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Understanding African Myth of Uhamiri, the Lake Goddess in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

Ms. M. Priya ¹, Dr. M. Angayarkan Vinayagaselvi ²

1. Researcher, Department of English, Bharathidasan University,
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bharathidasan University,
Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Flora Nwapa, an authorial female voice from Nigeria, is indebted to African myths and culture for her literary resources. Her female characters are shown operating under the strong influence of cultural and spiritual forces, yet negotiating their space within the circumscribed traditional norms. So, they represent an ideal symbol for female manifestation in a society deeply entrenched in cultural and colonial roots. By integrating indigeneity and modernity with the undercurrent of Uhamiri myth Nwapa has achieved a complementarity of two cultures, of course with subversive tone for western ambience. Nwapa's feminist writings uphold the Lake Goddess as an ideal symbol for African womanhood with the revolutionary and evolutionary manifestations. Hence, the article will discuss the contextualization of Uhamiri

myth in defying patriarchal institutions and affirming the manipulated female energy for self-elevation.

Keywords

African Tradition; Igbo Women; Uhamiri Myth and its Subversion.

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Flora Nwapa has been the prominent female voice who articulated feminist protest directly and loudly in contemporary African literature. Her subversive writings explore African women's lives and experiences authentically from women's perception, which was largely ignored by hegemonic literature produced by male scholars. Nwapa has created a trajectory of female literary tradition by establishing her own publishing house to set her foot firmly against the multiple jeopardies. Her works infuse culture and myth to operate broadly the metaphysical space of feminist resist and reproach. Nwapa's empowering and enlightening novels on the experience of Igbo women is the first of its kind in the early twentieth century when there had been a misrepresentation and misinterpretation on the portrayal of women as sexual object and trope of motherhood. Her deviation from conventional feminist concerns and search for alternative means of female empowerment docks her for the iconic water goddess, Uhamiri. Through this mythification Nwapa critiques the traditional expectation of woman and womanhood.

The myth of Uhamiri is a very popular one in the folklore of the people of Oguta, a town in Imo State in the Eastern part of the country, the very town Flora Nwapa came from. Uhamiri is believed to be the beautiful, wealthy, enigmatic, independent and large-hearted god of the Oguta Lake who cares and watches over the land, Ugwuta. Igbo people believe the deity's marriage with Okita, the God of Great River, is quarrelsome and both rule different territories. Though the reason for their constant quarrel is unknown, she is celebrated as a matriarchal model of successful women, particularly childless women and

symbolizes eternal conflict in the patriarchal institution of marriage. Traditionally, the lake goddess is associated with wealth and children when the goddess herself is childless. So, the local people's belief is questioned by Nwapa in *Efuru* that alleges the child-giving aspect of the goddess and questions the infertility caused to her worshipper. Nwapa challenges the divine power of the goddess and transfer the relevance of the deity from fertility to autonomy, a redefined feminist ideology.

Her debut novel *Efuru* is set in the Ugwuta village and the focus is on the life of rural community before colonial intrusion. *Efuru* is the story of a young Igbo woman, who struggles to flourish in the traditional Igbo world of marriage and motherhood. She turns to the river goddess in order to find spiritual and psychological solace. As Teresa U. Njoku puts it in *Emerging perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, *Efuru* gains spiritual elevation because of her association with the supernatural. The deification of the earth results in myths. The myth of the 'mermaid' or 'Woman of Lake' derives from the idea that the stream is a source of divinity. Though *Efuru* is childless, she is empowered by her position as the worshipper of the Woman of Lake. She accepts herself as she is a woman of beauty, wealth and generosity who exercises spiritual authority. Her beauty, like that of the Woman of Lake, is mythical (118).

It can be interpreted that Nwapa gives religious sanction to economic prosperity for women through the Uhamiri myth, thereby affirming the legitimacy of female autonomy and independence. Ugwuta people believed the Lake Goddess bestows wealth, beauty and children on women who worship her, and often their prayers are answered. But, this belief is defied in *Efuru* which presents a re-created myth in which the goddess blesses the worshipper with wealth and beauty but not children. Nwapa has adopted this method to authenticate and acknowledge the transcendence of women from their confined spheres of life.

Efuru is beautiful, autonomous and from a distinguished family. She transgresses the marriage conventions of her society by marrying less distinguished Adizua, the man she loves. As Adizua cannot pay the bride price, Efuru moves to Adizua's house to become his wife without her father's consent. Yet, Efuru with her economic success managed to satisfy her father by prompt payment of the bride price in a feast she had arranged for her relatives. Initially, Adizua and Efuru led a contented married life, till the dark reality dawned on her when she realized she remains childless. As per dibia's (the traditional medicine man's) instruction the couple did everything they could do to be blessed with a child and gave offerings to the lake goddess in order to appease her. In Igbo society, there is a lot of pressure on women to get married and bear children as early as possible. As a result, women consider children as their real wealth and pride more than their successes in their business. This is the reason why Efuru started to worry about her fruitless life and endured the ritual female genital excision to ease her labour pain.

Though Efuru is blessed with a girl baby, Ogonim, her life is plagued by the unhappy life with Adizua who was becoming more introvert and the reason for his transformation is mysterious. Yet, it seems to suggest that the overwhelming economic success of Efuru and her remarkable social status might have wounded Adizua that he becomes increasingly intolerable and began to live with another woman. After Adizua's disappearance and Ogonim's death Efuru did not wait endlessly for a truant husband, and understands the reality that she is meant to suffer for noble cause.

Though Efuru remains in authority of her economic success she knows that having children only decides the social identity of women. Thus, she marries Eneberi to persuade her motherhood dream. Yet, Efuru's problem with conception continues and there is no reason that can stop Eneberi from going to another woman for children. He has a child with another woman secretly. At this time, Efuru complained of peculiar dreams of the lake goddess who is

elegant, beautiful and found combing her long black hair with a golden comb, asking her to come to her. Further, some days, after these dreams she felt very happy and she could sell all the things she took to the market. It is explained only by her father, Nwashike Ogene, who said softly, “Your dream is good. The woman of the lake, our Uhamiri, has chosen you to be one of her worshippers. You have to see a dibia first and he will tell you what to do” (147). Similar to her mother Ona, Efuru too has visions of Uhamiri and its significance is illustrated by dibia as “It is a great honour. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you. But you must keep her laws. Look round this town, nearly all the storey buildings you find are built by women who one time or another have been worshippers of Uhamiri” (153). In order to get her blessings, he instructs Efuru to abstain from fishing and sexual intercourse on Orie day, which is auspicious day to the goddess, and should sacrifice a white fowl. Efuru accepts her spiritual role and keeps herself holy. Eneberi’s second marriage with Nkoyeni is miserable as she is loud-mouthed and picks quarrel often. When Nkoyeni comes to know of Eneberi’s affair with a woman who borne him a son, she becomes uncontrollable and made so much fuss threatening to leave if the boy did not go away to his mother.

Hence, it is decided that Eneberi should get married again in order to subdue Nkoyeni who is making more trouble in the house. Ogea, who was brought to Efuru as a small girl for her assistance, has grown up to a beautiful young girl and she will make a better match for Eneberi. Eneberi also felt happy when Efuru told him about Ogea. But, before the final arrangements are made for the marriage between Ogea and Eneberi, Efuru suddenly falls ill and becomes bed ridden. The illness was so sudden that everybody was afraid. Many dibias (traditional doctors) were consulted and all of them gave different diagnosis yet nothing worked out. Efuru’s health deteriorated further and there have been many rumours on air that Efuru committed adultery and she should confess her guilt to get rid off her sickness as she wronged the goddess of the

land. When Efuru is not in a position to defy or fight back the accusation against her, it is only Ajanupu, Efuru's well-wisher, saved her. After Efuru recovered health she absolved from the guilt by swearing in the name of the goddess Utuosu that the goddess should kill her if she had committed adultery. Still alive she proved her chastity to Eneberi and others, but, terminated her marital bondage with him. She ends where she began, that is, in her father's home. The novel ends with Efuru's contentment by the role of worshipper of the lake goddess as:

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (221)

With this note Nwapa sacralizes Efuru's decision to remain childless and husbandless like her goddess Uhamiri who grants religious sanction to economically successful women to have eternal beauty, wealth and success, but no children. By this metaphor Nwapa attempts to find an alternative means of women's empowerment and personal happiness which seems to deviate from the conventional myth to redefined motif for female emancipation and expand the boundaries of feminist discourses. This mythical influence is the major preoccupation in many of her novels. In *Never Again* Nwapa renders emotional support and upholds people's belief on the lake goddess by destructing the invading Nigerian soldiers. Though Uhamiri is not a character in *One is Enough* and *Women Are Different*, her ideologies are reflected in both the novels. The female protagonist Amaka, Rose, Dora and Agnes grow more assertive, self-reliant and independent, despite their marriage. While, the strong impulse to accumulate wealth and lead a dignified life in the corrupt

society indicate that they are true daughters of the goddess. They are depicted to have inherited the characteristics of the Lake Goddess like problematic marriages, problem in conceiving a child or remain childless. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996) opines that “Like their spiritual mother Uhamiri, they are resourceful and economically self-sufficient For emotional well-being, they engage in numerous activities, establishing female bonding”(141). Therefore, Uhamiri is drawn as the protector of women, particularly, childless ones.

Nwapa has employed this myth to redefine the femininity and sexuality to widen the scope of gender orientation. Legendary and archetypal myths authenticate socially acceptable behaviour of women and when these myths are interrogated or bent to suit the purpose of the author, it sets a new paradigm to the study of feminist discourse. Hence, Uhamiri motif is used as a powerful device to extend the limited scope of African feminist studies by integrating mythical, cultural and personal conflicts. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997) affirms that in the African context, mythology plays a central role in transmitting values and instilling discipline. Mythoform is significant in the ongoing attempt to construct an African feminist theory. Myths of creation, origin, empowerment, motherhood and the concept of heroism work together to determine gender delimitation, roles and status in the society (55). She holds that African myths, legends, proverbs and folktales play prominent roles in shaping the woman’s role. If the internalization of values is done through mythical influence then the re-created myth becomes a conscious imposition of redefined gender construction as a model for positive female assertion.

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