

« Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I am a woman at all »:

**African Cultural Conception of Motherhood in *Efuru***

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**ABSTRACT**

As Africa embarks in world development and mutation, African women who constitute essential pillars in this process are put at the periphery of their community. Their victimization results from traditional belief and narrow-mindedness related to procreation. In African traditional worldview, a woman is considered only if she procreates. Whatever her economic, social or political situation, her female identity is defined by her capacity to bear children. Traditional society always regards childbearing as a social passport. As a consequence, childless women are segregated against and denied all such social privileges as respect, celebration and consideration granted to childbearing women. This article articulates this traditional belief as pictured in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. It argues that from a culturally-based opinion, women are unjustly cast when they are childless. It also invites to view these women not as social pariahs but as people who should to be helped face their tragedy.

**KEYWORDS**

Africa, traditional belief, female identity, motherhood, social banishment, subjectivity

African women's condition has been of great concern for many African intellectuals. Such novels as Mariam Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979) or Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) examine women's social, political, economic and cultural roles in many African communities. Later critical or scholarly works such as Coquery-Vidrovitch's *Les Africaines : Histoire des femmes d'Afrique noire du XIX au XX siècle* (1994) or Gwendolyn Mikell's *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1997) focus on the same issues. This continuing interest in women's roles is important considering that

women are more and more ostracized despite their existence as social actors and their contribution to the social welfare of their community. One of the roles traditionally attributed to women that still influences African collective consciousness relates to motherhood which, in most African societies, plays a pivotal role in defining their condition as women. In African societies, a woman's identity is closely related to her capacity to produce children. This ideology of motherhood is so widely spread that what is natural (the capability to procreate) takes a cultural dimension. In fact, for Africans, a woman must not be "unproductive" or childless, be it naturally or voluntarily. In both cases, being childless identifies her not as a female but as "a man." Consequently, childlessness (natural or voluntary) is synonymous with social rejection and it defines the woman as an outcast.

Among the first post-independence works to address women's situation, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, deals with the importance attached to procreation. Drawn from Igbo (Nigeria) society, this text dramatizes the cultural tradition of this society through the tragedy of a young woman whose story illustrates the African conception regarding childbearing. In this paper, I propose to see how this shift from the natural to the cultural operates to make the African woman and particularly, the Igbo woman, a tragic heroine. My analysis will be articulated through a cultural reading approach, that is, how the text can be read in light of the cultural ideology of Igbo community. In this perspective, stress will be laid on the cultural function of motherhood as it impacts on and constructs the Igbo woman's identity.

When after a long period of social debasement and frustration, *Efuru* finally conceives her first baby, she asks herself: "Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I am a woman at all." (31) This introspection posits the problematic of childbearing as a central theme in the narrative and consequently sets the scope of my argument. Indeed, in *Efuru*, childbearing is a ubiquitous and encompassing subject. It circumscribes the heroine's social identity and delineates the borders of womanliness within her community. It also unfolds "ideology" as it sustains culture and is rooted in Igbo tradition. As it permeates the novel and constitutes the core of this work, the Igbo cultural ideology highlights what Raymond Williams calls the "pattern of culture," that is "a selection and configuration of interests and activities, and a particular valuation of them, producing a distinct organization, a 'way of life.'" (in Storey, 1994, 52) He further notes:

Within a given society, selection will be governed by many kinds of special interests, including class interests. Just as the actual situation will largely govern contemporary

selection, so the development of the society, the process of historical change, will largely determine the selective tradition. The traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its *contemporary* system of interests and values, for it is not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and interpretation. (55)

How then does this assertion apply to Nwapa's fiction? Indeed, in the heroine's community, the pattern of culture is shaped by a great interest in procreation. This interest becomes the community's way of life as it expresses the actual experience through which it is lived. Its valuation is so vital that a woman who does not or cannot fulfill it is ostracized. In the text, the ideology related to this cultural pattern is gender-oriented. While man is granted all favors and privileges, the woman evolves as his ultimate subordinate. Besides, the idea that the responsibility of childlessness lies on the woman defines a hierarchical class interest that feeds male/female social relationship. As a consequence, the natural assumption that a woman may be unproductive shifts into the cultural reality to strengthen the ideology of the society she lives in. If culture is seen as a mode of life gathered under the form of practices and identity as a dynamic and slow process of construction of this mode of life, then among the Igbo people, these practices occupy a central place insofar as they determine the community's life as a whole.

For most social scientists, the essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other concrete cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in a similar way. Under this perspective, culture is analyzed "through the lens of human solidarity." (Inglis, 2004) As a matter of fact, *Efuru* must be read with regard to what unifies and ties Igbo community to the concept of childbearing and how they live it as an expression of their culture.

As the text displays it, this concept is a symbolic, social and cultural identifier that contributes to define womanliness. It constructs the woman more as a social pariah than a productive subject if she cannot or does not want to fulfill it. Two important dimensions of culture interweave in the narrative. First, culture appears as patterns transmitted by symbols that constitute the distinctive achievements of the group and second, as conditioning elements of the group's further action. By positing motherhood as a *sine qua non* condition to acquire a true social identity, the Igbo express their attachment to their culture as it is rooted in their collective consciousness. In her turn, the woman, by procreating, recreates life and contributes

thus to the evolution of her community and the human species. Incidentally, when she fails to fulfill these social norms, her female identity is automatically put into question and this considerably impacts her social integration. She may not be chased from her community but she loses all the social respect granted to a mother.

It can thus be noted that the Igbo community demands more of a woman than it does a man. Her destiny is shaped through the cultural vision of the community as typical of group behavior and habits that characterize individual behavior. For Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, “the figure of the mother looms very large in Igbo family life. It is the mother or the woman of the house on whom the foundation of the home squarely rests. Her abilities or inadequacies would affect the home positively or negatively.” (Umeh, 1998, 61) However, though the text pictures the cultural importance the Igbo attach to motherhood, it largely unfolds their attitude toward this social role as it is generally grounded in many African societies.

On a larger scale, motherhood and marriage are interlaced. From a traditional perception, a woman without a man cannot procreate. It therefore is important to treat both elements concomitantly to show their interdependency. As in many sub-Saharan African societies, marriage holds a key social position among the Igbo. As Victor C. Uchendu puts it,

A girl’s life is essentially a preparation to marriage. Mothers lose no time in reminding their daughters that certain types of behavior cannot be tolerated from them. [...] In her natal home, the bride has seen how her father’s or brother’s new bride behaved. She remembers the advice her mother and other relatives gave her. She knows that her great objective in life is marriage; that a woman’s glory is her children, and that to have children she must have a husband. This is a chance she cannot afford to miss. (1965, 53)

It appears from the above quotation that the cultural significance of marriage does not only lie in the social identity it provides the newly married woman with – respect for herself and pride for her family – but also and essentially, in the productive metaphor underpinning it. Many African societies think it unacceptable that long after their union, a couple remains childless. Thus, even if traditionally children are important field hands for their parents, especially for the father, they greatly contribute to the social condition of their mother. Through them, she is respected and blessed. She gets a social identity, for as a childbearing woman, she can publicly partake in the social affairs of her community. To quote Victor C. Uchendu again,

Motherhood brings an important change in a woman's status, a change from a mistress who simply attracts and allures to a mother who shares the dignity of her husband and who has increased the lineage membership [...] Children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against dependence in old age. (57)

Consequently, procreation is a determining factor in a marriage because it fosters understanding and cohesion within the couple while it assures the social integration of the woman. Ajanupu rightly points this out when Efuru is double-minded whether to leave Adizua's house after the latter deserts their household and does not come back even after the death of their child:

My daughter [...] Adizua has treated you badly and you have borne it admirably. If your daughter were alive, one would have said don't go, stay for your daughter's sake. But Ogonim is no more and one does not know how to persuade you to stay. But I say, stay. I have no reason whatever for asking you to stay, but stay. (88)

The double point of Ajanupu's advice – she asks the heroine to leave while at the same time she wants her to stay – is the expression of a mother's attachment to her children; thence, an indication that motherhood is essential for a woman and that children occupy a central position within the family. They constitute its foundation as they can influence its destiny. For in the words of Ajanupu, the only thing that can compel Efuru to stay despite Adizua's ill-behavior is her daughter. But since she no longer lives, there is no reason for her to stay.

Ivorian writer Amadou Kourouma accurately underlines this important place of children within a family in *Les soleils des indépendances*: "What most befits a household, a woman: the child, motherhood that are more than the richest ornaments, more than the spectacular beauty! A childless woman misses more than half of her femininity." (1970, 52, translation mine) Following his lead, Patrick Mérand adds that in African societies, a child is always wished. It is considered as a gift from God, a blessing from the heavens (1977, 30). We understand, therefore, why Efuru refuses to go home while her pregnancy requires her to rest (29). From the aforementioned, it can be said that when a couple does not conceive, it lives a sorrowful situation, becoming thus the object of gossip. This is exactly what prevails in Efuru's community when, after her second marriage with Eneberi, she still remains unfruitful:

Seeing them together is not the important thing [...] 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? (137)

The community's gossip is not as much a manifestation of their jealousy with regard to the love Efurū and her husband mutually offer each other – they go to the stream together, swim together and show off in town. It rather demonstrates its attachment to the communal and productive ideology sustaining marriage. Most often, in case of childlessness in a marriage, the woman is wrongly accused of being responsible for this situation. Omirima's suggestion to Amede, Eneberi's mother, during a conversation highlights this fake accusation:

Look for a young girl for your son. He cannot remain childless. His fathers were not childless. So it not in the family. You daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go errands for us. (163)

The heroine knows that she must meet this cultural exigency of her people; otherwise she will function as an outsider and be rejected. This is why she is ready to undergo any kind of treatment to experience the joy of motherhood. For instance, she calls for the supernatural powers of a traditional priest who advises her on the appropriate way to overcome her misfortune:

She is to sacrifice to the ancestors. It is not much, but she will have to do it regularly. Every Afo day, she is to buy uziza, alligator pepper, and Kola from the market. Uziza must be bought every Nkow day from a pregnant woman. Every Afo day before the sun goes down or when the sun is here, and he pointed to the direction, she should put these things in a small calabash and go down to the lake; there she will leave the calabash to float away. So, go home young woman and be cheerful. Next year during the Owu festival if nothing happens to you, come back to me. Go in peace. (25-26)

When we consider the components of the sacrifice Efurū is asked to perform and the way it must be carried out, we notice that it has a crucial cultural significance: it must be

performed on specific days following a regular frequency, with specific items, and at precise times and place. Also, that one of its components must be bought from a pregnant woman is culturally important. Through her pregnancy, this woman stands for a symbol of motherhood. Thus, by selling this item to Efurū, she symbolically passes the baton of motherhood to her. Accordingly, she will procreate as the oracle firmly promises: “Next year during the Owu festival if nothing happens to you, come back to me.”

Basically, the different elements, artifacts, and symbols of the sacrifice are culturally poignant with meaning. For instance, the concavity, the fluidity of the calabash on the lake are masculine and the fact of the sun being up and not yet down is a reference to the masculine principle of visible erection. Shango is said to secrete a flaming orgasmic fluid: the alligator pepper (masculine) and kola (feminine). This refers to a symbolic sexual intercourse using local animalistic and floral imageries to explain and cure a disease – the heroine’s barrenness – by a sort of homeopathy. Finally, the association of these elements epitomizes fecundity and expresses Igbo people’s ties to their culture, the relationship between their visual life and spiritual one. And as an intercessor, the traditional priest’s intervention is intended to reconcile these two worlds.

On the other hand, the importance the community attaches to motherhood and its impatience to see Efurū fulfill this social and cultural “obligation” is carried out by such phrases as “a year passed, and no child came” (24), “about three months passed after Efurū’s visit to the dibia and nothing happened” (26) spoken by the narrator. Efurū, in turn, is conscious of this reality as she wonders whether she has inherited her situation from her mother: “Am I going to be like my mother?” (24) But she does not despair. On the contrary, she believes that if ever she has inherited something from her mother, she would not only procreate but precisely, she would have a baby girl: “If I am going to be like her, then I too will have a daughter like her.” (24) Finally, when she conceives her first baby, she cannot believe her eyes: “Is this happening to me or someone I know. Is that baby mine or somebody else’s? [...] Perhaps I am dreaming. I shall soon wake up and discover that it is not real.” (31) Her feeling here is more than the expression of astonishment. It illustrates a joy she can barely contain after a long period of desolation and fear of remaining childless.

For Efurū’s community, a childless woman brings shame on herself, her own family, and her husband and his family. This explains Adizua’s mother’s great happiness when she hears about Efurū’s pregnancy: “‘Efurū is pregnant? Orisha, thank you.’ She raised her two hands to the sky, then knelt down and bowed her head, knocking it on the floor of the room, thanking Orisha, who is God.” (27) The pregnancy of her daughter-in-law wipes out the

shame and the gossip that both her family and that of Efuru have been experiencing for so long. The heroine, too, knows that only motherhood can help her enjoy the plenitude of her femininity. It is this awareness that overwhelms her when she joins her age-mates for a dancing ceremony and refuses to go home though at this stage of a pregnancy, she greatly needs to rest:

One day her mates came for her. They told her that one of their age-group was performing the ceremony of the second burial of her father and so they must go and dance with her. Efuru went with them. They danced all day. In the evening when she did not come back, her mother-in-law went in search of her. She saw her still dancing and begged her to go with her. Efuru did not want to go then, and told her mother so. (29)

Here, Efuru wants to show her gossipers that she is not barren. Like them, she is a woman and has the same female attributes as them. By refusing to go home, she deconstructs the stereotypes of her people that construct the childless woman as a worthless being. Her attitude, then, puts forward the etiological discourse that is to follow later when she loses the baby. Argumentatively, the narrative matrix tries to demonstrate that the baby's loss serves her right, that it preserves the social system from becoming chaotic. But the female character should understand that pioneering or heroisation all rhyme with ostracism. Indeed, how can one venture onto the arena of History as an actor of change if one does not leave the status of spectatorship and followership?

Thus, from a broader deconstructionist perception, the heroine's refusal to go home serves to demonstrate that human history and History at large cannot be construed or constructed independently of the woman. Henceforth, her act calls for her people to reconsider their behavior toward these women who are not lucky enough to procreate. It is also a plea for the women in her society and across Africa who are made to bear their childlessness as a burden because of the whims of their societies. By the same token, her act is an invitation to regard barrenness not as a fatality and motherless women as social pariahs. On the contrary, these women should be encouraged to face their situation by showing them attention and love.

If motherhood constitutes the focus of my argument, it is nonetheless important to note that the novel largely deals with the broad cultural life of the Igbo community. Through Efuru's experience, Nwapa questions the very essence of culture, that is to say how it must

constructively impact the life of a people. In this perspective, the Igbo's reaction vis-à-vis childbearing as an expression of their culture reveals itself as a case study. What seems to be the writer's greatest concern here is the evolutionary nature of culture. For her, the value of a culture lies in its capability to transcend conformism. This does not mean that she rejects her culture. On the contrary, it is because she is deeply impregnated by it that she wants a change in it. Consequently, Efuru's desire to trade to have money to help her husband pay for the dowry (18) can be read as an expression of this change the writer so greatly seeks.

As culturally established in many African societies, it is man's cultural obligation to pay the dowry when he wants to marry a woman. And if his future wife has to help him, this must be done in a total secrecy. Thus, through the heroine's determination to help Adizua to pay for something for which he is traditionally and culturally responsible, Nwapa thus opposes modernity to tradition to question, as I argued, the essentiality of her culture. In so doing, she views marriage from a postcolonial perspective as she lays emphasis not on its cultural exigencies as the payment of the dowry before the woman moves to her future husband's house, but on the mutual understanding of the two lovers. Efuru's leaving of her father's house for Adizua's while the latter has not yet paid the dowry to her family well illustrates the writer's invitation for a postcolonial inspection of marriage. To her, since marriage delineates their future life, the mutual consent of the lovers is more important than everything. Adizua explains this to his mother: "I have no money for the dowry yet. Efuru herself understands this. We have agreed to be husband and wife and that is all that matters." (8)

In the same way, motherhood is culturally laced with marriage; it has a similar important relationship with the death of a mother's child. As said earlier, motherhood is determining among the Igbo. It determines their way of thinking and acting with regards to the woman. As such, it evolves as a real identity criteria for her social integration. It also stands for a matrix and works as a social "compass" to direct all her actions in her community. Additionally, it operates as a social production of culture. Here, culture is produced through manifestations and symbols underlining the creation of human life. Thus, though death is always a painful event, a woman who loses a child is more affected especially when she has only one child. This may seem like she has never conceived. It is therefore understandable that for Efuru who was thought by her community to be a barren woman for a long period, such an event is lived in a very traumatic and tragic way. If her only baby dies, this would symbolically mean that she has never been a mother. This is why she is completely upset when her baby falls sick. She laments: "What will I do if I lose? [...] If she dies, that

will mean the end of me.” (66) And when the latter finally dies, her grief becomes so painful that nothing, even tears, can explain it as she tells Ajanupu:

I cannot weep any more, Ajanupu. My grief is the kind of grief that allows no tears. It is a dry grief. Wet grief is better but I cannot weep [...] Ajanupu, my daughter has killed me. Ogonim has killed me. My only child has killed me. Why should I live? I should be dead too and lie in state beside my daughter. Oh, my chi, why have you dealt with me in this way? (73)

The death of her daughter symbolically implies her own death. For her, life is no longer worth living since what makes her feel like a mother, a woman, what demonstrates that she has experienced the joy of motherhood has vanished through the death of her only baby. In fact, being pregnant means having her belly full of life. But the death of the baby turns it into a vacuity which echoes her earthly return to “nothingness” and ontological incompleteness. The repetition of the phrase “my daughter has killed me” sheds light onto the importance of childbearing for her and on a larger scale, justifies the assumption that from a traditional African worldview, having many children is crucially important for a woman. Children, in fact, constitute social insurance and assistance for their parents in their old age. But they greatly help justify their mother’s procreation capacities as long as all or some of them are alive. Thus, if the heroine had many children, the death of her daughter would actually affect her but she would still have other children to testify to her womanliness or femininity.

By way of conclusion, let us say that Flora Nwapa has leaned on the theme of motherhood to explore her own culture and by extension, African cultural conception regarding this theme. Through the tragedy of her heroine, she has shown its importance in the woman’s life as it constructs her social identity. As displayed in the narrative and discussed in this paper, the woman cannot claim her femininity unless she experiences the joy of motherhood. By emphasizing the importance of motherhood among her people, the novelist incidentally draws attention to barrenness as a place of subjectivity and oppression for the woman. In the same vein, she questions the true value and meaning of culture if it must ostracize some people from their community. For, as is shown in the narrative, a woman who is not lucky enough to procreate or who does not want to do so is proscribed and denied all her femininity and relegated to the rank of a social outcast.

However, the writer's vision is more than a critique of her community's way of life or a claim for radical transformation of her culture. The most important point in her message, it seems, is undoubtedly an invitation to see culture not as fixed or static but as progressive and constructive for the evolution of the human species. As a matter of fact, childlessness should not be a motif for social banishment and debasement for the woman but as a stage in life that in many cases is beyond her control. Thus, the female being in such a situation should rather be loved and encouraged. All in all, *Efuru* is a work intended to moralize Africans about procreation.

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