

**SECTION A :  
LITERARY PERSPECTIVES**

## Chapter One

# IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE, EQUITY AND DIGNITY: MORE THAN FIVE DECADES OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN AFRICA

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**Abstract:**

*In the African traditional society men and women were oral artists. Among the Igbo, women were chanters, storytellers and creators of oral tales. When the writing culture was introduced by Christian Missionaries and the colonial administration, the art of writing was first made available to men. Thus language in the written and literary or imaginative forms was appropriated by men – whether in the local languages as found in Fagunwa's novels (Yoruba) or Pita Nwana's Omenuko (Igbo) – or in English as in Amos Tutuola's *The Palwime Drinkard* (1952), Cyprain Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The first novel by a Black African in English, entitled *Mhudi*, was written by the South African, Sol T. Plaatje, and was published in 1930. But it was not until 1966 that *Efuru*, the first novel in English by an African woman, Flora Nwapa, was published in London by Heinemann. The novel was the twenty sixth to be published in the famous African Writers Series. In this paper, I intend to examine the determined effort of African women writers, especially Nwapa and her generation, to challenge the injustice in the marginalization of women both in their capacity as women and in the lack of opportunity to inscribe women in literature. The aim is to use literature as an instrument to restore justice, equity and dignity to African women. The paper concludes that the pioneering achievement of Nwapa through her ground-breaking novel, *Efuru*, has impacted positively on African women's writing since its publication, especially in the areas of creating strong female characters, giving them agency in the struggle to assert their right to justice, equity and dignity.*

Key words: justice, equity, dignity, creativity, culture and literature.

### **Introduction**

Most literary critics would agree that African literature came of age with the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. However, Achebe was not the first writer to publish a literary work in English. There were writers who had published before him in Nigeria, for instance, Amos Tutuola whose *The Palm Wine Drinkard* was published in 1952 and Cyprian Ekwensi who published his novel *People of the City* in 1954. But even before them, Sol T. Plaatje was the first Black African to publish a novel entitled *Mhudi*, in English, in 1930. It is noteworthy that all these writers were male. The question then is: where were the women? There is strong evidence that in the African traditional society, women controlled the art of storytelling, the world of imagination and creativity in which stories were conceived, formulated and given life through the power of utterance. The claim can be authenticated by referring to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo's first wife, Ugoye, told stories to her son, Nwoye and other children. The omniscient narrator tells us that Nwoye preferred his mother's imaginative stories to the history of Umuofia and its wars narrated to him by his father, Okonkwo. Women were the storytellers. Why then were women absent from the first crop of storytellers whose literary productions formed the initial corpus of African literature?

Some answers have been proffered but it seems to me that the most crucial has to do with western education. Acquiring university education, for instance, was a determining factor in the literary career of Nigeria's earliest and most significant writers – Achebe, Soyinka, Ekwensi Clark, Aluko, Amadi, Munonye, Ike and Fagunwa who, however, chose to write in Yoruba. Amos Tutuola was virtually the exception to the rule as he only had primary education; still that was basic education at the time. On the other hand, very few women had primary education, let alone university education then. The right to education was denied women who watched their brothers going to school while they were restricted to domestic chores, marrying early and bearing children, preferably male children. Consequently, when it came to writing, women's participation was minimal. Little wonder, therefore, that women were latecomers in literary creativity in Nigeria and Africa. This is clear evidence that women's progress was impeded by both cultural and religious inhibitions even after the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, affirming the inalienable right of every individual member of the human family to be protected from all forms of discrimination, including sexism and racism. In spite of the declaration, women continued to suffer degrading treatment and sometimes punishment because of their sex or gender. In many parts of Africa, the rights of women have been ignored or abused. Women writers such as Nawal el Saadawi, Mabel Segun and Buchi Emecheta made it known that they suffered some form of violence from their husbands because they were writers.

### **Blazing the Trail For Women's Inclusion: Nwapa, The Pioneer Female Novelist**

Women's absence as literary producers in the burgeoning landscape of African literature created a gap that needed to be bridged. Fortunately, this bleak situation changed in 1966 when Flora Nwapa tore the veil of silence to shreds by publishing her ground-breaking novel, *Efuru* in the United Kingdom. She shattered the glass ceiling as the first African female novelist and later the first female publisher in Nigeria. By the circumstances of her birth, she was a potential 'glass ceiling crasher', a pathfinder, trailblazer, from the very beginning of her life. Her position as a major writer in the African literary tradition was, therefore, assured when she made history as Nigeria's and indeed Africa's first internationally published female novelist in 1966 after Heinemann of Britain brought out *Efuru*. Flora Nwapa belongs to the league of global female novelists who were pioneers or trailblazers in their national literature – they include Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*), Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Isabel Allende (*The House of the Spirits*) and Nawal el Saadawi (*Woman at Point Zero*).

The emergence of Nwapa and few other women writers in Africa attracted women critics from the West and Africa who took it upon themselves to examine, analyze and assess critically the new works, using feminist literary theories as critical criteria. Over the years, some of Africa's finest feminist critics and theorists have devoted much of their time analyzing Nwapa's works and most agree that she was a remarkable and visionary writer. For example, in a special edition of *Research in African Literature*, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi described her as "the mother of the African novel by women" (26). In the same edition of the journal, Marie Umeh, another well-known critic of African women's literature named her "the doyenne of African female writers" (22) and "ancestor and literary foremother" (26). In the book of essays she edited on Nwapa's works, Umeh stated that Nwapa was responsible for bringing forth a new literary canon from Nigeria (1998), and presented it to the world readership starved of truly authentic African women characters, in fiction. Nwapa did away with the stereotypical characterization of women as prostitutes, doormats, passive victims, male appendages and sex objects that proliferated in the works of male writers. She portrayed realistic and economically empowered women characters (Ezeigbo, "Options for Women's Development ..." 167). I completely agree with Umeh that "This picture of the new African woman remains the legacy of Flora Nwapa" (1998). Indeed Flora Nwapa and the few women writers who came after her in the 1970s and 1980s made it possible for African feminist literary criticism to blossom, as more and more feminist critics analyzed the writers' works.

### **WOMEN'S SUSTAINED CREATIVITY: OVER FIVE DECADES OF JUSTICE AND EQUITY ADVOCACY**

The influence and the impact that Nwapa's work had and still has on other women writers are significant. Through her remarkable example, she inspired and empowered women writers and readers. Equally important is the fact that she created strong women characters in her debut novel, *Efuru*. In a paper entitled "Nigeria: The Woman as a Writer", which she read at a conference in Iowa, USA, in 1984, she justifies her choice of subject, themes and characters which differed from that of her male contemporaries:

The Nigerian male writers fail to elevate women to their rightful plane. They overlook the safeguards with which custom surrounds her: the weight of feminine opinion, the independence of her economic position, the power she wields by the mere fact that she holds the pestle and the cooking pots. They fail to see all these things because they are men and are influenced by the colonial administration's Victorian type prejudices against women. (14)

She also stated that her "heroines are ordinary women ... often enmeshed in the customary beliefs of their society..." (11). *Efuru* is set in Nwapa's hometown, Ugwuta, where she grew up and began her education. The novel depicts life in traditional Ugwuta society and explores the history, culture and spirit of the community, especially from the women's perspective. Though set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the colonial period when the Christian religion was already established in Ugwuta, little had changed in the people's way of life. The belief in the local deities – Uhamiri, Okita, Utuosu, Urashi – was still strong. Nwapa's elevation of Uhamiri, the goddess of the beautiful Ugwuta Lake, above all other gods/goddesses is instructive as it confirms her feminist design to project women and empower them. Uhamiri is the epitome of Ugwuta womanhood, for the narrator describes her as beautiful, married, hardworking, rich, assertive and independent. Nwapa's most admirable female character, Efuru, is modelled on the goddess and is also an ardent worshipper of the goddess.

In two of her novels that explore the experience of modern Nigerian women, Nwapa tells the story of women who live in the city. These women, consequently, experience the city's dislocations as well as its 'liberating' influences from inhibitions and the burden of certain social responsibilities. In *One is Enough* (1981) and *Women Are Different* (1986), women fight for their rights or take steps to end their suffering in oppressive marital relationships and social situations. Nwapa provides options for women to help them survive the harsh patriarchal environment in which they are traumatized when their marriages fail or when they are barren or childless. Thus Nwapa left a legacy

of strong women characters for African women writers who came after her, such as Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Tess Onwueme, Akachi Ezeigbo, Ogochukwu Promise, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe (Nigerians); Ama Ata Aidoo and Amma Darko (Ghanaians); Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera, Virginia Phiri (Zimbabwean), etc.

Since the publication of *Efuru*, numerous books have been published by African women writers. How have subsequent women writers in Africa and the African Diaspora exploited the legacy Nwapa left and how have they advanced or enriched the tradition of women's literature she established over fifty years ago? One striking development in African women's writing is the expansion in thematic preoccupations which include migration, exile, globalization, transnationalism, transculturalism, sexuality, race relations, speculative fiction about life in other planets, etc. However, the delineation of strong women characters and the depiction of women's experience have continued in their writing. In the remaining part of this essay, I would like to examine more graphically how Nwapa's excellent example served as an inspiration to many of the writers that came after her. Her influence can be seen directly or indirectly in the works of most African women writers. In an interview I had with Buchi Emecheta in London, in 1990, she admitted that she was inspired to write her first novel by Nwapa's publication of *Efuru* in 1966 and that although her style is different from Nwapa's, she enjoys writing about "Women's experience, the reality of women's lives and raising children" (103). These are Nwapa's main themes in her first novel and they recur in virtually all the others. They are realistic themes that advocate justice, equity and dignity for the often disregarded or maligned women of Africa.

Like Nwapa, other female writers have produced gender-conscious literature for the purpose of decrying women subordination as experienced in the African, especially Nigerian, situation. Among them is the well-known Buchi Emecheta. In her novel, *Destination Biafra*, she tries to put the records straight, in relation to the roles played by men and women in the Nigerian Civil War. Violence against women is an important theme in the novel. Rape, the sexual violation of women by Nigerian soldiers is graphically captured in the ordeal of Debbie Ogedemgbe, the heroine of the novel. She is portrayed as courageous, competent and resourceful in spite of all she suffered in the face of male aggression. She is a leading figure in the search for peace and in the provision of relief and succour for the brutalized common people. Indeed, Emecheta's creation of a character such as Debbie shows that literature can be an effective tool for endorsing gender equity and dignity for women.

Apart from Emecheta, some of the best known first and second generation writers from Africa who have written from a woman's perspective include, Grace Ogot, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Rebecca Njau, Zaynab Alkali and Ifeoma Okoye. The works of these writers have attracted profound

criticism from renowned African and Western feminist critics over the years. Zaynab Alkali, who represents the voice of women from Northern Nigeria, has been influenced by Nwapa. Ogunyemi called her Flora Nwapa's literary daughter because her vision and agenda resemble Nwapa's (Ogunyemi, 1996: 313). Like Nwapa, she has inscribed women of her culture in literature in *The Stillborn*, her debut and award-winning novel. Her protagonist, Li, described as 'the man of the house' survives a destructive marriage, lifts herself up and in the process rescues and forgives Abu, her unworthy husband. In an interview with Adeola James, Alkali asserts that "presenting women's reality is not an option but an imperative..." (29). Mariama Ba's award-winning novel, *So Long a Letter*, also focuses on women's experience and portrays strong women who survive gender oppression, sexism and patriarchy in the Senegalese Muslim society.

It is important to note that women in various disciplines have been engaged in the struggle to lift womanhood up and eliminate the unbridled patriarchal authority of domination of the female gender by the male. Whether these women are active in medicine, law, sociology, history, politics, religion or literary studies, they are all involved in using their field to improve the condition of women. Their argument is that gender equity is a necessary condition for social justice and peace in the family and the nation.

The playwright, Tess Onwueme, tows a different line in her advocacy for literature as a viable means to inculcate gender equity in society. In her play *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), she creates a heroine who is strong and radical, unlike the disadvantaged and subjugated heroines in the works of some African playwrights, especially men, including Wole Soyinka (in *The Lion and the Jewel*) and J. P. Clark (in *Song of a Goat*). Her name is Wazobia – the regent of Ilaaa Kingdom, a model for all women (young and old), providing the humane and gender-sensitive leadership the kingdom needs for sustainable human development. She uses her political position to reverse the cultural traditions – such as widowhood rites and wife battering – which dehumanize women and perpetuate their subjugation. Wazobia's ambition is to restructure society in order to safeguard the rights of women and children. She carries her crusade for gender equity to the highest level. She succeeds in uniting the women of Ilaaa and prevailing on men to allow gender equity in the family and in the community.

The point Onwueme has made in her play can be summarized in the following statements. First, culture is pivotal in the construction of gender difference which promotes inequality and the abuse of women's rights. Second, culture plays a prominent role in the subordination of women in discourse and in real life; this is clearly seen in the way women are treated in Ilaaa tradition and in the way Chief Idehen belittled women in his speeches. Third, cultural institutions and myths tend to denigrate women as sub-humans. Fourth, such

culturally-instituted paradigms must be forcefully overthrown (as Wazobia does with the help of women) if women are to realize their fullest potentials within the society, as their male counterparts. And fifth, in the fight for gender equity, the perceived enemy is not necessarily the male oppressor alone, but the women that work with the male hegemony, as Anehe and Wa have done. Onwueme should be commended for recreating an ideal society where gender equity prevails – the type of society she wishes her countrymen and women to establish and enjoy.

Advocacy for justice and equity has been tackled in the area of children's literature by some African women writers. For instance, I write for children under the name Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and have published over twenty books in this area. I have consistently given agency to female characters more than any children's author who wrote before me or who is writing today in Nigeria. I did this deliberately when I discovered that most of the protagonists in Nigerian children's books are boys even though most of the authors are women. Most of my books for children have female protagonists or heroes. It is important to empower girls in this way, by creating the type of hero they can easily identify or empathize with. Female children have a sense of belonging and self-confidence when they read books where girl children play significant or major roles.

Some third generation writers 'recreating women' and their experiences in their works, include Chimamanda Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Kaine Agary, Ogochukwu Promise, Lola Shoneyin, Unoma Azuah, Amma Darko and Goretti Kyomuhando, etc. What are the contributions of these writers to resolving the 'woman question' and to giving women justice and dignity in the literary world? They write about women's lives in both the traditional and modern societies, thereby tracing the experience of African women from the pre-colonial to the colonial, post-independence and postmodern periods. The writers could be described as Nwapa's granddaughters. Chimamanda Adichie and Sefi Atta, for instance, produce works that are suffused with strong female characters who confront the gender imbalance in Nigeria or in the Diaspora. Their women characters are seen to be conscious of their rights and take steps to assert their rights to dignity and self-actualization. Characters like Olanna, Kainene (in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow sun*) and Ifeoma, Kambili's aunt (in *Purple Hibiscus*), Ifemelu (in *Americanah*, her most recent novel), and Enitan (in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*) are cast in this mould.

Speaking about her writing, The Ugandan writer, Goretti Kyomuhendo said, "As for my role as a woman writer, I can say that I am inclined to tell women stories and define them in their own voices and perspectives, so that other people can understand who they are" (23). The third generation writers have imbibed Nwapa's positive example and have put it to good use in their own special ways. Rose Sackeyfio captures these writers' achievements thus:

“Female voices are being heard as women craft fiction that bears witness to living history and culture from a woman’s perspective” (3) and describes Nwapa as one of their “godmother” (3).

### **Conclusion**

Women in Africa are aware of the limited opportunity they have to develop their potentials though many do not have the opportunity to change their situation. The works of many African women writers advocate a just society where gender equity prevails in human relations. Flora Nwapa set the pace with her original and innovative debut novel, *Efuru*, in 1966 for women empowerment and emancipation. Female novelists such as Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Akachi Ezeigbo, Ifeoma Nwoye and, more recently, Yvonne Vera, Calixthe Beyala, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Ogochukwu Promise, Chika Unigwe, Kaine Agary, Lola Shoneyin and Unoma Azua, etc, have addressed gender issues in their writing in order to reinterpret the female experience as a way of encouraging the womenfolk.

When Flora Nwapa published her trailblazing novel, *Efuru*, the battle to inscribe the African woman in fiction and balance the gender equation began in earnest. She was the first Nigerian writer to give women characters positive and significant roles in literature. *Efuru* was not a prostitute like Jagua Nana, the eponymous heroine of Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* (1960); nor was she a courtesan or deviant like Wole Soyinka’s Simi in *The Interpreters* (1965). Instead she was a serious-minded businesswoman who commanded great respect in her community like male characters created in male-authored texts. The works of many African female writers advocate a just society where gender equity prevails in human relations and where the dignity of women is respected. The creative energy of the women writers discussed in this essay is driven by a passion to change the condition of women in the society. The writers believe that literature is a means to fight for gender equity. Indeed they have, individually and collectively, created a dynamic and significant literary tradition of women’s writing that Africa should be proud of. They create authentic and memorable women characters, thereby demonstrating that women have the ability to succeed as political leaders, professionals and captains of industry and commerce. In fact African women writers are using their writing to sustain a creative and stimulating discursive forum that will shape social policies at the national level (Kolawole, iv). They are contributing to the struggle for the empowerment of women.

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