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Redefining Womanhood Beyond Motherhood: Identity, Empowerment and the Stigma of Childlessness in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of womanhood in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), focusing on identity formation, female empowerment and the social stigma of childlessness in patriarchal Igbo society. Set in a strongly pronatalist context, the novel challenges dominant narratives that equate a woman's value with reproductive capacity. The novel questions normative constructions of womanhood tied to marriage and motherhood and explores alternative paths to fulfilment grounded in economic independence, autonomy and social participation. The novel's protagonist, Efuru, embodies the cultural ideals of beauty, industriousness and moral integrity, but her childlessness overshadows her achievements. Nwapa exposes the idealising of motherhood as a mechanism of social control causing exclusion and emotional suffering. At the same time, Nwapa reclaims indigenous cultural resources, like the lake goddess Uhamiri, to imagine female fulfilment independent of procreation. The study employs textual analysis within a socio-anthropological framework, integrating African and Western feminist theories on gender, identity and motherhood as both lived experience and institutionalized practice.

KEYWORDS

African women's literature; motherhood; childlessness; stigma; female empowerment; Flora Nwapa

Flora Nwapa (1931–1993) is celebrated as the mother of the women's African novel and holds the distinction of being Nigeria's first woman to publish an English-language novel in Britain. This was during a time when the literary scene was largely male-dominated. She emerged as a significant African woman writer in the twentieth century (Umeh and Nwapa 23; Ogunyemi 131). As a pioneer for a new generation of African women writers, Nwapa developed a unique narrative style that challenged the traditions of her Igbo society, which often oppressed Nigerian women (Abdelsalam 919).

Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) is one of the seminal works of African women's literature written in English, notable for its profound and nuanced exploration of motherhood, as well as its contribution to discussions about gender, identity and societal roles within the African context. Patriarchal norms in Igbo society heavily emphasize a woman's role in reproduction. This analysis will explore how these cultural expectations influence the identities and experiences of the characters. Flora Nwapa emphasizes the importance of embracing change that fosters

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female emancipation and allows women the freedom to choose their own paths in life. She argues that those who have benefited from Western education bear the responsibility to challenge societal restrictions and stereotypes. Nwapa feels compelled to portray the realities she witnesses to inspire a pressing shift in the perception of gender roles. In her works, she challenges the idea that a woman's identity is defined by her marital status and motherhood. Through the character of Efuru, Nwapa introduces the idea of a new woman who, even without a husband or children, is empowered and deserving of respect. Nwapa does not dismiss Igbo tradition and culture, but thoughtfully incorporates them.

The novel takes place in Oguta (or Ugwuta) during the 1940s or 1950s and was published in 1966, shortly after Nigeria achieved independence (1960). *Efuru*, like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is set in rural Igboland. While both novels aim to depict Igbo social, political and religious life and examine the effects of colonialism, Nwapa shifts the narrative focus by prioritizing the lived experiences and social roles of women within Igbo society, thereby casting light on their distinct cultural domain (Stratton 87). Even though the novel takes place during the 1940s or 1950s, many of the events and themes explored in the novel continued to preoccupy the author throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. *Efuru* is set in a time that falls roughly between the Igbo Women's War of 1929 – when thousands of Igbo women protested against a proposed tax on married women – and the discovery of oil in Nigeria in 1956.

Efuru, the protagonist of the novel, is a beautiful and independent woman from a respected Igbo family. She defies societal norms by marrying Adizua, a poor farmer, without her father's approval. At first, their marriage is filled with love, and Efuru uses her entrepreneurial skills to support them. However, after struggling to conceive in their first year, she becomes worried. A visit to a *dibia*, the traditional healer, leads to the birth of their daughter, Ogonim.[1] Unfortunately, Ogonim dies at the age of two, and Adizua abandons Efuru, never returning – even for their child's funeral.

After moving back to her father's house, Efuru eventually gets married again, this time to Gilbert Eneberi, a childhood friend. Although they are compatible, Efuru remains childless and eventually suggests that Eneberi take a second wife. She often dreams of Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake, who represents wealth and feminine beauty but is also childless. Efuru becomes one of Uhamiri's followers, which further distances her from the societal expectations of motherhood.

Eneberi's second wife has a son, but their marriage begins to fall apart due to his irresponsibility and frequent absences, including a mysterious time spent in jail. Rumours about Efuru's supposed infidelity add to the strain, and when Eneberi confronts her with accusations, she decides to leave him and return to her father's home. The accusation from Omirima, her neighbour, leads to the disintegration of Efuru's second marriage. After the tragic loss of her child from her first marriage, this second union was her last opportunity to have another child in a way that society would accept. The novel ends with Efuru reflecting on the societal admiration for Uhamiri, a goddess who, like her, does not have children, highlighting the complex pressures placed on women in her culture.

Redefining Womanhood: Motherhood, Identity and Empowerment

Motherhood is a role commonly viewed as a natural composite of emotions and behaviours that arise during pregnancy and after childbirth. It is perceived as a moral

transformation, where a woman evolves from an independent individual to someone profoundly connected to her child (Akujobi 2). At times, motherhood serves more as an ideal than a lived experience (Forna 259). It represents both a personal journey and a societal institution moulded by cultural norms and patriarchal systems. This duality renders motherhood both a source of empowerment and a means of oppression (Rich 13). Its form and significance vary across cultures, yet it remains a recurring theme in literature and discourse globally (Akujobi 2).

In many sub-Saharan African contexts, motherhood carries immense significance, often overshadowing marriage in defining a woman's identity, social status and political or religious influence (Stephens 1). Within these traditional societies, a woman's worth, public recognition and perceived success are intrinsically linked to her fertility and her ability to bear children – particularly male heirs (Udenweze 2). Women who cannot meet this rigid cultural expectation frequently face community rejection and diminished self-esteem (Akujobi 4). This reproductive pressure is further compounded by socio-cultural structures that treat women as the property of men, transferring ownership from the father before marriage to the husband after it, thereby reducing a woman's primary value to her capacity for offspring (Udenweze 2).

Colonialism further influenced the meanings of motherhood and marriage by valuing these roles above women's education or employment opportunities, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures (Chuku 184). Today, women from Oguta (Nwapa's birthplace), experience considerable pressure to marry young and have numerous children, often prioritizing this over achieving financial independence, launching a business or developing a career. This attitude has endured despite progress in modernization and education (Jell-Bahlsen 8).

In Nwapa's *Efuru*, the protagonist is not only physically attractive but also possesses many qualities admired and expected of an ideal woman in her community, such as intelligence, industriousness and a caring nature. Efuru gains wealth through trading and occasionally defies her husband's decisions: 'Efuru refused to go to the farm with her husband' and tells him, 'If you like … go to the farm. I am not cut out for farm work. I am going to trade' (5). This statement highlights Efuru's self-awareness and portrays her as a strong-willed and unconventional figure. She makes her own choices, despite societal expectations that had predetermined a life for her as a farmer. While trading may have been somewhat acceptable for women, few could choose to avoid farm work entirely and focus solely on the market, particularly in the early stages of marriage in which childbearing is expected above all else.

It is important to state that Efuru does not deliberately choose to be without children. She gives birth to her daughter Ogonim, suffers deeply from her death and remarries hoping for stable motherhood. It would be misguided to interpret her childlessness as a voluntary decision or ideologically motivated. Efuru longs to fulfil the socially expected role for Igbo women. Yet the novel affirms her economic success, beauty and moral integrity, despite her failure to achieve this traditional maternal ideal. Nwapa presents infertility not as a desired triumph, but as a painful experience that forces the protagonist to redefine her identity. Efuru's heroism consists in surviving socially and emotionally within a culture that measures female success almost exclusively through motherhood.

African societal expectations of womanhood equate motherhood with female identity, social status and worth (Salami-Boukari 120; Showden 96). In Efuru's culture, as in many

African cultures, fertility and procreation are regarded as prerequisites of a *real* woman. Motherhood not only validates a woman's femininity but also her place in society. As Akujobi claims, 'it is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the "halo of maternity" shines over her' (4). The desire for offspring is not just personal but also reflects cultural expectations that emphasize the importance of family and continuity. From the perspective of an anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith refers to this cultural phenomenon as the 'importance of having people', noting that robust kinship networks are essential for individuals to gain social leverage and economic security. Because children are viewed as invaluable extensions of the family lineage rather than quantifiable assets, strict cultural taboos apply to discussions about them (228). This reverence is made clear when Ajanupu, the younger sister of Efuru's mother-in-law, gently reprimands [a person's name] for a breach of this etiquette:

> 'How many children have you, Ajanupu?'
>
> 'Hush, we don't ask people how many children they have. It is not done. Children are not goats or sheep or yams to be counted. I will tell you. I conceived eight times, one died of convulsion.' (34)

Because the community places value on family continuity, Efuru initially strives to embody these ideals, achieving a temporary sense of marital happiness by fulfilling her traditional gender roles. Her domestic success aligns closely with the Igbo concept of *ezigbo nwanyi* – the 'good woman'. As Ifi Amadiume notes, an *ezigbo nwanyi* is expected to be a 'good daughter, wife and mother' whose industriousness allows her to sustain the household even when her husband fails (93). Efuru mirrors this trait by taking financial and practical responsibility for her household during her first marriage. While Amadiume observes that the division of labour in Igbo society was historically fluid rather than rigidly fixed (16), colonial and modern shifts have pressured women to fit into narrower, more confining domestic boxes. From a Western feminist perspective, Simone de Beauvoir critiques this very pressure, asserting that men often seek to 'marry a "good woman"; by nature, she is virtuous, devoted, faithful, pure, and happy, and she thinks what she should think' (579). Ultimately, however, this patriarchal ideal proves to be a dangerous trap for Efuru; her dutiful adherence to the 'good woman' archetype cannot protect her life from being tragically overshadowed by her husband's eventual abandonment and the devastating loss of her only daughter.

In precolonial Igbo society, childless women could achieve social and economic prominence through trade: financial independence and respect in the marketplace. Wealthy female traders, like Efuru, could leverage their economic success to expand their households and labour forces – either by allowing their husbands to take additional wives or by acting as *female husbands* themselves, a term offered by Amadiume (15). Efuru, realizing she was no longer able to have children, decides to offer her domestic helper, Ogea, to her husband as a second wife:

> 'We want to marry again,' Efuru said laughing.
>
> 'Really, why?'
>
> 'Eneberi wants to marry another wife, and I think it is the right thing to do.'

[…]

'Ogea has grown you know. I think she will do.'

'I thought of it some time ago, you know. I think she will do.' (272–73)

In certain situations, women take on the role of the primary provider for their families. However, Efuru's case is particularly noteworthy because, during her first marriage to Adizua, her husband contributes hardly anything to the household finances. By assuming these responsibilities, Efuru gains a clear sense of empowerment, both economically and socially, earning the title of '"great woman"' (191). The men in Efuru's life – Adizua and Gilbert – prove inadequate as traditional male models by failing to provide emotional or familial fulfilment. This forces Efuru to rely on herself, so that her economic and social independence is a response to the male fragility surrounding her. Nwapa constructs a protagonist whose strength does not depend on a man. Efuru trades, makes decisions, and gains prestige through her own merit, shifting the centre of female authority away from the husband and toward the woman's individual capacity.

Efuru, depicted as both a breadwinner and an exceptional woman, can be compared to the central religious deity, the Igbo goddess Idemili, despite Idemili's associations with maternity (Amadiume, *Re-inventing* 18). She is a river goddess revered across Africa and the diaspora who created the world and embodies womanhood, motherhood and fertility in precolonial Igbo culture. In the nineteenth century she was often associated with siren-like sea and river goddesses (Krishnan 2).

Idemili embodies strength, independence and sustenance, qualities that align with Efuru's role as a provider and pillar of her community. As Ifi Amadiume asserts, 'Idemili, being very industrious, soon became a great woman; rich, powerful and much more popular than her husband' (10). Yet the comparisons we may draw to Idemili are limited since, as Ogunyemi states, 'a childless woman in traditional Igbo society is considered a nobody' (141). Motherhood in Igbo society is not only an institution that can be oppressive but also a complex state of being, shaped by the unique experiences and responsibilities that come with that role. This societal expectation is made clear through the character of Omirima, a village gossip, who comments to Amede, Efuru's second mother-in-law: 'Your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty' (205).

Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness in *Efuru*

For Efuru, despite her many successes, the absence of children lowers her esteem in the eyes of her community. For instance, Efuru's first 'mother-in-law was becoming anxious' (23) about 'what people would say' (15) when Efuru failed to conceive after undergoing various traditional practices aimed at ensuring fertility. These practices included hosting a celebratory feast and spending a month in seclusion. When the desired outcome was not achieved, 'her mother in-law wanted her to continue feasting for two months', believing that more time and adherence to the rituals might bring success (15). After a 'year passed, and no child came … [n]eighbours talked as they were bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman' who could potentially bear him children, as was often customary in such situations of childlessness (23). She becomes

the subject of community gossip. Her circumstances prompt her to reflect on her late mother, who passed away five years earlier and had only one child – Efuru. She becomes restless 'in the second year of her marriage. "My mother had only me", she said one night to herself. "My father told me so and also that she found it difficult to become pregnant. … But what if that is denied me? … Oh, what will I do?"' (24). She goes to her father, Nwashike Ogene, to see whether he can help her. Consequently, he goes with her to a *dibia* who allays her fears and tells her that she will be pregnant 'before Owu Festival' (26). Efuru does all she can to have a child, while her husband remains complacent because patriarchal society places the blame for childlessness on women: '"please don't think that it makes any difference to me whether you have a baby or not. … You know I cannot exchange you with a wife who would give me twenty sons"' (26).

Three months pass without any results after Efuru's visit to the *dibia*, leaving her in despair once again. One night, she told her husband, '"It does not seem as if anything will happen before Owu festival. I am losing hope again. Don't you think it will be better if you begin to look around for a young girl for a wife"' (26–27). Yet Efuru becomes pregnant, as the *dibia* predicted, and gives birth to a baby girl. Adizua may not have been pleased, as patriarchal traditions value male children over female ones. As one of her relatives says to Efuru, '"you had a baby girl. We all rejoiced for you. A girl is something, though we would have preferred a boy"' (87). According to Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, patrilineal kinship forms the basis of Oguta society, which is both Nwapa's hometown and the setting of her novel. In this system, lineage is traced through the male line, passed from father to son. Consequently, men rely on having male offspring to ensure the continuation of their family line within the kin group. While children are highly valued, male children represent the greatest aspiration for both Igbo and Oguta men and women (2). Ine Nnadi further explains that giving birth to a girl often brings women distress due to fears of their husband's disappointment and the possibility of rejection or abandonment (134). Having only daughters may be perceived as a form of *subfertility*, leading to women being labelled as *subfertile* (Whitehouse and Hollos 137). The preference for male children is closely tied to power and authority, providing a sense of security regarding the hereditary line of succession. For a woman, challenging these three foundational aspects can lead to severe consequences, being cast out by her spouse, family and community (Durojaye, Okeke and Adebanjo 6173).

Efuru becomes stigmatized because of her inability to bear male children. Stigma goes beyond a physical mark; it provokes broad social disapproval which leads to 'varieties of discrimination' (Goffman 5). A stigmatized person is someone whose social identity (or belonging to a particular group) leads others to question their full humanity and view them as diminished, tainted or defective. As a result, stigmatization carries significant personal, interpersonal and societal consequences (Crocker et al. 504). Efuru's barrenness becomes a source of judgment and exclusion: '[Efuru's mother-in-law] loved her daughter-in-law very much. She defended her anywhere she heard people say unkind words about her. When Efuru was sad, she consoled her, told her that a child would come when God willed it' (23). Efuru faces similar hardships in her second marriage when she is unable to conceive a child after two years. The village begins gossiping about her struggles with infertility:

> 'The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive?' (171)

Especially in rural Nigeria, the pressure to bear children is not only personal but public, as the woman's fertility becomes a matter of communal interest and judgment. The resulting shame or social ostracism that may follow her inability to conceive can be emotionally devastating and socially isolating, leading to a deep sense of exclusion and vulnerability (Van Balen and Bos 116). As Banyiwa-Horne states, 'Efuru's infertility is a source of concern, yes, and the constant lamenting of her condition, more by other women than by herself, reveals the importance her society attaches to childbearing' (122).Yusufu Turaki points out that the bride price in West African cultures represents more than just a marriage agreement; it comes with the expectation that the woman will bear children. When this expectation is not met, due to infertility, it can result in serious social repercussions, such as a demand for the return of the bride price. This situation places immense pressure on women and heightens their vulnerability to oppression and mistreatment within their marriages and social circles (106).

After the community exchanged opinions and gossip about Efuru's infertility, 'Efuru came up to the shore to take her water-pot' and was greeted by two villagers (171–72). Once Efuru and Gilbert (traditionally known as Eneberi) 'changed and went home', the whispering and chatting centred on Efuru's body:

> 'Did you look at her body … ?' one of the women asked.

> 'So you looked at her body. I watched her too. Nothing has happened. You can be sure of that, nothing has happened. … A woman, a wife for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time, and not fulfil the important function she is made to fulfil.' (172)

Efuru's infertility is read in her body, where the community places blame on her unchangeable biology.

Secondary infertility refers to the inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to term after previously having a successful pregnancy. Such is Efuru's case. Labelling Efuru as infertile reflects societal expectations for immediate or consistent childbearing within marriage However, such a classification oversimplifies the complex realities surrounding women's reproductive experiences. Being barren, bearing only female children, experiencing miscarriages or losing a child are distinct conditions that nevertheless tend to be conflated within a broader cultural notion of 'barenness'. Efuru's case is particularly complex: she is neither a woman who has never conceived nor one who has voluntarily eschewed motherhood, but rather someone who has experienced both maternity and loss. Moreover, the social categorization of infertility often fails to distinguish between biological limitations and personal choices, such as the ability to conceive but not doing so, or the deliberate decision not to have children at all. By collapsing these diverse experiences into a single stigmatized category, Efuru's community reinforces rigid and reductive definitions of womanhood, obscuring the nuanced conditions that shape female identity within her cultural context.

One day Ajanupu (Efuru's aunt-in-law) approaches Efuru with a direct and candid suggestion, reflecting her belief in plain speaking. After inquiring about Efuru's mother-in-

law, Ajanupu abruptly raises the sensitive issue of Efuru's childlessness. She advises Efuru to suggest that her husband take a second wife to bear children, warning him that if this decision is left to his mother, it could lead to a situation where Efuru loses influence and risks being marginalized in the household. Ernestina Safoa Donkor points out that if a wife is seen as barren, there may be societal pressure on the husband to take additional wives in hopes of having children, which further marginalizes the childless woman and jeopardizes her standing within the marriage (22).

Ajanupu reassures Efuru that childlessness is not necessarily permanent, citing examples of women who conceived after many years. However, Efuru is deeply troubled by the conversation, not because of the idea of Gilbert marrying another wife, but because 'she was considered barren. It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure' (207). Unable to sleep, she spends the entire night in deep reflection (154), consumed by thoughts of her infertility (153). This situation, overall, reinforces the pressure on African women to have children, perpetuating the expectation of mandatory motherhood. In this regard, children are viewed as the cornerstone of African motherhood and womanhood, traditionally valued, as discussed previously, as both human capital and social security (Ngcobo 533–34).

In Nigerian society, the stigma associated with being an unmarried woman remains pervasive, alongside societal pressures surrounding barrenness and fertility. Individuals such as older single women, infertile couples, widows or families without male children often experience normative stigma. Efuru, as a character, faces stigmatization related to both marriage and motherhood. In an interview with Marie Umeh, Nwapa states: 'There is this stigma on a woman who elects to be single. Mothers bring up their daughters telling them that they have to be married. In my own language we say, "No matter how beautiful one is, if she doesn't get married, she's nothing"' (Umeh and Nwapa 27).

Conclusions

Efuru marked an important break from earlier literary traditions by presenting a strong and complex female protagonist in a male-dominated literary context. Through this character, Flora Nwapa challenges traditional gender norms and offers a broader, more nuanced vision of womanhood. At the same time, Efuru allows us to address these questions from a complex perspective on African femininity, in which motherhood, economic autonomy, marriage and social prestige do not always align.

Indeed, one of the novel's greatest contributions is that it reveals the tensions between the traditional ideal of woman-as-mother and the possibility of constructing a valuable feminine identity beyond biological motherhood. Efuru's independence, resilience and depth enable Nwapa to critique the social and cultural constraints imposed on women by both traditional Igbo society and colonial systems. As a result, the novel opens space for more inclusive representations of women's experiences in African literature, foregrounding alternative ways of understanding female fulfilment and identity.

The novel's ending establishes an essential symbolic relationship between Efuru and the lake goddess Uhamiri. As a deity associated with beauty, wealth, spiritual power and prosperity rather than motherhood, Uhamiri functions as an alternative model of femininity that exists outside biological reproduction. This spiritual connection raises

important questions about whether motherhood is truly essential for female fulfilment, prompting readers to reflect on why women worship a goddess who never experienced maternity herself. Through this symbolic framework, Nwapa expands the possibilities of African femininity by presenting womanhood as plural, dynamic and grounded not exclusively in motherhood but also in selfhood, agency, labour, spirituality and social contribution. The novel's conclusion therefore invites readers to reconsider the traditional association between motherhood and happiness. While Efuru continues to suffer from her infertility, Nwapa insists that her life retains dignity and social value outside the traditional maternal ideal, suggesting that there are legitimate forms of feminine fulfilment distinct from biological reproduction.

Efuru's marriages further highlight the tension between personal agency and social expectations. Her independence and refusal to conform to submissive roles make her a target of gossip and criticism. Through Efuru's struggles, Nwapa exposes the emotional and social costs of patriarchal norms and challenges the idea that marriage and motherhood are the only valid paths to womanhood.

Overall, *Efuru* encourages readers to rethink traditional definitions of success and femininity. The novel promotes a vision of womanhood based on autonomy and financial independence rather than social approval. Nwapa ultimately presents a progressive perspective, showing how women can resist stigma, redefine identity and seek fulfilment beyond imposed cultural boundaries.

Note

1. A *dibia* is a traditional healer, diviner or spiritual guide within Igbo culture. They act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, utilizing their expertise in herbs, rituals and spiritual practices to diagnose and treat illnesses, offer guidance and connect with ancestors or deities. *Dibia* are greatly esteemed in their communities for their wisdom and skill in interpreting spiritual messages, often taking on important roles in addressing personal, family or community matters.

Notes on Contributor

Federico Vivanco holds a PhD in Anglophone African Literatures from the University of Málaga (Spain) and a BA in English Studies from Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. He also holds a Master's degree in Teacher Training and a Master's degree in English Studies from the University of Jaén. He is an Assistant Professor at Rey Juan Carlos University (Spain) and a Visiting Lecturer at the National University of San Martín (Argentina). He is the editor, anthologist and translator of *Ellas [también] cuentan*, editor and translator of *Ve, cuéntaselo al sol* by Botswanan writer Wame Molefhe, and translator of the novel *Las vidas secretas de las esposas de Baba Segi* by Nigerian writer Lola Shoneyin. He delivers seminars on African literatures in Mexico, Argentina and Spain, and collaborates with public universities such as the National University of San Martín, the National University of Tres de Febrero, and the National University of Patagonia San Juan Bosco.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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