

Alternative Realities, Transformation and the Goddess Myth in African Women's Fiction: A Sociological Perspective of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

Davies Ufuoma

Department of Languages and Literature, Lead City University, Ibadan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20230732>

ABSTRACT

African women writers have engaged in rhetorics and performative strategies, designed to project a sense of self redefinition for women in Africa. This is because in many African societies, women are largely invisible. However, over the past few decades, the narrative seems to be encouraging. Women writers have started contesting gendered roles, institutionalized structures and power relations that define their realities. Thus the paper examines Flora Nwapa's utilization of the goddess mythology, to create alternative realities for self-recreation of the African woman. The author demonstrates that Nwapa weaves the goddess myth in the plotline to assert a revisionist order in the tradocultural space. The goddess imagery is invested to construct a woman-centered ideology that supports women to attain psychological, economic spiritual and emotional succor away from the realms of tradition. A sociological theoretical perspective is deployed for elucidation.

Key words: goddess myth, sociology, alternative realities, fiction.

INTRODUCTION

African women were often presented as a subaltern and marginalized group who had no voice. Many western scholars saw African women as invisible and thus should be represented by western women and men writers. Mary Modupe Kolawole in "*Space for the subaltern: Flora Nwapa's Representation and Representation of Heroism*" explains that African women are

products of several agencies that negate their self enhancement, and the social structures prevalent are hindrances to their ability to speak out" (225) Gay Wilentz notes that with the publication of her first novel *Efuru* in 1966, Nwapa brought a "fresh perspective to traditional West African culture and modern Nigerian in literary works (31). To champion the women's values, Nwapa sets the novel in Ogwuta, Nigeria, the village, where she grew up in the 1930s. She explores the plot from a woman's viewpoint in a society close to its pre-colonial roots. As a child, she explains that she was not permitted to interact with the members of the community because her parents were Christians. This implies that she was never exposed to her society's traditional cultural mores, and the little she heard about these values, she got from her grandparents, who she says resisted the Christian tenets. It was the homestead of her grandparents that she listened to stories that aroused her imagination, It was in such a setting that she was able to listen to all the stories about Uhammiri, the water goddess, and the other community gods.

Operating from a culture that delineates women from the public sphere, Nwapa resorts to a mythical form that depicts the values of the African women's subjectivity, within a traditional pre-colonial context. The paper analyzes the utilization of the goddess myth to create alternative realities for transformation of the self in African

women. This is because Nwapa envisions the importance of highlighting women's experiences in a trado-cultural African society, where their social and economic activities and preoccupation with such problems as infertility, and child bearing demand innovative strategies of exposition. "Apart from exposing the pain, misery and humiliation which childless or barren women suffer in traditional societies", she wrote the novel - *Efuru* to highlight the resourcefulness of women, which often made them successful, respected and influential people in the community" (Nwapa,93). The resourcefulness Nwapa refers to is the creative awareness of alternative ways through which the women's bodies are returned into focus in the imaginary and symbolic as agents, through the goddess myth. Therefore, Nwapa deploys the goddess myth into her fiction for a number of reasons. The study will discuss the utilization of the goddess myth in relation to the experiences of women, stating its significance as a revisionist strategy to construct a women centered ideology.

Theoretical Framework

The suitability of this framework of sociological theory lies in its task of providing services to the society, as an interventionist role in human existence. In the words of Ushie (2008:6), Literature must serve society by an interventionist role, and writers must not merely write to amuse but take a critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role. Similarly, the theory is best suited as corroborated in the opinion of Raghava (1992) who declared in "*Novels, Novelists and Social Change: A sociological Analysis*, observes that the novel is the most socially conditioned of literary forms because it represents the society as it is, at any given time". Thus a sociological perspective of the novel highlights the deepest concern for society in its narrativisation of diverse issues of gender, politics, class, race and more.

DISCUSSIONS

In *Efuru*, the heroine, marginalized in society because she cannot fulfill her maternal obligations, seeks nurturance and succor in the female goddess Uhammiri with whom she forms a relationship that supports her to propagate her gender values in the society. Nwapa's discursive strategy of utilizing the goddess myth is to articulate a revisionist order in the symbolic that provides emotional and psychological succor for women. In order to comprehend the significance of mythological goddess in African societies, a historical review is essential. The worship of the goddess is an integral part of pre-colonial Africa, until the colonialist discouraged them on the goddess culture. Before then, the goddess had assumed many aspects in African societies. She was perceived as a creator, powerful, life-giver and fertile. But with the arrival of the Europeans, as Jennifer Woolger notes, the women lost the life affirming principles women experienced through the goddess mythology. The reconception of the goddess myth has significations on the personality of the woman and the novel structure.

First it provides Nwapa, the creative space to present a dual personality of her heroine. One, depicting her subordinate nature, and the other symbolizing the superpowers as a goddess ideal of the woman. According to Carol Christ, the social and political struggles for gender equity are reinforced through the goddess imaginary. The concept of the goddess worship in *Efuru* is inspired from the mythical activities of the Ugwuta Lake, where her community is located in Southwestern Nigeria. The community has unique cultural practices which accords women certain rights and privileges. For instance, when a woman pays the bride price for any male relation, she is honoured. Ugwuta community privileges the worship of goddess because the feminine aura gave them a sense of peace. Similarly, Nwapa portrays a deliberate creation of culture that specifies a woman centered ideological canon for black women writers. In other words, the goddess is deployed to provide a

haven for women, who are willing to confront societal norms. The goddess is usually considered to be the most powerful of deities, because what she lacks in children, she makes up with wealth and freedom.

The character of Efuru is designed from the outset of novel to challenge cultural and patriarchal norms. Efuru, the protagonist possesses unique characteristics: "Efuru was her name she was a remarkable woman. It is not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished "(7). In this narrative, the story begins when a 20-year-old Efuru runs away from her father's compound to her new lover Adizua's house. Despite the latter's inability to pay the bride price, Efuru risks societal reprimands to live with the man of her choice. To the protagonist, Efuru's marriage is an ideal and a vocation. In the first scenario, Nwapa creates a setting for a typical traditional marriage situation. The young woman is presented as an ideal wife who nurtures her husband's every need at any turn. It is not long before Nwapa introduces the thrust of her ideology, which is liberatory feminism. Efuru gradually realizes the implications of womanhood in traditional Igbo society. She discovers her state of powerfulness as a married woman, if she cannot fulfill her traditional obligatory roles of childbearing and motherhood.

Thus, Nwapa's resolve to commit Efuru as a goddess priestess and worshipper, is to re-inscribe her personality through a goddess from whom she attains both psychological and emotional comfort. Her liberatory spirit is ignited because Efuru, the protagonist, gains considerable leverage in society. "I dream several nights of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb" (146). Efuru tells her father. It is through this dream that Efuru first learns of her new role as a goddess priestess. "You are a great woman" the Dibia (tradition healer), tells Efuru before addressing her father: "Nwashike Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The

goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a great honor. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you" (Nwapa 153)

Nwapa's quest for a liberatory feminist role is reflected in the imagery of the goddess Uhammiri's power. The allusion to the goddess prowess supports Efuru to come to an understanding of herself. As a goddess worshipper, Efuru recreates and represents the spirit in a dynamic way that serves her devotional and social needs. Through Uhammiri, Nwapa envisions an alternative reality that seeks to correct the restrictions and societal challenges that Efuru suffers. The goddess motif is therefore a sociological device to enable Efuru to achieve healing and solace from a turbulent society. Similarly, her emotional sense of suffering and sorrow at her childlessness impels her to have an active affiliation with the embodied divine Uhammiri. The altar for her becomes a place of transformation, a place for positive relationship. She uses it as a place to seek Uhammiri's divine help to sustain her relationship with her community, given that the goddess allows her to disperse the secret to wealth.

At the altar of Uhammiri, Efuru displays an earthenware pot that she puts at the corner of her room, with a piece of white cloth. This ensemble reflects a confrontation of patriarchal ordained symbolic order of her society. She recreates an image of her goddess and on the days, she worships, (Orie day), she wears white, a symbolic colour that alludes to her purity, and she refrains from having any sexual relations. Efuru's body, as a site of spirituality and positive identification is emphasized. The altar becomes for Efuru, a place of personal consciousness. She prays, meditates and focuses. The potency of altars that have their origins in water is buttressed by Miriam Chamani, as: "Water-the-female-was the first altar. That is where the spirit was first carried. Water is the womb of the universe. Water is the place to be. Woman's role was from the beginning, always bringing light" (561). Even though

Uhammiri offers women wealth and beauty, she cannot give them children. Why then do they worship her? The answer is not far fetched. Uhammiri as a deity is presented in Efuru to achieve varying dimensions- as a mother who is a giver and consumer of life; as a succor-bearer, who alleviates the suffering of women, and to offer beauty and wealth to her worshippers. It also portrays the many facets of the woman. As a goddess, she can be everything that does not conform to rules, and reflects the collapse of binaries and the negation of linearity.

CONCLUSION

The paper demonstrates the deep cultural milieu of her society to reconstruct the woman and position her for visibility. To recast and re-inscribe the new woman personality African female writers, like Flora Nwapa resorts to the strategy of the water goddess - Uhammiri to propagate the gender values of the woman in the society

Declaration by Authors

Acknowledgement: None

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Altman, Janet Gurkin. (1998). "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology." *Writing the female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* Ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern up.172-198. Print
2. Angoff, Charles and John Povey. (1996). Eds. *African Writing Today: A Literary Review Book* New York Maryland Books print

3. Bartky, Sandra Lee.(1990) "Femininity and Domination": *Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York Routledge, print
4. Christ, Carol P.(1979). "Why Women Need the Goddess. "Woman Spirit Rising": *A Feminist Reader on Religion*. Harper & Row 273-287
5. Cixous Helene. (2000) "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. Eds Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances. Boston 256-262 print.
6. Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990). "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment: *Perspectives of Gender* Vol 2 Boston . Print
7. Davies, Carol Boyce. (1986) "Introduction" *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton. Africa World Press.1-17
8. De Certeau, Micheal. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall Berkeley: University of California Press. Print
9. Nwapa, Flora. (1966) *Efuru*. Heinemann .print.
10. Nwankwo, Chimalum "African Literature and the Woman: The Woman: The Imagined Reality
11. Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. (1996) "African Wolman Palava": *The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago &London: The University of Chicago Press. print

How to cite this article: Davies Ufuoma. Alternative realities, transformation and the goddess myth in African women's fiction: a sociological perspective of Flora Nwapa's Efuru. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2023; 10(7): 253-256.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20230732>
