



EXPLORING FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU* AS A WOMANIST THAN A FEMINIST

Dr. Uttam B. Sonkamble

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English,
SMRK BK AK Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nasik.

Abstract

The colonialism in Africa caused heavy damage to each African nation. It affected the nations in totality from their lives to culture that later made way out in to their agitation as catharsis in their writing contributing to the development of the Commonwealth Literature. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi shouldered this responsibility to lead the literature to the mainstream literature voicing their unrest. In the *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe brings out that unrest on the very first page citing the lines of WB Yeats about the harsh reality of agony and unrest caused due to the colonialism and neo-colonialism. But the male writers seem to be influenced more by the colonialism and their culture which held a bare respect for the African women by treating as only subservient. Imitating the colonisers, the male native Africans also treated their women as subordinate adding to their unending plight. Women found sandwiched between the colonialism and the neo-colonisers in their own male – this was all the show of the male authors. However female writers like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta et al represented by raising the voice of women and contributed equally in bringing the African Literature on the world literature forum. They presented the conflicts and the contradictions within the society with reflection of the aspiration of humanity for human rights and fundamental freedom.

Shouldering the feminist movement, they strove on their own forces to tackle the plight of women. Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo deals the problems of hypocrisy, corruption and in particular prostitution and the impacts of imperialism in her works like; *Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral, For Things Do Not Change and The Cutting of a Drink*. Aidoo puts the bitter truth of the neo-colonialism through her characters; the exploitation of African women by the native black imitating the tradition of the white masters. Buchi Emecheta deals the women's suffering by setting out to intellectualise and rationalize the trade of flesh and Flora Nwapa is observed to be more concerned to emancipate the women from the restrictive norms of conduct imposed by the male dominated society. She challenges the

traditional portrayal of women in the literature. Hence this paper is an attempt to envisage Flora Nwapa and her work in an womanist perspective.

Flora Nwapa as a womanist:

Flora Nwapa is the first black African internationally admired female novelist with *Efuru* published in 1966. She is a Nigerian author, teacher, administrator and a herald of whole generation of African women writers. Nwapa is a recognized for re-creating the Igbo (Ibo) life through her work. She believes that women possess strong belief, strength and ability and she wants to strengthen them by making the women positive; she languishes for a whole new world of women as in the Ibo, in woman's viewpoint. In an interview with Marie Umeh, Nwapa lauds women and their abilities-"When I

do write about women in Nigeria in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about women because there are many women who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent and very, very industrious". (Ebele Chizea). Being aware of the woman's status in the colonised and the post colonised societies, she puts a deaf ear in the changed tradition and suggests the women to avoid repenting for their suffering which would result in nothing in lieu of that she longs to rebuild their life by transformed potential women. This belief makes Flora Nwapa a womanist and refuses her to be branded as feminist. Her words do not remain words but sets lessons to boost the woman to stand for her identity. Her advocacy is to create womanism and not feminism in order to contribute towards life and the society's upliftment by offering- "...she worked with orphans and refugees. Further she worked as a publisher of African literature and promoted woman in African society". (Flora Nwapa, Wikipedia). Or like- "...she also encouraged with her own example to break the traditional female roles of wife/mother and strive for equality in the society. However, Nwapa did not call herself a feminist but a womanist..." (Petri Liukkonen).

***Efuru* a womanistic study:**

Efuru the first novel of Flora Nwapa is the realization of her beliefs in woman power. *Efuru* the protagonist is witnessed as content in her life in spite of couple of mishaps. She remains composed instead of moving to any unsettling moves leading to the societal disruption. Per contra, she continues her life of a woman of identity. *Efuru* opens as follows: *Efuru* is a pretty woman from a West African village and is a successful entrepreneur. Though a pretty woman, she is very unfortunate in getting an honest lover and husband. She is loved and deserted by two ordinary husbands. She elopes with her lover Adizua and marries him for what she is condemned by her family and friends. She continues her trust and attachment with her father. She lives a very happy married life and her happiness witnesses no bounds at the birth of a child but proves transitory. Illness of her dear child sends him shiver and he disappears

not to be returned even for the funeral of the child. She lives helpless and lone life without inkling of taking revenge on her husband and the society. Her bond with her father turns out to be useful in this misfortune. Finding a tiny hope in her father, she returns to her father. She regains normalcy with her father. To her surprise, one of her admirers Enbern appears to restore her unsettled life; he adores her and wishes to marry her. They have a blissful married life. Her father is equally happy too. But their bliss again lasts not too longer. Enbern also abandons her when her father starts counting his last breaths. He does not turn up even for his funeral as Adizua.

Efuru endures two disastrous marriages; she gets love from none of her husband. Normal woman like *Efuru* expects her husband to be proud of her. In fact, it turns out to be a fiasco of her married life. Unlike other situations, unperturbed by this, she accepts to journey childless, husbandless and fatherless life. As a result, *Efuru* could have easily driven to flesh trade to exploit her beauty for livelihood and setting lessons to the society. There are many incidences of wittingly or unwittingly leading to the flesh trade but it is the womanist approach of Flora Nwapa that leads *Efuru* to become a devotee of an African goddess 'Uhamiri'. She starts worshipping 'Uhamiri' and begins to dream like the goddess, 'elegant woman, very beautiful'.

She sets a womanist example through her independence and above all becomes a symbol of survival and independence even during the colonial domain. In a similar situation, Mma Ramotswe the protagonist of Alexander McCall Smith's fiction can be observed an ideal example. She starts her own enterprise and proves it thriving. What follows in her way is many distinguished men propose to marry her. It is an honour for what she has offered to the society in which she is at the lowest stratum. This fiction of Flora Nwapa *Efuru* is observed in an womanist perspective than a feminist. Following definitions of both are descriptive in this regard.

Feminist/feminism:

- a. A person who contributes in improving the status of woman in the patriarchal society.
- b. "a person whose beliefs and behaviour are based on feminist". "Of or relating to or advocating equal rights for women". (Wikipedia)
- c. "A socio-political movement whose objective is equality of rights, status and power for men and women: gender, sexism, suffrages, women's liberation movement". (Cambridge Concise Encyclopedia)

Womanist/Womanism:

- a. A woman who contributes to the society by creating her identity.
- b. A person who looks at the world necessarily from woman's perspective.
- c. "having or expressing a belief in or respect of women and their talents and abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class". (Wikipedia)
- d. Alice Walker who coined the word, made a sharp distinction between feminism and womanism. She prefers women's culture and women's strength, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. She believes that a woman who believes in herself she deserves respect from everyone and should not be treated different based on gender and that she can make the world a better place by her significant existence for herself and the society.

Considering these definitions, one can undoubtedly claim that the present fiction is a womanist than a feminist. For the latter inculcates to strive for woman's rights and privileges in a patriarchal order so as to get equal right. But a womanism is not a fight against any system but a fight of one self to prove her capability. Alice Walker adores that very woman's capability- "Womanist...tradition assumes, because of our experiences during slavery that black women are already capable". (Wikipedia)

Initially Alice Walker the pioneer of womanist term was under the feminist attacks

under the impression of feminism. She perceived that the feminist attacks on the colonial and neo-colonial tradition were fruitful enough to get equal rights and freedom but perceived that they were the momentary solutions. Sensing the capability women, she infused the confidence and courage in women and put them into action for creation of better effective society.

Unlike the feminist movement that began for the sexual rights by the white women, distancing from the predicament of the black women who were oppressed by racism, classism of the patriarchal order and the colonial power. The African Literature is a literary movement of struggle for survival and freedom than that of freedom of sex. Susan Leisure calls the Nigerian Literature as 'cries of protest'. She comments that the true Nigerian Literature is the realistic picture of gender issues in a patriarchal order. As a forerunner of re-creation of woman's life, Flora Nwapa dreams of the Igbo life. The people in Nigeria live in group known as Iboland. People live from some hundreds to thousands of population in a village. There are some committees to govern the village lead by some council of chiefs, women associations and secret societies. Every person male or female contributes in decision making and valued as well. One can not believe about the people about who talked that they are barbaric used to have women associations before the colonialism, when there was no rudimentary of education. The author longs such a system that was destroyed by the British invasion affecting that directly to the women. The colonisers destroyed the traditional and cultural equal status of women and being influenced by the white masters the native men also treated their own women as second class citizens, subservient and sometimes slaves and forced them to study 'womanly subjects' in school. In this changed scenario Nwapa endeavors to bring over and to make every African realise their foolishly and blindly clinging to the culture of the colonisers.

Flora Nwapa deserves due salutes for such womanistic movement. Her efforts are to make realise their blunder and revive their original culture of equality as in the Ibo culture.

What is appreciable about the movement is that it discourages to waging a war against the native and the original colonisers. Her character Efuru is an ideal paradigm of the Ibo. The movement of Flora Nwapa may attract a large group of women but those few influenced by this ideology with stanch faith can surely prove their place in the society. Efuru very rightly idolizes the paramount image in the women and the Nigerian society.

LIST OF WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED:

1. Agrawalla, Shyam. Ed. *The Africa Fiction* (New Essays). (Prestige, 2000).
2. Brown, Lloyd. W. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. (Green Wood Press, Westport, 1981)
3. Dhawan, RK. Ed. *African Literature Today*. (Prestige)
4. *Commonwealth Fiction*. (Prestige, 1989)
5. Ebele Chizea. *Womanism through the Eyes of Flora Nwapa's, Efuru*. African Media Inc. July 2011. African our voices, our vision, our Culture. 19 July 2011 <http://www.africanmag.com/FORUM-1247-design004/>
6. Flora Nwapa. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jan. 2011. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 19 July 2011 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flora_Nwapa/>
7. Joy, James and Ti. Denean Sharpley-Whiling. *The Black Feminist Reader*. (2000)
8. Rixbe, Richard. *Ghanaian Literature*. (Green Wood Press, Westport, 1988).
9. Sircar, Roopali. *Women in African Literature (The Twice Colonised)*. (Creative Books, New Delhi, 1995).
10. Liukkonen, Petri. *Flora Nwapa 1931-1993*. Ari Pesonen. Kuusankosken kaupunginkirjasto 2008. 19 July 2011 <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/nwapa.htm/>