
WOMEN IN CRISIS: A STUDY OF FLORA NWAPA'S NEVER AGAIN

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Abstract: Flora Nwapa, one of the pioneers of female novelists in West Africa, made an unprecedented contribution to African literature and thought. She opened up a woman-centered front in African anti-colonial discourse and pioneered in fighting Western intellectual Imperialism in areas such as History, Anthropology and Literature. Nwapa's literary fiction in some detail, including her Biafran War fiction, emphasizes how Nwapa depicts the dual- gender complementarity among the Igbos of the pre- colonial period and the role of women in communal and political life. Nwapa uses this analysis to propose the historical bridging from pre- to post- colonial times through the medium of women and how women try to discard the ever- present shackles of colonialism to pave the way for a more coherent and consistent African- centered philosophy. This paper tries to focus on the role of women in the development of a nation and also how women actively participated in the Biafran war in regard to the novel *Never Again*.

Keywords: Flora Nwapa, Biafran War fiction, Dual gender complementarities among Igbos, Role of women in the development of a Nation.

“War is the test case for realistic fiction. No other subject can be so obscured by the ivy of tradition, the crystallization of legend, the conventions of epic and romance. No situation can so enslave the individual to reifying forces beyond his control. Civilian conscription and long-range artillery, revolutionizing the technique of modern warfare, seemed to eliminate heroics utterly, to metamorphose people into things, and to minimize the soldier's awareness of what was happening...” (158) -Harry Levin

African literature does not exist as an isolated body of knowledge. The disciplines like Anthropology, History and Sociology are actively implicated in the essence of African literature but various anthropological and historical studies have projected the images of women as non- actors in history. They are accorded a private space and are rarely discussed in terms of social and historical development. Women have always been defined in terms of male subjectivity. The study of images of women in fiction should be made while examining the status of women in society. It is also necessary to analyze the crucial roles played by women in the historical development of a nation. Since literature is embedded in the social reality of a nation, it is essential, according to Abiola Irele, to

“correlate the work to the social background to see how the author's intention and attitude issue out of the wider social context of his art....and to get an understanding of the way each writer or group of writers captures a moment in the historical consciousness of his society.” (23-24)

African fiction has a distinctive socio- historical orientation and hence it is essential to consider the social background of women's involvement in African history. War has been regarded exclusively as a male concern, due to various socio-economic reasons. But there are many instances when women have actively

participated in war activities along with men. This resulted in a subversion of the cultural role assigned to them. The participation of Nigerian women in the war is reminiscent of British and American women's involvement in various activities during the First and Second World Wars. War literature depicts the struggles of men and women during war time and the imbalance created by gender, power relationships as a result of war. The cries of protest and turmoil in the country formed an integral part of Nigerian literature. The Biafran war was a watershed in Nigerian history, not only for its ravaging impact but also for its influence on the lives of many people, especially women. The impact of war subverted the roles of women and acted as a release from social, economic and cultural bonds. The role of women in the Biafran war appeared as backdrop in numerous works of fiction. Nigerian writers responded to the Biafran war in several ways by producing documentaries, diaries and poems. Biafra is remembered by many people in the context of sunken eyes and starving children whose faces haunted people for many years. Thousands of civilians and children perished in a period of thirty months. This was a period when America was preoccupied with the Vietnam War abroad. Chinua Achebe and other writers have given expression to the revolutionary struggle of their people for independence, whereas writers like Buchi Emecheta, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi and Flora Nwapa participated actively in helping the people during the war and wrote about it in their works. The Nigerian Civil War was an occasion for the people to examine the national existence. Biafran nationalism was even more sterilizing and passionate because everybody was affected by the war. There had been periodic sweeps by military forces in Lagos and Ibadan and sometimes deserters were found dead. Nwapa presents women as the unsung heroes of the

war. The changes that took place during the Nigerian Civil War shows a sharp intelligence in handling of their relationships and in negotiating the space. Their points of view were refreshing and direct. Henceforth, women's role could no longer be overlooked and they realized their own abilities and contributions to their societies. This new dimension given to the role of women in Nigerian literature gave second generation Nigerian writers a better view of women. Coupled with the Marxist, Leninist and feminist tendencies of the time, Nigerian writers of the late 1970s and 1980s were more plausible in their representation of women. Flora Nwapa, who returned from Lagos to her home state during the war, made a significant contribution by rehabilitating thousands of refugee children. The pattern of movement and her commitment during the war appeared in her collection of short stories- "Wives at war and Other Stories" (1980). Her novel *Never Again* (1975) depicted the war in progress and the turmoil in society during this period. Nwapa received critical acclaim for her honesty in dealing with the conflicts between people and of social relationships during the war-time. In *Never Again*, Nwapa emphasized the trauma of refugees in the process of fleeing from one place to the other. In an Interview with Brenda F. Berrian, Nwapa said that

"Never again is about my personal experiences during the war. The book is intended to depict the evils of war and demonstrate that people should not indulge in wars. During the war I encountered many difficulties when I exposed thoughts that differed from the false propaganda. My choice was to think like the majority in order to survive. Personally, I could not swallow everything without asking questions." (997)

The war had significantly altered the lives of women. The areas of human failings and frailties in the process of struggle are depicted in the novel *Never Again*. Women also participated in various activities including the job of collecting gallons of petrol for evacuation. They did not depend on men and made their own arrangements. The educated women of Nigeria were not 'voiceless women' but strong survivors in the history of Nigeria. The narrative of the novel *Never Again* is from the point of view of a woman who moves from one place to another during the war. Kate, the narrator, anticipates defeat but embraces the idea of an independent Biafran state. Kate is frustrated with the distorted situations in her society and rejects the thoughts of her mother that the gods will not allow defeat to Biafra. She argues with her mother

"To me god will not intervene in the affairs of Nigeria and Biafra. God had nothing at all to do with it. Not long ago in Nigeria we prayed to one god. Now we

have two gods: the God of Nigeria and the God of Biafra."(5)

Kate had independent views about the conditions in Ugwuta and could judge the situation efficiently. During the war period, the voice of woman was suppressed and her thoughts were not considered 'important' by men. The men opposed the idea of women participating in other spheres and questioned their authority. In the novel, *Kal*, Kate's husband intervened in Kate's affairs. But Kate had different perception about war and believed that war could not be won by mere words. This sense of questioning came to her as a result of her education which gave her strength to participate in the political action for the development of her nation. In traditional African societies, there was a division of labour based on gender where women were assigned the role of psychological balance of the family and men were responsible for providing economic support. In the novel *Never Again*, Kate's mother is a representative of the traditional woman who believed that Ugwuta cannot be threatened. She warns her daughter not to frighten her about the invasion of the vandals. She believed that the Woman of the Lake would protect them. Nwapa voices the views of both the generations of women where the traditional woman like Kate's mother has faith and belief in the rituals and traditional thought patterns while the younger generations of women have a conflict of both the traditional as well as modern ideas. There is a failure of logic in the new context. Kate's mother believes that if women offered a white ram to the Woman of the Lake, she would not leave her worshippers in despair. The older generation was much more concerned with the village and strongly believed in their traditions, while the educated young women believed that 'survival' is the most important thing. They were greatly worried about their families and thought of some safety measure in order to move from the place, if such a need arose. They made necessary arrangements for fleeing in order to survive. Kate's mother questions her daughter in this context:

"...My daughter, tell me, you who went to school. Why won't they leave us alone? We have left them in Nigeria. They said: all right, you are killing us because we grabbed everything. We are not going to grab any more. We are going home.... Do they want us back; so that they can kill all of us, wipe out the whole race?"(27)

Kate's mother-in-law was also determined that the Nigerians would not enter Ugwuta. She believed that the armed forces would save them if all the Vandals come. Kate's mother and mother-in-law argued with Kate and asked her not to disturb their peace. Nwapa presents the importance of women during the

war in her novel *Never Again*, while Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Destination Biafra* (1982) presents a new heroine in African woman. She seems to question the concept of womanhood through oppressive spirit in Debbie. Femininity is a cultural construct, as Simon de Beauvoir points out, that one isn't born a woman, one becomes a woman. Debbie epitomizes the woman's struggle for survival in a patriarchal society during the war. She joins the army against the wish of her parents. Unlike Debbie, Kate is not directly involved in the war activities, but she gains first-hand experience about the war. Her perceptions about the war ravaged society makes her question the patriarchal authority. African women have always enjoyed economic independence despite the patriarchal social structure. Both wife and husband had clearly defined income. Women developed their skills in trade even before marriage. They were engaged in various professions like trade and farming. The Biafran war had a significant impact on the economic activities of women. Many women emerged as entrepreneurs by taking up assignments such as food contractors during the war-time. They supplied food for the soldiers and they were also forced to obtain food stuff for their families. One of the important aspects is that they dominated the internal trade and took part in 'attack trade'. The women contractors supplied food when there was a shortage for the soldiers in the warfront. Retail trade was also one of the most widespread of women's occupations. They asserted their independence by creating their own distinctive identities. The women were therefore, exposed to a new world, after the war. For women, the life of a refugee would bring with it a psychological and physical death. It also brought a sense of helplessness when a mother failed to nurture her children. The period of war explores the movement from birth to death and there are many intervening spaces occupied by illness, health and hope for recovery. Nwapa explores the chronic maladies of childlessness, madness and death in her novel. There are three vital aspects involved in the body politic according to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyenu: they are Law, Religion and Medicine. The people involved in the war travelled like the Ogbanje longing for another place. Death plays an important role in Nwapa's novel *Never Again*. When there is a conflict in the power struggles, Nwapa opts for a more amenable place departing from the present world. Nwapa mentions that during war, life becomes miserable and it is difficult to obtain even water which is an important factor for living. The only drink available during the war-time is vodka that was not popular in that part of Nigeria. There were deaths everywhere in the new born nation- Biafra. There has been loss of human power and potential which

indicates the paradoxical situation of the state. One could not expect women, during the war time, to produce men for the future. Nwapa gives an account of the impact of armed conflict and its sequels on daily life and relationships. She highlights the shift in values and changing attitudes to life that people experienced as a result of displacement, restrictions, daily exposure to danger and the overwhelming presence of death. The novel also reveals the presence of women at the heart of war zone and their centrality in the preservation of life. Nwapa shows that there is a hope for recovery in spite of the conflict between life and death. There is possibility of people surviving and narrating the story that created a horrifying situation. The number of women and children who lost their lives during the war has been more than that of men. Thus the voice of the narrator generates a story of the unheard voice. While representing the chaos of the war situation, Nwapa also shows prospects for reconstruction. She chooses the religious source and water deity Uhamiri for recovery. The Lake Goddess in terms of divine presence and power is directed towards the protection of Ugwuta. The people still know where to go in crisis with their unshakeable faith on the water deity. The Lake Goddess provides spiritual strength in times of uncertainty and stress. In the novel *Never Again*, women worship her to defend them from the vandals and they offer sacrifices to the deity. Unlike Nwapa's other novels, *Never Again* presents Uhamiri as the life giving force that rescues the people of Ugwuta from throes of war. There is no life without water and Uhamiri's presence gives a healing aura to the people. In the crisis, women relate the deity to traditional sources. Uhamiri's still waters ensure Ugwuta's defense. She protected the people of Ugwuta from vandals and remained the source of their hope and strength. She sank the gun-boat and the bodies of dead soldiers floated on the Lake. But the war did not affect the Lake and the Lake remained

"calm, pure, peaceful and ageless." (84)

The connectedness of birth and death that runs through Nwapa's novel links her with that of Barthes's text and Foucault's *Death and the Labyrinth*. The interrelatedness between the life and death is affirmed by Foucault in *Death and Labyrinth* and he states.

"And the nature of the labyrinth comes infinitely close to the metamorphosis resulting in the passage from life to death, and in the maintenance of life in death." (94)

The war was a leveller, shrouding people into anonymity as families, rich and poor got scattered on the roads. The road, which often acted like umbilical cord holding physically separated spouses and

families together, also witnessed the making and unmaking of ephemeral, unstable relationships sustained by the fear of death and the craving for basic human needs – food, shelter and reassurance. The novel also focuses on many signs of a dysfunctional society. Communities emerging from colonial violence suffer from post colonial traumatic syndrome. A picture of a sick community in war-torn Ugwuta is presented in *Never Again*. During the Civil War, many children suffered from Kwashiorkor which was considered a deadly disease. Nwapa not only gives the ill-effects of the war but also shows how it affects the psychological development of people. The chaos in Ugwuta produced several problems afflicting people with madness, dumbness and deafness. Kate's disorientation is an example of the mad leading the mad and Ezekoro's dislocation are case histories. Ezekoro recovers from madness which suggests self limiting problems in interpersonal communication. Ezekoro

“was a mad man. For several years he was deaf and dumb. Then miraculously he regained his speech, and he talked and talked and talked.” (62)

Ezekoro represents a breakdown of communication between the author and reader. He represents a microcosm where the nation is at war with itself. He mindlessly comes back to Ugwuta to defend her. Flora Nwapa advocates that female solidarity, independence and power make them emerge as champions against the patriarchal authority. Their courage in the struggle at all odds, their strength in surviving the crisis is presented by Nwapa in her novel *Never Again*. Nwapa highlights the multiple facets of women during the war period to combat the rigid roles assigned to women and their choice of fighting against all odds. As Sylvia Leith Ross observes that in the social status of Igbo women.

“there seems to exist an invisible bond among the women which links them over wide areas” (21-22)

Nwapa believes that these women should be united to enhance their strength. They can exercise their power and change the lives of others through collective effort. She advocates that knowledge about society and strength of will to fight against all odds makes an African woman independent.

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