

Breaking the Taboo of Marriage and Childbearing: Nwapa's Commitment in *One is Enough*



Original Research Article

ISSN : 2456-1045 (Online)

(ICV-ACL/Impact Value): 63.78

(GIF) Impact Factor: 4.126

Publishing Copyright @ International Journal Foundation

Journal Code: ARJMD/ACL/V-31.0/I-1/C-9/NOV-2018

Category : ART, CULTURE & LITERATURE

Volume : 31.0 / Chapter- IX/ Issue - (NOVEMBER-2018)

Journal Website: www.journalresearchijf.com

Paper Received: 25.11.2018

Paper Accepted: 03.11.2018

Date of Publication: 10-12-2018

Page: 55-59



Name of the Author :

Maina Ouarodima

PhD, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria.
Department of Modern European Languages
and Linguistics

Citation of the Article

Ouarodima M; (2018) Breaking the Taboo of Marriage and Childbearing: Nwapa's Commitment in *One is Enough*; *Advance Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Discoveries*.31(9)pp. 55-59

ABSTRACT

In the past and as well as up to date, the humiliating treatment women face in marriage and childbearing in the African societies, as illustrated in the African literatures by some male writers, coupled with the willingness that characterizes African women writers, in general, and Nwapa, in particular, to explore all the possibilities to move women from the margin to the center attract our attention and raise a need for the current research. The study focuses on some of the evil practices against the freedom of women with regard to marriage and childbearing which have continued to persist in the African societies. The social context of marriage and the meaning attached to birthing constitute a good starting point for appreciating the image of women in the Igbo society. Thus, Nwapa's commitment in *One is Enough* relates not only to the writer's awareness of the women's problems but also and mainly the commitment of the writer in voicing the problems of women and all women's attainment of self-liberation and social transformation. This could, genuinely, be attributed to the fact that the social conditions under which the writer produces her work is patriarchal in nature. As a result, Nwapa, by virtue of gender experience as well as by her desire to transform these experiences into weapons of change, is committed to react to socio cultural norms that discriminate women.

KEYWORD: Flora Nwapa, Commitment, Marriage, Childbearing

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a wider and alarming awareness that in the African literatures by male writers, women are left in the margin. Hooks (2015: xvii) views that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.” For instance, Nnolim (2009:151), upon analyzing *Things Fall Apart* from the angle of marriage, observes that: “there is no happy marriages in Achebe, no soft and romantic moments between husbands and their wives, no intimate family counsels involving a father, his wife and children...” Conscious that the description or depiction of female characters by male writers is not without consequence, women writers attempt to react by correcting the misconceptions. However, instead of rendering tribute to women writers for trying hard, within patriarchal societies, to ‘realistically’ depict women’s living conditions; some male critics, among whom Palmer (1972), respond by relegating women’s literary productions to the backward.

Palmer’s criticism of *Efuru*, which is not only Nwapa’s first and foremost novel but also and mainly the very first novel published in English by an African woman, gives an unwelcome dimension to the women writers in Africa. Palmer (1972:57) contrasts the novel *Efuru* by Nwapa and the *Concubine* by Amadi and observes that: “Flora Nwapa’s novel leaves the reader with the impression that its author has not mastered her craft. It lacks the fluency, effortlessness, and economy of *The Concubine*. It is too obviously a first novel.” What is more, in an attempt to minimize Nwapa’s creativity, Palmer (1972) suggested that Nwapa should have read Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to master the narrative style and be able to convey socio cultural information adequately. Certainly, Palmer views Nwapa’s *Efuru* as weak and inefficient just because she reflects women’s personal and domestic themes.

Knowing that Palmer’s reaction to *Efuru* was in 1972 and that the novel *One is Enough* was first published in 1981, there is almost nine full years of reflection and transformation that Nwapa has gone through. The complexities of the relationship between men and women, in societies in general and in the literatures in particular, have certainly made Nwapa’s commitment even stronger than nine years before when she writes *Efuru*.

In fact, in *Efuru*, Nwapa is much more flexible towards the recommendations of her society that regulate men-women relationship; especially with regard to marriage and childbearing issues. For instance, despite the difficulties *Efuru* faces in her first marriage, after the breakdown, she is married again (first to Adizua and then to Gilbert). Also, *Efuru*’s childlessness is attributed to adultery and to prove to the gossipers or even better to the society that she was not guilty of adultery, *Efuru* swore in the name of Uttuosu: “God in heaven knows that since I married Adizua I have been faithful to him. Our ancestors know that since I ran away from my father’s house to Adizua’s that nobody, no man has seen my nakedness” (Nwapa, 1966:58).

In *One is Enough*, the protagonist, Amaka is married only once and after she rejects marriage as reflected by the title: *One is Enough*. What is more, while in *Efuru* the society is right that *Efuru* is barren and can no more bear a child, in *One is Enough* the society and even better the doctors are proved wrong because in opposition to their predictions, Amaka got twins out of wedlock. This proves to the whole society of Amaka that women are wrongly accused of barrenness, which men do not even investigate if ever there is compatibility in the couple or not. The narrator’s voice informs us that Amaka “has come to the conclusion that apart from Obiora [her husband], another man, any man could make her pregnant” (Nwapa, 1981:60). What is more, female sexuality is no more condemned as opposed to the community of *Efuru*. Ayo, Amaka’s sister, states that she has “four children without a husband...” (Nwapa, 1981:127).

Nwapa’s commitment to female realistic portrayal or the shifting of the canon from the Novel *Efuru* to *One is Enough* (though the comparison of the two novels is not our focus in this research, it gives a good background), shows the vital role of a writer within a patriarchal society; and as a pioneer, her attitude can help emerge several committed African women writers capable to react to the patriarchal forces that continuously kill women’s feelings, ambitions and determinations. As such, Nwapa’s commitment should be viewed as an attempt to redirect the mind of both men and women towards a positive change of attitude rather than an outstanding fight against men.

II. SOCIO CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF MARRIAGE IN THE IGBO SOCIETY

There is no doubt that there are many things that are involved in the process of becoming socially acceptable in any type of society but the crux of the matter is that women are at social disadvantage in their relations to men in various ways. This includes even aspect of little importance. For instance, when Adaobi and Mike discuss about their little girl, Adaeze, who grows fast; Mike reacts that: “she is a woman. She shouldn’t be too tall” (Nwapa, 1981:37). In the Igbo society, for instance, a woman is always seen according to her relationship with a male. She is a wife or a mother. A woman is blessed if she is fortunate enough to be both a wife and a mother in the Igbo patriarchal society. However, what has worsened the position of Igbo women, among other things, is the lack of choice in marriage and childbearing.

In the Igbo society, marriage remains a highly regarded social institution. The narrator’s voice in *One is Enough* makes the reader feel such concern when she states that: “There did seem to be some magic about the word ‘husband’. Her [Amaka’s] people had drummed it into their ears as children growing up that a girl had one ambition –to be married” (Nwapa, 1981:22). Uko (2002:15) states that: “Marriage has a foremost place in the Igbo social economy. It looms upon the horizon of any maid and youth as an indispensable obligation to be fulfilled with as little delay as possible after reaching the age of puberty.” In *One Is Enough*, Nwapa makes the reader feel such pressure on marriage after a little delay: “Her [Amaka’s] age-grades were all getting married and leaving home. They were all having children and playing mother roles...” (Nwapa, 1981:9).

Sometimes, it even becomes a source of mockery: “Some of her age – grades, either to make fun of her or out of sympathy for her plight, made clumsy match-making attempts which embarrassed and angered her” (Nwapa, 1981:10). Thus, the patriarchal norms conditioned women to see marriage as a vital solution. In *One is Enough*, Amaka’s “sole ambition is to be a wife” (Nwapa, 1981:6). What is more, even father Mclaid, the priest, thinks that: “every woman’s ambition was to get married...” (Nwapa, 1981: 136).

To be eligible but unmarried woman is considered disastrous. A common saying among the Igbos is that “a woman’s honor resides in her status as a married woman.” This is so because an unmarried woman is looked upon as unfulfilled. That is certainly why in the traditional Igbo society, every ‘normal’ woman has a husband. Chuwkwu (2004: 55) even compares traditional Igbo marriage to a drama “in which every normal person is an actor or an actress and nobody assumes the position of an audience.” This can find illustration in *One is Enough* whereby the narrator’s voice states: “All women should have men [husbands] in their lives” (Nwapa, 1981:66). This is an indication that a girl’s marriage is the only means of her integration in the society.

Moreover, in the Igbo marriage, love has little place. Dora (1991:12) points out that girl-father relationship, at large, is based on the principle that the girl is “supposed to do what her parents, especially her father, tell her. She marries when the parents think she is old enough to marry and often to the man they have chosen/or approved for her.” Set in the similar Igbo context, Usman (1998:98) views that: “Emecheta [in *The Joys of Motherhood*] presents marriage as an arranged affair in which the girl has no say. A girl’s husband is chosen for her by her parents for they are considered to know what is best for her.” That is certainly why, in *One is Enough*, Ayo, upon advising Amaka, her sister, to marry Father Mclaid, says: “...marry him. Love will perhaps come later on” (Nwapa, 1981:146). What is more, often love never comes. This is what we learned from Amaka’s mother who had to accept her husband because it was the procedure. That is, she has no say in the choice of her husband. Her marriage was without love: “I’ll tell you [speaking to Amaka and Ayo] frankly. I had nothing to do at all in the marriage between your father and I. It was my mother who arranged everything. I protested. I said I didn’t like him, that I didn’t want to marry him...I still did not love him. In fact, as time went on, I dislike him more and more” (Nwapa, 1981:138).

The above is an indication that marriage is not a private affair because girls receive much pressure. Umeh (1998:532) rationalizes that such is a “community of customs: of ancient, unquestioned traditions. A woman must marry in a certain manner; a woman must mourn in a certain manner; a woman must submit herself, willingly and happily, to the laws and the rituals of the community...any deviation from those specified roles...may mean total ostracism from the community.” Yet, a conventional marriage itself is by no means a guarantee for the success of a marriage if a woman remains childless.

III. SOCIO CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF CHILDBEARING IN THE IGBO SOCIETY

To begin with, the anthropologist Agbasiere (2000:85) states that the link between the mother and her child is “the keystone of Igbo social structure.” According to Amaka’s people, as well, in *One is Enough*, “A marriage is no marriage without children” (Nwapa, 1981:8). Accordingly, upon advising Amaka on the importance of children, her own mother rationalizes “Marriage or no marriage, have children” (Nwapa, 1981:11). This is proves that having children is very important for the Igbos. That is the essential value of a woman, either married or not, depends on her fertility. When Amaka’s mother learns that her daughter is a mother of twins, though out of wedlock, her reaction was: “*whoever the father of the twins is a man...Amaka is a woman, she is a mother, and that is all that matters...*” (Nwapa, 1981:117 emphasis mine).

It is over the question of children that tension is most often created between a husband and his wife or even between a woman and the patriarchal society. In the Igbo society, Arndt (2002:126) states, “women’s identity and the justification of their existence is rooted in their motherhood.” This is so because womanhood is assessed by a woman’s ability to produce children. If she is childless and dare leave her husband she must even pay back the dowry to the husband otherwise even if she dies before the dowry is paid back, she has to face humiliation. Amaka recalls the tradition in her discussion with Adaobi, her friend: “you do not understand, Adaobi. You have children, I haven’t. if anything happened to your marriage now, and you left or your husband left you, you would be alright, because you have children. I am not so blessed. According to our custom, if I died tomorrow I would not be buried until my husband was informed” (Nwapa, 1981:51-52).

In short, it is as a mother that the African married woman plays her most important role in the family. Henrietta (1989:5) rightly puts that: “...by far the greatest test for a married woman is bearing children.” That is certainly why, in *One Is Enough*, a narrator’s voice says that: “God had deprived her[Amaka] of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joys of being a mother” (Nwapa,1981:20). What is more, Henrietta (1989:22) further notes that if a woman is childless among the Igbos “she is subjected to all sorts of indignities like being called a man especially in the traditional milieu.” It is then clear that in the traditional Igbo society, for a woman to lack the reproductive power is similar to being deprived of her own ‘raison d’ être’ in life. This is known to Amaka, herself, who utters that she “ would have gone to a beggar in the street if he could make [her] pregnant” (Nwapa, 1981:104).

It is even worth mentioning that such attitude even transcends the traditional Igbo society because, according to Ernest (2006:73), “Even in a society that is experimenting with woman’s emancipation, professional success and wealth are not enough to justify a childless existence.” That is certainly why, the tragedy of barrenness is a recurring theme in Flora Nwapa’s novels.

In short, the prayer uttered by Amaka’s mother when she was informed by Ayo that Amaka was expecting a baby is enough to portray a moral tragedy of innocent individuals:

God I thank you
 God I thank you
 With my whole heart
 With my whole soul
 With my everything
 --- (Nwapa, 1981:106).

But, is a woman useless if she is not married? Then, despite the tremendous responsibilities shouldered by a married woman, is she not a woman if she is barren? Why is women’s barrenness not regarded as one of the numerous accidents of nature? Also, why when a couple do not conceive, women alone are held responsible? The next section dealing with Nwapa’s commitment reacts to such preoccupations.

IV. NWAPA’S COMMITMENT IN RAISING PROBLEMS AND REDIRECTING THE MINDS

As said earlier, the section aims at discussing Nwapa’s commitment not only in voicing the problems that her fellow women face but also and mainly by redirecting the minds of both men and women towards a positive change of attitudes. Aidoo, the Ghanaian woman writer, seemingly conveys Nwapa’s preoccupations when she says that: “...it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that environment can offer” (Umeh, 1998: 304-305). Thus, to break the patriarchal taboo and to be able to achieve the aims, Nwapa, first of all, educates her female protagonist in *One Is Enough*. She views education as one of the major agents of women’s liberation and emancipation. This is also known to Christine (1980:16) who observes that: “...majority of women assume ‘silence is golden’ because they lack the confidence or education to deal with male dominance.”

To begin with, marriage in the community of Amaka is perceived as means of social integrations for girls. If a girl refuses to marry at certain age, then the society has a bad opinion on her. As Uko (2002:15) points it out, marriage is “...an indispensable obligation to be fulfilled with as little delay as possible after reaching the age of puberty.” Then, does it sound that a woman has no merit if she is not married? However, Nwapa realizes that such traditional norms or patriarchal perceptions of women’s worth are not without

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negative effects on women because they may certainly devote all their effort looking for husbands just to avoid the social criticism. That is certainly why, Nwapa rationalizes that “The erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved” (Nwapa, 1981:24). That is despite the patriarchal norms that conditioned women, themselves, to see marriage as a vital solution, they are able at a certain time to reject such ‘world view’ and stand free.

In fact, in *One Is Enough*, “Amaka had always wanted to be married. She envied married people, and when Obiora decided to marry her, she was on top of the world” (Nwapa, 1981:1). But, later when she goes through hardship, she is able to leave her husband and be free. What is more, she was even able to pay back the dowry, which according to their custom would ensure the total breaking of her marriage with Obiora; “ I [Amaka] have come to return the dowry to Obiora...I want to be free, absolutely free” (Nwapa, 1981:84). Nwapa’s didacticism is that a woman can do her best to preserve a happy marriage, but a marriage that is sour need not be tolerated. Right from the opening of the novel, Nwapa’s female protagonist is not such a woman to obey blindly to the pattern of life in that society. After six years of marriage in difficulties, due to the involvement of in-laws in her marital life, Amaka, without hesitation, rejects a second marriage.

I don’t want to be a wife any more, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that world that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am always impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working for me. I don’t want to go back to my “wifely” days. No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos (Nwapa, 1981:127).

Also, when the man who wants to marry Amaka, that is Father Mclaid, asks Amaka’s mother to persuade her to marry him, Amaka rationalizes that “she was not going to change her mind” (Nwapa, 1981:135). Moreover, Amaka reacts to her mother: “It would appear that you are *selling* me to Izu [Another name for Father Mclaid], Mother” (Nwapa, 1981:147 emphasis mine). Nwapa’s didacticism tends to say that the syndrome of dependency has no place in educated women even if fate turns out to be the case that Amaka finds herself in, that is as a divorcee and later with children. Thanks to education, she is able to sign contracts, supplying materials and equipment to government ministries and the military, to provide to her basic needs and that of her children without the help and support of a husband. For Nwapa, a woman must, like Amaka, map out survival strategies and succeed in life despite the social challenge and the patriarchal culture that define her existence.

As far as childbearing is concerned and as said earlier, the essential value of a woman, either married or not, depends on her fertility. In the community of Amaka, childbearing is so important that Adaobi, Amaka’s friend once said that if possible, Amaka could have “ a child from any man, even a beggar from the street’ (Nwapa,1981:60). This is an indication that, in the Igbo community, the importance of childbearing transcend even the importance of marriage because with or without a husband, what matters it to have a child. Amaka, herself, rightly puts that: “A childless marriage cannot [even] last in the Nigeria of today” (Nwapa, 1981:34). Such view is materialized in *One is Enough* whereby Ayo says: “If they [all the men that Amaka is associating with] with give her children, she will sleep with all of them one after the other. She will not even care who the father is, once she is pregnant” (Nwapa, 1981:60). Usman (1998:96) rationalizes that it is not “the marriage, the companionship, love, friendship or the mutual emotional satisfaction of the couple that matters but the children born out of the marriage.”

The crux of the matter is that, in Amaka’s community when a married couple is childless, it is the woman who is held responsible for the barrenness. Yet, one of the direct consequences of such accusations as Henrietta (1989:32) observes would involve women “in drugs and subject her to all kinds of psychological tortures, without also testing the man to ascertain his potency.” That is certainly why, Nwapa, in *One Is Enough*, reacts to such attitude by proving that procreation is a result of a joint action of both male and female and that the female should not be blamed alone for the misfortune. Henrietta (1989:32) is of the same idea that: “It is not right to blame all cases of infertility and childlessness on the wife.”

In fact, in *one is Enough*, Amaka has no child in her marriage with Obiora, but the latter has two sons by another woman out of wedlock. This is certainly what has made Obiora’s mother, upon discovering that her son is ‘fertile’, speak to Amaka in such a term: “if my son heard me, if he listened to me, his house would have been full of children by now” (Nwapa, 1981:13). However, Nwapa’s didacticism does seem to raise certain questions, as Obiora is not married to the woman with whom he conceived, is there any evidence that he is really the father of the sons? Especially when we know that female sexuality is not condemned within the society as we learn through Amaka’s mother when she advises her daughter to leave her husband: “I told you, four years ago, to leave him, or if you did not want to leave him, to go to other men and get pregnant” (Nwapa, 198:32). Then Can we say that Amaka is barren knowing that she is faithful to her husband while the latter is a womanizer? It is then true that in the community of Amaka: “A wife took the blame for her husband’s failure in business or in life generally” (Nwapa, 1981:17).

Nwapa, esthetically, provides an answer to the above preoccupation in *One Is Enough*. In the novel, it is proved that Amaka is not barren but there is a problem of compatibility with her husband. That is Amaka is fertile but “she needed a special man to make her do so [That is to beget a child]” (Nwapa, 1981:22). Accordingly, Amaka got twins with Father Mclaid, out of wedlock. This proves that the way men hold women alone as responsible for procreation is quite unfortunate and it is an indication of the one-sidedness of a culture that ignores men’s role in it. That is certainly why, Ezeigbo (1998:65) reads Nwapa’s *One is Enough* as a “forthright encouragement of childless women to look for other ways of living a self-fulfilled and profitable life.”

What is more, for the Igbos, wealth and children do not go together. One may only have either of them: “Wealth come first, and blocked the chances of having children. According to their belief, the two did not go together. You either had children or you had wealth” (Nwapa, 1981:116). However, Nwapa has proved them wrong because Amaka has both wealth and children. Nwapa shows that the burden shouldered by women has its source in traditional practices, beliefs and prejudices which arise from ignorance. As a result, she prompts African Women to be conscious of the roles they play in the society and redress distorted images.

V. CONCLUSION

Both men and women have their own rights and needs to live with modest admiration. Also, no nation can develop or make any positive progress without active participation of both men and women. In other words, if the building block, the mothers, are poor, ignorant and unmotivated, so would likely be the nation.

Thus, following the discussion, *One is Enough* is certainly the outcome of the old adage: “Once bitten twice shy” (Nwapa, 1981:142). This is because the society is very critical of women both in marriage and childbearing. In marriage, women don’t have a say at all and when confronted with barrenness they are to support the blame. This is because, in the community of Amaka, a blessed marriage is a marriage arranged by parents and a happy marriage is certainly a marriage blessed with children. Such state of affairs has made Nwapa, as a committed writer, to say that enough is enough. However, Nwapa is not against marriage but advocates marriage where there is love, mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. She is not as well against childbearing but she strongly stands against compulsory childbearing. For instance, for Amaka, a “child will come in God’s own time” (Nwapa, 1981:53) and this is really what happens to her in the novel.

Yet, it is also good to point out that such stand does not turn Nwapa into a radical feminist, as her protagonist does not claim for a world without men. Rather, when she says ‘*One is Enough*’, it is about husband not men: “Good bye to husbands, not goodbye to men. They are two different things” (Nwapa, 1981:85). All in all, it is known to Nwapa that the struggle to redirect the mind of both men and women towards equal consideration, in a patriarchal society, is not an easy task. That is why, in *One is Enough*, she narrates the story with an uncompromising self-assertion. But however, *One is Enough* should be read as women’s movement against oppression rather than Nwapa’s outstanding fight against men.

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