors. For instance, when she asks Amede: "How did they settle that problem of Gilbert's son who came from Ndoni?" [2:196], at first, Amede, herself, was surprised that Omirima had the knowledge of what is considered to be a private matter. She exclaims: "Problem of my son's son? Who told you?" [2:196]. What is more, she is able to give more details to Amede concerning the son that Gilbert had in Ndoni, out of wedlock. Omirima does seem to be depicted, simply, to show the hypocritical side of the Igbo society.

## CONCLUSION

Every research is a result of discussions. From the above discussion, it is clear that an Igbo novel or Igbo literature, as a whole, stems from an Igbo life. It embraces the social and emotional forms that characterize Igbo life. This is so, because an evaluation of an Igbo work of art is not simply an appreciation of the validity of form or content but also and mainly the appropriateness of the characterization.

Characterization, as said earlier, is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. There is no doubt that revealing the personality of a character reveals much about the society, as well, and it mainly helps us to 'measure' contextually the worth of the struggle of women to free themselves from the patriarchal yoke. In this paper and through characterization, we are able to understand the societal problems that affect Igbo women as each character stands firmly for or against a particular vision that shapes her mind.

In sum, this paper is in the tradition of valuing characterization in literatures as a means of propagating a culture and or expressing the societal ills which does seem to be neglected by many African researchers.

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