

CULTURAL BURDEN IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU

S.NANDINI

Assistant professor,
UG Department of English,
Sree Saraswathi Thyagaraja College, Pollachi, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.

ABSTRACT: *The present paper focuses on Flora Nwapa's novel Efuru which is noted for insightful treatment of the African culture. She portrays the life of the African and their predicament. She has endeavoured to develop a very critical and comprehensive view to project loathsome traditions of which torture and mutilate not only the body but also the soul of the Igbo women. It also projects the cultural practice of female circumcision as a cultural burden. The women in Nwapa's novel struggle to achieve individual identity within their culture. They seek love and respect from the community and acceptance of the choice they make. The paper expounds the commitment of the author to fight for the oppressed class.*

KEY WORDS: *Igbo society, cultural burden, mutilation, FGM, circumcision.*

Literature generally evolves out of historical and cultural experience of the people. In the case of African literature, this experience was completely different from the Western. The view that the African novel evolved, not from the western novel, but from the well-established tradition of African prose writing and even more ancient tradition of oral literature. The relationship between oral and written traditions and in particular between oral and modern written literature is one of great complexity and not a matter of simple evolution. Modern African literatures were born in the educational systems imposed by colonialism, with models drawn from Europe rather than existing African traditions. But the African oral traditions exerted their own influence on these literatures. In the colonial days, African culture was adversely affected by the imperialist experiences since everything was judged by the western cultural standards and there was a tendency to suppress those aspects of the African culture which could not be reconciled with western culture.

Since the 1950's and the 1960's, African literature has been dominated by male writers such as Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who have inevitably presented African culture and tradition from a male-oriented perspective. Sub-Saharan African literature is increasingly popular among critics and general readers throughout the world. Until fairly recently, feminist issues in African literature have not received the attention they deserve, for example, in the works of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Ogot and Ama Ata Aidoo. African women writers only began to be accorded a space in the African literary canon from 1966, with the publication of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*.

Florence Nwanzuruahu Nkiru Nwapa was a Nigerian author best known as Flora Nwapa. She is known as the 'mother of modern African literature'. As a forerunner to a generation of African women writers, she is acknowledged as the first African woman novelist to be recognized in the English language in Britain. She achieved international recognition with her first novel *Efuru* which was published in 1966. She is best known for recreating life and traditions from an Igbo woman's point of view.

Flora Nwapa writes about the African women's lives, issues, and concerns within a traditional Igbo culture radically affected by the British colonialism. As she explores and analyzes many of the Igbo women's desire for a change, choice and acceptance fully as human beings not just in the roles traditionally allowed them- as workers, wives and mothers. Instead, they long for greater freedom than traditional Igbo customs allow in the domestic and public realms. But their beliefs and values have been transformed by Christianity, western education, and an increasing emphasis upon the individual. The women in Nwapa's novels speak for the needs of both collective and individual female identity within their culture. They seek love and respect from the community and acceptance of the choices they make.

Igbo is a culturally rich people and they are industrious, friendly and educated people and they played an important role in Nigerian political development. Igbo people have a dynamic and fascinating cultural heritage that says a lot about them, and most of the Igbo people are Christians. Their culture is further divided into many groups. Many countries have officially banned different kinds of violence and discriminatory cultural practices and behaviors including the sexual exploitation of women and children, female genital mutilation or circumcision that remained like Damocles's sword over the heads of young women, and children. The practice of Female genital cutting or mutilation (FGC/FGM) has continued throughout history and its dangers are still haunting countless young women today.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a procedure which involves partial or total removal of the external female genital or injury to the female genital organs, whether for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons. FGM is an unhealthy traditional practice inflicted on girls and women worldwide. FGM is widely recognized as a violation of human rights, which is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and perceptions over decades and generations with no easy task for change. FGM is widely practiced in Nigeria, with its large population; Nigeria has the highest absolute number of cases of FGM in the world.

The history of FGC is of a global nature; each country and community possesses its own story or hidden past with female genital cutting. The respondents gave reasons for FGM. They regarded FGM as a tribal traditional practice (our custom is a good tradition and has to be protected), as a superstitious belief practiced for preservation of chastity and purification, family honor, hygiene, esthetic reasons, protection of virginity and prevention of promiscuity, modification of socio-sexual attitudes (countering failure of a woman to attain orgasm), increasing sexual pleasures of husband, enhancing fertility and increasing matrimonial opportunities. Other reasons are to prevent mother and child from dying during childbirth and for legal reasons, (one cannot inherit property if not circumcised). In some parts of Nigeria, the cut edges of the external genitalia are smeared with secretions from a snail footpad with the belief that the snail being a slow animal would influence the circumcised girl to 'go slow' with sexual activities in future.

It reflects the deep-rooted inequality between the sexes and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It involves violation of rights of the children and violation of a person's right to health, security, and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Furthermore, girls usually undergo the practice without their informed consent, depriving them of the opportunity to make independent decision about their bodies. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) first became a matter of considerable international concern at the 1980s women's NGO forum in Copenhagen, when the practice was portrayed as barbaric and cruel by the western female advocates for women's rights.

In most African countries the practice of female circumcision is to suppress the woman's sexual pleasure, it would be difficult to buy into that interpretation and believe that all the perpetrators look for is to prevent women's eroticism, and as a result, inflict pain. The people consider this a sadistic behavior seeking to inflict pain upon young innocent girls. Most often, mothers are present to help the young girl endure it without too much fear. When people put themselves in the minds of the people who still practice this rite, it is apparent that they do not see it as a bad thing, but rather they see an ethical and even a certain 'aesthetic' value in doing it not only to conform with tradition, but also to elevate the girl's self-esteem among the peers who might have been already circumcised.

Female circumcision, also referred to as excision, is a tradition that is found in different cultures in Africa, Asia and even in some parts of Southern America. Just as young boys went through wrestling and other physical and mental initiation rites to become men, the girls, apart from the household duties, had to be circumcised. Thus in Nwapa's *Efuru*, an African girl's biography, observation on circumcision is almost casual, touching upon the subject matter merely as a part of the girl's wedding preparations. In *Efuru*, at the beginning of her stay with her husband Adizua, Efuru has to undergo this customary practice or ritual before getting pregnant. Here, circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) would depend on whether the practice is done in the socio-cultural context or whether it looks at the practice as a barbaric mutilation of innocent females.

Efuru is a novel with a heroine who consciously decides to break one major rule of tradition she decides to get married before the bride prize is paid to her family, but this is the first of several customs she manipulates as a matter of choice and freedom. The novel ends with Efuru living happily among her people while helping them and worshipping Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake, who gave her wealth and happiness but no children.

In Nwapa's novel, the eponymous protagonist Efuru undergoes the ordeal of FGM. She realizes that she accepted the torture of circumcision in order to prove that she too, was courageous, and therefore was a woman, like many others around her. In the minds of the women, this is the first experience of childbirth. But the people should not overlook the physical pains that women endure during this operation. It is as much painful as the pleasure and the joy one expects to gain after the surgery. Nwapa gives us an eloquent illustration that during circumcision, Efuru screamed and screamed because of pain. Her mother-in-law consoled her that it will soon be over. Later on, when Efuru gives birth to a girl, her delivery is not too painful and uncomplicated; there are no mentions of re-stitching or any circumcision-caused side effects. As it is said in *Efuru*, 'having a bath' is a euphemism for clitoridectomy, and the ritual 'purification' is so important that one baby's death was attributed to the mother's fear of the razor. Since Nwapa presents traditional society in a realistic way, her portrayal of attitudes favouring genital mutilation is, to some extent, entirely appropriate and understandable.

The African women are culturally burdened by FGM out of which there is no escape. To become a wife and a mother, women in African societies must undergo circumcision rites. This is the most sacrosanct area of a woman's life. Unless she is circumcised, she is not considered a woman. Most African writers, both male and female have displayed an ambivalent attitude to female circumcision.

The word 'painful' is repeated a number of times in this novel and the author has not left in any doubt about the physical trauma that women must go through to be circumcised. But the readers are made aware of the psychological necessity that the women and the society that they live in, feel about circumcision. Efuru herself states, "It is much better now. It was dreadful the first day." This statement elicits the response, "It is what every woman undergoes. So don't worry" (Nwapa 15). Thus, in *Efuru*, an African girl's biography, the observation on circumcision is almost casual, touching upon the subject merely as a part of the girl's wedding preparations.

The novel accepts female circumcision as an integral part of a vital culture. Since Nwapa presents traditional society in a realistic mode, her portrayal of attitudes favouring genital mutilation is, on one level entirely appropriate.

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