

The Image of African Motherhood as portrayed in Flora Nwapa's *Idu*

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ABSTRACT

Flora Nwapa is one of the pioneering and leading voices in Nigerian and African literature. Her works speak boldly and evocatively for the empowerment of women and other marginalized sections of their society. Her writings are extremely poignant observation of their society in which traditional and the social context tend to devalue women and conventional feminine attributes where the women are forced to end up bearing an excessive burden of coercion and exploitation. Her novels are rooted in humanitarian themes exploring issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social justice and sexual exploitation. The women in Nwapa's novels speak to the needs of both collective and individual female identity within their culture. They seek love and respect from the community and acceptance of the choices they make. As Nwapa's novels evolve, her female characters become increasingly independent, aggressive and self-styled: they become women with a mission to realize themselves. This paper focus on the image of African motherhood as portrayed in the novel *Idu*.

Keywords: Motherhood, barrenness, Nwapa, Idu.

African literature is popular among the critics and the readers throughout the world. With the rise of the black women writers, there has been a drastic change in the African literary scenario. The women writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie head focus on the theme of political and economical marginalization of the women in their society. So this paper will be focused on the importance of “motherhood” in African culture through the novel *Idu* by Nwapa. The opening voices in the novel *Idu* represent tradition in the Igbo community. They speak of ecstasy and peace and they tribute the young married couple; but they also show anxiety because the couple does not have children, spends too much time together, and is well off economically. Actually, the dialogue of the novel begins at the stream, which is supposed to represent healing, and, according to Ogunyemi, is the place for people to meet and discuss the ills of the community. Two women—Uzoечи and Nwasobi—see *Idu* at the lake and inquire about her husband.

Idu tells them he is sick, and they wish him well completely. After *Idu* leaves, Nwasobi, says to Uzoечи, *Idu* pregnant yet?" Uzoечи replies, "No, she's not. It's time she was. What's wrong?" (3).Nwasthi replies," 'Who knows? Sometimes when the woman starts with money, children run away.'" "That's true. Have they plenty of money?" as Uzoечи. Nwasobi replies, "They are comfortably off. *Idu* is the child of yesterday" (3). Uzoечи advises, "Give them time. *Idu* will be like her mother. She wasn't barren. No, none of her people is unproductive. What I like about them is the way they live their happy marriage" Booth would note that this exchange is one example of a stylistic device for making the reader aware of the Igbo value system. The reader learns about the background of *Idu*'s mother and the economical status of *Idu* and Adiwere. According to cultural historians Uchendu and Edeh, family folks is important to marriage. It helps bloodline and community determine if a woman is likely to bear children and to know whether the family is truthful, diligent and decent. The reader is also reminded by the exchange that money, as in *Efuru*, often complicates the childbearing situation of couples. But the most important issue of the exchange is clearly the women's concern about the role of motherhood for *Idu*.

The traditional beliefs about motherhood and barrenness are explored in the conversation between the two women. For example, Uzoечи's words "wrong" and "it's time" suggest *Idu* has failed to do something. These expressions do not leave space for stretchability within a wedding.

Traditional society expects all married couples to have children even though there is no written law. People in the village will begin asking questions and talking behind a person's back if there are no signs of pregnancy by the end of the first year of marriage. Uzoечи's comment "give them time" suggests a speech act of multiplicity of voices seeking a solution (3). Uzoечи admits that Idu and Adiwere have been married for a while, three years, but she is not willing to announce that Idu is barren. She wants to compare Idu to her mother, for some women do not get pregnant early in their marriages. Another character, the nosy, difficult Onyemuru, stresses, however, the importance of following Igbo tradition in which wives "allow" husbands to marry other wives so there will be children in the family. Onyemuru says, "If Idu can't have a child, let her allow her husband to marry another wife. That's what our people do. There are many girls around" (33). Tradition is important to the female characters, for Nwasobi responds to Onyemuru by saying, "You speak the truth. . . I shall speak with Idu" (34). Moreover, in an earlier conversation Uzoечи appears to have convinced Nwasobi that Idu will be pregnant in due time. It is obvious that the women of this Igbo village believe children have a very important role in marriage and family- No one seems to suggest that Idu is not a good woman; they seem to give her the authority to "allow" her husband to marry a second wife, so there will be children in the family. Her willingness to share her husband for the sake of children and tradition will make her a good woman. However, the conclusion of the conversation between the women is that there must be children. Therefore, motherhood takes on the semblance of a mandatory requirement; it is obligatory.

The first problem of the novel, childlessness, is addressed in the second and fourth characteristics of African feminism presented by Carole Boyce Davies. The second focuses on the consciousness of women that there are inequities and limitations in society due to traditional customs as well as those introduced and reinforced by colonialism. Thus, Idu and Ojiugo are aware that society expects them to find avenues to make motherhood possible. Motherhood is mandatory. The fourth attribute examines the concept of motherhood for its positive and negative effects. It respects motherhood but questions obligatory motherhood. It sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy (Davies 9). Davies understands that polygamy can allow senior wives the freedom to conduct businesses while the younger wives take care of household chores and the husband's needs, especially if the senior wife is unable to have

children. Often the women have special time to spend with the husband, all of them, then, having some freedom.

Nwapa also has the narrator examine parenthood and motherhood through the lives of another couple, Amarajeme and Ojiugo. After several years of marriage, they do not have children, and Ojiugo realizes that her husband is impotent. The need to fulfill her traditional role as a mother causes Amarajeme's wife to take extreme measures to become a mother. She walks into Amarajeme's friend Obukudi's home with his other wives. Uzoechi is surprised when she hears the news and asks, "what's wrong with them? This action by Ojiugo is not the norm since Igbo culture allows women to procreate by other men if their husbands are sterile, but remains in their marital home; the children are considered to belong to the husband even if people suspect otherwise. When Idu and Adiwere discuss the situation, Idu is surprised at the revelation that Amarajeme is impotent, but Adiwere explains that Ojiugo has known for about two years. He says, "She wanted a child. Do you blame her when she went to the man who could give her one?". The diction choices—"do you blame her" and "man who could give her one"—indicate Adiwere's acceptance or understanding of why Ojiugo chooses an alternative or unheard of method to solve her problem. Again, the character has used the word "blame" instead of "hold responsible" to indicate the seriousness of her choice. Nwapa is asking the reader to consider if women should take such measures to ensure motherhood at all cost. Must one consider the moral implications for Ojiugo, Amarajeme, and the community at large? Evidence throughout the novel confirms my position that the author is negotiating choices for women within tag the traditional community. After all, it is the community that insists on motherhood for acceptance even when it knows men and women could have medical problems that prevent fatherhood or motherhood. Joseph Asanbe discusses the possibility that fate call prevent women from attaining certain goals such as love and children in the same marriage (81). He believes there is a question that must be considered: "can a person find an individual way to become and act in a reality in which culture and fate determine what one can do and what one can be?" (81). Ojiugo's decision to leave her husband's marital home in order to accomplish her personal and cultural goal seems quite greedy at first, but if one examines her choice from a cultural point of view, she has confer a choice, although an amazing one. Asanbe refers to her actions as using free will -to dictate an outcome (192).

Culture does influence Amarajeme's actions; even though he is heartbroken refuses to eat, according to cultural custom, there is nothing that can be done to appease the gods if a wife leaves her husband's home for another man. He chooses to believe that his wife will return to him even after hearing she is pregnant. Eight months later upon hearing that she has given birth to a baby boy, Amarajeme exclaims, "Wait, a baby boy. Wait, it's my boy, my first son, mine, and mine. No, but wait. She left my house eight months ago so the child must be mine. He is my child. But why did she leave me? Why? Then? ... Am I not the father of the boy? Am I not?"(129). These arguments finally ooze into his consciousness, and now he realizes what everyone else has known. His name is now disgraced, and he is humiliated. One must ask why Ojiugo leaves him if she has already committed adultery with Obukodi. Why does she not return after the baby is born? Is there a hidden message the authorial voice is advocating through Ojiugd's unusual actions? Maybe Nwapa is implying that it is time for the truth to be revealed and accepted publicly, for many people in the community have been aware that Amarajeme is impotent. It is time to admit that men and women may have medical conditions that prevent births of children; moreover, everyone knows that all children do not live, and it is not the fault of the mothers if God chooses to take the children. People in the community must stop placing all of the blame on the women. Barbara Christian's thoughts concur with Davies' views about motherhood. Christian does not inlet ill perceptions towards motherhood. But she does not wish for it to be "universally imposed upon women as their sole identity, above all else". She questions what happens when women tell their stories about motherhood. Personally, I think Ojiugo's actions when she marries Obukodi reveal to us what she feels about motherhood: one must become a mother at all cost.

Clearly Nwapa has dealt with motherhood in a different manner in Idu than in Efuru. When one realizes that Ojiugo has other options according to Igbo cultural beliefs, one must question Ojiugo's decision to leave her husband's home and live with another man and his family to have children. Surely, Ojiugo could have found a way to become impregnated without calling attention to her husband's medical condition. Why does Nwapa have her character make such a choice? I think the operative word is "choice." Joseph Asanbe firmly states that Nwapa gives her characters free will to choose; thus, he does not see them as pitiful women demoralized by society, but rather women who make choices to suit themselves (78). Obiora Nnaemeka uses the term that I prefer; she says the characters "arbitrate" choices. His other point that culture and

fate can determine what one can become and do is valid to a degree. It is the beliefs of the culture that cause Ojiugo to take such drastic action to become what society expects of her, but at the same time she tramples upon the feelings of her husband, Amarajeme. To what extent does Ojiugo contribute to Amarajeme's suicide? Or is his decision to commit suicide based only on the culture's belief that if he cannot produce children, he is not a man and not to be respected. I do recognize that Amarajeme does not negotiate; he succumbs to society's beliefs. Yes, choices have been made by individuals, but those individuals have felt demoralized and useless. Thus the paper explains that how Nwapa gives importance to motherhood through her novel *Idu*.

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