

IGBO Women's Resilience and Politics of Survival in *One is Enough* by Flora Nwapa

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Abstract

Flora Nwapa championed the articulation of African women's troubled existence in which they are drifting between the need to uphold indigeneity and modernity. She is best known for her debut work *Efuru* (1966) which reinscribes African womanhood forsaking the obligatory motherhood role. It is a great breakthrough in the tenets of Women's Writing in Nigeria where women writers received less recognition and reception in African and International literary domain. *Efuru* is followed by an array of novels like *Idu* (1970), *Never Again* (1975), *One is Enough* (1981) and *Women Are Different* (1986). *One is Enough* is a powerful story of expedients of Amaka, the protagonist, who undergoes difficult lives, struggle and humiliation, eventually arrive at self-liberation by releasing herself from the stifling traditional institutions of marriage and family. Despite the politics of gender and sexuality the novel illustrates women's struggle for survival in the post-war Nigeria, and represents the immense power of female energy to withstand any undesirable conditions. Thus, this paper will examine the various 'efforts' of different women characters, including Amaka, to overcome the war threats and its aftermath.

Keywords: Biafran war, war narratives, predicaments of women in war, survival strategies like attack trade, prostitution, illegal trading and flexible sexual acts.

I. INTRODUCTION

Flora Nwapa made history as Nigeria's first published female novelist in English with an impressive collection of novels, short stories, books for children and poetry. She established her own publishing company, Flora Nwapa Books Ltd., and backed it up with a printing press, Tana Press Ltd, which was an act of great courage. She restored African women's voice by her special mission in this publishing venture because women writers in Africa were criticized and underestimated by the critics and publishers.

Through the depiction of unyielding heroines, Flora Nwapa captured the resonance of Igbo

culture of Oguta people and double burden of women in embracing tradition and modernity in contemporary Nigeria. With her literary creativity and gender sensitive writings Nwapa has created a distinct identity and image for African womanhood. Igbo women in Nwapa's works become the mouthpieces for their gender and race. By her works Nwapa sets forth the complexity, ambiguities and contradictions with regard to the African canon of womanhood, motherhood, marriage, heterosexuality and gender polemics. *Efuru* invites many questions about the protagonist Efuru's ambiguous relation to the Lake Goddess, her controversial decision to terminate her marital bondage with Gilbert and ultimately, Efuru's realization as the goddess manifestation. *Idu* represents cultural, emotional and individual complexities of the protagonist, Idu, who decides to follow her dead husband to the other world. *Never Again* chronicles a slice of Biafran history from the protagonist, Kate's perception to document Biafra's unprepared and unwitting moves and advances in the Nigerian civil war. *One is Enough* and *Women Are Different* are the two novels that reveal the dilemma and struggle of women in the cities that modify them to cope with new values and ethics for economic success in the corrupt society.

The major preoccupation of her war narratives *Never Again*, *This is Lagos* and *Wives at War* is to explore women's ability to cope under stress of the civil war and to depict the survival strategies women adopted to counteract the mental and physical dislocations that prevailed. Nwapa's vision in the war writings is women-centered that revolve around individual family caught in the events of the cruel war. The theme of her later novels *One is Enough* and *Women Are Different* is the struggle of modern women to survive the postwar society with redefined gender roles and identities. The protagonists of these novels have strategies and options but their choices are circumscribed in ways different than for men. *One is Enough* justifiably portrays Amaka's strategies to negotiate her space in the disintegrated country and her choice to affirm her as an independent, assertive and economically active individual.

Amaka's relationship with her husband is at first one of ideal love, devotion and mutual respect despite the fact that she is barren. Later, Amaka's mother-in-law disrupted the family's peace when she comes with a plan to look for second wife for her son. Of course, Amaka can stay back at home with the tag of senior wife, yet be powerless and secondary sexual companion to Obiora. The restrictions put on Amaka threaten her the very essence. Being the main breadwinner of the family, Amaka's successful role in the public domain is not going to elevate her position in the private sphere as housewife and mother. Without children she is at the risk of social ostracization. When Obiora's mother insists him to bring the woman with whom he has been living secretly for few years and fathered two sons, Amaka is utterly shocked and could no longer control her emotions. Further, fuelled by his mother's 'consoling' words, "My son's wife and mother of his sons wanted you thrown out of this house. But I told her I would have none of it, that you will not be thrown out because you are the first wife. I too am the first wife of my husband. So, I told her categorically that you would not be thrown out" (OIE 15). After a nasty fight with Obiora, Amaka is cast out precipitating her departure from Obiora's family. Amaka runs away to the big city Lagos where she recounts her mother's advice with her friend Adaobi that she should have taken the steps of her elder sister, Ayo, who left her unfaithful husband and let herself 'kept' by a Permanent Secretary. Ayo started her life with the man whose wife went to abroad for her studies for four years. In the mean time, Ayo had four children and bought her a house from her 'husband', and when the lady of the Secretary returns suddenly she moved out with her children, into her new home. Unlike Amaka's long stay with her husband who could not impregnate her, Ayo was swift enough in breaking her marital bondage to formulate her own course of life, and that is why Amaka's mother admired her. Amaka's short stay with her mother gave her a great deal of change and decided to go to Lagos to start her life again with a new lesson from her mother that "A childless marriage cannot last in the Nigeria of today. So if a wife is unable to have children by her husband, she should leave and try elsewhere" (OIE 34). Now, Amaka is all set to try her fortune in the new land, Lagos, which has transformed considerably after the Nigerian civil war and opened new avenues for various opportunities. When Amaka registers her new company to do contract jobs, it was only her friend Adaobi who helped Amaka in getting contracts from Ministry through one of her relatives. Initially, Amaka is stunned by the new 'laws' of Lagos where "Before the war, a government official rarely ever asked for a bribe ... Alas, it was no longer so. You had to give money first before you are even considered for a contract" (OIE 45). She has to be very careful in getting contracts and social identity in the place which seduces one with all its gimmicks.

Amaka has been successful in her first contract with three thousand naira profit with which she moved into a new flat. Yet, knowing how competitive getting contracts jobs these days, Ayo introduced a group of young women who had lost their husbands during the war, and all of them had moved to Lagos because there were some army jobs (called attack trade). The conversation among these young women in Ayo's house reveal hard reality of war struck Nigeria that encourage weird kind of businesses like attack trade. In this trade women risk their life to go the war front for the exchange of commodities with the food stuffs and other essentials. During civil war, men had only two choices, either they should go to war field to fight as soldiers or have to hide at home to avoid war. On the other hand, women had been active in looking after the family as sole breadwinner. In that case, women started exploring all the possible ways to earn and save money by doing odd jobs like attack trade by organizing a group of women and minted money. Though Amaka did contract business in her village, she is new to this kind of trading practices which pose more threats to their life and chastity. So, Amaka carefully listened to the tactics adopted by the attack traders gathered at Ayo's home. Every woman narrated their horrible experiences that one was in a refugee camp with her six children when the planes descended and she lost three of her children. Another woman escaped from the stragglers who tied her up and demanded all she had by pointing her toy gun at him. He panicked and escaped. But the other woman in the group was unprepared and hence, robbed of while the other one was shot as she resisted. Still, some women are making fortunes in this trade like Madam Onyei who was one of the attack traders. When her husband was killed in the civil war, her husband's colleagues helped her by giving her contracts. Later, she struck a business deal with an Army Captain. Both made fortunes during the war. It is also rumoured that she sent her eldest daughter to the mercy of men and received numerous contracts. But, she went on making money and doing bigger deals that she had a house in her home town, and even she had organized the exportation of hemp to Europe. Hence, Lagos was turning to be a place for female autonomy gaining economic independence with the female bonding and organized women networks, at the same time, women's flexible attitude towards sexual advances making advantage of the holocaustic condition of Nigeria challenges the patriarchal conception of sexuality. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi opines that:

In Lagos, female solidarity thrives in the all-women Cash Madam Club. The Club has cast off male authority and uses eroticism to access power. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, these Lagos women flaunt their wealth. Theirs is what Adrienne Rich would call

a “lesbian continuum”, with its female “bonding against male tyranny” (1980, 23). The fear and/or contempt of men for women without men, commonly expressed towards lesbians, is extended to the Club members. Nonetheless, they represent female autonomy (171).

Thus, Amaka experiments with what she learnt from her mother and sister. In order to get more contracts she lures a priest, Father Mclaid, who holds a influential position in the army. Amaka knew that she had enough with her first husband yet she develops an affair with the priest only for the dream of motherhood. This unconventional radical attitude marks a change in her consciousness that coincides with the changing society. “She was going to exploit the situation. What drove her to see Father Mclaid was just the contract and nothing else . . . A priest was also a man capable of manly feelings” (OIE 54). Hence, the relationship with the priest resulted in the birth of male twins, yet, she maintains her freedom and individuality by rejecting the proposal of the Revered Father who is ready to quit the priesthood and marry her. Amaka’s search for new identity is successful as her search for freedom and success is crowned by motherhood. But she achieves this outside conventional codes of morality and by rebellion (Kolawole 160).

Bribery, corruption and infidelity become the order of life in Lagos. Nwapa examines the flexibility of Biafran female’s attitude. The narrative critiques the role of “girls who turned soldiers overnight and slept in trenches with fighting soldiers had fallen on the mercy of Biafran officers who were only too glad to have them as troop-comforter” (OIE 58). Nwapa’s defensive stance is reflected when she argues that these girls have to survive, that is, they

have to survive the war and peace. If they have to return home, there is no home to go because the war had destroyed their families.

Nwapa’s exploration of women’s survival strategies during the war reveals that women are exposed to much danger as that of men in the war front. Though women and children are the main casualties of war, Nwapa’s positive depiction of women more than sex objects ascertains the inherent resilient nature of women whose only motive in war is to live by all means. This brutal reality forces them to adopt conflictual and controversial trades which incur eternal scars on the bodies and minds of natives. Rejecting the status quo of women in war situation as prostitutes whose characterization is crippled by benign moral lapses, Nwapa recreates women as independent, assertive and resilient. She does not perceive selling of body to the highest bidder as prostitution but a tactful politics of survival despite the traditional roles as breadwinner, caretaker and nurturers. According to Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo women become vital hope for the regeneration of society. As agents of survival, they devote their energy to countering the forces of destruction, hunger, and starvation, through their survival strategies (Umeh 492). Thus, *One is Enough* captures Igbo women’s enormous strength and determination through economic success by their varied tactics in the trade.

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