

THE CASSAVA'S VOICE: THE SENSE OF 'OTHERNESS' IN NWAPA'S POEMS

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Abstract: Flora Nwapa, the first West African woman writer to publish a novel in English is often known for recreating life and traditions from a woman's point of view. The present paper is an attempt to show how Nwapa's poems are unique in relocating the women's space from the margins to the centre. Her sole volume of poetry focuses on Cassava- the African women's crop and its significance in African women's lives. Flora Nwapa relates the sense of otherness to cassava and how it is marginalized by rice- the foreign crop. She tries to associate positivity of cassava thus elevating womanhood and thus proves the versatility of the crop. Nwapa uses cassava as a symbol to challenge the contemporary dilemmas about the role of African woman writers.

Keywords: cassava song, elevating womanhood, relocating women's space, versatility of the crop.

Introduction: Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa was a forerunner to many young writers and is best remembered for recreating life and traditions from a woman's point of view. She is considered the Doyenne of African Literature and is well known as the first African woman to publish a novel in English. However, her contribution to children's literature and poetry is not widely recognised. As a poet, short story writer and children's author, she wanted to narrate tales of those 'gifted females' who are ignored by the society. Her sole volume of poetry *Cassava Song and Rice Song* (1986) speaks volumes about her passion to accord a special place for women in the annals of Nigerian history and she did it with such grace that many women followed her path in true spirit.

Flora Nwapa tries to redefine the roles of women by relocating the marginal space accorded to women by launching her protagonists to the centre. The women characters in her novels use their abilities as individuals to confront, question and empower themselves. Nwapa uses the concept of Ngambika-that seeks for a fair share of work/ balance of load. Even in her collection of poems - *Cassava Song and Rice Song*, she gives a unique flavour to the existing concept of 'yam'. She tries to relocate women's crop 'cassava' from the margins to the centre. In traditional societies, yam is often used for religious purposes and festivals while cassava is relegated to the margins. Nwapa uses a mock-epic style to give importance to cassava. Through this style, she brings in the positivity associated with cassava thereby elevating womanhood and proving the versatility of the crop. All other crops including yam are dwarfed out in the process. Simon de Beauvoir's theory of 'Otherness' clarifies Nwapa's struggle to destroy the misconceptions on woman's space in her society. For this, Flora Nwapa had to work on the process of digging the mountain of myths associated with the misrepresentations of women. She had to struggle against the myths of subordination of women and her position as the 'other'.

Nwapa's resistance to question the inferior 'otherness' of African women inspired many young, budding women writers. Flora Nwapa also attributes a 'national identity' to the cassava. She eulogises the cassava as a national food in her collection of poems *Cassava Song and Rice Song*. She compares rice and cassava in this context and says that eating rice is western and fashionable. However, cassava is home grown and mother of food as it has the essence of her motherland. According to Obododimma Oha, it is not essentially the foreignness of rice that is significant but also the psychological and social implications in preference for the imported rice are to be considered. In the post-colonial Nigerian society, Rice became a symbol of class superiority.

Cassava Song is a tribute that Nwapa pays to her motherland. It had been a staple food of Nigerians for a long time. On the other hand, *Rice Song* is a condemnation of the existing state of affairs. The submissive and docile image of women in African societies was questioned by Nwapa in her poems. Cassava is usually addressed as 'mother' and by attributing the status of mother to the cassava, Nwapa emphasis the role and importance of mother in Igbo society. In most of the Igbo songs, mother is given utmost importance and motherhood is an important aspect of individual and society at large. According to Catherine Acholonu, Motherhood and childbearing are central to the life of African people. It is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which all else rests in the African society, and especially the family. (31)

The pervasive image of women as culturally bound prevails in all societies but recent studies in African literature attests the fact that in many African societies, women yielded considerable influence and power as that of their men. Nwapa through her poems pleads the Nigerian government to give a thought as to how much money they are spending to import rice. She is critical of the 'nairas' that go into the importation of rice. Nwapa also makes a request

to encourage people to grow cassava. She in fact makes a demand:

Naira in cash

For I am one of the population

And I don't care about rice

I am an adult, a wife and

A mother

So, can you give me

My share which is

Approximately one million naira? (Nwapa 1986, 135)

Cassava may not be attractive crop but many African women over the years have expressed their happiness in exercising their power and influence on such a valuable crop. It cannot be considered a cash crop of Africa but with its resilience and sturdiness, it can survive difficult times. Nwapa uses this crop as an example for depicting the perseverance of African women who can thrive and survive in difficult times. As cassava keeps many of the rural families alive, African women make their motherland proud by combating the strong forces that try to prove them as significant 'others'. Nwapa also mentions the nutritious quality that cassava has. She says that the lives of Nigerians are built around cassava. Nwapa even admires the odour of cassava. The nutritious values that cassava has wipe off the fermented odour.

In her songs, she writes:

The he-goat smells

The she-goat smells

You smell

Great Mother

You too must have

An identity

The leopard too

He has an identity

So we don't mind

Great Mother

Your odour

It does not matter

On the contrary, she begins her Rice Song with a question:

In the days gone by

Before the white men came

To our shore to trade in slaves

To colonize our country

Before they imposed their

Strange government on us;

Who south of the Niger

Heard about Rice?

Flora Nwapa mentions that her great grandparents are not aware of rice. They prepared only yam, cassava, maize fufu and soups. She makes a plea for all the Nigerians to go back to the roots and eat cassava. The maternal presence attributed to the cassava is, as Kristeva says, to repress the masculine symbolism (131). It also equates the cassava to the nation and rice as being foreign.

Flora Nwapa uses the cassava as a symbol to challenge the contemporary dilemmas about the role of African woman writer. In an interview with *Contemporary Authors*, Nwapa commented, "I have been writing for nearly thirty years. My interest has been on both the rural and the urban woman in her quest for survival in a fast-changing world dominated by men." She projected women as strong survivors even during crisis. Her protagonists offer realistic picture of gender issues in a patriarchal society. Her collection of poems also vividly portrays the sense of belonging that women have towards society in spite of them being considered the significant 'others'.

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