

THE METAPHORS FOR WOMEN IN FLORA NWAPA'S "CASSAVA SONG"

IDRIS HAMZA YANA
idris.yana@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Most African societies are patriarchal where men tend to be the heads of their household and bread winners of their families while women are seen as weak and dependent upon men for support, guidance and protection. Men are the protectors of the society during wars while women are often the victims of atrocities committed. Even though things are gradually improving in terms of male dominance in African societies, women are still lagging behind in many respects. This is said to have prompted some writers to decry the situation in their writings. These writers protest the position of woman in African society on issues regarding barrenness, witchcraft, misfortune and other vices attributed to women. Flora Nwapa is one of the pioneer women writers in Africa whose major thematic concern is women and their position in African society. Her poem, "Cassava Song" is one of such works that compare African woman's experience with that of a food crop called cassava. Drawing on Sarah Sceats' insights into food imagery in her book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women Fiction* (2003), this paper aims to critically examine the poem "Cassava Song" to study how Nwapa artistically uses cassava as a metaphor for women in the African context.

Word Count: Three thousand five hundred and eighty-seven (3,587) words.

Key Words: Poetry, Poem, Woman, Cassava, Africa

INTRODUCTION

African society is, by virtue of its setup and cultural practices, mostly patriarchal. Men are often the heads and bread winners of their families. Boys are groomed to become strong members of the society who protect it and safeguard its norms and mores. Women, on the other hand, are considered weak and dependent upon men for support, guidance and protection. In the event of war, men go to protect their territorial integrity while women are left at home and they often end up being the victims of the atrocities committed. Although there are said to be improvements, in terms of male dominance in African societies, women are still not as influential, in many respects, as they should be. This is said to have prompted some writers, whose majority is female, to decry the situation. These writers protest the position of women in African society on such issues as barrenness, witchcraft, misfortune and other vices attributed to women. Flora Nwapa is one of these writers and this paper dwells on some these issues she tackled in her poem "Cassava Song".

TACKLING ISSUES OF GENDER IN AFRICA AND THE ROLE OF POETRY

The representation of gender issues through works of literature is a long tradition whose roots could be traced to the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when feminism brought to the fore the broader conception of women's right. Although the genesis of the movement is from the West, it continued to spread and reached the African shores and penetrated the continent. In Africa, fiction writers such as Nawal El Sadawi, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Flora Nwapa directed their writings towards addressing those issues. Most of female writers in Africa use prose as their medium for advocacy. Texts like *God Dies by the Nile* (El Sadawi), *So Long a Letter* (Ba), *Maru* (Head) and *Efuru* (Nwapa) showcase how African women are engaged in addressing the role of gender in African society through prose in the first half of the twentieth century. Most of

the writings of the afore-mentioned African women writers were geared towards addressing the issues of gender disparity in Africa.

The poetic tradition that is referred to as Modern African Poetry is relatively new. Before the emergence of the trend, there was an oral tradition that predated it. Poetry was usually recited, committed to memory and passed on from generation to generation. The example of such poetic traditions could be seen in praise poems of South Africa, sacred songs of Masai, the Odu corpus of Yoruba, funeral dirges of Akan, Sundiata Epic of Mali and the likes. These examples attest to the fact that there was a long poetic tradition in Africa even before the continent's first contact with the West. The emergence of modern poetic tradition in Africa was said to have started with the continent's first contact with the West. Slavery, missionary activities and colonisation are said to be the three chronological factors that contributed immensely in that regard. Female voices in modern African poetry were audible even from the onset. Phillis Wheatley is regarded among the pioneer African poets in the Diaspora. Although her major concern is Christianity, rather than the position of women, her works are regarded as "superior" even among her white peers (Nkosi 1981). In the second generation, there were other poetesses like Gladys May Casely-Hayford, Iman Mirsal, Marina Gashe, Ama Aita Aido, Micere Githae Mugo, Kristina Rungano and Flora Nwapa. Recently there are poets like Catherine Obianuju Acholoru, Mabel Segun, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Chinelu Okparanta among others. These poetesses render their voices in the project of redressing Africa regarding such issues as economy, politics, culture, morality, health, religion and the likes. They also tackle the sensitive issues of gender inequality, discrimination, forced/arranged marriage, widowhood practices, genital mutilation, rape and sexual abuse, right to inheritance, marginalisation in education, employment opportunities, etc. (Bamgbose 2012). However, it is worth noting that these discriminations do not always lead to gender conflict because they are seen as somewhat natural order – members of the society, especially women, are conditioned to believe that there is nothing wrong about it. According to Ezeigbo (1997), young women were trained to be subordinates to men while their men counterparts were prepared to be "aggressive and fearless". This could be said to have prompted the emergence of female voices in the African poetic tradition, especially in the post-independent Africa with a view to changing the consciousness of the African woman.

It could be argued that despite African women's rendering their voices to modern African poetic tradition, their works are not given much credit, possibly due to the patriarchal nature of the African society. Therefore, there is a need to refocus on modern African poetry since according to Chipasula (1995), this "is a necessary first step towards reversing the objectification of women and rendering visible the invisible poets themselves". There is thus the need for a paradigm shift in the status quo for female poets to be represented properly and adequately. The women, however, continue to write, hoping that somehow of their writings will make an impact not only on the psyche of the females alone, but also on the males who seem to dominate the artistic and intellectual sphere of the continent as Chipasula (1995) rightly put it: "It is not fulfilling enough to achieve cultural relevance and gender equity but to radically free the female from the cumbersome yoke of domination and injustice".

FLORA NWAPA'S PROSE FICTION

Before examining the major text, which is "Cassava Song", it is important to have a glimpse on Flora Nwapa's other literary works. Nwapa is most popular for her two novels namely *Efuru* and *Idu*. In the novels, she portrays the conditions and experience of women in their matrimonial homes. The setting of the novels is Oguta, Igbo land, in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. By its nature, the Igbo society is patriarchal and men are the dominant and powerful members and protectors of the society. Women are considered weak, passive and submissive depending on men for their wellbeing (Ezeigbo 1997). Thus, Nwapa's two novels depict the experiences of two major characters whose names the novels bear respectively. *Efuru* is the first novel to be published in English by a Nigerian female writer. This, according to Mears (2009) earned Nwapa prestige and recognition in the society. *Efuru* narrates a story of a woman who challenges the traditional practices of her society by getting married even before her husband paid the dowry. She also violates and manipulates many customs and tradition intentionally to assert her freedom. This did not go down well with the leaders of the community but at the end, the heroine lives happily among her people, offering them spiritual and material help – the role only men were known for. In *Idu*, Nwapa portrays how an enterprising woman earns her husband's affection and respect due to the material value she adds to the wellbeing of the family. She also explores the fate of traditional beliefs under the influence of western world view. Flora Nwapa clearly wrote about women and issues surrounding their lives. According to Mears (2009), Nwapa "explores and analyzes many of the characteristics of her tribal group, she posits women's desire for change, choice, and acceptance within a society in which they wish to participate fully as human beings not just women traditionally expected to participate in a limited, culturally-defined way". Her female protagonists express the need for female identity collectively and individually within the society and demand for affection from the community as well as respect for their choices. She makes her heroines ambitious, assertive, self-dependent and purposeful who understand and define the meaning of life.

The changes witnessed in Nwapa's heroines could be attributed to colonialism through which Igbo communities had first contact with Western education and Christianity. According to Mears (2009), "The ideas and customs taught in the schools often contradicted traditional Igbo values, beliefs, and habits, thus creating tensions and ambiguity in individual, families, and the whole community". These have greatly affected the social, cultural, economic and

political aspects of the Igbo community. Issues like arranged marriages, killing of twins, albinos and lepers, as traditional practices were challenged by Christianity. This gave succour to many who were tired of the traditions and a new hope as well as offering an alternative faith. This ushered in a somewhat radical perspective on some members of Igbo communities to challenge the status quo. Nwapa's "Cassava Song", which is her only collection of poems, builds on this thematic concern, especially the issues of gender conflict in Igbo marriage institution.

FOOD IMAGERY IN "CASSAVA SONG"

Food and eating are two important aspects of human life which, like sexuality, "are psychologically, socially and politically constructed, and symbolisms, customs and behaviours are indicators and results of cultural conditioning." (Sarah Sceats 2003:3). Food and eating are also an integral part of self-consciousness that plays a very important role in identifying one's culture, class and family. Food and women are intertwined in many cultures because, apart from being those who cook the food for their families, their bodily attributes such as conceiving pregnancy, giving birth, breast feeding, match with the roles of food. Women's body has the capacity to produce food (breast milk) for infants and they have "traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others" (Sceats 2003:2). The food that woman gives (in form of breast milk or meal served to the family) also conditions the love she receives and represents a love she gives. These roles are said to have a mimetic effect on women's writing. This argument suggests that women writers are thus likely to be influenced by their relationship with food processing and production when they write about their conditions in the society.

"Cassava Song and Rice Song" is Flora Nwapa's only collection of poems. In "Cassava Song", Nwapa's thematic concern is woman and the celebration of womanhood. Nwapa's choice of cassava may not be far from gender politics attached to food stuffs in Igbo society. According to Gloria Chuku (2016), Igbo society could be seen as highly stratified along lines. Gender differentiation was perceived as a vital feature of social organization. This perception has presented a picture of superior masculinity vis-à-vis inferior or subordinate femininity" (46). In a typical Igbo setting, "when Igbo talk about farming they talk about yams" because it is "central to Igbo food culture, food security, and the prevailing gender ideology of male and female crops" (Chima J. Korieh 2007:222). The ladder of social mobility and one of the ways of measuring ones' masculinity, achievement, and identity among Igbos is the number of yam tubers one has in his barn. Cultivation of Cassava on the other hand is considered unworthy of men "perceived as inferior to yam [which] became virtually a women's crop" (Korieh 2007:227-8). Nwapa uses food imagery to artistically deploy figurative expressions that portray the condition of African women in general and Igbo woman in particular. Using cassava as a metaphorical figure, Nwapa paints the picture of how woman is treated in the Igbo society in general and by her husband in particular. Cassava as a perceived inferior food crop, speaks to Nwapa's idea of how women are treated in this society. Nwapa opens the poem by highlighting some of the attributes of cassava in the two succeeding stanzas:

You grow in poor soils
 You grow in rich soils
 You grow in gardens
 You grow in farms.

You are easy to grow
 Children can plant you
 Women can plant you
 Everybody can plant you.

In these stanzas, the poetic persona tries to show the simplistic and accommodating nature of cassava whereby anybody can plant it. And because of this, she says, We must sing for you/ Great cassava, we must sing/ We must not forget/ Thee, the great one. This is echoed by Korieh (2007) who opined that cassava has advantage over other crops because "It has the capacity to withstand extreme stress and survive in relatively poor soil" (230). The poem also shows how, after serving its purpose of replenishing people, they turn their backs at her. This shows how ungrateful people are, usually to women, particularly mothers after giving birth to children and bringing them up. This is captured in the following stanzas:

We easily turn our backs
 When you have fed us fat
 We easily turn our backs
 When we become so important.

We deny you
 We make fun of you
 We jeer at you
 We easily forget

As children, you fed us
 You were like a mother
 You fed us fat
 But we easily forget

The third stanza also echoes Scaats' idea of woman as a source of nourishment. Another important issue tackled by the poem is the comparison between cassava and yam. Both crops play key role in the socio-cultural settings of Igbo people. Yam is considered the most important crop in Igbo hence there is a special annual celebration set aside for yam called "The New Yam Festival". Although several Igbo communities have diverse cultures, Yam Festival is a common festival of all Igbo people. The Festival is held at the end of rainy season in early August (Ugo 2007). During the festivity, yam is eaten throughout the communities and people show off tubers of yam as a sign of great accomplishment. Yam is considered a special crop that only men can grow. In "Cassava Song", Nwapa uses yam and cassava as metaphors of men and women respectively. This is demonstrated in the following lines:

We sing for the yam
 We have yam festival
 Why, Oh why are
 These denied you...

The yam is great
 But you are greater...

Great yam
 You only have
 A false value
 Stop your arrogance!

In the stanzas above, Nwapa shows how men are seen as more important than women. She, however, undermines this importance attributed to men in other stanzas when men went to war and left women to take care of the children and the family. During the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970, Igbo people were the most affected communities. This is because the agitation for an independent nation called Biafra started there and about two million Igbos lost their lives. Most of the casualties were men while women were left with the burden of fending for the family. The poem also expresses appreciation for the sacrifices that women made during the civil war. It thus expresses gratitude to women who were allegorised as saviours during war just like cassava was the saviour during yam scarcity as seen in the following stanzas:

Don't be angry
 Great mother
 You were our Saviour
 During the war.

You have been our Saviour
 Long before the war.
 When the yam disappeared
 Great Mother was with us.
 We never lack Cassava
 In the time of peace
 In the time of war
 We never lack Cassava.

Thus, both in time of peace and war, woman, like the cassava, always makes sure that her family never lacks. Other issues that Nwapa tackles in the poem are sexual exploitation and early marriage experienced by women. Nwapa employs high use metaphor to show how women are married off very early and the sexual exploitation that followed. In the following stanza, she shows how women are rushed to be married before the right time:

In a short time
 You grow very big
 In a short time
 You are ready for harvest.

You make no fuss
 You are most humble
 You are most kind...

This explicitly captures the situation some women go through regarding early marriage. Regarding the sexual exploitation, Nwapa dramatises how men treat women as objects for quenching their sexual desires:

Where is the wooden spoon?
 The large wooden spoon
 The nice balls
 Must be put into the pot

It is time
 Where is the wooden spoon?
 Come on.
 Do your job

We pound you
 We pound you
 We continue to pound
 We pound and pound

You endure the pounding
 For our sake
 For the sake of your children
 You endure.

This vividly captures the gruesome experience of women during sexual intercourse where there is no respect for their feeling but only for the satisfaction of the men. The wooden spoon and the soft ball are metaphorical representations of male sexual organs which are being put into the boiling pot, a representation of female genital.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the discussions above, this paper shows how Flora Nwapa, using food imagery, has employed different poetic devices to highlight the women's experience in Igbo culture. Due to its patriarchal nature, Igbo society affords women limited opportunity to thrive. Nwapa explores food imagery to demonstrate gender relations in an agrarian society. She uses Cassava as a metaphor of woman and Yam as that of man to portray gender roles in a typical Igbo setting. While Yam is celebrated as the king, cassava is considered as inferior crop worthy only of women, the perceived inferior gender. Nwapa, however, foreshadows a rather radical perspective regarding cassava's role in the unity and sustenance of the society. While "Many Igbo people, especially titleholders, never ate cassava because of its inferior status" (Chuku 2016: 50), it offered women, who embraced its farming, economic prosperity and self-confidence. This has also reduced over-reliance of women on their husbands thereby ushering in a new paradigm shift in the family structure. As seen in the poem, cassava rescues the Igbo people from the famine caused by the civil war as well as in the "traditional famine period preceding the yam harvest" (Korieh 2007: 228). Thus, Flora Nwapa's clever use of cassava as a metaphor for woman is not for lamentation but rather to assert the change that is taking place in the Igbo society regarding gender roles. Nwapa seems to imply that just like the cassava is altering the socio-economic strata in the Igbo community, it is also radicalising the role of women in it. Woman, like cassava, is being looked upon in times of need. Men can only be celebrated like yam, but the actual influencers of the society are women. This could be the reason why she refers to Cassava as Great Mother, Mother or Great Cassava. Throughout the poem, she writes cassava with the upper case "C" and she even declares that "Mother and Cassava are one" to mean how both alter the social, economic, political and indeed gender structures of the society. It could thus be deduced that the poem "Cassava Song" is not actually about cassava the food crop but the woman metaphorically represented as cassava.

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