Re-writing motherhood in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract
In the critical commentary about African women's writings, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* has become the quintessential novel that ostensibly privileges the discourse of motherhood. In response to this critical position this paper examines Nwapa's debut novel, and the potential connection between female objectification, heterosexuality, motherhood, and patriarchal domination. Reading the novel through the prism of Adrienne Rich's idea of "compulsory heterosexuality," it observes that even though motherhood is central to African communities and literary production, uncritical internalization of it helps to perpetuate heterosexual power, which objectifies women as targets of male sexual fantasy. The paper argues that the centrality of motherhood to *Efuru* might suggest its supremacy and consequently, women's fulfilment, but the subliminal text of the novel is that motherhood is not necessarily always biological, and that women can find fulfilment in their social and sexual relationships as well as in their material wealth. Therefore, *Efuru* is radical in its own way, in the sense that it dares to create a women-centred space, which not only subtly challenges patriarchal social production, but also their representation as signifier and embodiment of male libidinal energy.

Keywords:
Objectification, Homoeroticism, Heterosexuality, Motherhood, Material wealth
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Introduction

Despite the sustained critical attention that Flora Nwapa's (1966) *Efuru* has received since its publication, it is necessary to reassess its contribution to the theme of motherhood. Its inclusion in school syllabi and being an inspirational text to subsequent generations of writers attest to its canonical place in the teaching and research in African literature. These accolades notwithstanding, Nwapa's first novel needs to be revisited especially with special focus on the topic of motherhood that has refused to be laid to rest. Nwapa might have been one of the earliest canonical voices in Nigerian Women's literature but the vexed issue of motherhood did not originate from her. Motherhood can be

traced, at least, to another foundational and canonical text, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

At a marriage ceremony of Obierika's daughter, the bride's brother offers a prayer in which he wishes the blessings of motherhood on his sister: To bear nine sons like the mother of their town (117). Primarily because this prayer represents the climax of the wedding, motherhood becomes one, if not the most important aspect of this rite. In addition, motherhood assumes both historical and mythical signification in that it is evoked as the foundation of the community. Also, since this moment of origin is not historicised, the feat of bearing nine sons takes on a mythical and supernatural aspect. Yet, this prayer (and injunction) is one of the legacies bequeathed to Nwapa's *Efuru* and it explains in part the intensity and logic with which motherhood is thematized. It is no wonder that there is constant reference to the "joys of motherhood" in *Efuru*. However, the aggressiveness with which the eponymous character of Nwapa's novel pursues the "joys of motherhood" can mislead the reader to conclude that the text has simply re-inscribed *Things Fall Apart*'s (1958) valorization of motherhood.

On the contrary, though *Efuru* does not oppose motherhood per se, it demonstrates that the burden that it places on women is enormous and that there are other dimensions of social existence from which women can find fulfilment. While in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) motherhood signifies a woman's ultimate fulfilment, in *Efuru* motherhood is not *the* determinant of a woman's success. This message is unequivocal in the last passage of the text in which the river goddess Uhamiri, who has not tasted the joys of motherhood, is nevertheless happy, and accepts Efuru into this space (221). It is in this sense that *Efuru* rewrites the grand narrative of motherhood as expressed in Achebe's first novel. Whereas *Things Fall Apart* idealises motherhood, *Efuru* de-mythologises it.

Successive generations of Nigerian women writers continue to reflect on the theme of motherhood. For instance, Buchi Emecheta's famous novel entitled *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) challenges the cause-and-effect fallacy between motherhood and women's social and economic fulfillment. Emecheta's novel is not only saying that a woman's fulfilment cannot be guaranteed only through motherhood but also that motherhood, regardless of the values ascribed to it, can be destructive to the woman. Rather than serving as mechanism for social security and public veneration, as thematized in the Emecheta's protagonist, motherhood can also jeopardize the mother's wellbeing, alienate her, or lead to her demise.

While the perspectives privileged by *The Joys of Motherhood* may be valid in that they highlight the tragic dimensions of motherhood in a modern society, some readers might under-appreciate the resistance strategies foregrounded by Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. By the end of the story in *Efuru* two interrelated stances emerge:

motherhood is not a precondition for women's personal and social fulfilment; and self-consciously inhabiting a women-centred space mitigates heterosexual and patriarchal demands of motherhood and sexual objectification on women. In other words, motherhood transcends mere social production because it is a patriarchal technology designed to discipline women's body and subject it exclusively to male sexual desire. Therefore, by occupying a women's space, the eponymous heroine of Nwapa's novel destabilises unreasonable expectations of motherhood and objectification of women as target of excessive male sexual fantasy.

Ifeoma Okoye's (1982) *Behind the Clouds* challenges the myth that women only are responsible for childlessness. By demonstrating that men are as responsible for childlessness as women are, Okoye questions societal valorization of motherhood, stigmatization of childless women, and normalization of male privilege. In addition to these, *Behind the Clouds* also suggests that motherhood can cause desperate women to become vulnerable to religious charlatans, and more important, other women can exploit motherhood for material gains which may result in destabilizing marriages.

Recent Nigerian women's novelists are not excluded from the discourse of motherhood. Novels such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2003) *Purple Hibiscus*, Sefi Atta's (2005) *Everything Good Will Come*, Sade Adeniran's (2009) *Imagine This*, Unoma Nguemo Azuah's (2005) *Sky-High Flames* and Lola Shoneyin's (2009) *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, have emphasized the centrality of motherhood to their stories. For example, the narrator of Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* says that "Marriage could immediately wipe out a sluttish past, but angel or not, a woman had to have a child" (Atta, 2005, p. 102). This statement highlights the tremendous pressure that writers contend with in terms of the resilience of the discourse of motherhood. Shoneyin's *Secret Lives* and Abimbola Adunni Adelakun's (2008) *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* are novels which show that the forces of patriarchal motherhood are still a source of concern to contemporary women writers as much as they were for Nwapa and writers that emerged after her, such as Buchi Emecheta and Ifeoma Okoye.

In addition to these literary rewritings of motherhood, critical responses have provided insightful views on Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru*. In "Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's Literary Tradition," Susan Z. Andrade (1990) examines the issue of motherhood, history, and women's resistance through the prism of Bakhtin's dialogic criticism. It is through this framework of dialogism that she juxtaposes Nwapa's *Efuru* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and claims that the latter recognizes the ambivalence about happiness without children in the former (Andrade, 1990, p. 100). She contends that "Nwapa negotiates the closure by so elevating the discourse of motherhood

that the success of Uhamiri, and by extension, that of Efuru is undermined" (Andrade, 1990, p. 104). In the case of Ifi Amadiume (2002, p. 52) in her essay entitled, "Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy Water," she argues that the focus on the Mammy Water with a fixed stereotypical sexuality allowed Nwapa to "expand the discourse on women's sexuality in a radical fashion." She argues further that Nwapa's concern about women's bodies is grounded in conflicts arising from the confined domestic spaces, which is a manifestation of patriarchal ideology of European family structure (2002, p. 53). According to Amadiume (2002, p. 60), the claustrophobic domestic space causes Nwapa to pursue individual women's quest for sexual freedom. Also, she suggests that Nwapa fails to take advantage of Igbo gender flexibility, which her main characters also repudiate. She concludes her essay by stating:

> Mammy Water beliefs are local, but the image is foreign. Thus, the discourse on desire and sexuality completely moves away from women's histories and women's systems to a world of patriarchy and capital in which postcolonial African women, posited purely as individuals, are isolated in their desires and afflictions, consuming imports from Europe and India and in turn dreaming of Whiteness. (Amadiume, 2002, p. 64)

Florence Stratton (1994, p. 96) also contributes to the debate on women's body in Nwapa's *Efuru*. She claims that Efuru "dreams of a beneficent goddess who gives women beauty and wealth but does not give them children. In contrast to many male-authored works, beauty does not in this novel signify the sexual objectification of women. Rather, it is the biologically-based definitions of womanhood constructed by the discourse of patriarchy . . . that objectify women in *Efuru*."

Susan Z. Andrade's reading of *Efuru* may be justified for what she calls the ambivalent ending of the novel about happiness without children. This ambivalence arises from Efuru's unmistakable happiness and the longing to fulfill the patriarchal expectation of motherhood. This observation validates the dialogic approach to interpreting women's history, motherhood, and rebellion, particularly, the ruthless rewriting of *Efuru* in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The question that ends *Efuru*, "Why then did the women worship her?" (1966, p. 221), for Andrade and Emecheta, is a philosophical question. Hence, its interpretation as ambivalence of happiness without children. However, rather than being a philosophical question, it is a rhetorical question in that Efuru is not trying to ponder the *raison d'être* for women's devotion to Uhamiri. In contrast, the question suggests that happiness is not contingent upon the fulfillment of motherhood as can be seen in Uhamiri herself. The issue at the heart of the question may be bewildering only if one fails to grasp the irony that lies within it. Nwapa must have been aware of the gargantuan burden of motherhood placed

on the women of Ugwuta that a blatant rejection of motherhood would have been unthinkable and scandalous.

Ifi Amadiume's (2002, p. 53) observation that "Nwapa's concern about women's bodies seems . . . grounded in the conflicts arising from domesticity practices within the confining spaces and patriarchal ideologies of the European imposed family structure" is valid. It is, therefore, consistent with her argument that Nwapa's notions of beauty, wealth, and barrenness are antithetical to Igbo ideals of womanhood on the one hand (2002, p. 58), and are also in opposition to Ugwuta's norms of womanhood on the other (2002, p. 59). The issue for Amadiume is that Efuru's quest for sexual freedom ultimately isolates her because of fetishistic acquisition of western commodity, capitalist wealth, and European model of the female body (2002, p. 64). While Amadiume rightly asserts that Nwapa did not "exploit the full possibilities in Igbo gender flexibility" and therefore questions her heroine's isolation at the end of *Efuru*, it should be noted that though the space of Uhamiri isolates Efuru while failed motherhood stigmatizes her as failure, the ostensibly childless and happy goddess empowers her through the prospects of material wealth that is so necessary just as Ugwuta transitions to a modern society where capitalist economy predominates.

One may be tempted to agree with Florence Stratton's (1994, p. 96) assertion that in Ugwuta, beauty does not signify sexual objectification of women but masculinization of the childless woman's body does (96). The patriarchal point of view expressed by Omirima, an antagonist and advocate for hetero-patriarchy, attests to this viewpoint. For both Stratton and Efuru's enemies, failure in motherhood disrupts gender epistemology, which is why Efuru is considered a man since she is unable to have a child (Stratton, 1994, 96; Nwapa, 1996, p. 24). In the patriarchal heterosexual world of Ugwuta, motherhood is the totality of success, while being childless is the totality of failure. However, displacing the female body from the symbolic order in which it functions only as the sign of motherhood and relocating it onto the female space of Uhamiri transforms the female body into a transgressive body that troubles the grand narrative of sexual objectification, heterosexual marriage, and social production (Nwapa, 1996, p. 51).

The essay follows Adrienne Rich (2001, p. 1762) in "From *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience*" in which she states that heterosexuality is a political institution whose aim is to disempower women. According to Rich, men have made women to believe that they are men's sexual property and that women's autonomy, and equality would "threaten family, religion, and state" (2001, p. 1763). For men to achieve these, according to Rich, they have relied on other institutions such as economy, the nuclear family, and compulsory heterosexuality (2001, p. 1763). In addition to these institutions is what Rich terms patriarchal motherhood (2001, p. 1763), which also works by ignoring women's

diverse sexualities and coercing them into compulsory heterosexuality. As a way of undermining this compulsory heterosexuality, Rich calls on heterosexual feminists to examine heterosexuality as an ideology and practice that robs women of agency (2001, p.1762). To achieve this goal all women need to consider and embrace a strategy that she has termed "lesbian experience" (2001, p. 1764). Rich explains further, "Any theory of cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal or less 'natural' phenomenon, as mere 'sexual preference,' or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby. Feminist theory can no longer afford merely to voice a toleration of 'lesbianism' as an 'alternative lifestyle' or make token allusion to lesbians" (2001, pp. 1764-1765). Since the institution of heterosexuality and in particular patriarchal motherhood depends on inscribing male sexual desire on women's body, it becomes logical that Rich posits "lesbian experience" as a weapon that women can deploy to destabilize men's power. She elaborates by debunking the idea that men's primal "fear of women" arises from women's sexual insatiability. In contrast, she suggests that what men fear about women is not unbridled sexual appetites directed towards men but rather that women can be indifferent to men's sexual overtures (2001, p. 1770). The implication of this according to Rich is that what men fear is the thought of actualizing their sexual desire strictly on women's terms (2001, p. 1770). In other words, men's fear is women's ability to exercise control over their own body.

In addition to lesbian experience, Rich coins another term, "lesbian continuum," which she explains as women's continuing creation of the meaning of lesbian experience. Meanwhile, she argues that neither lesbian experience nor lesbian continuum is reducible to sexual activity. She contends that lesbian continuum includes a range of "woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (2001, p. 1774). Lesbian experience as advocated by Rich is geared towards depriving men uninhibited sexual access to the woman's body, which is a resistance to excessive subjugation of women by patriarchy (2001, p. 1775). Since women's identification and power have been consistently jeopardised under the institution of heterosexuality, it becomes quite important to resist the power of patriarchy by developing a woman-centred relationship that negates and questions the doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality (2001, p. 1778).

Such a relationship would explode the myth in Western cultural tradition which claims that women are always and inevitably attracted to men (2001, p. 1778). Women's purported romantic attraction to men, according to Rich, might have been a Western idea, as unrestrained male sexual desire is a universal ideology (2001, p. 1771). Rich, therefore, argues that the issues that feminists have been confronting are not merely gender inequality or taboos against homosexuality but

rather "the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right to physical, economic, and emotional access" (2001, p. 1773).

Though Adrienne Rich has developed her theory of lesbian experience and lesbian continuum from Western cultural perspective, it resonates with other cultural contexts in which male power is established and maintained through compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal motherhood. Unoma Azuah (2005, p. 130) draws on Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's argument on feminism when she claims that "Nigerian men conceive of women's liberation as a female desire to reduce men to housekeepers, or to 'feminize' them." This resistance to women's liberation Azuah attributes to men's phallocentrism and over-valorization of masculinity, which subtly suggests an implicit or explicit subordination of female gender. Azuah therefore argues further that "The mistrust attached to feminism means that lesbianism has little chance of being acknowledged; it already creates enough angst among Nigerian men when a woman is single" (Azuah, 2005, pp. 130-131). She then states that since Nigerian men consider a woman's single state as an insult to their manhood, asserting sexual independence might bring devastating results on women (2005, p. 131). The fact that women's potential sexual independence from men through lesbian experience could be so unsettling to masculinity shows that the lesbian experience that Adrienne Rich advocates and Azuah's privileging of emerging lesbian voices in Nigerian literature have the tendency to destabilise patriarchal ideology that aims at homogenizing all women as heterosexual.

More significantly, whereas it is uncertain that the relation at the end of Nwapa's novel is a lesbian one, it nevertheless functions as a strategy through which social essentialization of motherhood can be undermined. Societal valorization of heterosexuality and motherhood may have influenced the ambiguous ending of the novel, but the women-centred context of Efuru and the river goddess suggests that homoeroticism cannot be eliminated entirely. As Rich has clearly explained, lesbian experience is not reducible to sexual act but a woman-centred relationship that aims at mitigating sexual access to women (2001, p. 1778). It is in this regard that Rich's elaboration of lesbian experience and lesbian continuum will be relevant to the analysis of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, particularly in deconstructing the institution of motherhood. However, before discussing the text proper, it is necessary to draw on African feminist voices, especially on the topic of motherhood.

African feminism and motherhood

Although African feminists engage issues as varied as the problem of canonization (Aidoo, 1988 [2007]), anxiety over women's body (El Saadawi, 1980 [2007]), and the role of class and gender in the oppression of women (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2007 [1994]), motherhood has been a central issue in African feminist

criticism. Few of the contributions to the subject of motherhood had been provided by African writers such as Nwapa and Emecheta. For instance, in "Women and creative writing in Africa" (1998, p. 531) Nwapa argues that African women writers would continue to write about motherhood and the issue of infertility primarily because childbirth is an act that is unique to women and that "when this unique function is denied a woman, she is devastated." While Nwapa observes that some women find motherhood fulfilling, she states that childlessness should not necessarily devalue a woman (1998, 531).

In Emecheta's (1988) "Feminism with a small 'f'!" she contends that feminism is culture-based, which is why in the West sexual fulfilment is considered an important milestone in feminist struggles. For Emecheta, despite the importance of sex to an African woman, other concerns such as ensuring her immediate survival, providing support for her family, and fostering her connectedness to other women of similar goals (554). It is for this reason that Emecheta asserts that motherhood is probably the supreme job that is hardly rewarded (556), but which requires great sacrifice mainly because women are the ones who ensure the success of future generations (556).

Just as Nwapa and Emecheta, Lauretta Ngcobo acknowledges the influence that motherhood bequeaths on women and the suffering it imposes on them. In "African motherhood: myth and reality" (1988, p. 539) she observes that "older widows, seeing that old age and motherhood confer power and status, are content to remain at their in-laws to assist their grown sons in anchoring a strong male dominated establishment against young wives and outsiders." This role notwithstanding, she claims that African motherhood is not about mothers but about children (533), because African families depended on human capital and social security, both of which alienate mothers and childless women (534). The oppression and poverty that women suffer in African societies Ngcobo contends are due to "social and sexual subordination" (540). These perspectives show that motherhood, sometimes, bestows on women symbolic and material power; but more often, women's sacrifices in producing future generations are largely unrewarded. Though patriarchy romanticizes motherhood, it devalues and subordinates women. As Nwapa's *Efuru* empowers the eponymous character economically, bestows on her a celestial beauty and gives her social visibility and prestige, it re-conceptualises women's value beyond patriarchal motherhood.

Woman's body, motherhood, and patriarchy

Efuru is the story of the eponymous heroine, the daughter of nobility (Nwashike Ogene), whose introduction to the reader hinges on the subversion of the norms of marriage. Through her willful marriage to her lover, Adizua, Efuru more or less commits class suicide because Adizua lacks the wherewithal to fulfill the obligations in a heterosexual marriage, obligations which are actually carried out

by Efuru, leading to the rewriting of the normative gender classifications. Although unable to conceive in the first year of marriage, Efuru eventually gives birth to a baby named Ogonim after performing a ritual. Unfortunately, Ogonim dies and Efuru is unable to have another child and has to leave Adizua, who apparently has deserted her. Efuru's marriage to Gilbert does not produce a child and after being falsely accused of adultery, Efuru leaves Gilbert and eventually becomes a devotee of the sea goddess, Uhamiri.

A closer look at *Efuru* shows how patriarchal ideology impacts social construction of the woman's body and motherhood. One of such instances in the novel is when Efuru's father (Nwashike Ogene) idealizes Efuru's mother, stating that "I was fond of her not because of her beauty but because of her goodness" (Nwapa, 1996, p. 150). Nwashike Ogene's strategy is to present female body and goodness as mutually exclusive entities by stating that the factor that endeared him to Efuru's mother was character and not beauty. However, he ironically conflates them because he is a product of a culture that represses explicit expression of sexual desire. Without knowing or admitting it, Ogene succeeds in eroticizing the female body albeit through an unconscious and verbal denial of objectifying the woman. His statement conflates beauty and goodness, and it is no wonder that Efuru's mother is privileged over the other wives.

Probably the most profound manifestation of sexual objectification of the female body is the portrayal of Efuru in popular masculine imagination of Ugwuta. In such conversations, Efuru's body is erotically coded in a way that contradicts Stratton's (1994, p. 96) contention that beauty does not objectify women in Ugwuta. Shortly after the marriage of Efuru and Adizua, the latter goes to work on the farm while the latter stays at home to trade. The longer Adizua stays working on the farm, the less productive he becomes. Soon, his colleagues begin to gossip about his actions. One of the men says, "'She refused to go to the farm. She is trading instead. She said she was not cut out for farm work. And I don't blame her, she is so beautiful. You would think that the woman of the lake is her mother'" (Nwapa, 1996, p. 12). Efuru's beauty in the popular male imagination is supernatural. As the conversation progresses, the objectification of Efuru's beauty becomes apparent. Another man says, "'Have I not told you that she is so beautiful . . . If I were Adizua, I would not stay in the farm. What's the point of dreaming about your wife. You can dream about a woman friend or another man's wife, but definitely not your own wife. Adizua is stupid'. . . He had not the courage to tell his wife that she was responsible for his laziness . . . He did not tell her that he thought of her so much that he no longer wished to be away from her" (1996, p. 20). Of course, the reference to "wife" is certainly to Efuru's erotically coded female form. There is no doubt that the female body is invested with erotic power and Efuru's body in this case produces sexual desire in Adizua to the extent that he becomes unproductive on the farm. As a result, when he returns

home finally from the farm, it is not because he is lazy; rather, it is because he intends to fulfil his sexual desire with Efuru's body.

What is apparent from the foregoing is that eroticized body of the woman is framed in an exclusively heterosexual economy, which legitimates male sexual fantasy and consumption of that body. One of the mechanisms through which this consumption of the body is normalized is motherhood. Therefore, the essentialization of motherhood is a discourse that occludes female objectification in *Efuru*. If there is one major point that *Efuru* has stressed in its resistance to patriarchy, it is that motherhood functions as an apparatus designed to discipline women's body into signifying exclusively as target of heterosexual fantasy. The novel shows that social imaginary regarding the female body as sexual object can be understood through its construction in the public space. For example, when Nwosu (the father of Ogea, Efuru's housemaid) and Igwe (the fisherman) are coming home on the suspicion that Efuru's father, Nwashike Ogene has died, they observe white women swimming in swimsuits and the narrator captures their reaction in the following quotation: "'Why do the white women wear tight dresses for swimming? Why don't they use wrappers as our women do? They have no shame; they do not know that they are naked'" (1996, p. 202).

Although the men seem to agree that white women's choice of swimsuit is a result of their ignorance about their body as sexual object, the novel shows that the female body is an "unmotivated sign" (Barry, 1995, p. 40), and that its erotic signification is imposed on it by the men. If dress code is not a problem in Ugwuta except when it applies to the expatriates, the reason is that local patriarchal order has coded the female body as erotic and consequently regulated it through its dress regime. The dress code attempts to regulate the body but at the same time tries to control women's access to economic and political agency (Bakare-Yusuf, 2011, p. 175). Also, Western feminist critics have consistently drawn attention to the sexual objectification of the female body. Luce Irigaray (1980, p. 26) points out the position of the female as "the beautiful object" of male desire, while Laura Mulvey (1999, p. 838) argues that the female body functions as "erotic object."

Within African feminist discourse, objectification of women is sometimes theorized as imposition of foreign gender bias on African cultures such as Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997, p. 9) argues that gender difference, which in western societies objectifies the female body, is not a universal phenomenon. Certainly, this is a valid observation, but it is important to consider the fact that it is nevertheless anachronistic. Objectification of the female form has been globalized and can no longer be ignored. Prescriptive imaginary of the female form in Sefi Atta's (2005) *Everything Good Will Come*, the sexual predation of the female body in Kaine Agary's (2006) *Yellow-Yellow*, massive commercialization of women's

bodies in Chika Unigwe's (2009) *On Black Sisters' Street*, and the molestation and exploitation of women in Sade Adeniran's (2009) *Imagine This*, all show that the female body within Nigerian literary production is also subjected to objectification. The men of Ugwuta may want to organize their world through a Manichean divide in which white women's bodies are eroticized and Ugwuta women's bodies are de-eroticized. But whether the body is sexualized in swimsuit or de-sexualized in wrappers, the common denominator is still sexual objectification. In the former, the body is self-consciously eroticized and in the latter it is self-consciously de-eroticised through a dress precisely because of the implicit assumption that the body always already possesses excessive erotic signs. Therefore, when Efuru embraces the worship of Uhamiri, she frees herself not only from the tyrannical demands of heterosexual motherhood but also, and significantly from fulfilling men's sexual fantasy.

Towards women-centred space

The strength of *Efuru*'s resistance appears in its efforts to rewrite women's subjectivity by deconstructing the discourse of motherhood. Consequently, Efuru's resistance begins with conformity. The desperation to experience the "joy of motherhood" is a theme that imposes itself on the narrative except in the concluding part of the story when Efuru rediscovers Uhamiri (Nwapa, 1966, p. 24). More specifically, Efuru's "barrenness" is controversial precisely because she once had a child. Though the child (Ogonim) dies, the novel seems to suggest that Efuru's body is not a barren body but possesses the possibility of experiencing motherhood again. Efuru's desire to have another child after the death of Ogonim, her initial vacillation about worshipping Uhamiri, and her suggestion to Gilbert to take another wife, all point to her acceptance and internalization of the discourse of heterosexual motherhood. The heroine's conformity to motherhood assumes an even greater significance when she initially enters the domain of Uhamiri. That is why the narrator tells us: "Then it struck her [Efuru] that since she started to worship Uhamiri, she had never seen babies in her abode" 165), a statement that affirms Efuru's concern about her desire to experience the joys of motherhood again.

A closer look at the novel opens alternative vistas for reimagining Efuru's resistance. Efuru lives in a world where motherhood is the totality of a woman's life, which implies that regardless of other achievements that a woman might have had, without motherhood those accomplishments diminish in value. This essentialization of motherhood is expressed when some gossips see Efuru and Gilbert's open display of affection. One of them says, "Seeing them together is not the important thing . . . 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 your husband licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive" (1966, p. 137). Also,

during a conversation between the village gossip Omirima and Efuru's mother-in-law (Amede) the former tells the latter that "Your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go on errands for us" (1966, p. 163). The fact that Efuru can have a child in the first place shows the potential of her body to produce. Although her inability to have a second child may have robbed her of the "joys of motherhood," it also encodes her body as rebellious body, the one that refuses to obey the primordial command of motherhood in totality. Consequently, it would be a fallacy to label Efuru "barren" precisely because her body once experienced the joys of motherhood and it destabilises the rhetoric of barrenness since the birth of Ogonim debunks that allegation.

The novel also suggests that motherhood transcends biological reproduction. Almost all the characters in the text including her detractors agree that Efuru is a good woman. Sacrificial service to Adizua's mother (Ossai), her benevolence to indigent couples in Ugwuta, supporting Nwosu's treatment at Dr Difu's hospital, and her motherly care towards Ogea and other young women in the community demonstrate that motherhood cannot be attributed entirely to biology. Through her selfless nurturing of other people, Efuru emerges as a heroine deserving of biologically and socially constructed category of mother.

If motherhood is not entirely contingent upon biological cause, the implication is that Nwapa's novel acquires the liberty to undermine patriarchal hold on women's body whether through motherhood or through unrestricted sexual access, which makes Adrienne Rich argue that "Women learn to accept as natural the inevitability of this 'drive' because they receive it as dogma" (2001, p. 1772). The normalization of male heterosexual desire becomes one of the targets of Nwapa's novel once Efuru's marriage to Gilbert begins to unravel. Gilbert's dishonesty, his misogyny, false accusation of adultery, all propel Efuru towards repelling the brutal force of patriarchy. Perhaps the most politically significant of these strategies of resistance in *Efuru* is liberating the body from patriarchal heterosexual reproductive economy and placing it within the feminine space of the lake goddess, Uhamiri.

Within this space, Efuru's body becomes taboo for male desire. Even before leaving Gilbert, Efuru must abstain from sexual contact with her husband on *Orie* days and now that she longer has marital obligations to him, her body is freed from masculine sexual consumption. Through her entry to the domain of Uhamiri, Efuru acquires the agency to negotiate asphyxiating narratives of childlessness and is empowered to challenge heterosexual domination. Her entry into the space of Uhamiri obliterates the stigma of childlessness and simultaneously liberates her body from the demands of heterosexual marriage.

Efuru's liberated body functions as the voice that resists the domination of patriarchy, which is the reason that her transgressive body destabilizes the syntax of patriarchal symbolic order. The significance of resistance through Efuru's inhabiting of Uhamiri's domain can be appreciated when compared to Adizua's lover who also frees her body by allegedly leaving her husband but nevertheless faces social rejection. This unnamed woman is simply referred to as "a bad woman," "a worthless woman," and "the daughter of a beach" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 57). Precisely because she is believed to have committed adultery when she tells her husband that their child is not his (1966, p. 55), because she is freed from marital obligations by absconding from her matrimonial home, she is able to control her sexuality outside of marriage, which is a source of patriarchal anxiety. It is the bodies of unmarried, economically independent females that constitute patriarchal anxiety because they violate the social censorship of marriage and motherhood (Amadiume, 2002, p. 49).

Thus, the coding of the female body for hetero-erotic signification is not a coincidence; it is a discourse that subordinates female sexual desire and inscribes her body into the masculine scopic economy (Irigaray, 1980, p. 26). The fact that she is unnamed and occupies the fringes of the society and the margins of the story forces her into the category of the unknown evil that haunts the community. Efuru avoids such identity but embraces Uhamiri. Regardless of the vague identity of Adizua's lover and Efuru's identity as devotee of the lake goddess, the two bodies are excluded from patriarchal grip, and the fact that Efuru's body can no longer fulfil the expectation of motherhood rewrites the discourse of patriarchy. But because adultery and sexual liberty in Ugwuta are considered reprehensible, Efuru avoids this anti-social label, which is why finding refuge as devotee of Uhamiri helps to avoid social sanction. But more important, she frees herself from the runaway husband (Adizua) and dishonest one (Gilbert).

Therefore, Efuru's body constitutes a discourse of resistance by signaling the ambivalence of, conformity to, and transgression of, the discourse of heterosexism. In the novel, hetero-patriarchy operates by depriving women access to sexual agency, forcing them into compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 2001, p. 1765). This strategy of resistance becomes almost inevitable when one considers the magnitude of patriarchal power, which operates sometimes without coercion but with conformity. Michel Foucault (1977, p. 137) has drawn attention to this strategy in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, particularly when he argues that "These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body [. . .] might be called 'disciplines'." He also says further that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (1977, p. 138). Although Foucault's arguments are situated within the operation of the law, legal system, judicial operation, and penal code, the production of docile bodies within his own context is like the methods by which patriarchy produces "docile"

female bodies. Through the mythologization of motherhood, patriarchy produces docile female bodies, which through the naturalization of motherhood, canonizes heterosexuality. In other words, the effectiveness of heterosexuality consists in naturalizing the docility of the body, which is like the mechanism by which myth legitimates itself. This is the position of Roland Barthes (1972, 131) when he contends that "myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden . . . but because they are naturalized." In *Efuru*, heterosexuality operates like myth, from which Efuru's body extricates itself.

Efuru's decision to become Uhamiri's worshipper becomes invested with political significance. What makes patriarchy so strong in Ugwuta is the conflation of reproduction and sexual objectification in which the former is the conscious while the latter is the unconscious. By deterritorializing the body (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, p. 16), Efuru not only frees herself from conformity to motherhood, but also liberates herself from the imperial dominance of heterosexuality. Of course, on one of her gossip trips to Gilbert's mother (Amede) Omirima asks, "How many women in this town who worship Uhamiri have children?" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 162). The rhetorical question inadvertently signals the growing number of women whose bodies cease to fulfill the "manifest destiny" of reproduction within the dominant political regime of patriarchy.

With Efuru's entry onto the sacred space of the sea goddess, the novel inserts itself into a different kind of scopic regime. However, this is a space in which the main actors are women who gaze at the woman of the lake in a paradoxically non-sexual and sexual way. Although the image of Uhamiri exists in popular imagination, it is now located outside of the influence of the male gaze. Within Uhamiri's abode, the male gaze becomes an empty gaze, a hollowed gaze, whose power of possession and consumption has been neutralised. In the female gaze on the contrary, Uhamiri is objectified as target of Efuru's female fantasy, outside of hetero-scopophilia (Amadiume, 2012, pp. 63-64). It is in this neutralization of patriarchal heterosexual gaze that Efuru's transgressive body assumes its ultimate significance.

Conclusion

Moreover, *Efuru* reconstructs the grand narrative of heterosexuality in the sense that Efuru's body parallels the body of Adizua's lover precisely because, whether with Uhamiri or at the margins of Ugwuta, the bodies of unmarried women threaten patriarchal control. Amadiume (2002, p. 49) emphasizes this point when she says that "Unmarried women are feared because their sexuality is unregulated." The acceptability of Efuru and condemnation of Adizua's lover notwithstanding, the two bodies are transgressive bodies that resist patriarchal and heterosexual hold. Adizua's lover assumes control of her sexuality by transgressing the institution of marriage while Efuru destabilizes patriarchy by

embracing non-heterosexual relationship with Uhamiri (Nwapa, 1996, p. 51). Her relationship with Uhamiri is strengthened by the fact that at the end of the novel, Efuru is without a husband and there is little suggestion that she would look for another husband, a development that places her outside of the male-ordered family structure. The political implication of transgressive bodies is not in doubt when compared to Ossai, Adizua's mother, who represents the devout wife, and who subjects her body to the authority of her husband from exile and from the grave. In other words, the resistance in *Efuru* consists in undermining the burden of motherhood as well as reterritorializing the female body beyond the reach of masculine sexual possession.

Nwapa's novels such as *One is Enough* 1981), *Idu* (1970), and *The Lake Goddess* (1995), have not departed from the major concerns in *Efuru*. The other novels equally consider the constricting space of a heterosexual marriage and the possibilities of subverting patriarchal domination on the one hand, and the need to undermine masculine expectations on the other. In the concluding section of the novel, Efuru is without a husband and without a child. Yet, the novel suggests the possibility of achieving happiness without either or both, defying the patriarchal order of motherhood. A little earlier the narrator says, "Then suddenly it struck her that since she started to worship Uhamiri, she had never seen babies in her abode. 'Can she give me children?' . . . 'She cannot give me children, because she has not got children herself'" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 165). The importance of this quotation lays in the comments that follow in which the narrator says, "Efuru was growing logical in her reasoning. She thought it unusual for women to be logical. Usually, intuition did their reasoning for them" (1966, p. 165). Apart from exploding the myth of gendered subjectivity, the passage also suggests that the decision to worship Uhamiri is a self-conscious one, in a relationship that showers Efuru with material benefits and possible erotic affection.

However, the revolutionary dimension of the novel seems questioned by the notion of pre-determinism that runs through the novel. For example, the popular reaction to Gilbert's alleged stealing and imprisonment is that no one stole in his family and so the allegation of stealing and imprisonment are unusual. When Efuru's father, Nwashike Ogene, invites Enesha Agorua to divine for Efuru, his harangue about the destruction of his family has a broader implication. According to him, the murder that his forefathers committed continues to haunt the family to the extent that their children never grow to adulthood. It is for this reason that he decides not to raise a family. Also, when Efuru decides to look for a new wife for Gilbert and makes a proposal to her mother-in-law, the latter replies by saying that "My daughter, Enebiri [Gilbert] my son will not marry the daughter of Eneke. There is murder in that family. Eneke is not a good woman, how can a bad woman have a good daughter? We shall look somewhere else for a wife for Enebiri" (1966, p. 180). The infamous role that Nwashike Ogene's forefathers

played in the history of Ugwuta and their questionable wealth as a result of this role might suggest a link between this history and Efuru's childlessness. Even if this were not so and that it simply is because Efuru's mother's beauty and her link to Uhamiri predisposes her to having just one daughter, the novel unwittingly suggests that Efuru's decision to embrace Uhamiri is a decision already made for her by history and divinity. Therefore, both history and Uhamiri seem to rob the novel of female-based political action.

Although *Efuru* does not elaborate this point, it nevertheless displaces human action, behaviour, and more importantly, the female body and subjectivity, from the realms of historical act to that of spiritual pre-determinism. While major androcentric literature *hails* women to put their bodies at the disposal of patriarchal motherhood, by the end of the novel, Nwapa's narrative embraces motherhood but simply as an option that may not necessarily be fulfilled. Efuru's transgressive body enters a space culturally and spiritually approved by the community. Though subtle, her decision is also a carefully chosen one, a decision that announces the heroine's subjectivity, and nevertheless ruptures the grand narratives of motherhood, gender, and sexuality. It is therefore no wonder that apart from autonomy from heterosexuality, Uhamiri also promises material wealth that has the potential to sustain female independence from marital manacles.

Despite Amadiume's concern that Nwapa could have considered Igbo women's heritage of solidarity and gender flexibility (2002, p. 60), Efuru hardly needs such solidarity and does not need to highlight specific gender performance. Probably because she is idealized to a certain extent, Efuru is beloved by most people in Ugwuta, which may be due to her motherly affection to people and the material support she freely offers her community. Therefore, breaking the hold of patriarchy through resistance to the institution of marriage and motherhood helps to relocate women onto another terrain of agency, where marriage, heterosexuality, motherhood, material possession and non-heterosexual desires are options from which women can choose.

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