GENDER DISPARITIES IN THE IGBO CULTURE AS PORTRAYED IN NWAPA’S EFURU

By

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Abstract

Gender disparity is a major issue that has been in effect for a very long time. It is even worse in a patriarchal society. Men are not the only beings who exploit women. Women do it to themselves. They become advocates to Patriarchy. Igbo culture is one of the foremost cultures which follows Patriarchy. Women in the culture are inferior to men by all means. The women are provided with various restrictions while the man is free from customs to a certain extent. Exploitation of women in the Igbo culture happens at various levels and existence of women is at times unknown. Existing in a society means he is part of the society. In a patriarchal this is often questioned as men dictate what is right and wrong, what should be done and what should not be done. Women are mere spectators in the drama hosted by the men where they have to perform certain roles and leave. Ngabe brings forth not only the treatment of women but also the existential crisis she undergoes through her novels. Though she gives her women a higher status, they are still a refugee to their men at some point of time.

Keywords: patriarchy, motherhood, gender, customs, barren, marriage.

African traditions are one of the oldest traditions and are mostly patriarchal, where a woman is expected to serve her husband by all means. Most of their societies are still patriarchal. It is a fact that, many women face hardships in their life, just because they are inferior to men. They face these kinds of hardship not only in public sphere but also in family. In most of the places in Africa, women are devalued and considered as “second class citizens”. Simon de Beauvoir in her book Second Sex says that women are constructed by men as passive and inconsequential objects. Male writers have projected women as tragic heroines who are unable to speak from their subaltern position.

Feminism is one of the movements that later emerged as theories with the primary motive of fighting for the rights of women. Women were suppressed by men as they are considered as mere ‘objects’ to satisfy their needs. Furthermore, they are suppressed by their own kind. As bell hooks in her book Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory states that Women, in particular the black women are considered
as an object with no expressions or opinions by their fellow white women and they become objects of double suppression. Even Simone de Beauvoir, an existentialist philosopher and one of the prominent feminists of the 20th century makes a historical account on the disadvantages experienced by the women.

Gender has become the social identity of the individual, and thus creating serious issues in a society dominated by patriarchy. Identity is the one that determines the place of an individual in the society. If the identity of the individual is lost, she or he is nothing but a dead being. Flora Nwapa in her novels, fights to bring out a change in the minds of her people to “restore women’s images and dignity as mothers and wives and promote collaboration and complementary among the sexes in Nigeria and more generally in Africa” (Amouzou 97)

Patriarchy is a social organization in which males show their power and thus making women to feel their inferiority position. Adeola James In Their Own Voices (1990) says that men are the subject of history in all societies. The gender differentiation creates women’s marginalization. The way the male writers treat women are very different and sometimes very cruel too. When society is dominated by men, they make their own rules which completely break women’s images as “positive contributors to the development of their society” (Amozou 97).

Patriarchy or the male domination in the society has been followed not only because they are forced by the men in the society, but also because they are advocated by the women in the society. Subjectivity of women at all levels is ensured. Beauvoir in The Second Sex, speaks about this as, “No one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility”. (xxvi) In the novel Efuru, Women follow patriarchy in two broad ways, one by deceiving other women and the other by literally becoming slaves to men. Omirima, in the novel deceives Efuru by spreading false accusations about Efuru and tries to defeat Efuru by breaking her relationship with Gilbert.

Adizua’s mother Ossai is also a good example to the second type. Though she was abandoned by Adizua’s father, she remains faithful to him till the end of her life. She also explains her situation to Efuru saying how much she had suffered in order to remain faithful to her husband and she also encourages Efuru to do the same with Adizua. Even after he abandons Ossai, she still had faith in him. She had a hope that he

would come to her and Adizua. So Ossai advises Efuru to be patient until he returns back. Ossai had lived the rest of her life without her husband, who abandoned her. There may have been pride or self-satisfaction, but definitely there is no fun in her pain. Efuru also talks about her aunt who is very influential. She is very queer in her ways. She is very good at organizing plays with her friends. She is very bold and self-assertive even stealing from the garden that belongs to white men. But now she is married and “calm as a lamb now” (Nwapa 114).

Femininity is the quality constructed upon the women that restricts her from doing a great deal of things. Femininity is something advocated by the men for the women and propagated by the women to maintain the purity of the race. As Simone De Beauvoir states, the sole purpose of the women is to seduce her husband and to be loyal to him, whatever the condition is. Furthermore Beauvoir explains Femininity in his The Second Sex as,

“To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive and docile. The girl is supposed not only to primp and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters. Any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness”. (348)

According to Charles Nnolem (1989), women are largely categorized as incapable, weak, prostitutes, or even good time girls in the works by Achebe, Amadi. In all Nwapa’s novels, she creates a very decent society for her living characters. She has constructed a society that gives respect to women. She confronts the issues of gender and the male power by the patriarchal society. In the beginning of the novel, she illustrates her female characters to be very innocent and helpless and then turning into a state of self-recognition and power throughout the texts.

Nwapa says that the problem for women arises by the way how men treat the women in the society. Nwapa is not saying the simple ideology that “men are bad, women are good” (Patrick). This is clarified by some portrait of women in the novel. For example, in Efuru, Omirima is a great gossiper and creates problem in Efuru’s life. She creates problem in Efuru’s second marriage by speaking about Efuru’s infertility. Moreover, at the end of the novel Omirima blames Efuru that she has committed adultery. Patrick says that “Omirima is at least as objectionable as
Adizua, and clearly far more objectionable than Gilbert” (Nwapa53).

Marriage in the Nigerian tradition is valued of the customs than of the individuals. Marriage between two individuals is considered as a purely family affair and not that of an individual. Therefore, the issue of elopement is completely not acceptable. Marriage in the African society is the true test of womanhood. Helen Chukwuma in her paper *Women’s Quest for Rights: African Feminist Theory in Fiction* asserts “the true test for female assertion is in the marriage institution and motherhood. It is in the home that the real fight for women identity and survival is waged”. (Chuckuma)

Nigerian women consider themselves to be real women only if they prove themselves to be fertile. This is true for most of the women in Africa who are considered to be “the real or responsible women” (139, Sandipan Ghosh) only when they attain the stage of motherhood. Many non-mothering women in the society experience the feeling of rejection and low self-esteem. In *Efuru* Nwapa speaks about the frustration faced by Efuru because of her inability to become a mother. Woman's worth is measured by motherhood. When she fails to attain this stage, she is considered as waste to herself, to her husband and to her society. Nwapa portrays the theme of barrenness because the people in Igbo look upon barren women as a bad luck to their family. In Igbo tradition women are embodied in the goddess of Uhamiri, and the goddess teaches that “women should treat one another as daughter of goddess, sharing their property with one another, just as Efuru shares her property with Nnona” (Patrick). In the novel *Efuru*, Goddess “uhamiri” is the blessings of wealth and not children. It is also believed that she chooses to bless people with abundance in production of farm and children.

When Uhamiri denies her blessing, her followers suffer from huge hardship and humiliation in the case of fruit of the womb. Efuru suffers from childlessness because of Uhamiri’s refusal to bless her. It is seen as the punishment that Uhamiri gives them indirectly. Although Efuru is said to be kind loving, beautiful and wealthy woman, Omirima says, “Good but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go on errand for us” (Nwapa163).

Omirima sees Efuru as a barren woman rather than admiring her beauty. Though she consults numerous dibiyas, her condition does not improve. Omirima says that Efuru has committed adultery. She can
get well once she confesses her sin to Gilbert. Gilbert believes Omirima and asks Efuru to confess her sins. Thus, the position of women, that too his wife below the custom and tradition is portrayed in the novel.

Motherhood is a set of natural feelings and behaviors that is triggered in a woman’s body. The experience of motherhood is shaped by a social context and culture. The life of motherhood is entirely different from what she thinks her as an autonomous individual. In many societies, motherhood is wrapped with many cultural meanings like what the society thinks that the mother should be. In Efuru, she speaks this concept, how motherhood plays an important role in the Nigerian society. Although there is a lot of changes in the culture, patriarchal societies present a woman’s central purpose is to bear a child and it is also believed that motherhood is the only thing of woman’s identity.

Nwapa presents Efuru and brings forth the question on how the society treats a woman without a child? Do mothers have equal rights? In African society, having children is very important. But Nwapa thinks otherwise, in the end of the novel, it is Efuru’s wealth that substitutes for motherhood.

Nwapa is against the fact that women are voiceless. All the female characters in her fiction are not meant only working for their husband and children. “They count in significant matters affecting community or national life” (qtd. in Amouzo 101). Nwapa creates a new space and voice for women. Though Nwapa in her novels empowers her female characters by giving them freedom or certain dignity in their community, her women always need men’s support and compliment from them. Though Efuru is very strong and successful in such a way that she is introduced as,

Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman.
It was not only she came from a distinguished family.
She was distinguished herself. (Nwapa1).
Efuru still longs for a suitable husband.

The voice of the women, the exact problems and crisis has not been brought out and answered as they are mostly written from a male perspective. If a suppressor writes about the condition of the suppressed, much of the important issues and problems will be suppressed. In The Second Sex, the author brings out a similar statement as, “Representations of the world, like the world itself, is the work
of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth” (Beauvoir 161) Nwapa's novel projects the female characters in her works to show that “women’s voices should not be muted voices of a group of subaltern, but ideological voices.” (Amouzou 103).

Works Cited


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Ashmi has completed her Post graduate degree in English and Master of Philosophy in English. She has been a full time Ph.D Research Scholar in Bharthi Women's College at University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India since 2018. She is a good orator. She has participated seminars and workshops at National level. She has presented papers in seminars.

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