



Repositioning 'woman' in Nwapa's *Efuru* and Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*

Sifiso Sibanda

To cite this article: Sifiso Sibanda (2024) Repositioning 'woman' in Nwapa's *Efuru* and Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10:2, 122-134, DOI: [10.1080/23277408.2024.2361516](https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2024.2361516)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2024.2361516>



© 2024 The Author(s). Co-published by NISC Pty (Ltd) and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 849



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Repositioning ‘woman’ in Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood*

Sifiso Sibanda

Faculty of Education, School of Language Education, North-West University, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Nwapa and Emecheta’s transformative representation of their heroines in *Efuru* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, respectively. In these two works, the authors seek to reposition ‘woman’ and inaugurate her as a formidable force of change. They carve female protagonists whose mission is to transform a culture that downplays the role of women by overlooking their value in society. Nwapa parades *Efuru* as a ‘femme fatale’ empowered by the lake goddess Uhamiri and endorsed by female revolutionaries such as Ajanupu. Emecheta, on the other hand, represents her revolutionary female characters in the form of Ona, long-suffering Nnu Ego alongside Adaku and Kehinde who measure up to women free from male subjugation. These heroines defy various forms of sexism often veiled in patriarchy. There is a deliberate attempt to prolong the lives of these characters in the novels to champion their transformative influence in their villages of origin. Moreover, Emecheta advances the need for the emancipation of African women who still depend on men. By posturing ‘barren’ women in their works, the two authors appear to reject conformity to patriarchal tenets whose view of women is centred on childbearing.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 October 2023
Accepted 26 May 2024

KEYWORDS

agents of change, feminism, misogyny, femininity, masculinity

Introduction

There is an ever-growing concern about advancing the rights of women in today’s world. This notion gets its mandate from a women’s conference held in Beijing, China, from 4 to 15 September 1995, where women’s issues were dealt with extensively. Several views, most of which expound on the notion of the recognition of women, have arisen before and after that conference. The need to empower women in all spheres of leadership and business is enshrined in the constitutions of several African countries. Some of the issues that were raised in the Beijing conference were that:

CONTACT Sifiso Sibanda  thulani.sifisosibanda@gmail.com

© 2024 The Authors

Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies is co-published by NISC Pty (Ltd) and Informa Limited (trading as Taylor & Francis Group)

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

it is essential to design, implement and monitor, with the full participation of women, effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes including development policies and programmes, at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women. (Beijing Declaration 2014)

After the Beijing conference, the Fourth World Conference for Women, it is evident that the need for advancement of women remains crucial, compelling several authors to entrench the ideals of feminism in some of their works.

In spite of the ongoing debates about gender equity, the world continues to read horrific narratives of toxic masculinity which often result from misconstrued tenets of patriarchy. This perversion of patriarchy has led to various forms of women abuse. In many instances, this abuse has escalated to femicide, living communities contemplating how this phenomenon may be curtailed. In response to crimes against women, 'feminism fights for equal rights to vote, education, and employment; equal payment, reproductive rights, etc. and also works against rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment' (Mohajan 2022, 6).

In South Africa alone, cases of femicide are on the rise in spite of numerous campaigns and setting aside the month of August as women's month.

[t]he gruesome cases more often than not involving sex crimes and brutal murder, most commonly of women (often at the social margins – immigrants, prostitutes), bring forth a female investigator who challenges beliefs and attitudes toward representing the feminine in terms of (in)equalities and (in)justice but also the body, both social and corporeal. (Mulvey and Rogers 2015, 31)

In light of the ever-growing concern about the peril women face at the hands of their male partners, several female and male writers have written novels that seek to amplify the voice of women against female prejudice. Writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta have written novels that advance women by repositioning them as equal partners with their male counterparts in all spheres of life, including decision making. To some readers, the selected works might seem archaic as they were published several years ago, however, they are still very significant as they still mirror the challenges facing our contemporary world. Nwapa's eponymous *Efuru* departs from the usual stereotypical pattern of 'woman' by choosing her own husband and refusing to heed the patriarchal voices that endeavour to restrain her. She disrupts social patterns in patriarchal cultures challenging the culture that seeks to subjugate females. She prevails against othering, subjugation and violence women are exposed to. In line with Nwapa's *Efuru*,

Girls now control enough money to attract attention as a demographic group. This may or may not represent an advance in terms of girls' actual social power, but it does indicate that cultural producers are taking them seriously. (Karlyn 2011, 6)

Efuru typifies the young women who are gradually emancipating themselves from patriarchy and empire. Of late, the corporate world is abuzz with newcomers in industry and business. Many women are beginning to transform

themselves and their communities. This reveals the extent to which women have challenged patriarchal supremacy.

Emecheta's female character, Ona, enjoys independence from her father as well as her lover, chief Agbadi Nwokocha. She defies oppressive empires and long-standing patriarchal authority. Conversely, Nwapa punishes Ona's daughter for succumbing to male domination. Unlike her mother, Nu Ego is desperate to get married and bear children. She thus remains oblivious to her freedom of choice of a life partner. Nu Ego deviates from her mother's life pattern because she wishes to fulfil the role of a woman — as a child bearer. She forfeits her freedom and totally submits herself to Nnaife to whom she is beholden dearly. She appears to espouse a strange notion that whatever women do, it is done to please men. Nwapa, however, allows the reader to watch Nu Ego as her life sadly ebbs away after her male children desert her.

Nwapa and Emecheta's novels serve to valorise the emergence of a female literary tradition, and to refute conventional images of women. Bobo has commented that:

Recently, black women's texts have attracted much more receptive audiences. The emergence of an influential group of black women cultural consumers has proven successful to their success. Consequently, black female voices are being heard by audiences who truly want to listen to them. (Bobo 1995, 2)

Several authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie, Chinua Achebe, Shimmer Chinodya and Zakes Mda have joined the bandwagon of high-lighters of the plight of women. More and more authors are beginning to 'challenge familiar representations of femininity by affirming female friendship, agency and physical power' (Karlyn 2011, 6). This move is significantly improving the images and visibility of women globally.

Theoretical Framework

The article uses feminism as its lens to analyse and appreciate the stance of the selected works. Feminism 'is about our entire grounding as human beings seeking equal attention in all areas of our existence. It is vital for women to seek this resolution through their different voices' (Larson 2001, 84). Larson further argues that 'the position of woman needs to be re-examined with the greater determination and a forceful idea for change' (84).

In her presentation at the 2013 TEDx Euston event, Adichie gave a simplified and more user-friendly definition of the term, 'A feminist is a man or a woman who says, "Yes there is a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better"' (Adichie 2013). Feminism is concerned about gender equity, the abolishing of 'othering' women. Feminism should not be understood as a women's problem but a national crisis that should be addressed by dismantling rigid traditional patriarchal beliefs. It seeks to awaken people to the

realisation that women, like men, are equal partners in the development and transformation of world.

Based on the feminist perspective elaborated above, as well as the view of Lu (2019, 125) that Nwapa and Emecheta's female characters are agents of change. The article traces the characters' transformative influence in the novels. Female protagonists in the two novels launch a new culture through resisting and transforming the old and rigid patriarchal monoculture. 'By foregrounding the changeability of culture in time and the human tendency to move beyond the present, Nwapa's narrative encourages a reconceptualization of women-culture relation; one that is characterized by proactivity rather than passivity' (Lu 2019, 125).

One of the fundamental contentions of feminist writers is to fight subalternity of the female gender. They declare that women should be accorded same treatment received by their male counterparts who have been dominating them for eons. Ojedoja (2018, 92) has established that 'Flora Nwapa inculcates her novel with a theme of feminine and natural liberation from domination and violence'. More so, Nwapa has commented that, if you are a woman, '...you are oppressed at home, you are oppressed at work. Your husband oppresses you and then your society piles upon you double, if not treble suffering' (Newell 2006, 155). Moreover, in Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, a teenage girl who has decided to resist male domination laments:

All my life I have been running. On the run. On the road. Men molesting me. I was once a dutiful daughter. A nice Christian home. It was the settled area. CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE THE UNSEEN GUEST AT EVERY MEAL THE SILENT LISTENER TO EVERY CONVERSATION. I ran away from school because the headmaster wanted to do wicked things with me. Always: you remain behind. You take the wood to my house. You take this chalk and books to the office. Then he would follow me and all he wanted was to touch my breasts. So I left school. (...) But my father would have nothing of it. He called me an idler and sent me to pick leaves for that cruel settler, Mr. Jones. How he used to abuse and punish us! I had to run away from home, from my father, from Mr Jones ... In the city it was the boys. (...) A girl cannot run, run, run all her life. (Ngũgĩ and Mugo 1976, 41)

The young girl is determined to take control of her life, and has thus decided to face her male oppressors head-on. This stance by Ngũgĩ confirms that as a writer, he prioritises the advancement of women. A similarly grim story of patriarchal cruelty to a young woman is given prominence in Ngũgĩ's *Matigari*, in which Guthera traces her abuse back to when she was young. After her father has been arrested at the height of the liberation war for alleged collusion with terrorists, the chief police officer demands sexual favours so that he can facilitate the release of her father, but the girl remains resolute that she will never give in:

The superintendent came out smiling slyly. He said: My superiors do not know about this yet. We can settle this matter between us here and now. Give me your purity, and I will

give your parent back to you. The young maiden remained silent. The superintendent explained further: You are carrying your father's life between your legs. (Ngũgĩ 1987, 35)

The girl has total control of her life and finally chooses to remain chaste, even at the cost of her father's life. Ngũgĩ's rebuttal of the position offered to a young woman as 'vulnerable' ordains his feministic position.

Moreover, Emecheta's 'main concern is domestic relations and, more precisely with the position of women in both traditional society, as presented by the village and with traditional values as these are carried into complex city life and, in some respects, modified there' (Killam 2004, 44).

Mohajan distinguishes four waves over which feminism has evolved. The first wave of feminism begins in the 19th and early 20th epochs, and is concerned with suffrage, equal chances, and legal privileges for women. The second wave which stretches from 1960s to 1990s focuses on education and employment opportunities, maternity leave, access to birth control and abortion rights, domestic violence issues, marital rape issues, sexual harassment. Third wave is from 1990s to 2000s where women find themselves powerful, working in various professions and not subjected to a chauvinistic patriarchy. The fourth wave of feminism starts around 2012, which offers a new feminism that depends on online social media, such as Facebook, Twitter (now called X), Instagram, YouTube, etc. (Mohajan 2022, 2–3).

Nwapa, 'now seen as the forerunner of a whole generation of African women writers' (Parekh and Jagne 1998, 340) and Emecheta's female characters fall under the second wave where the struggle's focus is mainly on gender equity and abuse of women in their marital spaces. The rethinking of women's position in society continues in spite of many challenges that seek to reverse and re-confine them to spaces proscribed by patriarchy. However, the feminism in Nwapa is viewed as African feminism 'based on the real social and economic situation of women in Africa, which is markedly different from the socioeconomic position of most white, middle-class feminists' (Parekh and Jagne 1998, 340). This sets it apart from Western-hatched feminism. The feminism in Nwapa's *Efuru* originates from Africa as women navigate through their Africa-born challenges. Nevertheless, African feminism, does not entirely contradict quintessential Western feminism; there are variations in terms of epochs and the nature of emancipation advanced by African tenets. Nonetheless, the essence of feminism is the same globally with varying paces from country to country.

Emecheta on the other hand, ostensibly describes herself as a feminist. 'The major theme in her books is the extirpation of retrogressive Igbo cultural norms that prevent women from participation in a wide range of activities said to be the preserve of men' (Parekh and Jagne 1998, 149). In her writing, Emecheta demonstrates a determined attempt to express her concern against the subjugation of Igbo women in pursuit for collective transformation.

Moreover, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* highlights the critical nature of matriarchy which forms the basis of feminism. Achebe's hero, Okonkwo, an

arch-patriarch, must seek refuge in his motherland, Mbanta, after accidentally fatally shooting a kinsman, because 'Mother is supreme' (Achebe 1958, 94). Okonkwo finds refuge in his mother's house when patriarchy wishes to avenge the death of a boy, albeit killed accidentally. Allowing Okonkwo to seek refuge in his mother's house confirms Achebe's hint of feminism in his writings. His mother's house becomes a sanctuary out of bounds from patriarchal fury.

Feminism is thus a massive undertaking initiated by women and men to eliminate all forms of suffragette repressions by men that are prevailing in male-controlled societies. The movement's role is transformative and seeks erasure of 'the fault lines of binary thinking (black/white; public/private; male/ female' (Knowles 2021, 4). Alongside these oppressions are the subsequent debasing and othering contingent on the junctions of race, social standing and gender amongst other classifications.

Female resistance to male subjugation

In *Efuru*, Nwapa focuses on 'proving her own belief in the need for the African woman to be versatile for her own survival' (James 1990, 110). Efuru disobeys her father and joins herself in matrimony with a nonentity, Adizua, who does not even have money to pay her bride-price. Nwashike Ogene, Efuru's father, is a respected man in the entire village but Efuru 'a daughter' subverts his authority by eloping with Adizua (Stratton 1994, 93). Efuru's cousin explains their desperate attempt to reclaim her, 'Efuru has brought shame on us, something must be done immediately to get her back' (Nwapa 1966, 9). The young men who are sent twice to bring her back, return empty handed.

"We shall go, our daughter," the spokesman said. You seem to be happy here and we wonder why your father wants us to bring you back. We shall tell him what we have seen' (9). Efuru's spontaneous resistance to social pressures is indicative of an ongoing cultural change (Lu 2019, 123). Nwapa seems to be inaugurating Efuru as an agent of change in a society where 'woman' is synonymous with subservience. Despite their two attempts at reversing her 'illegal marriage', Efuru's will prevails in spite of her being a woman. Lu (2019, 124) contends that narrating the life of Efuru 'enables a reading of women in her culture not just as passive beings moulded by sociocultural institutions, but also as active agents of cultural change'. Efuru's obstinance is similar to Ngũgĩ's Muthoni in *The River Between*. In that novel, Muthoni, a young woman defies her father's order not to be circumcised, showing a breakaway from toxic patriarchal authority:

'Tell Muthoni to come back. If she agrees we shall forget everything. If she does not, then tell her that she ceases to be my daughter.' On the following day Nyambura brought the sad news that Muthoni had refused to return home. (Ngũgĩ 1965, 36)

Even though Muthoni eventually dies from the clitoridectomy wound that does not heal, she dies a proud, self-determined woman, whose example is followed

by her sister, Nyambura, who eventually elopes with Waiyaki. Although the rhetoric may be religious, one of the key issues in this narrative is the girl's refusal to bow to her father's domination of his household.

Having been married to Adizua and after the clitoridectomy, Efuru is less tolerant of the mandatory period of confinement which follows the operation. Her refusal to remain secluded and be fattened, as is customary, foreshadows her ultimate rebellion against her confinement in sexual roles. Longing to be 'up and doing', she insists that one week of confinement is enough and returns to her trade (Sibanda, 2015). Subsequently, she takes several decisions that indicate her consciousness that pursuing stereotypical roles of motherhood can interfere with a woman's attainment of social and economic power. She is, for example, resolute in her decision to take up trade as her vocation rather than join Adizua in farming. Efuru refuses to go to the farm with her husband, stating: 'if you like, she said to her husband, go to the farm. I am not cut out for farm work. I am going to trade. That year the man went to farm while his wife remained in town' (Nwapa 1966, 10). As a result, she and her husband live apart during the first few months of their marriage. The authority in Efuru's voice is quintessentially masculine. Her behaviour elevates the text to universal relevance and thus transcends the Euro/Americentric tradition/modernity worldview (Lu 2019, 124).

When she finally falls pregnant, she insists on continuing to trade almost up to the time of her delivery. Much to Adizua's annoyance, she spends what turns out to be the night she gives birth at an age-group celebration (30). There is very little conformity to patriarchally prescribed femininity in what she does. Contrary to the advice she is given, she returns to her work almost immediately after the birth of her baby. This endorses Efuru's rejection of orthodox definitions of gender (Stratton 1994, 99).

After Adizua deserts her, in spite of Ajanapu's 'wait for a year' plea, she leaves and goes back to her father's house and argues that the husband left her and not vice-versa despite the incessant correction by Difu and Nnona who contend that a husband does not leave the wife, but the opposite is true. 'Did I hear that you have left your husband? "Yes, he has left me." Don't say that we say that a woman has left her husband, but never say that a husband has left his wife, wives leave husbands not the other way round' (Nwapa 1966, 90).

Efuru endeavours to correct the ill-gotten notion that seems to protect men even when it is evident that they have erred. This direct confrontation is meant to indict patriarchy which seems to thrive by using females as scapegoats. This light-hearted altercation seeks to reinforce the notion that men are not always right as patriarchal culture often presumes. It affirms that a woman must not be blamed for a man's wrongdoing. To underpin this argument, 'Efuru uses the power she acquires to succour the members of her community, taking the ill to the hospital in Onicha, paying medical bills, and even lending or sometimes giving money to those in financial dire straits' (Stratton 1994, 99).

Nwosu, a man, debases himself by asking Efuru to lend him ten pounds. In this case, Nwosu as a man is admitting that Efuru is a woman who is more capable than a man in accumulation of wealth. The same Nwosu is assisted by Efuru to go to hospital. Again, this tends to ordain Efuru as 'a man' since the duties she performs are unquestionably masculine in terms of patriarchy. The perception raised through the assistance given to Nwosu by Efuru is meant to advance and emphasise that 'Feminism is a belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes in every stage of the society' (Mohajan 2022, 3). Nwosu benefits from the benevolence of a hardworking woman who has demonstrated her support for equality of sexes. In fact, Nwapa's Efuru emerges as a woman in the second wave of Mohajan's feminist movement in which:

Feminism is an attempt to provide equal rights and opportunities irrespective of male and female. It tries to uphold the identities, experiences, knowledge, strengths, in all step of the society [sic]. It attempts to make conscious [sic] women about their rights. It wants to see the end to sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression and to achieve full gender equality in law and in practice. (Mohajan 2022, 6)

Later in the novel when Efuru marries Gilbert, she begins worshipping the lake goddess, Uhamiri, who gradually transforms her life, 'Efuru was sleeping alone in her bed. It was orie night ...' (Nwapa 1966, 165). Efuru is portrayed as a woman free from conjugal obligations. Gilbert cannot impose himself on Efuru. The 'orie night' episode serves as a rebuttal on the role of a woman's body as an object of fulfilling the erotic desires of a man. Consequently, 'the eponymous heroine of Nwapa's novel destabilises unreasonable expectations of motherhood and objectification of women as target of excessive male sexual fantasy' (Ògúnfolábí 2022). Through Uhamiri, Efuru reverses the stereotypical role of a woman. She is able to worship Uhamiri, perform her rites and disdain the wishes of her second husband, Gilbert. Uhamiri is a goddess who does not have children but has a command of wealth, which is a symbol of power. 'Efuru, on the other hand, is not as Brown notes, on the male's desire or need; but rather on the woman's, Efuru's needs. For the goddess figure, rather than being an object of male desire is a symbol of freedom and independence for women' (Brown in Stratton 1994, 92). Worshipping 'Uhamiri allows Efuru to reclaim her femaleness, her beauty, and her very personhood in spite of her childlessness. In a culture where women's roles are defined by their ability to produce children for the community, such an option implies that certain patriarchal dictates can be transcended' (Odoja 2018, 95). By so doing, Efuru qualifies as an agent of change. Stratton argues,

More crucially, Nwapa's narration of the myth places Achebe's characterization of Ibo society as strictly patriarchal and excessively masculinist under revision. For the myth of Uhamiri embraces both matriarchal and patriarchal principles. Upholding the principle of gender equality, it gives cultural legitimacy to female power. (Stratton 1994, 90)

Nwosu and other fisherman witness 'the waters of the blue lake mingling beautifully, majestically, and calmly with the brown waters of the Great River (...) Uhamiri, the owner of the lake, and Okita the owner of the great river. The two were supposed to be husband and wife, but they governed different domains and nearly always, quarrelled. Nobody knew the cause or the nature of their constant quarrels' (Nwapa 1966, 201).

The idea raised here is that Uhamiri and Okita are equal since both of them rule clearly demarcated spaces. This climaxes Nwapa's notion of gender equality. Efuru epitomizes the notion of women independence and free will. This notion resonates with Mariama Ba whose 'commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women in Africa led her to write *So long a letter*' (Ba 1981, iv). Ostensibly, Nwapa joins the bandwagon of feminists to advance a gender parity agenda.

In an interview with Adeola, Nwapa's sentiments reveal that in her works,

The message is and it has always been, that whatever happens in a woman's life ... message is not the end of this world; Childless is not the end of everything. You must survive one way or the other, and there are a hundred and one other things to make you happy apart from marriage. (James 1990, 114)

Efuru is represented as in total rejection of a woman's patriarchally prescribed role. 'What Efuru realizes, then, is that "infertility" is a form of resistance to male domination which, however, unconsciously is practiced by some women' (Stratton 1994, 96). It is therefore out of the creation of Efuru that Nwapa demonstrates the power of a woman and her total disdain for the male dominated world. The violent punishment Ajanupu administers on Gilbert further establishes the extent of female power in disciplining sexist males. In addition, 'Ajanupu offers her advice on childcare, relationships, and trade. Through these conversations, Nwapa reveals Igbo social values and how women themselves accept, reject, or revise these mores in pursuit of their own goals' (Parekh and Jagne 1998, 339).

Efuru's return to her father's house at a time when her father is dead may mark eternal freedom from patriarchal tendencies.

Efuru stood at a historic crossroads and spoke in the voice of a still marginalized group in the modernizing new state, women. As such, it can be seen as Nwapa's symbolic effort to chart new possible paths toward autonomy for her female compatriots at the onset of a new history. More specifically, it can be seen as her way to explore new possibilities for post-independence Nigerian women to rise above the discursive pressures. (Lu 2019, 125)

The final return of Efuru to her father's house at the demise of her father epitomizes the expiry of patriarchy and the realization of a new era where the historically marginalized females are seeking prominence.

On the other hand, Emecheta presents Ona as a girl who always accompanies her father, a chief, to important gatherings. This is a deviation from the expected

cultural norms and values of the society. The value placed on Ona is equal, if not more, to that which is vested on a son. Stratton concurs that '... even though Ona's life too is circumscribed by the prescriptions and taboos of Ibuza patriarchy, she enjoys far more freedom ...' (Stratton 1994, 113).

In the novel, Ona is termed 'a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance. So stubborn was she that she refused to live with Agbadi' (Emecheta 1994, 11). Taunting a chief of Nwokocha Agbadi's status endows her absolute power over men. Ona reprimands her father Obi Umunna and Nwokocha when they pick a quarrel about her (Emecheta 1994, 26). The fact that a young woman can settle a dispute between quarrelling chiefs elevates her far above them. Ona then serves as a very significant signpost of change. Agbadi craves sexual intimacy but she never yields to his advances, unlike the senior wife, who supposedly falls ill and later dies upon hearing her husband giving pleasure to another woman. The death of the senior wife could be marking the demise of the dependency syndrome on the part of women.

Punishment of the Stereotypical, Long-suffering, Female Characters

Unlike Efuru, Ona's daughter Nnu Ego is unassertive, and she pays dearly for perpetuating patriarchy. Firstly, she is tossed from Amatokuwu to Nnaife after a humiliating wife battering. After Amatokuwu divorces her for her supposed barrenness, a new marriage is arranged for her. She does not even love the man whom she sees as, 'a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, (...). The belly coupled with the fact that he was short made him look like a barrel' (Emecheta 1994, 41). Even if she hates her new husband, Nnu Ego 'knew even though her father was the best of fathers, there was such a thing as overstaying one's welcome' (43). She has to force herself to live with this man because she desperately wants to be a mother and has to subscribe to men's definition of women, that limits them to child bearing. Although she protests time and again, it is just token resistance. Her constant nagging of Nnaife may seem rebellious against male domination simply because culture compels women to submit to their husbands. But, in fact, '[t]oo timid to flout patriarchal authority, Nnu Ego accepts without question until her later years that there is no greater honour (...) for a woman than to be a mother' (Stratton 1994, 114).

Caught in this double bind that Ibuza patriarchy has created for her, she clings to motherhood as her ideal even in the face of starvation. At one point she nearly rejects patriarchy but quickly relapses into her subaltern position: 'God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being not anybody's appendage' (Emecheta 1994, 186–187).

Armed with adequate ammunition to disentangle herself from Nnaife's authority, she relapses by admitting that Nnaife owns her, whatever she does belongs to him. 'Nnaife is the head of the family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay fees, yet he owns me. So in other ways he pays' (217). This unprecedented submission contradicts her co-wife Adaku who says, 'Nnaife does not own

anybody, not in Nigeria today but senior wife, don't worry. You believe in tradition. You have changed a little but stood firm by your belief' (218). In spite of her insight, Nnu Ego continues conducting herself in accordance with patterns laid down for her by Ibuza patriarchy: 'Try to forgive my condemning you for leaving Nnaife when I did. I am beginning to understand now' (218). She takes comfort in all her travails in the fact that one day her boys will be men and take care of her. It is unfortunate that she clings to this belief until her life grinds to a sad end: 'She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her' (224).

Contrary to the societal expectations on women, Emecheta punishes her conservative heroine and rewards Adaku for her rebellion. In this case the novel has two major roles, to valorise the emergence of a female literary tradition and to refute conventional images of women. By contrast, Adaku is redeemed when she decides to remain a prostitute in the city. Using Nnu Ego, 'Emecheta goes on to unfold her metaphor of enslaved Igbo women, arguing that the society also programs women to be slaves of their male offspring as well as their husbands' (Parekh and Jagne 1998, 151). Valorising the theme of empowerment in her treatment of Adaku, Emecheta also ridicules the notion of redemption through repatriation to the village in her treatment of Nnu Ego (Stratton 1994, 118). The success given to Adaku as a single mother of two daughters indicates the gratification of single parenthood and its subsequent independence. In this context, Emecheta is advancing emancipation of women. 'Adaku ... had left the family fold to strike out successfully on her own' (Nwapa 1966, 172). Adaku manages to send her children to good schools in spite of their female gender, further affirming Emecheta's position of empowering women. Nnu Ego sends boys to school, but they totally neglect her, get married to women in America and Canada, and only return to erect a shrine on her grave when she is dead.

Of interest is Kehinde, one of Nnu Ego's twin daughters. Like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Nyambura in *The River Between*, she marries a man of her choice despite her father, Nnaife's disapproval. This marks another break-away from male authority. Kehinde's insolent answer to her father when he tries to arrange marriage for her is indicative of the rebellion Emecheta seeks to promote: 'I am not marrying that man' (Emecheta 1994, 204). After this showdown, she goes on to marry the man of her choice, a Yoruba, against her father's will. The fact that Nnaife is eventually arrested following his attack on Kehinde's boyfriend and family symbolises the decline of patriarchy in the society. The girl is later happily married. Nnu Ego's girls support her while the boys conspicuously desert her (224). Emecheta's idea is to show the reader that girls could be more responsible than boys in looking after their parents. The punishment Nnu Ego suffers serves to confirm this position.

Conclusion

Breaking away from the prescribed roles of women as seen in Ona, Adaku, Kehinde, Efuru and Ajanapu reflects Emecheta and Nwapa's ideals of African

Feminism. The rebellious women are rewarded bountifully and appear to be leading happy lives. This foregrounds the most crucial aspects of feminism whose tenets envisage an abolishment of women's subalternity. The unprecedented suffering Nnu Ego undergoes as a result of obedience to the patriarchal stereotyping highlights the second of the dual images of women in the texts and further affirms the disadvantages of subjugation. Nnu Ego's suffering reveals how sometimes patriarchy may sentence its subjects to perpetual domination by the male gender which further subalternates the female gender. Okita the river god and Uhamiri the lake goddess who occupy their distinct spaces typify gender equity as seen by Nwapa. Nwapa and Emecheta are thus advocating a change that they actually perceive as imminent.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Achebe, C. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Adichie, C.N. 2013. "We should all be feminists." *TEDx Euston*. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists.
- Ba, M. 1981. *So Long a Letter*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers (Pty) Limited.
- Beijing Declaration. 1995. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: The Fourth World Conference on Women*. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E
- Bobo, J. 1995. *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Emecheta, B. 1994. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers (Pty) Ltd.
- James, A. 1990. *In their Own Voices. African Women Writers Talk*. London: Heinemann.
- Karlyn, K. R. 2011. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Killam, D. 2004. *Literature of Africa. (Literature as Windows to World Culture)*. West Port: Greenwood Press.
- Knowles, C. 2021. "Decolonization and Afro-Feminism." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 39 (4): 644–647. doi:10.1080/02589001.2021.1938976.
- Larson, C. R. 2001. *The Ordeal of the African Writer*. London: Zed Books.
- Lu, N. T. 2019. "Between Tradition and Modernity: Practical Resistance and Reform of Culture in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*." *Research in African Literatures* 50 (2): 123–141. doi:10.2979/reseafritlite.50.2.09.
- Mohajan, H. 2022. "Four Waves of Feminism: A Blessing for Global Humanity." *Studies in Social Sciences & Humanities* 1 (2): 1–8. doi:10.56397/SSSH.2022.09.01.
- Mulvey, L., and A. B. Rogers. 2015. *Feminisms*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press B. V. doi:10.1515/9789048523634.
- Newell, S. 2006. *West African Literatures*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oso/9780199298877.001.0001.
- Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. 1987. *Matigari*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Limited.
- Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. 1965. *The River Between*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. and M. G. Mugo 1976. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Nwapa, F. 1966. *Efuru*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers (Pty) Ltd.

- Ojedoja, S. 2018. "An Ecofeminist Study of Flora Nwapa's 'Efuru'." *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH) Ethiopia* 7 (3): 92–99. doi:[10.4314/ijah.v7i3.11](https://doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v7i3.11).
- Ògúnfolábí, K. O. 2022. "Re-writing Motherhood in Flora Nwapa's Efuru. UMMA." *Journal of the Contemporary Literature and Creative Arts* 8 (1): 1–18. doi:[10.56279/ummaj.v8i1.1](https://doi.org/10.56279/ummaj.v8i1.1).
- Ogunrotimi, O., and O. K. Owoye. 2019. "Notions of Alienation and Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*." *Crossings* 10. doi:[10.59817/cjes.v10i.90](https://doi.org/10.59817/cjes.v10i.90).
- Parekh, P. N., and S. F. Jagne. 1998. *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
- Sibanda, S. 2015. "Zimbabwe's Betrayed Liberation Struggle: A Consideration of Two Novels by Shimmer Chinodya." Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa.
- Stratton, F. 1994. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Mississauga: Routledge.