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Woman –Woman Marriage: A panacea to Igbo Women’s Empowerment in Two Selected Flora Nwapa’s Novels

Akinola Monday Allagbe

Département d’Anglais, Faculté des Lettres, Langues, Arts et Communication (FLLAC), Université d’Abomey, Calavi (UAC), Bénin

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Abstract: Several studies have revealed that women’s social, economic and political status have started changing due to feminists’, womanists’ and their ramifications’ advocacy for women, in the world, especially in African societies (e.g., Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2015; Allagbe & Allagbe, 2015; Houndjo & Allagbe, 2018, Gbaguidi & Allagbe, 2018; Allagbe & Amoussou 2020). But women, especially African women, still face challenges concerning how to continue managing their marital homes with their new status. This article examines, via womanist theory, the case study of Igbo women who face the above problems and how they have been able to use woman-woman marriage as panacea to maintaining their new status and managing their marital home in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1992). The findings reveal that woman marrying another woman exists in Igbo society. It is used by some married women who are childless in order to continue their husbands’ lineages, maintain their position of first wife and also have control over the new wife/wives in their marital homes. Another aspect of the finding, is that, women who are in business or trading, having difficulties in playing their domestic and marital roles towards their husbands and children, deliberately marry a young woman so as to take care of their husband and children while they continue with their business or trade. In a nutshell, it has empowered them in decision making, enhanced a strong complementarity between them and their husband and paved the way for amalgamation between their economic and social status with their marital home.

Keywords: Igbo-Women, Woman-Woman Marriage, Empowerment, Trade, Household.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies have revealed patriarchy as main source of social imbalance between women and their men counterparts (e.g., Capo-Chichi et al 2016; Allagbe and Allagbe, 2015; Houndjo and Allagbe, 2018). Particularly, feminists’, womanists and their ramifications have identified patriarchy, as one of the main sources of social injustice that gives men more privilege than women. Amouzou (2006, p. 97) contends that “Patriarchy is that form of social organization in which males exercise power and thus create for female an inferior status.”

Indeed, patriarchal setting of most African societies has not only maintained women in an inferior status, it has sometimes dictated/influenced gender performances by men and women. As Allagbe & Allagbe (2015) note that “While men are expected to play such stereotypical roles as fatherhood, husbandhood, and leadership, women are traditionally expected to be mothers, housewives and subservient (p.386). It has also caused oppression to women. Furthermore, Asgher *et al.* (2016, p. 147) stipulate that “[...] oppression on women makes their lives miserable and full of pain, but when women work against oppression and get power they become free.”

In fact, historically, women have always learned to live with or struggle against misery and oppression in patriarchal settings in traditional African societies. Their struggle over patriarchal oppressions has been ignited by the feminists, womanists’ and their ramifications’ advocacy for social justice between women and men in African societies. For instance, in African societies today, women have started occupying strategic working positions which men used to occupy. But that has not totally put an end to women’s problems.

Women, especially African women, still face challenges concerning how to manage their marital homes with their new status. Most women who work in offices, trading and any business activities rarely have enough time to cater for their marital homes, especially their husbands, children and doing domestic chores. That makes them encounter accusations from their husbands and relatives. The situation becomes worse when the women do not have children. In fact, some, in their quest for a solution to that problem, try to employ some young ladies, as house-helpers but they sometimes end up seeing their husbands being snatched away. They are sometimes seen as promiscuous and wayward women through gossips which people say about them and even by their husbands. That creates ceaseless quarrels between them and their husbands to

the extent that some have to leave their marital homes. In short, those problems sometimes make majority of them quit their office work, trading and businesses so as to save their marital homes.

As a remedy to those problems women are still facing, this article has examined certain African traditional practices, especially an Igbo traditional practice such as woman-woman marriage. As matter of fact, woman marrying another woman is not a phenomenon that is new in African societies. It is practised in certain African societies in West Africa, South Africa, East Africa and the Soudan (O'Brien 1977 cited by Njambi & O'Brien, 2005, p.145). The problem is that the studies of women who marry women in Africa are relatively few in number and generally dated, with few recent contributors (Njambi & O'Brien 2005, p. 145). But precious few writings addressing woman-woman marriage practices exclusively account for cross-cultural difference which tend to emphasize the male-female relationship as paramount due to the common presumption of opposite-sex partners as the basis for all marriage. (Amadiume, 1987; Burton, 1979; Krige, 1974; O'Brien 1977; Oboler, 1980; Davis & Whitten, 1987; Mackenzie, 1990; Okonjo, 1992; Njambi, & O'Brien 2005; Uchendu 2006).

Therefore, it is not a synonym of what is practised in Western and European world as lesbianism/female homosexuality. Although a few texts imply that there may be sexual involvement among women in woman-woman marriage, in certain parts of Africa (Herskovits 1937; Davis & Whitten 1987 as cited by Njambi, & O'Brien 2005, p. 149), this article has focused its analysis on its basic reasons that can be traced to "pursue a range of social, economic, political, and personal interests" (Njambi, & O'Brien 2005, p. 145).

This article has tried to trace the social, socio-economic, and personal interests' reasons of woman-woman marriage as a panacea of empowering Igbo women in Nwapa's fictional texts. It has examined, via womanist theory, the case study of igbo women and how they have been able to use woman-woman marriage as panacea to maintaining their new status and managing their marital home in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966a) and *One is Enough* (1992b). Furthermore, it contains abstract, introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, woman-woman marriage in two selected Nwapa's novels, conclusion and references. In so doing, theoretical framework used in the article is womanism.

Theoretical Framework

There are many types of women's movements which promote "the political ideology of women's movements like feminism, womanism stiwanism, African feminism and other is to redress the power imbalance between men and women through advocacy of women's right" (Houndjo & Allagbe, 2018, p.149).

But this article embarks on womanism because it is a movement which has presented an alternative to feminism and other women's movement aforementioned.

It advocates inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness. The inclusiveness has to do with what Walker calls "survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Walker, 1983). Though it is a woman's movement, it advocates for wellbeing of women, men, children and nature. Izgarjan & Markov (2012) confirm that "At the center of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment" (p. 305). Indeed, one of the main characteristics of womanism, in a female character, can be traced in a behavior which is at the same time responsible, playful, fearless and compassionate. As Izgarjan and Markov further argue [...] womanism served as an example of different modes of behavior and thinking, and retrieved the submerged history which led to the transformation and redefinition of existing norms and to the broadening of traditional views (2012, p.309).

In addition, it promotes solidarity/ sisterhood among women. Many African American scholars and writers supported such solidarity among women. Solidarity enables different groups of women to support each other without insisting that their situation is identical; it also enables women to form alliances with oppressed groups of men. Womanism strived to challenge all power structures which inhibit human growth and development and it largely contributed to the discussions about dynamics of power not just within feminist and womanist circles but also on a more global scale (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012, pp.309-310).

Not only have many prominent female scholars and writers such as Buchi Ememcheta, Mariana Bâ, Miriam Tlali identified themselves as womanists rather than feminists but they have also used womanism as a paradigm in their analysis of the texts of women from ethnic minorities or economically undeveloped countries (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012, p.310). So, Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian novelist cannot be counted out of the above African prominent writers. This article has used womanism to understand how igbo women have been able to use woman-woman marriage as panacea to maintaining their new status and managing their marital home in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966a) and *One is Enough* (1992b).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this article is typically a discourse analysis because the women, on whom analyses are carried out on, are represented in Flora Nwapa's fictional œuvres such as *Efuru* (1966a) and *One is Enough* (1992b). The technique used in choosing the women is basically purposive. The reason

why the article has taken the acts of the women represented in Nwapa's fiction, under study as Igbo women's, is because the subject matter of this article, woman-woman marriage, is a reality in the traditional society- And Nwapa, herself, is an aborigine of the geographical locality of the Igbos which is oguta, eastern part of Nigeria. She has tried to confirm the parallel link between social reality and literature by reproducing woman-woman marriage in her two novels under study.

Woman-woman Marriage in Nwapa's Novels

Historically, some Igbo women, in pre-colonial and post-colonial periods, especially before, during and after the Biafra war, who were once known as domestic wives, have engaged in the economic life of their society due to geographical location of their land, causing them long distance trading, and which may take them days or months before returning back to their husbands and children. As a result, Iyam (2013) note that

The precolonial African woman was never confined to the kitchen but effectively explored her domain and forcefully engaged the entire community, as in the case of the Ghanaian businesswoman, or acted as the community's spear point during warfare, as was the case in a southeastern Nigerian group (p.ix).

Apart from warfare which has made the southeastern Nigerian women group to become businesswomen, the geographical local of the Igbos has made women engage in commerce so as to buy and sell products which cannot easily be produced in neighbouring locality. That has not only made them responsible for the economic life of their society but it has also contributed to their economic independence.

So, the Igbo women have not allowed their economic status to tamper with their marital roles. They have prudently tried to manage their homes along with their trading by recurring to woman-woman marriage. To borrow Ekejiuba (1967)'s and Amadium (1987)'s briefing of woman-woman marriage, as cited by Uchendu (2006) that:

Woman-woman marriage was contracted for social and economic reasons. In most cases, women who married fellow women were either barren or had passed the childbearing age without begetting a male child. Others were wealthy and influential women who married fellow women as a means of celebrating their wealth and for economic gains. Woman-woman marriage as a mark of wealth, and, for economic exploitation was popular in parts of Igboland in the second half of the 19th century (p. 2).

Indeed, the above reasons about woman-woman marriage have been reproduced in Nwapa's

novel, *Efuru* (1966). Apart from social and economic reasons for woman-woman marriage, it is contracted so as to solve problem of barrenness among couples. Before going deep into the reasons for that kind of marriage in certain traditional African societies, especially the Igbo society, it is important to point out that the traditional African woman, especially the traditional Igbo woman is brought up with an ideology that it is only a bad woman who will want to have a husband for herself alone. That ideology is known to a woman and man whether married or not married right from their childhood. That is why, if a married lady discovers that she is not able to get pregnant after many years of marriage she may suggest to her husband to start looking for another young girl who can give him children. This is done, in the novel, *Efuru* (1966a), when a female character called Efuru is not being able to get pregnant for her husband, Adizua (Efuru's first husband), she suggests to him to look around for a young girl for a wife (p. 26).

So, if the husband does not quickly reponse to the suggestion of the barren woman, she may either deliberately or with the consent of her husband and sometimes with that of her mother-in-law look for the young girl. When the young girl is found, she pays for her bride-price and brings her to her husband so that she will give birth to the husband. The above attitude is seen with Efuru, a female character when she divorces her first husband and has got married to Gilbert, also known as Eneberi. When she discovers that she is not getting pregnant for him, she calls him saying "Eneberi, I am thinking of getting a wife for you... 'I [Eneberi/Gilbert] may not like your choice' Gilbert said" (p.174).

In fact, the above attitude of Efuru can be qualified as womanist because she is not self-centered but she is compassionate by thinking of the procreation of her husband despite her not being able to have children for him. In addition, Efuru does not object to Gilbert's decision of allowing him to make his choice among the girls, she is willing to marry for him. That is shown in the following excerpt from the novel: "That is no problem. You [Eneberi/Gilbert] are going to be shown several girls and you are to make your choice" (p. 174). In this vein, Eneberi/Gilbert finally makes a choice of a young girl called Nkoyeni who is married and later gives birth to a bouncing baby boy for the family. Nevertheless, the reason why Efuru chooses to marry a woman for her husband is for her to maintain her position, as the first wife and also to have control over the young wife. That fact can be deduced in an advice, Ajanupu, an elderly woman gives to her in the following excerpt from the novel:

Don't you think you should now begin to look for a young girl for him [Gilbert]? [...] If you leave it to him and his mother, his mother might get someone that will over-ride you. You will have no control over her and it will

be difficult for you. One day they will tell you, you have no children and therefore no right to be in the house, your wealth notwithstanding (pp.164-5).

Indeed, Efuru succeeds in having handover her marital home after marrying Nkoyeni, a young woman for her husband. That is made possible through her economic position and that has made her have total control of the family. To the extent that when the young wife has started making life difficult for their husband, Gilbert, Efuru automatically starts looking for ways to marry another wife who can compete with her. In short, it seems that marrying another wife over a troublesome housewife is a kind of way, used in African societies, especially in the Igbo Society, of temporizing her insolence.

In addition, one can notice a complementarity between Efuru and her husband, Gilbert and this has made them decide, in common accord, to marry another wife so as to temporize the insolence of the young wife towards her husband. This can be remarked in the discussion between Efuru and Ajanupu :

‘We want to marry again,’ Efuru said laughing [...] Nkoyeni is giving us [Efuru and her husband] trouble [...] we must get another wife who will compete with her. She thinks she can do what she likes in this house. So we are looking around (p.214).

In fact, the above affirmation of Efuru shows the powerful role she occupies in decision-making in the marital home. That fact that shows how Efuru is able to make amalgamation between her economic and social status with her marital home. So woman marrying another woman is a panacea for empowering barren women who have economic stability.

Similarly, woman-woman marriage is used by women who are occupied with trades, or businesses. In reality, trading and businesses sometimes consume women’s time, to the extent that they hardly have time to take care of their husband and children. The fact of women’s inability to care for their husband and children do bring quarrels in many marital homes. So some women who are in such affairs use woman –woman marriage to fill in the missing gap between doing business/trade and their marital homes in Nwapa’s novels such as *Efuru* and *One is Enough*.

Notably, women who are in business or trading are women with financial capacity. In Nwapa’s *Efuru*, a female character called Ajanupu marries another woman for her husband when she is occupied by trading. One can deduce this in her discussion with Efuru, another woman :“I had to recommend a girl for my husband when i saw that i was too busy to look after him and the children, and at the same time carry on with my trade”(p.57).

Indeed, the above resolution is made possible, as mentioned before, due to the belief inculcated in the mind of the Igbo girls/women that there is nothing wrong with a man marrying a second wife and also in the belief that only a bad woman would like to be alone by her husband. That claim seems to be understood by majority of Igbo girls/women and boys/men and it is transferred to their grandchildren. One can deduce that, as Amaka’s aunt confide in her about her marital experience and which she has inherited from her mother and transferred to her children, in Nwapa (1992b)’s *One is Enough*, in the followings : “Marriage can and unmake one. I learnt a lot from my own mother and i am putting into practice what she taught me. It has worked for me and my children. It will work for you as well”. (p.9)

Truly, young women whether married or not need to be thoroughly educated, before and after being married, about marriage. Managing a marital home successfully does not depend on a woman’s secular educational background. Amaka’s aunt explains to her what she has learnt from her mother and which has made her and children succeed in their marital homes. The secrets which have made her succeed in her marriage are self-confidence, having children, trading and woman-woman marriage. She exhorts young married woman or about to marry to concentrate on trade/business and make money so as to cater for their children and children’s education rather than on husbands/men. In fact, she has demonstrated that by narrating to her niece, Amaka, how she has not been domestically and maritally available for her husband and children. In fact, that decision of Amaka’s aunt’s wanting to concentrate on her business by turning her back from her marital responsibilities is without trouble between her husband and herself but she has recourse to woman-woman marriage, as a panacea. As the narrator informs the reader, Amaka’s aunt confide in her in the following :

When he began making too much fuss about this, I got a sixteen year old girl for him. Yes, I married her for him. I said to her, this is our husband, take care of him, i am going to take care of our children. I must see that they all have good education. Good education means money. So I am concentrating on my children and business (p.9).

In short, Amaka’s behaviour is a womanist one because her resolution is not for herself alone but for the survival of the wholeness of her family. Nwapa has confirm the broader framework of womanist concept, in Amaka’s aunt than feminism. In addition, Nwapa, as the first Nigerian novelist has joined her voice with many prominent female scholars and writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Mariana Bâ, Miriam Tlali identified themselves as womanists rather than feminists and used womanism as a paradigm in their analysis of the texts of

women from ethnic minorities or economically undeveloped countries. Women from Africa and the African diaspora have particularly embraced the idea of a network of women who support each other, especially mothers, since mothers are most vulnerable in the early stages of their children's development and need additional sustenance in African countries which often struggle with poverty, diseases and political turmoil (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012, p.310).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined, via womanist theory, how women have reached some certain levels in terms of economical, social, and political empowerment face problem of managing their marital home and their new status. It has used, Igbo women as case study, so as to see how they have been able to use woman-woman marriage as panacea to maintaining their new status and managing their marital home in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1992). The findings revealed that woman marrying another woman exists in Igbo society. It is used by some married women who are childless in order to continue their husbands' lineages, maintain their position of first wife and also have control over the new wife/wives in their marital homes. Another aspect of the finding, is that, women who are in business or trading, having difficulties in playing their domestic and marital roles towards their husbands and children, deliberately marry a young woman so as to take care of their husband and children while they continue with their business or trade. In a nutshell, it has empowered them in decision making, enhanced a strong complementarity between them and their husband and also paved a way for amalgamation between their economic and social status with their marital home.

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