

## **Implications of Childlessness in The African Novel: Shaping the Future of Woman in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough***

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Childlessness, voluntary or involuntary is a subject of concern worldwide for the traumatic impacts on women. But the perception, social and cultural consequences and acceptability differ across many societies. Within the context of African society where children are highly valued in marriage, to guarantee the lineage imperishability, the female identity is enveloped in the stereotypical image of motherhood; the ability to procreate, raise a family and enhance life. Childless marriage is a devastating experience for the African woman, who is demeaned, stigmatized, even meant to shoulder all the consequences of childlessness and compelled to prove her womanhood in her overbearing patriarchal society. This paper's objective therefore, is to examine the implications of childlessness on the African woman as depicted in Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981) and to explore the tactic coping mechanisms and the African woman adopts to deal with childlessness and achieve self-actualization. Using the feministic theoretical framework, this paper analyses the plight of the childless African woman as she seeks solutions to her problems and deal with stigmatization. Finally, the paper through a close study of Nwapa's *One is Enough*, reveals that the childless African woman is not just a passive victim of her ordeal but actively confronts her branded identity, devise means to respond to her plight and assert herself; thus changing the way female childlessness is presented, analyzed and discussed in Africa.

**Keywords: Africa, Childlessness, Flora Nwapa, Stigma, Trauma**

## Introduction

In Africa, the subject of childlessness is currently getting intense inquiry in the academic and correspondingly by creative writers. Perhaps, this distinctive attention is motivated principally by the increase in involuntary childlessness observed globally. Interestingly, the capability to produce offspring has for ages ascertained the status and worth of women in marriage and in society. This assertion had been offered by religious thoughts and assumed a stamp through human societies. As Laurie Lisle makes clear; "Femininity and maternity have been entwined since the Garden of Eden" (168). Thus the duty of a woman must be to "provide the society with children" (de Beauvoir 416). De Beauvoir goes on to add that, "It is in maternity that woman fulfills her psychological destiny; it is her natural 'calling,' since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species" (467).

Evidently, African societies where motherhood is identical to womanhood, a childless woman is dispensed with as incapable of realizing her motherly role (Ireland 7) and professed a lesser woman, infertile and suffering from "incomplete feminization" (Ehrenreich and English 276). As Alexander Abasili would have us believe, "The begetting of children is a social and religious duty attached to marriage and is vital to it" (555). Accordingly, most African societies would frequently delineate a woman by the number of children she gives birth to; with "the preference for boys" (Lewu 564). Celestine Obi argues that in African "the birth of the child gives her the title of wife" (1). As Benjamin Spock maintains "A woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God" (39). Helen Chukwuma notes that "women in the cultural context achieve status through marriage and become fulfilled through motherhood" (133). For all intents and purposes childlessness "constitutes the worst tyranny for in marriage" since "it defies any solution till date" (Chukwuma 121).

In African societies, the principal drive of marriage is to have children as any marriage deprived of children is considered incomplete and unstable. Accordingly Silke Dyer acknowledged six crucial benefits of children: (1) marital stability, (2) social security and domestic support, (3) gender identity and parenthood, (4) social status and stigmatization, (5) continuity and religious beliefs, and (6) emotional values (73). One more strand relevant to this argument is that land

ownerships are usually “negotiated through the number of their children” (Dyer 73) and that children continue the family name and lineage, inherit family land and wealth, and confer a sense of continuity and belonging” (Dyer 74).

The foremost Nigerian novelist Flora Nwapa, is clearly one of the most enthralling African writers whose works are seen as the radical essence of female independence. *One is Enough*, is one of Nwapa’s best-known novels which not only educates us “about the woman’s realm of experience” (Ogundipe-Leslie 11) but defines the female vision as she “reaches the heights of female assertiveness” (Chukwuma 120). The basic claim to Nwapa’s novel is that it shatters the frequently side-lined topic of female childlessness in Africa, as it gives voice to an issue which affects many married women. In addition, the Nwapa’s novel maintains that childlessness inflicts deep emotional, physical and psychological trauma on women who suffer its tenets. Beyond that, the novel, *One is Enough*, illuminates the idea that a childless woman is not a passive sufferer as she has devised sundry coping strategies to search for solutions to her childlessness in order to deal with stigma.

### **Objective of the Study**

This study specifically evaluates the various implications of the childless African woman, the issues of stigmatization and the coping strategies available to her. Bearing in mind the objectives of this study, the paper brings to fore a number of questions on childlessness and how they are related in Nwapa’s novel. First, can an African woman embrace a life without a child? Second, if she is perceived to be childless by circumstance when does she contemplates letting go of her dreams of parenthood? Third, can a childless African woman defy and break off from unfair custom that abuse, demean, isolate and victimize her in the society. Fourth, can stigmatization affects an African woman’s perception of herself. Finally, how can an African woman change the course of motherhood when she leaves the marriage? Certainly, Nwapa’s novel answers these questions as it takes us into the journey of being childless while being married and how the African woman navigates the stigma of childlessness to create a future which proves that childlessness is not always an enduring thing neither is it a woman’s fault.

### **Conceptual Thrust**

This section shall undertake the explanations of key concepts relevant to this study. Childlessness is the condition of people unable to have offspring or children. It has been defined as the “absence of biological... children in an individual’s life” (Miettinen et al 6). Childlessness may be voluntary or involuntary. Typically, voluntary childlessness is by personal choice, this happens when a perfectly fertile individual chooses not to have children. Involuntary childlessness is the inability of a person to conceive a child due to life situations or medical conditions. Childlessness has major implications for affected persons, especially for the woman. Clearly, “Any failure to fulfill the motherhood role negatively affects a woman's perception of herself because the failure to biologically reproduce represents a failure to meet gender role expectations” (Nachtigall, Becker and Wozny 119).

Trauma as Robert Goldenson asserts is: “an injury (Greek, “wound”), either physical or psychological” that causes “emotional shocks that have a more or less permanent effect” (762) on an individual. Cathy Caruth defines it as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). For Briere and Scott “The term ‘trauma’ can mean different things, depending on the context. Semantically, trauma refers to an experience or an event; nevertheless, people use the term interchangeably to refer to either a traumatic experience or event, resulting injury or stress, or the longer-term impacts and consequences” (51).

Stigma is considered as a sign of shame or degradation attached to someone or thing looked upon as socially unacceptable. Erving Goffman speaks of stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction” (3) so that reduces the individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (3). Accordingly, an individual’s stigma “makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be and of a less desirable kind” (3). Implicated here is that a stigmatized individual is written off as as different from what is regarded “normal” in a number of ways. Stafford and Scott delineate stigma as “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit” (80). On their part, Crocker and Wallendorf affirm that “stigmatized

individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (505). Goffman unambiguously adds a modifying condition that stigma "is really a relationship between an attribute and stereotype" (4).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Employing the feminist literary approach, this study critically analyzes Nwapa's *One is Enough* to explicate and comprehend the implications of childlessness on the African sphere. Strikingly, Simon de Beauvoir proclaims that feminists are women or even men, who are striving to enhance women's condition (6). The feminist standpoint offers a valuable corrective to gender relationships. Rightly so, feministic theory underscores females' agency in circumstances where they face prejudice and abuse. Thus, feminism from its inception has urged womankind to contend with their status as victims of traditionally created subordinated stance by looking for innovative ways to fight back domination.

As a literary theory, feminism is applied in the description and interpretation of "women's experience as depicted in various kinds of literature" (Cuddon 338). In Lois Tyson's assertion "feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women" (83). According to Tuula Gordon, feminism is preoccupied with reshaping the world on the justification of the situation and involvements of women, underscoring their subjugation and subordination (37). Feminism for Linda Gordon "is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of how to change it" (qtd in Singh 8). Bell Hooks sees feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (8). In Maggie Humm's declaration it is "a label for a commitment or movement to achieve equality for women" (1). Toril Moi submits that "feminism is a bourgeoisie, egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system" (103). For Robert Tong, it is an "intellectual and political commitments to women" (qtd in Dickinson 114). Implicated here is the belief that women should have cerebral, political, financial and societal rights equivalent to those of men. Feminism for Helen Chukwuma denotes "a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human being" (9).

### **Critical Evaluation of Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough***

Flora Nwapa, in *One is Enough*, depicts the struggles of the African woman in a society that places child-bearing, over female productivity, love and happiness. We draw on the feminist theory to enable the study appreciate the effects on the emotional, social and psychological actions of the childless African woman within the family unit. Basically, Nwapa's *One is Enough*, explores the notion of childlessness and the impact and struggles faced by the African woman who is usually blamed for unproductiveness whenever a family desire to have children. The story focuses on the protagonist, Amaka; a flourishing business woman who encounters communal pressure and stigma due to her failure to bear children. The novel depicts the conflicts Amaka faces; her efforts to overcome her childlessness, including consulting traditional doctors and modern medical specialists and the alternative path she takes to achieve personal fulfillment outside conventional aspirations of motherhood.

In the novel, Amaka's failure to conceive and bear children turn out to be a cause of immense distress for her. Her society expects her to fulfill the expectation of having children or face stigma. To this end, her aunt brings it to her notice that: "What is important is not marriage as such, but children, being able to have children, being a mother. A marriage is no marriage without children. Have your children... and you will be respected" (8). Since childlessness can be a harrowing and nerve-racking experience for the African woman, Amaka's mother prevailed on her to "make men friends and start thinking of having children. Marriage or no marriages, have children" (11) so that she will be valued. Otherwise Amaka's mother warned her: "You will be very lonely" she goes on to add that "As a mother, you are fulfilled" (11). The point to be observed here is the fact that Amaka's mother would welcome any means it takes for Amaka to get pregnant within or outside marriage in the quest for children. What is at issue, is that by delineating a woman's worth and accomplishment by her fertility, diminishes her to a mere child generating machine devoid of any positive contribution to the improvement of her society.

It would interest the reader to know that Amaka, who longs to have a family: "a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage" (1) failed to conceive after six years of waiting. This condition of unfruitfulness results in

tension and frustration in her marriage. Amaka's inability to conceive strains her relationship with her husband, Obiora leading to her sufferings and the feelings of guilt and blame placed on her as she is degraded and branded infertile. Obiora's expectations and the desire for children put immense pressure on Amaka, resulting in irritation and tensed communication. Despite Amaka's show of affection and care towards Obiora her husband, he impulsively says to her:

You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you are childless. You wouldnot raise your voice in this house if you were sensible. You should go about your business quietly and not offend anyone because if you do, one would be tempted to give you one or two home truths. (19)

Amaka, faces societal pressure and personal conflicts because she is considered infertile and has failed to meet the expectations of her society. Since Amaka is troubled by her society's attitude, she does everything possible to prove that she can be pregnant by visiting traditional medicine men and professional doctors. Charles Nnolim submits that African societal expectations regarding childless women are: "forcing them to consult various medicine-men, doctors, prophets or leaving their marital homes in frustration" (140). From this point we can see why in Africa, being a parent is measured to be more fundamental to the life of a woman than to the life of a man. For Amaka laments that despite all she had done to procreate that:

God has deprived her of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joy of being a mother. Was that really the end of the world? Was she useless to the world if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world ... Surely not, why then was she suffering these indignities both from her husband and his mother? (20)

Amaka's sense of identity and self-worth are influenced by general judgments and stigmas associated with her childlessness. She is subjected to psychological, emotional and physical abuse at the hand of her husband and his mother. The readers are made to see that Amaka is repeatedly beaten by her husband. The novel tells us that Obiora "rushed at her. He was a very strong man. He had beaten her...and she did not recover from that beating for a week. Her face was swollen,

her head ached. She had bruised all over her" (26). The readers are informed that "He beat her so mercilessly that Amaka was afraid that he was going to kill her" (27). Another instance of abuse on Amaka depicted in the novel occurs when she confronts Obiora about his infidelity that produces two sons. He turns on Amaka and quite callously says to her:

You whore, you good-for-nothing woman, you prostitute. What have you beendoing behind my back? Sleeping with other men? I am going to kill you today and take your corpse to your mother and nobody will ask questions... Open the door and I will tear you to pieces. (28-29)

In like fashion, Obiora's mother employs emotional and psychological abuse against Amaka, whom she alleges is the cause of the adversity in her family saying; "I have been sleeping badly for the past year. Don't you see how thin I am? Was I as thin as this when you married my son six years ago? So don't complain of sleeping badly for just one night" (3). Obiora's mother claims that Amaka has conveyed her disaster-prone nature on her son as she cries thus:

And you with your ilk talk of my son, my lovely son, my good son who saved you from shame and form humiliation. How many suitors had you before my son came to marry you?... I told him not to marry you.... I told Obiora not to marry you, that you were going to be barren. (5)

To further distress Amaka and lower her self-esteem because of her childlessness, Obiora's mother accuses Amaka for her son's lack of progress:

The next thing I want to tell you is that you have done nothing at all towards the advancement of my son since you married him six years ago. Look aroundand you see others married at the time you were married. My son has not started building a house yet, nor has he done anything for his age-grade in this town. (15)

Also implicated from the excerpt above is the fact that in the community of Amaka: "A wife took the blame for her husband's failure in business or in life generally" (17).



To blame Amaka of infertility and worsen her agony, Obiora and his mother engage in a clandestine marriage with another woman which produces two children; so as to avoid the stigma of being childless and circumvent putting the responsibility on Obiora. To this end, Amaka is left to grapple with the feelings of shock, isolation and a loss of identity. The narrative tells us that Amaka "began to tremble. She could no longer control her emotions. She holds on to the bed, so she does not faint" (14). Obiora clearly does not have compassion for her, rather he goes on to intimidate Amaka declaring: "but let me warn you that if you step out of this house in protest when my wife and my two sons arrive, you stay out forever. You must not come back" (20).

After his partner and sons arrive, Obiora keeps on upsetting Amaka by demanding that she recognizes his new spouse. When Amaka inquires, "Where is the mother of your sons? Obiora act in response by saying, "You mean my wife?" (25). Implying that his new wife is now his priority and object of his attention.

Expressing her grief and shame on account of the new wife who displaces her as the legitimate wife of Obiora, Amaka articulates her hopelessness to her husband saying: "Congratulations. I thought that in this sort of thing, a wife, even a barren one should have been taken into confidence. It beats me how you should do all this behind my back, be involved with a woman, have sons by her, marry her without breathing a word to your wife (25 - 26). Increasing Amaka's pain, Obiora's mother speaks to Amaka in such an undignified term: "if my son heard me, if he listened to me, his house would have been full of children by now" (13).

Having endured for long, the physical, psychological, emotional abuse and sufferings meted out to her on account of her childlessness, Amaka resolves to take her destiny in her hands by engaging in a coping strategies based on own discernment. Consequently, she leaves her matrimonial home and is determined to do anything to procreate. The yearning for a child of her own makes Amaka participate in a relationship with a priest, Father Mclaid, which produced two male offspring proving to her society that she is not infertile. This analysis is in line with Nwapa's artistic message that Amaka is not barren but there is a problem of compatibility with her husband. This means that Amaka is not infertile, she only "needed a special man to make her do so (that is procreate)" (22). It is worthy to

note that numerous blameless women are tagged childless in Africa without verification. Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, is a casualty of this situation. This study thus challenges the way African men and society hold women alone as responsible for procreation.

### Conclusion

From the foregoing, we can comfortably state that a child does not define who a woman is. Childlessness should not be blamed on the woman; it may also arise from the conditions of a man. Nwapa through her novel encourages everyone to seriously consider the feelings of childless women, for it is only a matter of time that they too can become mothers [as we see in the case of Amaka]. This paper examined the implications of childlessness on the African woman who is often blamed for a couple's childlessness, as depicted in Nwapa's *One is Enough*; and explore the tactic and coping mechanisms the African woman adopts, to deal with childlessness and become the woman she desires to be, by creating a future which ends the shame on female childlessness; proving that the African woman can go against the dynamics of societal expectations, cultural norms and personal circumstances which take a toll on the childless woman to gain self-actualization and her mental well-being.

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