

Flora Nwapa'nın *Kadınlar Farklıdır* Romanında Kadın Konusu

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ÖZ

Bu çalışmada, Flora Nwapa'nın *Women are Different* adlı romanından yola çıkılarak Nijerya toplumundaki toplumsal cinsel kimlik modelleri incelenecektir. Bu romanda, Flora Nwapa Nijeryalı kadınların hakları konusunda örneğin eğitim hakkı gibi nasıl bilinçlendiklerini anlatmaktadır. Ayrıca, Flora Nwapa henüz yeni bağımsızlığını kazanan Nijerya'da yaşamının kadınlar açısından avantajlarını ve dezavantajlarını da bu romanında gündeme getirmektedir. Romanda, (bir çelişki gibi de gözükse) bazı Nijeryalı kadın karakterlerin eski İngiliz yönetiminin olduğu günleri özledikleri gözlenmektedir, çünkü özgürlük onlara beraberinde bazı sorumluluklar da getirmiştir ve yeterli eğitimsel donanımları ve ekonomik özgürlükleri olmadığı için bu sorumluluklar bazı kadınların omzunda bir yük olmaya başlamıştır. Tüm bu olumsuzluklara rağmen, çoğu kadın karakter sömürge dönemi Nijerya'sından sömürgecilik sonrası Nijerya'ya geçiş döneminde elinden geleni yapıp sorunların üstesinden gelmeye çalışmıştır. Bu konulara ek olarak, *Women are Different* adlı romanda Nijeryalı erkeklerin toplumsal cinsel kimlik konusunun yanı sıra, toplumsal sorunlara ve sosyo-politik konulara olan tutumları da okuyucuya aktarılmaktadır. Romanda, Nijeryalı kadın ve erkeklerin toplumsal sosyal cinsel kimlik modelleri karşılaştırılarak, sadece Nijerya'da değil, aslında tüm dünyada kadın hakları konusunda bir bilinç oluşturma ne kadar önemli olduğunun altı çizilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmada Flora Nwapa'nın *Women are Different* adlı romanından örneklemelerle sömürgecilik dönemi sonrası Nijerya'sında kadınların rolleri ve sorumlulukları incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Flora Nwapa, *Women are Different*, Nijeryalı kadınlar, toplumsal cinsel kimlik, sömürgecilik sonrası Nijerya.

The Women Issue In Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the gender patterns in Nigerian society with reference to Flora Nwapa's novel, namely *Women are Different*. In this novel, Flora Nwapa narrates how the Nigerian women begin to gain consciousness about their rights such as having access to education. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of living in a newly independent Nigeria for the Nigerian women are brought forward by Flora Nwapa. Related to this, in the novel, paradoxically it has been observed that some Nigerian women characters begin to long for the old British colonial days due to the fact that freedom brings some responsibilities as well. Lacking the necessary educational background and economic independence, these women's new responsibilities begin to be a burden on their shoulders. Yet, they try to cope with all the problems successfully during the time of the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period. In addition to these, the Nigerian males' attitude towards all these political, social and gender problems are conveyed to the readers in *Women are Different*. Meanwhile, the Nigerian female gender patterns are compared and contrasted with the Nigerian male gender patterns and eventually, the importance of raising consciousness about the women's problems not only in Nigeria, but also all around the world has been underlined in the novel. Accordingly, in this paper, the Nigerian women's role in the postcolonial Nigerian society will be evaluated with regard to the examples given from *Women are Different*.

Keywords: Flora Nwapa-Nwakuche, *Women are Different*, Nigerian women, gender patterns, post/colonial Nigeria.

Flora Nwapa, the first West African woman to publish a novel in English (Berrian 1995: 53) dedicates her novel to "women who are different", and she tells the story of Nigerian women who struggle for financial independence, for a career and who try to hold their families together without a man's support in postcolonial Nigeria. In fact, these problems are the universal problems faced by women everywhere. The events in the novel evolve around three women characters; namely Agnes, Dora and Rose. These three women characters, who follow their ideals and dreams, study at a missionary school and they are close friends. Their adventures and problems are conveyed to the readers in *Women are Different* in such a way so as to question the gender patterns in Nigeria and to raise consciousness and question marks in the minds of the readers. Nwapa gives the chance of having an insight into Nigerian history, culture and gender patterns to her readers as well as "depict[ing] the growth and maturation of the silenced and subservient" (Erol 2010: 110) fictional female characters and illustrates how "[i]n the face of necessities life presses upon [them], [they] encounter many obstacles, claims and exert [their] own authority" (Erol 2010: 110).

To begin with, for instance, in the novel, it is explained that Agnes has a step-mother and she is sent to the boarding school until they find somebody to marry her. Her family finds an old rich man as a husband

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Makalenin Gönderim Tarihi: 01.02.2017; Makalenin Kabul Tarihi: 16.03.2017

for her. Although Agnes* does not want to marry him, she could not resist her father's pressure and she marries in the end. This is expressed in the passage below: "[S]he was under pressure to get married to someone she did not like. He was much older than herself – no he was as old as her father... she knew her own mind, she was determined to be in school and take the Cambridge School Certificate examination before she married" (Nwapa 1992: 22).

A more careful consideration should be given at these women characters in order to understand their problems better. After being trained as a nurse, Agnes' friend, Dora marries to a man called Chris. But unfortunately, her husband makes no attempt to go to any institution of higher education. From the beginning, in the novel, their marriage seems to be doomed to fail, because Chris loves the good things in life such as dressing well. Yet, he does not like working much. In *Women are Different*, he takes bribes and he does nothing to develop his intellect. Meanwhile, Dora works as a nurse under difficult conditions in a hospital. However, the Chief Nursing Officer makes life more difficult for her as she believes that "women could do either of two things; be a wife and stay at home or be a nurse and work in the hospitals full time" (Nwapa 1992: 68). Thus, even women in patriarchal societies do not let other women partake both inside and outside of home by confining them either to home, or to work.

Despite all these obstacles, Dora sets up a bakery† and Chris begins to keep the books for her but "having to work for his own wife bothers him" as he thinks that it is unmanly to work for his wife. In the eye of Chris, he is the breadwinner in the family and he is the master of Dora or rather, he owns her. Dora senses his feelings and consoles him by saying "Chris, it is a partnership. You will be the Managing Director and everything. I'll do the donkey work". But Chris has other plans in his mind such as going abroad and studying law. With the help of Dora, he goes to England to read law and in his absence Dora experiences the coup‡ of 1966 with her five children and becomes a witness to the violation of human rights and the widespread violence stemmed from the chaotic atmosphere of the coup of 1966. In the marriage of Dora and Chris, the "reversal of the gender roles"§ can be observed since Dora is the breadwinner and the head of the family in practice. Chris is an escapist and escapes from his responsibilities and even stops writing letters both to Dora and to the children. Moreover, he steals Dora's money and sells one of their houses secretly. After that event, "for the first time in her life she went to see a lawyer". Mostly, Law and Administration are the men's land and women cannot enter easily into these

* Comfort, one of her friends from the school becomes the mouth-piece of the patriarchy. She believes that their parents are wasting their money by educating them. Rose opposes to this idea fiercely and she says "the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world". For Comfort, the hand that rocks the cradle is not necessarily an educated hand. "All that mattered to women was getting married and having children and starting a beautiful home" (Nwapa 1992: 12). Later on, they discussed this topic with the boys. After the meeting of the girls' school with the boys' school, boys accompany girls back to their schools. The accompaniment of the girls by boys is used to show the traditional gender-roles in Nigeria, that is men should protect women or in other words, women are in need of men and the following sentence illustrates this possessive male attitude clearly, "when the junior boys went back, the senior boys organized themselves again and made one more supreme effort to see the girls safely to their school" (Nwapa 1992: 18).

† In the novel, Chris is about to lose his job because of taking bribes and therefore, he begins to work for his wife.

‡ On the other hand, ironically enough, in the novel, there is a woman character called Janet, who sees violence as the only solution to every problem. This may stem from her up-bringing. Psychiatrists say that people, who are exposed to violence, tend to use violence towards other people as well. And when the managers of the school punishes girls for the hunger-strike, Janet suggests beating teachers as expressed in the following sentence: "One of the girls, Janet by name, who was so quarrelsome, and who came from an area where matches were used freely said that the only lesson that Misses Hill and Backhouse would be taught was beating. If the girls agreed with her, she would beat the two women up" (Nwapa 1992: 32).

In addition to physical violence, there is also psychological violence in the girls' school. For instance, the school managers use psychological violence upon the girls, when the prefects decide to go on a hunger strike for improving their food. In other words, women are silenced, when they want their rights and this is expressed in the sentence below: "The prefects were no longer to be prefects. For the rest of the year, the principal and staff of the school nominated the girls they thought fit to be prefects" (Nwapa 1992: 37). In other words, in the novel, girls are oppressed and there is no democracy in their school. Moreover, the Nigerian girls are three times oppressed because they are colonized, they are black and they are women.

§ Comfort, another girl in their school, monopolizes boys and goes out with many boys. I think, here there is another example of the reversal of the gender roles. Notice that a girl has many lovers, whereas in Africa, it is the men, who are supposed to have many lovers or wives.

areas in the 1960's of Nigeria. But Dora is not an ordinary woman and Chris' absence makes her even more extrovert, or in Nwapa's own words more "outward".

Compared to other women in Nigeria, she is more conscious of the political situation in Nigeria after the independence; "... we had power thrust into our hands and we did not know what to do with it... When a political party lost, overnight, its loss became victory, for during the dead of the night, those who lost had bribed those who won, and a defeat turned to victory" (Nwapa 1992: 72) says she. She knows that a civil war is about to come and she prays to God that He would prevent the civil war. But "due to Dora's foresight, she and her family did not suffer too much during the civil war" (Nwapa 1992: 75). Therefore, in a time when many people had lost their houses, she bought back her house. Furthermore, in the novel, she is depicted as a good mother, "she never shouted at her children, never. She was very gentle with them. She was loving but firm. She was busy baking her bread and cake, but she found time to be with her children. She loved them all five of them. But their father had betrayed her. He was a traitor" (Nwapa 1992: 73) says the narrator. Thus, in the novel she is depicted as a nourisher, a businesswoman and a loving mother.

After having heard Chris' failure in Law school, Dora visits him in Hamburg in order to find an answer to her questions, but Chris pretends to be a stranger to her. This leads Dora to a self-questioning and then, she achieves self-liberation:

For a week she stayed in her bedroom. She looked at herself in the mirror. She was not bad. Then she removed all her clothes and looked in the mirror again. She was not bad. She ran both hands over her head. Yes, she still had long hair. She had not lost any hair. She looked young. At least Chris aged. She hadn't aged. That must be a consolation. What happened to Chris in London and Hamburg? What went wrong with Chris? Her sympathy dramatically turned to Chris. At first she had locked herself up and felt sorry for herself. Now she felt sorry for Chris. He should not have gone to England in the first place. She told him, but he did not listen to her. And the German lady? Was she Chris' wife or concubine or what? Was she keeping Chris? When did Chris go to Hamburg? Why Hamburg? No, she must stop all these questions which had no answers. She must do something. But what? What was she going to do? (Nwapa 1992: 78)

A month after her return from Hamburg, she divorces Chris by native law and custom. This scene is another example of the reversal of the gender roles since it is a woman, who takes the action for a divorce. Thus, women are shown as active decision-makers, not passive and obedient as usual. However, towards the end of the novel, surprisingly enough when Chris comes back, she accepts him into the family for the sake of her children. Upon this event, she says "but I have the whip hand. I am not a fool. Now my children have a father. That is all that matters" (Nwapa 1992: 133). When the necessity arouses, she gives the priority to her family and can forget her hatred against Chris.

Moreover, as it is observed in many patriarchal cultures and societies, in Nigerian culture and society too when "[d]efining the ideal woman who was portrayed in the novels, respectability comes to the foreground" (Yıldız 2010: 295). And in relation to the meaning of respectability and its coverage, it is stated that "[r]espectability was... referred to good manners in general such as fidelity in sexual relations, being virtuous and religious (qtd. in Yıldız 2010: 295). And here as is shown in the case of Dora, infidelity in sexual relations if committed by the male party may be ignored and forgiven.

Not only Dora, but her friend Rose needs to be closely analyzed in order to have a better understanding of Nigerian women's problems and lives. Rose is the protagonist of the novel and she is in the same school with Dora. When she is in school, she is not good at Maths, but she is good at writing stories in Ibo language and "she was a serious minded girl and she knew why she was in the school" (Nwapa 1992: 24). Then, she even influences her father with her political ideas. After her first two years at school, her father begins to believe in the freedom of Nigeria just like she does.

In the novel, she likes a boy called Ernest. She thinks that Ernest would go to Yaba Higher College and then read medicine. In *Women are Different*, it is stated that Ernest "should go abroad and read for his specialist degree [and] he would take her. She was not sure of what she would read when she went abroad, but whatever Ernest suggested would be all right... But then all depended on Ernest. He knew what was good for her". As it is observed in the passage above, she puts Ernest at the center of the universe and of

her own life. Therefore, she becomes submissive to him and utters the following words: “[W]hat I know is that I am going to marry after being trained. I may even go to the University, I don’t know. It all depends on Ernest” (Nwapa 1992: 42).

As expected, Ernest gains admission to Yaba Higher College to read medicine and it is the institution that the brains of the country go. “The college was highly competitive” and “there were [only] three girls in the college” (Nwapa 1992: 43). And the number of the girls in the medicine school reveals the gender-discrimination in the education system in Nigeria. Therefore, Nigerian women need to have policies of positive discrimination in order to improve their status in Nigerian society. As sociologists also point it out, daily relations between boys and girls in the classroom are another source of reinforcement for gender-based stereotypes (see Myers’&Dugan’s article, “Sexism in Graduate School Classrooms: Consequences for Students and Faculty”). Not only teachers, but also students find it normal for boys to dominate and for girls to be in the background and to be passive, especially in the fields of medicine and engineering (see Ketherine Clarricoates). The sexist attitudes in the education system lead youth to categorize courses or occupations with regard to their genders and internalize these stereotypical images, which suggest that science is for boys, not for girls. Thus, science is perceived to be a masculine subject and by imposing these images, girls or women are forced to give up competition in these fields (see Bossert and Clarricoates 1981).

Parallel to these, in the novel, both Rose and her friend, Comfort are depicted as having problems in mathematics, whereas they are described as good at verbal lessons. For instance, Rose is good at story-writing and Comfort likes reading romances very much. And for centuries all over the world, romance is taken as a feminine genre.

Complying with these gender-biased educational backgrounds, Ernest goes abroad to continue his medical studies and Rose enters to University College, Ibadan. However, she could not get any news from Ernest. Afterwards, she meets Mark, who has already passed his BSc and who plans to go to the United States of America to read economics. “What intrigued Rose so much was Mark’s domesticity, he took over the cooking. He cleaned the house and he even baked” (Nwapa 1992: 58) states the narrator. Therefore, Rose starts to think of Mark seriously and eventually, they get married. Later on, he has been admitted to Harvard and Rose withdraws all her savings to supply him with money. Then, she learns that their marriage is a fake one and Mark has betrayed her. In other words, she is abused both psychologically and economically by Mark. First, she has lost contact with Ernest and then with Mark. Thus, whenever Rose trusts men, she is betrayed by them.

Although, Rose has a good status in the society and can use her intellectual skills and talents at her job, she still feels a lack of something in her life. This is expressed in the following words: “Her friends in school are married and have children and if she were pregnant, she would have had something to look forward to, a baby, a boy or girl it didn’t matter. Nearly eight years after leaving school, she could only boast of a degree and nothing else” (Nwapa 1992: 84). Under the influence of these feelings, Rose begins to have a relationship with a businessman called Olu. In the novel, it is stated that “Olu was accomplished. He was interested in the [sic] arts. He discussed Nigerian writers, dramatists and artists. For a Nigerian tycoon to discuss in that way, he was really educated. He won Rose’s admiration immediately, but she had to be careful, after Mark” (Nwapa 1992: 86). As expressed above, Olu is intellectually well-developed and because of this quality, Rose decides to have a baby from him. In doing so, unconsciously Rose** tries to conform to the patriarchal norms since motherhood is imposed on women in patriarchal societies.

However, one day, suddenly Olu’s wife comes to Rose’s office and threatens her and wants her to leave Olu. Due to this shock, Rose loses her baby and she never sees Olu again. Like her old boy friends††,

** The best side of this relationship for Rose is that she does not feel indebted to him, as Olu does not buy her expensive gifts. In this relationship, both of them are economically independent and Olu is there to take “care of her [Rose’s] emotional problems” (Nwapa 1992: 63).

†† One day, all of a sudden, Ernest comes back to and would like to have a second chance for their relationship, and tells his story in England. He has an affair with an Irish girl and has to marry her as she becomes pregnant. Then, she runs away and he has to find foster parents for his daughter. Like the other men in *Women are Different*, Ernest escapes from his responsibilities and he leaves his daughter to foster parents. And he comes back to marry Rose. His behaviour raises question marks in the minds of the

Olu does not behave honestly and hurts Rose. In the novel, it is shown that whatever she does, she is unable to find Mr. Right.

To compensate for the loss of her baby, she throws herself back into her work again. This incidence is illustrative on the grounds that having a job is not only necessary for economic independence, but it is also necessary for the “psychological satisfaction of the women” (Reis 2000: “Individual and Society in Britain-Unpublished MA-Course Notes”).

Then, Rose tries her chance with another man called Tunde. In the novel, it is stated that Tunde loses her wife at a traffic accident and he could not forget her. What is more important is that he feels guilty as he was driving the car himself during the accident. He is trying to get rid of the sense of guiltiness by cleaning everything in the novel. Although he is rich, he does not have servants. In the beginning, Rose is fascinated by his cleanliness, his way of cooking and his knowledge of art, but she understands that the shadow of his ex-wife and his guilt over her death will always be with them.

With regard to the patriarchal norms, men are supposed to protect women and in the case of Tunde, he fails to protect his wife during the accident and this event hurts his psychology and he puts his ex-wife on a pedestal and always talks about her. This is expressed in the passage below: “Tunde was searching for something he knew he had lost forever. Rose could share with him his type of music, his books and even his solitude, but the memory of his wife and his guilt over her death, she could not share” (Nwapa 1992: 138). It shows that a woman cannot share her man with another woman, instead she may prefer loneliness.

Dora's and Rose's mutual friend Agnes, who is mentioned briefly before, should also be analyzed in detail. In the novel, an old man wants to marry her, when she was a little girl of ten years old. But her family asks for some extra time so that she could finish her education. Yet, within time, Agnes becomes an object to sell and buy in the hands of her father. This is expressed in the novel by a woman character in these very colloquial words: “[B]ut you know what our husbands are like. Once they're given money, they sell their daughters” (Nwapa 1992: 22). Then, in the novel, it is revealed that her husband is an impostor, he is not a medical doctor, but a drug-smuggler.

All these events trigger Agnes' rebirth. After giving birth to four children, Agnes enrolls at a University for evening classes in Yaba. She is realizing her dream of going to a University and is depicted as an idealist woman. Afterwards, she falls in love with a man, named Ayo Dele, who “was both [sic] a lover and a teacher and a father to her children” (Nwapa 1992: 62).

Ayo Dele is the only man in the novel, who takes the responsibility for his family and he is the role model for the other men to learn their ideal masculine roles. Unfortunately, he does not live long and everything is left on Agnes' shoulders again. She rents a two-bedroom-flat in Yaba and begins to teach mathematics and English in a school. Within a year, she joins the civil service at Enugu and is appointed as the “Woman Education Officer in the Ministry of Education”. As time goes by, enterprising Agnes becomes wealthy and this is expressed in the following sentence: “Agnes now had a car which of course went with the job. She had to get a driver for a short while before she learnt to drive. Another privilege was being invited to cocktail parties given by ministers” (Nwapa 1992: 64). Agnes learns how to drive a car, which is supposed to be a man's job. Thus, Agnes breaks the patriarchal rules and becomes an independent woman in postcolonial Nigeria.

She goes through a transformation from “a passive, lamb like woman” to a “wayward woman” (Nwapa 1992: 65). One day, she visits her ex-husband and he wants his children back by saying, “whether you answer my name or not, you are my wife and the children are mine. One day, you will bring them back to me. You cannot say they are not mine. They are mine. You had them in my home, under holy wedlock. So whether you committed adultery or not, having them was my responsibility, they are mine”

readers and we, as readers begin to think that if Rose were poor, he wouldn't return since he is not the kind of person, one can trust. He is like a parasite and feeds on the earnings of women like Chris.

After Ernest's return, Rose realizes that “their love had been childish. All they had done was exchange love letters written in blue writing pads with envelopes to match” (Nwapa 1992: 50). Ernest is no longer at the center of the universe for her. Eventually, she sees the real face of Ernest and does not want him back, he remains in her past buried.

(Nwapa 1992: 65). What is remarkable is that Agnes' husband wants his children back, not out of love, but out of the sense of responsibility and as children are perceived as something, which belong to him. Thus, his behaviour is only a reflection of the typical "possessive male attitude".

But, Agnes does not give her children back to him and continues to rise in her career. She begins to work as an executive in a firm called "John Levis Production and Research Bureau". And this job gives her many opportunities such as a good pay, a flat at Ikoyi and a car and extensive travel opportunity in Nigeria. Being determined, she overcomes all the obstacles in her life and eventually does what she wants and becomes whom she wants.

Furthermore, there are some improvements in the conditions of Nigerian women and this is shown through Chinwe, who is Dora's daughter. Chinwe/the new generation has the courage to start up again and therefore, despite her mother's protests she leaves her husband, who brings another wife to their home. This event is narrated in the passage below:

... Her husband had already brought in a seventeen year old girl to her matrimonial home and she had moved out. Rose told her it was wrong for her to have moved out. But she said she would rather die than have a seventeen year old girl share her home with her. She was young she said, and would find her happiness elsewhere. She could start all over again at her age, but her own mother could not because of her age. She would work hard like mother and she would make it to the top. And when Rose asked about her children, she said they would understand when they grew up. And besides, she was too young to sacrifice her life and happiness for her children when she was still young" (Nwapa 1992: 111)

Here, Nwapa "writes with a sociological emphasis, [as she] also challenges the opinion that women are respected and honored as wives and mothers" (Berrian 1995: 56). In *Women are Different*, Chinwe gets a divorce, though her parents do not support her. Dora disapproves Chinwe's decision by saying, "I don't want her to leave her husband, because of the effect it will have on her younger sister who is not yet married. Soon people will say that they are incapable of marriage, that they are following my footsteps" (Nwapa 1992: 113).

Under the light of all the examples given from the novel so far, it can be concluded that Nigerian women are exploited physically, psychologically and economically by men and expected to fit into the norms of patriarchy. Yet, through a good education and the awakening of a consciousness in the minds of the people and with the help of positive discrimination policies#, women's status can be improved in Nigeria. And to empower women, [in *Women are Different* as well as in her other novels such as *One is Enough*] Nwapa deals with the themes of "marginalisation of women" (Ngcobo 1992:68)", "the betrayal of trust; the insecurity of marriage and motherhood; the re-evaluation and recentering of motherhood" (Berrian 1995: 56) and she articulates on "the possibility that women can be economically and emotionally independent" (Berrian 1995: 56). What is more, "[i]t is in her fiction that the enterprising African woman takes a stand and demands her rightful place in the halls of global literary history" (Umeh 1995: 24) as it is shown through the female characters in *Women are Different*. Thus, she believes in the power of Nigerian women.

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Thus, the freedom of Nigeria means more freedom for the Nigerian women, as well.

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