

THE MYTHIC WORLD IN THE FICTION OF FLORA NWAPA

Dr. Seema Malpotra
Sr. Assistant Professor
Department of English
G.G.M. Science College,
Jammu, India

Flora Nwapa uses myth to achieve aesthetic purpose; they become her means of empowering the woman. Flora Nwapa is a mother figure in novel writing in West Africa. Like other African writers, she combines Western and African literary modes, bringing together in her fiction the Western realist mode and Igbo forms of narration, especially the folktale and the mythic mode, with the myth of Uhamiri giving shape to a number of her novels. Nwapa's fiction is its submersion of the conventional realist novel's well-made plot in conversation or verbal exchange, which provides her novels with what Elleke Boehmer refers to as their "self generating orality" (16). Born into a society where the myth of female inferiority and other negative myths that destroy the female psyche are accepted and unquestioned she adopts a type of writing whose "surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible levels of meaning" (Gilbert, Gubar 73). She generates a new tradition in which the women are the center of focus, and draws largely from the mythic reservoir to explore every aspect of female experience. Nwapa's treatment of the mythic helps to articulate her liberal feminism.

Nwapa's earliest novels, *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1969), reveal the deeper reality embodied in myths. In *Efuru* and *Idu*, Nwapa seems to agree with David Bidney that myth is "not a conscious creation or invention of an individual but ... a product of man's spontaneous expression of emotion and feeling of unity with nature as a whole" (14). Nwapa invents as well as recreates Ugwuta Community in her novels. *Efuru* and *Idu* are set in her home town of Ugwuta, where she grew up and began her education. The two novels depict life of traditional Ugwuta society and embody the history culture and spirit of the community. The society portrayed in the novels was largely traditional, with the worship of the local deities, Uhamiri, Okita and Utuosu.

The mystical influence of the "beautiful blue Ugwuta lake" which the community depended upon for food, transportation, and for life sustenance was decisive in Nwapa's mythopoeia when she began to create her women centered fiction. Her mythic imagination derives its force from the spiritual being that controls this body of water – Uhamiri (also called Woman of the Lake), the powerful female deity worshipped by Ugwuta people. Uhamiri is the central and controlling image and represents the feminine principle in *Efuru* and *Idu*. In the war novel, *Never Again* (1975), the Woman of the Lake becomes the influential, powerful figure and deity to which the people run to for refuge.

Uhamiri is the epitome of female power, independence, beauty and accomplishment. There is every indication that Nwapa modifies the myth to suit her purpose of empowering women and uplifting them. The myth of Uhamiri seems to have given Nwapa the seminal idea of Efuru's character. For *Efuru's* development is defined by her relationship to Uhamiri. Nwapa's narration of myth places Achebe's characterization of Igbo society as strictly patriarchal and excessively masculinist under revision. For the myth of Uhamiri embraces both matriarchal and patriarchal principles. Upholding the principle of gender equality, it gives cultural legitimacy to female power. "Uhamiri the owner of the lake, and Okita, the owner of the great river ... were supposed to be husband and wife, but they governed different domains and nearly always quarreled. Nobody knew the cause or nature of their constant quarrels" (201). Furthermore, through the myth Nwapa articulates a feminist ideology and celebrates a matriarchal heritage. And in *Efuru* herself, Nwapa has created a memorable inspiring image of African womanhood, where reality and myth mingle, and the human almost spirals towards the Divine. Uhamiri restores Efuru and moves her from the temporal world, represented by men, motherhood, and domesticity, into the spiritual realm of the worship of the womanspirit, Uhamiri. This name is not translated, but it contains the root word, mmiri or water. By her names, then, we can infer that the images which many Africans have of this spirit are female ones, or at least, as a being personified as partially female and partially fish or reptile. Nwapa describes Uhamiri as "an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb" (146). Other descriptions emphasize the fairness of her skin, the fine texture of her hair, the serenity of her expression and the wealth displayed on her person.

The mythic world of *Efuru* and *Idu* performs two functions. Firstly the novelist uses the myths to destroy earlier myths of the society in which thought and imagination "are employed uncritically and are deliberately used to promote social delusion of women" (Bidney 22). One of the myths which Nwapa explodes is that of female inferiority in her two early novels. She does this by projecting female characters who emerge as heroines in a world where heroism is usually associated with man. Another myth in this category is that which regards barrenness as a mark of failure on the part of the woman rather than as an incident of nature. In *Efuru*, other myths include that which state that a baby born with two upper teeth desecrates the land and will cause a poor harvest. Gilbert, Efuru's husband, expresses the false myth that it is a waste of money to send girls to school. For him, preference should be given to boys because girls get married quickly and thus waste the money used in training them. Myths that endanger the personhood of the woman also occur in *Idu*. It is a myth that "when a woman starts with money, children run away" (3). Nwapa shelters this myth because *Idu* later gets a male child and is expecting another one when she dies. In *Women are Different* (1986) and *One is Enough* (1981), Nwapa shows that educating the female is worth the effort.

Nwapa also erects new myths. These are embodied in the rites of passage they experience from one stage of life to another. The ceremonies are life-cycle ones and are both social and religious. The rites in the two novels are the central activities from which myths are derived. The first rite of passage the grown up Efuru undergoes in *Efuru* is her "bath". The operation of circumcision is seen as a bath, which all adult women need to take, in order to become clean and ready for marriage and child bearing. Here is the internalized myth according to which women are inferior and unclean. Those girls and their mothers who hesitate or refuse to embrace this tradition are seen as foolish and stupid (13-14). From duration of one month to six or twelve months, they are fed fat like animals for slaughter, as they are readied for life with their future

husbands. “She was to eat the best food and she was to do no work. She was simply to eat and grow fat and above all was to look beautiful” (15). This has to do with the transitional stage to procreation and involves the seclusion of Efuru, and such taboos as visitors sprinkling black substance on their feet before going to her room. On the cultural level, the circumcision indicates social puberty. Though a physical mutilation of the female, it is regarded as a rite of purification by the society. In addition it is only after the ritual of the payment of the bride-price that Efuru and Adizua feel really married. Efuru elopes with Adizua – a nonentity who is unable to afford the bride price. But Efuru’s hard work enables him to pay it.

The myth of the *dibia* and his god is also depicted in these novels. Efuru’s dreams of getting a lot of money from her wares is explained by the *dibia* as indications of her selection as a worshipper of the Woman of the Lake. She would be more wealthy if she keeps the laws of the goddess. When Efuru becomes ill later, the *dibia* also tells her mother-in-law that she must appear the goddess with a prescribed ritual because Efuru had neglected her. The *dibia* also analyses Efuru’s position as a worshipper of the Woman of the Lake: “Now listen to me. *Uhamiri* is a great woman. She is a goddess and above all she is very kind to women. If you are to worship her, you must keep her taboos” (153). Efuru’s initiation and experience as a worshipper of *Uhamiri* emphasize physical separation and mental development. Efuru ends where she begins, in her father’s house. The rites of passage she has gone through protect and provide her with health and prosperity. The rituals in the story give validity to the myth of the water goddess and the ancestor. Efuru gains spiritual elevation because of her association with the supernatural. She is empowered by her position as the worshipper of the Woman of the Lake. Her beauty, like that of the Woman of the Lake, is mythical. Efuru ends with the rhetorical question “She (*Uhamiri*) gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?” (221). Women choose to worship her because only with her may they remain true to themselves as whole bodies and spirits. Women reign supreme in this world.

Similar rites of passage occur in *Idu*. *Idu* is the name of a mythical kingdom which refers to the ancient Benin Kingdom. It features in *Ibogo* folk tales, legends and myths. It is based on the myth of reincarnation which states that dead people can come back to life. According to the myth of reincarnation, when one is born one leaves one’s paddle (*amarauwa*) before journeying to earth. It is at this point, where the paddles are deposited, that couples decide to get married. If this wish is fulfilled in physical life, it means that the couples will be intimate and, if one of them dies, the partner follows (*Uchendu* 16). This is so because the marriage on earth is merely a continuation of the betrothal started in the mystic world. When *Idu*’s husband dies mysteriously, she is determined to go with her husband to the land of the dead where they would continue their lives: “Weep for *Adiewere*? That is not what we agreed on. He has cheated me ... leave me alone. I am going with him” (210). The myth of the continuation of life of dead persons provides the emotional tolerance that enables people to say her death is a journey.

Nwapa’s mythic world takes us to the past, the present, the future, and the supernatural world. There is interaction between the living and the dead. Although the society *Nwapa* projects in *Efuru* and *Idu* is patriarchal and sexist, she gives the culture mythic proportions in order to show the centrality of female experience. *Idu* undermines the foundations of traditional mores which state that a woman must marry her husband’s brother at his death. She chooses to die in order to be free from such a marriage. She exercises the freedom to live and die as a moral being, for whom one marital experience is enough. Like the heroine of mythology, she comes to a

sudden end. On Efuru's part, her identity as the priestess of Uhamiri is a passport to the spiritual realm of female experience. She returns to the source of the "mythic world of female powers" (Heilbrun 70).

Through myths Nwapa structures her own ideals for her culture in order to remodel it for modernity.

References:

- Bidney, David. "Myth, Symbolism and Truth" in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas Sedeok. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958, 14. Print.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Stories of Women and Mother" Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa". *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, The Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: Women's Press, 1991, 16. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, 73. Print.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Towards a recognition of Androgyny*. Mew York: Norton, 1982, 70. Print.
- Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. London: Heinemann, 1966. Print.
- . *Idu*. London: Heinemann, 1970. Print.
- . *Never Again* (1975). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992. Print.
- . *One is Enough* (1981). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Women are Different* (1986). Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992. Print.
- Uchendu, V.C. *The Igbo of South East Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1965, 16. Print.