Folk Stereotypes and the Theme of Marital Incompatibility in the Novels of Flora Nwapa

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FOLK STEREOTYPES AND THE THEME OF MARITAL COMPATIBILITY
IN THE NOVELS OF FLORA NWAPA

by
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A common assumption in the criticism of the novels of the leading Nigerian woman novelist of Igbo origin, Flora Nwapa, is that she is preoccupied with the existential problems of the typical Igbo woman in a community in which the womenfolk live under the burden of the myth that there can be no happiness in marriage (and, indeed, in life) without children. But this is only partially true. Flora Nwapa, in her novels is equally concerned with showing that the Igbo womenfolk are no less concerned with the ideal of “happy marriage” based on love and compatibility, and it is this concern — more than the myth that infertility is a curse — that is the determination of the fate which ultimately befalls her characters. The characters themselves are essentially based on folk stereotypes, but they nevertheless function in the novels as powerful vehicles for the exploration of the theme.

The folk stereotypes on which Flora Nwapa’s characters are based are not the products of sheer fantasy. They are rather frozen images of reality — of categories of real human beings — formed over the generations from countless similar experiences of the attitudes, behaviour and fortunes of representatives of the ordinary folk in the living community. They embody certain shared moral values and generally represent the projections of the fears, hopes, anxieties and sources of satisfaction of the ordinary folk in the community. They strike us as real, because we can sometimes identify ourselves with the attitudes, experiences and fortunes which they represent, or recognize the foibles or admirable qualities of friends, relatives and neighbours in them. Nevertheless, folk stereotypes are not the finished products of artistic characterization. They are rather powerful and highly suggestive sketches of reality which the artist receives from tradition and which he can imbue with life within the limits of his skill and intentions. Like the Gestalt (see Jacobi, 1959:53—55), they are at first forms without content and it is left to the artist or traditor who employs them in a narrative to turn them into flat or round characters. A romancer may turn them into fantastic, or stylized, figures which might “expand into psychological archetypes” (Frye 1973). A passive traditor will employ them in their raw and sketchy form and will make no effort at imbuing them with the fire of life; but the novelist and the creative traditor will focus on their potentialities for the illumination of the nature of the human personality and place them in situations of conflict in
which they will be involved — as fully rounded characters — in a dynamic interaction with one another towards the development of a particular theme.

Flora Nwapa is neither a romancer nor a passive traditor. She is both a novelist and a creative traditor. In her two full-length novels (Efuru, 1966 and Idu, 1970) — which are the focal interest of the present paper — she has taken a set of significant folk stereotypes from traditions handed down from one generation of women to another (through popular gossip, old wives' tales, rumour, homilies and women's folk songs) and breathed new life into them, placing them in a dynamic inter-relationship with one another in a sustained effort at revealing what it feels like to be a woman in a community in which life is a cyclical pattern of fertility rites and ceremonies on account of the myth by which the people live. The myth is summed up in two short sentences in Idu (p. 50):

What we are praying for is children.
What else do we want if we have children.

It is repeated and elaborated in practically all conversations, speeches, reminiscences and gossips, and ritually re-enacted in practically all dramatic situations, in the novels. However, Flora Nwapa — as an Igbo woman — is close enough to the milieu to know that despite the power of this myth, having children is by no means the only thing the Igbo womenfolk want in life. She demonstrates through the fortunes of the parallel and contrasting characters she presents, that given a certain combination of circumstances, the degree of love and compatibility between a woman and her husband may prove to be even more important than the breeding of children. It seems clear from the utterances and actions of the characters in the novels that this is no modernist, or feminist, standpoint of Flora Nwapa herself but that it is as much a part of the traditional belief of the Igbo womenfolk as the myth that reechoes in many situations throughout the two novels: that infertility is anathema. Nowhere else is this fact more clearly demonstrated than in the fate that befalls the protagonist of Idu, as underlined in the summary of the story of the novel on the blurb of the Heinemann African Writers' Series paperback edition:

"What we are praying for is children. What else do we want if we have children?" These two sentences contain the basic theme of the book, a novel set in a small Nigerian town where the life of the individual is woven into that of the community as a whole. For long it appears as though Idu is unable to have a child, and her husband Adiewere even takes a second wife. But finally Idu gives birth to a fine boy, Ijoma. But it is not until Ijoma is four years old that Idu becomes pregnant for the second time. Before her second child arrives, however, Adiewere mysteriously dies. Idu flouts all conventions by refusing to marry her husband's brother, preferring to follow her husband to the next world. Clearly, children are not the only thing she wants in life. (Emphasis added).

It is therefore not true to say that Flora Nwapa "is over-preoccupied with the concern for children in marriage in an age when the fear of over-population is acute and some ecologists are talking about 'zero population growth'. (Eme-
nyonu, 1975:32). From her intimate knowledge of Igbo women’s folklore — traditional beliefs, customs and rituals — which she must have experienced as a child and obviously encountered in many situations as a married, divorced and remarried adult Igbo woman — she is more keenly aware than her male counterparts that the Igbo woman is as preoccupied with “happy marriage” based on love and compatibility between a woman and her husband as with children. Idu’s utterances before her mysterious but rather dignified death are indicative of the mystical bond of love that subsists between her and her husband, a love that transcends the common concern for children and the ordinary requirements of custom. Refusing to weep for her dead husband, she heroically declares:

“Weep for what? . . . Weep for Adiewere? That is not what we agreed on. He has cheated me. We did not agree that this would happen. We did not agree on what to do if this sort of thing happened. We did not think of it. Why do you want me to weep. I am going with him. Leave me alone. I am going with him.” (p 210).

In the end, Idu keeps her words and follows her husband to the land of the dead (pp. 217–218). After a nice meal which she specially requests to be cooked for her, she simply lies down and dies.

An early reviewer of Idu, Adeola James (1971:152) has questioned the validity of this portrayal of the death of the heroine in these words:

Our moral perspective remains equivocal because of the writer’s own lack of moral involvement.
Are we to regard Idu’s final rejection of life and children in preference to following her dead husband as a courageous act, or is it an indication of the deepest kind of love, or is it a cowardly act—a failure to face up to the responsibilities of motherhood.

It seems worth pointing out at this stage that by posing these questions, James appears to have contradicted one basic assumption of his review that Nwapa’s novels are lacking in, among other artistic merits, “powerful characterization” (1975:153). For the impression conveyed by his repotest is that there is in fact a fair degree of complexity in Flora Nwapa’s characterization, (in any case) in the nature of the character, Idu, which, as we shall see presently, she has created from a folk stereotype. It is only a flat character, “one centring about a single idea or quality” and “lacking in complexity” that “never surprises” (see Beckson and Ganz, 1961:69). Idu is clearly not such a character. Nevertheless, when we understand the implicit argument in Flora Nwapa’s novels that having children is not all that the Igbo womenfolk live for, her rejection of life and children ceases to be a riddle, for it is a rejection of life with a man who typifies what, in the philosophy of the womenfolk, is the most dreaded trait in a man, a refusal to succumb to negative social pressures and accept to lead a life of humiliation and suffering for a worthless man — in this case, Ishiodu, her husband’s brother:

Ishiodu, Adiewere’s brother was a ne’er-do-well. There is nothing he did and did well. It was Adiewere who had arranged his marriage, it was Adiewere who had built the house he
Ironically, Ishiodu’s wife, Ogbenyeanu, is a hard-working woman blessed with many children. But hers is a life of persistent suffering for a worthless man. As we shall see later, she represents the stupid suffering type of wife who suffers because she lacks the good sense to recognize her husband for what he is, a truant, improvident, fool. One of the dominant themes of the novels of Flora Nwapa is the reminder that one of the most important aspects of the traditional education of the Igbo woman is to equip her with the necessary insight and capacity to reject a worthless man if and whenever he comes into her life.

In exploring this theme, Flora Nwapa presents two sets of parallel and contrasting characters based on folk stereotypes: the truant and the suffering husband, on the one hand, and the truant and the suffering wife, on the other. In the representation of the lives and actions of these sets of characters, there is a consistent equation of truancy with irresponsibility and suffering with responsibility; in a sustained effort to reveal what could happen to a suffering wife when she is faced with the choice of spending her life under the roof of a truant husband with whom she is incompatible both in temperament and background.

The tragedy of the heroine of Flora Nwapa’s first novel, Efuru is the sense of total emptiness and self-reproach which overpowers a woman who, after successfully rejecting a truant husband, discovers that under the social mask of responsibility worn by her second husband lurks a dangerous truancy. In the end, she is left with nothing: no children and no husband worth living for. Efuru’s first husband, Adizua, is an example of the truant husband par excellence. His “waywardness” is in his blood and you can do nothing about it” (p. 71). He is indeed presented kind of clone of his own father:

He did exactly what his father did — this time
...ran away with a woman who had left her husband (p. 97)

And besides he bears a close physical resemblance to his father. As his mother, Ossai, declares: “he is exactly like him — the height and everything” (p. 71). This association of truancy with genetic inheritance is rooted in the folk belief which forms the rationale for the traditional Igbo practice of investigating the backgrounds of both the man and the woman before they are permitted by their respective families to get married. In the case of Efuru, however, there is no opportunity for such an investigation, for she flouts convention and elopes with Adizua, although she knows fully well that he is a worthless man (p. 1). Efuru’s subsequent experiences are thus a vindication of the necessity for the folk practice of pre-marital investigation; it underlines the enormity of the suffering a woman can bring to herself by a reckless breach of an age-old custom. The moral is clear. If Efuru had allowed custom to take its course, the good judgement of her highly respected father and family would have ensured a happy and compatible marriage for her, like the “happy marriage” of Idu and Adiewere. One is reminded here of the fortunes of another suffering wife, Uberife, in Idu, who because she fails to listen to the voice of custom, marries into a family with a history of hereditary insanity only to become the unhappy mother of a mad boy. Of the mad boy and her own suffering, Uberife says, when she is visited by Idu:
As you have seen him, you have seen his father when he was younger. His father vomited him out. But what pity. He could have been like me. I have three other boys, they are all younger than this one and they are all like me. I thank God for that. But the eldest boy will be like his father. Soap cannot wash it off. Our people told me before I married my husband that insanity was in his family. But I did not heed them and here we see it. I am suffering because of my foolhardiness (p. 122).

Flora Nwapa’s novels suggest that the traditional education of the Igbo woman stresses the virtue of heroic rejection as a way of liberation for any woman encumbered with a worthless man. Thus, against the folk stereotype of the truant husband, two basic variants of the suffering wife are portrayed, namely the heroic suffering wife (who rejects humiliation) and the stupid suffering wife (who succumbs to it). The former is represented by Adizu’s mother. Ossai (in Efuru) and by Ishiodu’s wife, Ogbenyeanu (in Idu).

Adizu’s mother, Ossai, is a stupid suffering wife because she fails to act judiciously when she recognizes the truant in her husband. She is the direct opposite of her sister, Ajanupu, the energetic, sensible wife, who we are told “would have interfered even with fate” if the circumstances so warranted:

She (Ossai) did not have the fighting spirit which Ajanupu possessed in abundance. So whenever her misfortune came, instead of fighting it, as Ajanupu would have done, she succumbed to it. She surrendered everything to fate. Ajanupu would have interfered with fate. She would have played her own tune and invited fate to dance to it. Not Ossai. When Ajanupu and her mother wanted her to do something after her husband had left her, she did nothing. She merely folded her hands and waited for her truant husband to come back to her (Efuru), p. 96).

Like other figures in the novels of Flora Nwapa, the stupid suffering wife is the product of generations of collective female anger, in this case with women who fail to recognize the futility of succumbing to so much suffering for worthless men. Thus, in a “brutally frank” admonition to her sister, Ajunupu tells Ossai:

How could you be suffering for a person who did not appreciate your suffering, the person who despised you. It was not virtue, it was plain stupidity. You merely wanted to suffer for the fun of it, as if there was any virtue in suffering for a worthless man (Efutu, p. 97).

It is because no reasonable Igbo woman can put up with so much senseless suffering that Efuru is overwhelmed by self-reproach when, in the denouncement, she recognizes the shdaow of the truant husband in Gilbert (her second husband) and of the stupid suffering wife in herself:

Everything was clear at last. The mystery of her husband’s absence at her father’s burial was now explained. He could not come, because he was in jail. She felt very sorry at first, then suddenly, she was filled with fury. She was angry because her husband, with whom she had lived nearly six years, could, at
this stage of their married life, hide something from
her. Angry because she had again loved in vain.
She had deceived herself when she was Adizua’s wife,
She was filled with hate and resentment, qualities
which were foreign to her nature (Efuru,
p. 265–266).

But this is a passionate response to a tragic circumstance which Efuru could
not have foreseen, and hence to control. Her true nature is that of a true female
hero with the capacity for judicious action in trying situations. This quality
which defines her as the heroic type of the suffering wife, is revealed in the
musings which come as a preface to her prompt rejection of her first husband
after listening to her mother-in-law’s fatalistic reflections on the affinities
between Adizua’s behaviour and that of his father:

And my mother-in-law, — poor woman. She does
look as if she had seen many sad days, and the
behaviour of her son has reminded her of all she
suffered in her younger days. Perhaps self-
imposed suffering appeals to her. It does not
appeal to me. I know I am capable of suffering
for greater things. But to suffer for a truant hus-
band, an irresponsible husband like Adizua is
to debase suffering. My own suffering will be
noble. When Adizua comes back, I shall leave
him (Efuru, p. 73).

As already observed above, it is by the same kind of reasoning that Idu re-
jects her late husband’s brother, Ishiodu, preferring to die than become his
wife. On the mystery of Idu’s death, Emenyonyu (1973:30) has posed a series
of questions and answers which I consider to be relevant to the present dis-
course:

Too fantastic? Not if you have been ‘listening’
to the voices of the novel. Too unrealistic?
Not if you have been close enough to the Igbo
culture and life-ways. Too remote? Not if you
understand that even among the Igbo, the love
between two individuals can be such that one
can die without the other.

Idu’s self-sacrificing love is indeed not alien to the Igbo cultural outlook.
It echoes a recurrent theme not only in Igbo woman’s folklore but also in
general Igbo folklore about women. It is particularly strong in heroic poetry,
notably in the oral epic songs of the Cross River Igbo people of Ohafia (see
Azuonye, 1979:143–149). In its legends of brave women, the Ohafia Igbo
epic recounts the heroic deeds of courageous women who have found so much
satisfaction in their marriage to particular men that they have been able to
reject life and children and court death rather than live without their beloved
husbands. As I have shown in a recent paper (Azuonye, 1983:332–380), this is
the heroic essence of one epic, the epic of Nne Mgbafo, the story of a woman
who risks death to go seek her husband in alien Ibibio country where he had
been lost in battle. This is the constant element that remains unchanged in
numerous versions of the epic irrespective of numerous changes made in its
structure and phraseology by one or more singers in performance after per-
formance.

Idu is a novelistic essay on the kind of marital compatibility and love which
can conduce this kind of self-sacrificing heroism. It enumerates and applies to the lives of the characters it presents various factors which, according to the philosophy of the womenfolk, make for compatibility in married life. For example, we can learn from a conversation between Uzoechi and Nwasobi, at the streamside, that the factors that make for compatibility are not always fixed traits which spouses bring into the marriage; they may be developed in the course of the marriage through harmonious interaction:

“What I like about them is the way they live, their happy marriage.”

“It’s not only that, our Uzoechi, it is their kindness. Do you know what, when two people live together, one gradually begins to behave like the other?”

“What do you mean?” asked Uzoechi.

“You know Adiwere was not at all that magnanimous before he married Idu. Now the two of them are about the kindest couple I know in this town.” (Idu, p.3).

The compatibility of Idu and Adiwere is further revealed in everything they do and say in their hopes, fears and desires, and even in such mundane man-and-wife diversions as mutual backscratching on the bed:

“By the help of God, things will be all right this season”, Adiwere said... “What I am praying for is strength and health. That’s all. Something is scratching (sic = itching) my back. Please scratch it for me.”

“You don’t give me a moment’s peace”, said Idu.

“What part of the back?”

“This side. That’s it, you have got it. We shouldn’t have mosquitoes at this time of year.”

“No, it is not a mosquito bite. Something else must have bitten you. Will you scratch my back now, I have scratched yours?”

“Where?”

“All over my back. Good, thank you...”

Throughout the novel, Idu is portrayed as representing that highly valued type of wife commonly described in Igbo women’s parlance as okwere-nke-di-kara (she that agrees with everything her husband says), and her husband in turn is portrayed throughout as epitomizing the equally highly valued type of husband commonly eulogized in Igbo women’s folksongs as dim m oma (my good husband): bestower of gifts, kind-hearted and loving. What every Igbo man expects to find in a wife is that she should conform to the ideal of the okwere-nke-di-kara, and the dream of every Igbo woman is to have the good fortune to have a husband whom she can always address in public, as in private, without any reservations as di m oma. The result of the union of such a man and woman is the kind of perfect agreement that subsists between Idu and Adiwere.

But agreement between husband and wife is incomplete, in Igbo custom and thought, if it does not involve the in-laws — the man and the woman’s parents and the woman and the man’s parents. The marriage between Idu and Adiwere epitomizes this level of marital compatibility. So too does the marriage of Efuru and her second husband, Gilbert, in its early phase:
Gilbert loved and respected Efuru. Efuru on the other hand knew the duties of a wife. She did not for one moment slack in her duties. She did not only take good care of her husband, she was sweet to her mother-in-law. She did not for one day give her cause to be dissatisfied with her (Efuru, p. 170).

Agreement between husband and wife not only breeds mutual respect but the kind of togetherness of which the womenfolk are highly appreciative. Efuru and Gilbert "were so much together that people admired them. They went to the stream together, there they swam together, they came back together and ate together" (Efuru, p. 171), and everywhere they went they provoked appreciative comments such as the following:

"I like them", one woman said. . .
"When two people live like that, then the world is worth living in", said another.
(Efuru, p. 220).

It seems clear from Flora Nwapa's novels that popular dreams of the ideal, compatible marriage are often as important, if not more important, in Igbo folklife than the more conventional dreams of motherhood. This is notwithstanding misgivings such as the one contained in the following gossip about Efuru and Gilbert:

"Seeing them together is not the important thing" another said, "The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive" (Efuru, p. 171).

This point of view is promptly countered by the next speaker who, it is significant to note, is presented by Flora Nwapa — in one of the significant intrusions of authorial voice in novels — as "the only reasonable one" among the gossipers:

"Are you not in a hurry?" said the only reasonable one among them (Emphasis added).
"What hurry? Of course, not. What are they waiting for?"
"But they have been married for only a year."
"Hear what she is talking. How long does it take a woman to be pregnant? What are you talking about?"
(Efuru, p. 171).

The attentive reader of the novels of Flora Nwapa will hear the resonance of these two opposing voices reflecting two radically opposed attitudes to fertility and compatibility as determinants of happy marriage. One voice (the voice of emotion) stresses fertility while the other voice (the voice of reason) stresses compatibility. As has been pointed out above, Flora Nwapa is clearly on the side of the voice of reason, the voice of "the only reasonable one among them". The voice of emotion is redolent with impatience, fear, superstition, anxiety, contempt and ill-temper while the voice of reason is sober and self-assured. In her utterances, Efuru reveals the sobriety and self-assuredness of the voice of reason. But so deafening and destabilizing is the voice of emotion that, in spite of her self-assuredness, Efuru is completely overwhelmed after a conversa-
tion with Ajanupu (a typical voice of emotion) in which the latter suggests that she allows her second husband to take another wife, as she herself does not appear to be able to become pregnant ever again:

Efuru went home that night with a heavy heart. It was not the thought of another wife for Gilbert that made her heart so heavy. It was the fact that she was considered barren. It was a curse to be barren. It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure (Efuru, p. 207).

Even the most reasonable person cannot help entertaining such voices of popular emotion in certain situations, such as the situation in which Efuru found herself that night. Listening to such voices can result in the tragic destruction of a perfectly happy marriage. This is what happens to the marriage of Ojiugo who is forced to desert her husband whom she loves dearly and with whom she has experienced a most happy relationship, and the poor man is driven to suicide. James (1971:152) has questioned the validity of ‘Amarajeme’s suicide and suggested that Amarajeme is not a convincing character.

He writes:

The effect of Amarajeme’s suicide is pathos, not tragedy. Although the words chosen to describe Amarajeme’s taking of his own life by hanging and its aftermath do echo Okonkwo’s tragic end in Things Fall Apart, yet the highly emotive words fall flat and seem misplaced essentially because Amarajeme is not a convincing character. He does not behave like a man, he seems morally weak than doomed, therefore his end does not arouse in us the pity and fear necessary for a tragic experience.

But what does an unhappy impotent rejected by his wife do in a society in which the emotive voices of the great majority of the people are everywhere crying aloud that infertility is a curse? Protected by the love and confidence of his loving and beloved wife, Ojiugo, Amarajeme could go on living. After all, the childlessness of their marriage could be blamed on his wife. But exposed by his wife’s unceremonious departure for another man, a real man, Amarajeme is doubly scandalized. His fate does indeed arouse pity and fear: pity because of the circumstances in which it occurs; fear, because it could happen to anyone who has not yet proved his manhood. Only after Amarajeme has been driven to suicide does the voice of reason visit the heart of Ojiugo and she is so overwhelmed by the realization that the bond of love between her and her husband does indeed go beyond what the ordinary folk regarded as the basis of happy marriage. The frustration that overcomes her is as good as death:

She “died” the day her husband died. The day
Amarajeme died, that was the day she died,"
(Idu, p. 216).

Apart from the basic issues of fertility and compatibility in marriage, there are of course, other issues which recur in the novels of Flora Nwapa and which provide the focus for her massive documentation and application of the beliefs,

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customs, rituals and arts of the womenfolk in the fishing and trading riverine-Igbo town of Ugwuta (her own hometown) in which her characters live. The novels are a rich mine of detailed and authentic information on marriage customs and rituals, fertility and puberty rites, problems of childbirth and infant mortality and "traditions about women's and children's diseases and everything connected with the care of children (Von Sydow, 1948:48–49), and there is a wealth of superstitions and beliefs covering every aspect of the life of women in the community, especially with regard to the worship of the childless, wealth-giving, but child-denying woman of the Lake, Uhamiri. These details make for local colour and enhance the realism of the participants by providing a realistic, true-to-life setting for their actions. But apart from this, the voices we hear in various situations in the novels are inchoate with authentic folk speech although there is generally no phrase or sentence-by-sentence equivalence between the structure of the utterances and Igbo grammatical forms. As Emenyonu has observed with special reference to Idu,

One would have to understand the language of Flora Nwapa's novels in order to appreciate her achievements. This 'language' includes both the Igbo world-view which she communicates and the way she reaches down to all her characters and communicates authentically at all their levels not excluding their idiosyncrasies and mannerisms which she manifests in their speech patterns to help reveal more and more the nature of the characters. There is not one false note (that is, if you can listens carefully) in the voices of these characters whether that is Onyemuru the unmitakable flippant bearer of bad news, or Nwasobi, the philosophical antithesis of Onyemuru, or Ishiodu the totally undiplomatic and nonchalant spend thrift or Adiawere the silently aggressive achiever, or Idu the dignified suffering woman (1975: 31).

We may say the same of the parallel and contrasting characters in the earlier novel, Efuru. Apart from the heroine herself, the sister of Efuru's mother-in-law, Ajanupu, is perhaps the most memorable character in the novel, both on account of her skills and the power of her utterances. She belongs essentially to the category of "old women, who without being counted among the wise ones often have a rich tradition about children's and women's diseases and everything connected with the care of children" (The quotation is from Von Sydow, 1948: 48–49). She is also the perfect disciplinarian, in control of everything, and with a proper sense of the right orientation of women's education. She is paralleled in Idu by Nwasobi, a less domineering woman but no less an energetic and ubiquitous helper and interloper. Like Ajanupu, she is always at hand at emergencies and ever ready to offer advice and bully emotion-choked ladies into reasonable action.

In his essay on Idu, Emenyonu (1975) has made an observation which may serve as a fitting summing up of the argument of this paper: "Flora Nwapa writes with a peculiar realism. She brings a feminine closeness and intuition into a theme that has been repeatedly treated by such male Igbo authors as Onuora Nzekwu, John Munonye, Cyprian Ekweusi, and others, but which is best understood in all its ramifications by a woman" (1975: 31). Unlike her male counterparts, she does not bully us into accepting the erroneous notion that the existen-
tial anguish of the traditional Igbo woman stems solely from the collective acceptance of one emotion-toned folk philosophy. Because of her closeness to the culture of the womenfolk and her own personal experiences as an adult Igbo woman, she is more circumspect. Inasmuch as Igbo women’s folklore tends to regard childlessness in marriage as a curse, it also values the ideal of a happy marriage based on love and compatibility. By presenting these two complements of Igbo folk belief and dramatizing the various ways in which they impinge on the fortunes of stereotypic but true-to-life characters representative of the folk, Flora Nwapa has succeeded in presenting a truly balanced and realistic picture of the life and fortunes of the typical Igbo woman in a traditional Igbo community.

NOTES


2. Brancaccio (1981) makes much the same point but with slightly different emphasis in his Claremont African Literature Association Conference paper: “Flora Nwapa focuses her narratives on two unconventional women who accept their major functions as wives and mothers, but seek to do it on their own terms. Without openly rebelling against convention, they attempt to fulfill themselves through marriage based on companionship and shared emotional experiences” (p. 1). See also Lloyd Brown’s observation (1975:500) that Efuru “is really pre-occupied, not with specific roles as roles, but with the women’s need for a free choice of roles.”

3. Flora Nwapa has since published two collections of short stories (1971 and 1980a), three story-books for younger readers (1972 and 1980b), a novellete set in the Nigerian civil war (1975) and an attempt at science fiction (1980c) see References below.

4. In her contribution to the panel discussion of this and Brancaccio’s paper, at Claremont, Flora Nwapa confessed that most of her characters are not original creations but fictional versions of actual persons whom she knew in her riverine Igbo home-town of Oguta (=Ugwuta), the setting of the novels.

5. Contrarily, Brancaccio (1981:1) remarks: “The community sees the long hours the women (i.e. Efuru and Idu) spend with their husbands and the public displays of affection as socially threatening”. This, I think, is somewhat exaggerated.

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