

FLORA NWAPA  
(13 January 1931- )

Gay Wilentz  
East Carolina University

educational Books [African Writers Series, 26],

BOOKS: Efuru (London: Heinemann, 1966); Idu (London: Heinemann Education,

Books [African Writers Series, 56],  
and Other Stories

1970); This is Lagos (Enugu: Nigeria: Nwamife, 1971); Never Again

(Enugu: Nwamife, 1975; Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press,

and Other Stories

U.S. distribution); Wives at War (Enugu: Tana Press, 1980;

Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, U.S. distribution);

One is Enough (Enugu: Tana Press, 1981); Washington, D.C.: Three

Continents Press, U.S. distribution); Women are Different (Enugu: Tana Press, 1986); Cassava Song and Rice Song (Enugu: Tana Press, 1986).

CHILDREN'S BOOKS: Emeka-Driver's Guard (London: University of

London, 1972); Mammy Water (Enugu: Tana Press, 1979; Washington,

D.C.: Three Continents Press, U.S. distribution); The Adventures

of Deke (Enugu: Tana Press, 1980); Journey to Space (Enugu: <sup>Flora</sup> Tana

Nwapa and Co.,

~~Press~~, 1980); The Miracle Kittens (Enugu: Tana Press, 1980).

Flora Nwapa (Nwakuche), novelist, short story and children's book writer, publisher, is best known as Nigeria's first woman novelist and the first African woman writer to publish a novel in English (Efuru 1966). Although early critics of African

literature did not recognize the significance of her work, Nwapa now is widely praised for her ability to adapt the English language to capture the flavor of the Igbo idiom. Nwapa brings a fresh perspective <sup>on</sup> ~~of~~ traditional West African culture and modern Nigeria to readers of African literature by exploring a woman's point of view; furthermore, her use of the oral tradition and the folk language of village women reflects a commitment to create literature from the orature of her foremothers.

Nwapa, the eldest of six children, was born in the lake village of Oguta, Imo State, East Central Nigeria, the area in which most of her writings take place. As a child, she was surrounded by village women who told tales and sang songs, and she freely admits that these women, including her own mother, have informed her art. This influence is evident in all of Nwapa's work, which has been called by critic Prema Nandakumar "an expansion of an African tale." Nwapa left Oguta to finish her schooling, first in the coastal town of Port Harcourt and later in Lagos, the capital. After receiving her B.A. from <sup>the</sup> University of Ibadan, she went to Edinburgh University, Scotland, for her

Diploma in Education. On her return to Nigeria, she served as Woman Education officer in Calabar and began teaching in Eastern Nigeria.

All Nwapa's writings center on the role of women in Nigerian society--whether urban or rural. Her earliest works are based in the rural village of her childhood but later works have branched out into the hectic world of Lagos. Nwapa's concern for women's rights and position in Nigerian society is apparent in her comments on her reasons for writing: "Flora Nwapa writes stories about women because these stories are familiar to her. . . . If I'm trying to prove something, it is that women are first and foremost human beings!" In her work, Nwapa views women dialectically in both traditional and modern day society. On <sup>the</sup> one hand, they are powerful figures in the traditional culture, economically secure and socially vibrant; yet on the other, they are bound to a system of male dominance which limits their choices. In facing this dilemma, Nwapa's women confront both pre- and post-colonial Nigeria in their search for self-determination

within the confines of their culture.

Nwapa's attention to women's lives, particularly <sup>in the</sup> village, ~~women's~~, gives her writing a unique oral quality in which the voices of women define the pattern and structure of her novels and short stories. Nwapa, like many of her male counterparts, relies heavily on African orature in the form of proverbs, parables, songs and tales, creating a distinctly African quality to her written work in English; moreover, her language reflects the oral tradition in another way. Nwapa's writing style is rarely descriptive; the information we receive is passed on to us by dialogue as it is to the other characters. As in an oral culture, the characters in her novels and short stories find out important news through the market <sup>place</sup>, at the farm, in town, or around the family compound. It is the presence of "talk" as confiding conversations, sexual banter, child socialization, value judgments, and community palaver which <sup>marks</sup> ~~underscores~~ Nwapa's literature as both Afrocentric and women-centered.

Efuru (1966), Nwapa's first novel, is concerned with the

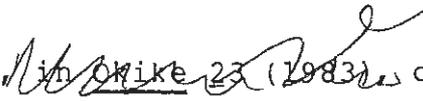
village community of Oguta where Nwapa was raised. Efuru, the protagonist, is a "remarkable" woman: She is beautiful, intelligent, and a successful trader, yet she has one severe flaw--she cannot have a child. Although she respects her village traditions, she does not always follow them. She chooses both her husbands without familial approval and both marriages end disastrously. Yet even though she cannot meet the conventional requirements of the society as wife and mother, Efuru is given another option in which to serve her community--as the worshipper of the lake deity, Uhamiri. As a child, Nwapa was fascinated with the stories of Uhamiri, and it is through this powerful female god that Efuru takes her place as a full citizen of her society. Throughout the novel, Efuru wrestles with her situation and, by the end, finds a path different from the conventional one for women, yet her choice is within the framework of the community's structure. The problem Efuru poses is that this option is one which is not open to all women who, for biological or other reasons, do not fit into traditional West African society. Moreover, even though the ending seems a

positive one for Efuru, we are left with a question:

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. . . . She 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?" (281).

The themes present in Efuru surface in the majority of Nwapa's works. She examines the relationship of the individual-- in particular, the individual woman--to her community, an important motif in contemporary African literature; furthermore, she explores women's central role in the society as mother and educator of the children as well as the painful theme of childlessness. As critic Juliet Okonkwo comments, "Since the primary purpose in the Igbo marriage is to raise a family," the childless Efuru can neither be what society expects of her nor can she fulfill herself within that context. Even though she is wealthy, beautiful, generous and kind, the childless Efuru is seen as deficient within her cultural milieu. While there is another option for Efuru, the questions this issue raises are left open, and Nwapa returns to this theme in her next novel, Idu.

At the time of Efuru's publication, critical response tended to be negative or indifferent at best. Nwapa was seen as a mediocre copy of Chinua Achebe or as a writer overly concerned with unimportant things--such as women's lives. Ironically, one of her harshest critics, Eustace Palmer, addressed one of her greatest strengths as an African writer, although he saw it as a fault: "It is as if Flora Nwapa has set herself the task of writing an East Nigerian epic and wants to ensure, whatever the subject matter, her novel should embody the culture and spirit of her tribe." What Palmer failed to realize, although it has been acknowledged by contemporary critics of Nwapa, is that her subject matter--the place of women in a communal village society--is inextricable from her representation of her culture and its oral traditions. Today, Efuru is seen as an early classic of African literature since it explores a world close to its precolonial roots and women's important role in that world.

Adewale Maja-Pearce,  in Onike 23 (1983), calls Efuru an "indisputable masterpiece . . . which will, I'm sure, come to be recognized as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth

century."

As evinced in her second novel, Idu (1970), Nwapa had not fully addressed all the issues that concerned her in Efuru. Even with the contradictions implied in Efuru, it is not a grave novel; Idu, on the other hand, is somber in tone and subject. Like Efuru, Idu is a successful trader, well thought of in her community, and known for her good deeds, but they differ in one respect: Idu is happily married to Adiewere. Idu's conflict comes because she, too, is unable to have a child and her husband refuses to marry a second wife. This conflict between the needs of the individual and the demands of the community has gained in intensity since the earlier novel. Lloyd Brown comments that there is a "tightly knit, even suffocating communality in Idu's world." The somber tone of the novel comes from a number of personal disasters that take place in an environment of natural calamities and disturbances. These incidents foreshadow the novel's end--the tragic deaths of both Idu and Adiewere. Idu, who has finally conceived and given birth to a boy, is again

pregnant when Adiewere, who has suffered from an unnamed illness throughout the novel, dies. In a ending which has disturbed both readers and critics, Idu wills herself to die, thus ending her own life and that of her unborn child. Idu states, "I am going with my husband. Both of us will go to the land of the dead. It will be even better there" <sup>WATU</sup>. For Idu, death is not the worst alternative; she sees no alternatives in life. Idu's choice is indeed a tragic one, not only because of the useless death of her unborn child but because she could see no life-giving options by remaining alive. Although the novel Efuru has a more positive approach in dealing with the conflicts of women in a male-dominated society, it is necessary to note that Idu's choice has also been a historical option for women unable to fit into society's conventions.

Critical attitudes at the time of Idu's publication appeared to be based on moral outrage: They did not find the ending acceptable. African critic <sup>d</sup>~~A~~peola James commented that although the theme--which questions the dominant attitudes of Africans

towards children as the sole basis of marriage--is important, Nwapa leaves the deep moral questions surrounding Idu's actions unanswered. In response to James and others who called the ending of Idu fantastic and morally unacceptable, Ernest Emenyonu has stated that their judgments were indicative of a larger problem--how to judge African literature without being limited by Eurocentric prejudices. He then calls Idu a successful novel in terms of "validity of content as well as appropriateness of form." Nwapa, in response to the critics who questioned the validity of the novel, comments that the story is "authentic," one that she heard from her mother. Nwapa returns to this issue of childlessness and the demand for children in her third full-length novel, One is Enough (1981).

Both Efuru and Idu were published in Heinemann's African Writers Series; Nwapa's next book, a collection of short stories This is Lagos (1971), not only changed the direction of the material--moving for the most part from the rural village to the urban capital--but it was also published by a Nigerian press, Nwamife (Nwankwo-Ifejika). Although her transition to Nwamife

helped to bolster Nigerian readership and the Nigerian publishing industry, it did cut back on critical responses to this collection--unfortunately, the majority of critical writings on African literature still tends to focus on materials published in the US or UK. This collection centers primarily on young people from the villages in Nwapa's Igboland who move to Lagos, although the last two stories are concerned with the time preceding the Biafran war. The title story, "This is Lagos," is about the breakdown of traditional culture and family systems in Lagos. Soha, a quiet girl from a village in Eastern Nigeria, goes to live in Lagos with her aunt. Her mother warns her that "Lagos men do not just chase women, they snatch them" *etc.* Soha, swayed by the materialism of the big city, falls for a young man with a big car and soon is out of her aunt's control--living the high life in Lagos. Other stories revolve around female narrators and are concerned with, for example, an adolescent on "we we" (marijuana), a Lagos man trying unsuccessfully to seduce a woman in the provincial capital (Enugu), and a young woman with two

small children who loses her husband and then is accused by his family of stealing his money. The last two stories in this collection recount the days after the 1966 military coup which eventually plunged Nigeria into a devastating civil war.

Like Chinua Achebe and other Nigerian writers, Nwapa turned away from writing novels at this time since the upheaval in their country did not offer the leisure to write at length--only snatches of time for short stories and poetry. The aftermath of this turbulence may also account for the brevity of her next two works after This is Lagos. The first is a novella of the Nigerian civil war, Never Again, and the second is another collection of short stories, Wives at War. Like other Igbo during the war, Nwapa (who was Assistant Registrar at <sup>the University</sup> ~~A~~ of Lagos), her husband (industrialist Gogo Nwakuche), and their family were forced to leave Lagos and return to her natal village, Oguta. It is reflections on this <sup>disruption</sup> ~~account~~ as well as on the disaster that followed which she dispassionately details in Never Again (1975). Nwapa was well suited to write this novella

of the Nigerian civil war, not only because of her past career as a writer and her personal experience during the fighting but also because she was involved in the administration of the former Biafra after the war as a member of the East Central State Executive Council. Her experiences before, throughout, and after the war inform Never Again--probably more important for its documentation than its literary merit; the novella is a mixture of personal vindication and social commentary which clearly reflects Nwapa's anti-war sentiments.

With the release of Never Again, Nwapa made a big change in her writing career; she became a publisher. In 1975, ~~she~~<sup>she</sup> had left her position as Commissioner and planned to devote her time to writing, but she admits she was unable to write in <sup>the</sup> isolation of her house; she needed interaction with others outside the home environment. Moreover, she saw her publishing role enhancing her position as writer, not limiting it: "I have to be very busy to be able to write. You have greater freedom as writer and publisher in terms of what shape your book will have; you are in control of these things." Still, the relative freedom of

publishing her own work as well as others' has posed some problems for Nwapa. First, import duty and currency changes have often left her newly published books stranded at the docks. Second, a small editorial staff has not had the resources with which to produce error-free publications; thus, the books abound with typographical mistakes and suffer from the want of careful editing. Finally, because of the lack of communication between Nigeria and other African countries and the West, there has not been much distribution or critical response to her later publications; however, three of her recent works for adults, Never Again, Wives at War and Once is Enough, and a children's book, Mammy Water, are now being distributed by Three Continents Press in Washington D. C., which may ameliorate the lack of response somewhat.

Wives at War (1980) is Nwapa's second collection of short stories and is much more somber and angry than This is Lagos, perhaps owing to her experiences during the Nigerian civil war. Most of the stories in the collection concern war, the aftermath

of war, and the social disintegration of the society; Nwapa's emphasis--which differs from that of many Nigerian male writers--is on the participation of women during the war, illustrated in the title story. Moreover, Nwapa explores the devastating effect of the war on women's lives. Three other stories deal with women's roles in changing Nigeria; one, "Man Palaver," is particularly intriguing since it foreshadows Nwapa's most recent novel, One is Enough.

One is Enough, Nwapa's third, full-length novel, returns to one of her predominant themes--that of the childless woman; yet this novel exposes a more radical feminist stance than her earlier ones. The protagonist, Amaku, wants nothing more than to have a home and family, yet she cannot have a child. Ridiculed by her mother-in-law and humiliated by her husband Obiora, she chooses to leave her matrimonial home to strike out on her own in Lagos. In the capital, she quickly becomes rich working as a "cash madam" (a woman who sells building contracts) and becomes sexually involved with a priest. Eventually she becomes pregnant

by this priest and she gives birth to twins. The priest decides to give up his vocation to marry her, but she refuses <sup>him</sup> even in <sup>^</sup> opposition to her mother, making it clear that indeed one husband is enough: "As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working for me. I don't want to go back to my 'wifely' days. No, I am through with husbands." ~~(132)~~.

It is unfortunate that there has been little critical response to this novel because it poses some interesting questions about the Nigerian woman and Nigerian society in general. Amaku appears as the independent modern woman who denies community rules and familial advice to chose her own path in life. Yet as a heroine, Amaku is a strange choice since she is obviously a powerful woman in an illegal trade clearly opposed to the economic health of her country. When questioned on this issue, Nwapa has commented: "Well, it is Amaku's story and it is her own story. There are many people who do this in our society. If the evils are relevant to the stories I am telling, I will include them; it does not mean that I approve of it." Amaku is

sympathetic to readers because she takes positive steps to liberate herself from the unjust restrictions placed on childless women by this West African society; yet the means by which she succeeds is based in a system which has eventually bankrupted Nigeria. Since she tends to record rather than reform, Nwapa does not make a moral judgment on her character's actions; therefore, the reader may feel uncomfortable with Amaku's triumph. Still, in light of Amaku's position, there are few other options open <sup>to her</sup> ~~to~~ to support herself and preserve dignity.

Nwapa's reflections on the role of women in both precolonial and modern Nigerian society place women at "the heart of the turmoil of their continent," as critic Maryse Condé notes. From rural women like Efuru and Idu to new urbanites like Kate and Amaku, these women make choices about their lives, taking what they can from both the traditional and modern-day cultures to try and forge some life for themselves and their communities.

Of the early writers in <sup>anglophone</sup> African literature, ~~written in~~ ~~English~~, Flora Nwapa has perhaps been the least acknowledged; it

is probable that this lack of attention has a simple explanation:

Nwapa is a woman writing about the lives of women which makes

her even further removed from the attention of the literary

mainstream than the already marginal<sup>ized</sup> African male writers. With

new approaches to African literature and <sup>with</sup> more women critics,

Nwapa's works are receiving some of the recognition they deserve <sup>(B)</sup>

— particularly her first two novels, Efuru and Idu— Presently,

<sup>she</sup> ~~Nwapa~~ is continuing with her publishing house, Tana Press (Flora

Nwapa & Co), and her new novel, Women are Different, which

further explores the place of women in Nigerian society, has <sup>recently</sup> ~~just~~

been published in Nigeria. She has also recently finished a new

piece, Cassava Song, and is working on a collection of short

stories. For most contemporary critics of African literature,

Nwapa's position as a foremother of modern African women's

writings is secure, for it is through the voices of her classic

novel, Efuru, and her other works that the undocumented women

storytellers in African villages are heard.

Mineke Schipper, "Women and Literature in Africa," Unheard Words,

ed. Mineke Schipper (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), 22-58;

Nancy Schmidt, "Children's Books by Well-Known African Authors,"

World Literature Written in English, 18.1 (1979): 117-118;

Oladele Taiwo, Female Novelists in Modern Africa (London:

Macmillan/New York: St. Martins, 1984);

Gay Wilentz, "From Africa to America: Cultural Ties that Bind in

the Works of Contemporary African and African-American Women

Writers," Diss. U of Texas, 1986;

Gay Wilentz, "The Individual Voice in the Communal Chorus  
The Possibility of Choice in Flora Nwapa's Efuru,"  
ACLALS Bulletin, 7, 4 (1986): 30-36.

Adewale Maja-Pearce, "Flora Nwapa's Efuru: A Study in Misplaced Hostility," World Literature Written in English, 25 (1985): 10-15;

African Literature (London: Macmillan, 1980);

Adewale Maja-Pearce, "Chinweizu and 'Western Realism': A Open Letter," Okike 23 (1983): 131-132;

<sup>e</sup>  
Prāma Nandakumar, "An Image of African Womanhood: A Study of

Flora Nwapa's Efuru," Africa Quarterly, 11 (1967): 136-146;

Ogunsanwo. "Never-Again," Afriscopes, 11.1 (1981): 37-38;

Femi Ojo-Ade, "Female Writers, Male Critics," African Literature

Today 13 (1983): 158-179;

Jerry Okero, "Tales of Lagos," West Africa, 24-March-1972: 353-

354;

Juliet Okonkwo, "Adam and Eve: Igbo Marriage in the Nigerian

Novel," The Conch 3.2 (September 1971): 137-151;

----- "The Talented Woman in African Literature," African

Quarterly, 15 (1975): 35-47;

Eustace Palmer, "Review of Elechi Amadi, The Concubine, and Flora

Nwapa, Efuru," African Literature Today, 1 (1968): 56-58;

Harold Scheub, "Two African Women," Revue des langues vivantes,

37.5 (1971): 545-558;

---

Add to entry on FLORA NWAPA:

REFERENCES:

Femi Ojo-Ade, "Women and the Nigerian Civil War: Buchi Emecheta and  
Flora Nwapa," Etudes Germano-Africaines, 6 (1988): 75-86.

Sunday O. Anozie, Sociologie du roman Africain: Réalisme, structure, et détermination dans le roman Ouest-Africain (Paris: Aubert-Montaigne, 1970);

Brenda Berrian, "African Women as Seen in the Works of Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo," CLA Journal, 25,3 (1982): 331-39.

Lloyd Brown, Women Writers in Black Africa (Westport, CN: 1981);  
Greenwood Press,

Maryse Condé, "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa," Presence Africaine, 82 (1972): 136-139;

Carol Boyce Davies and Ann Adams Graves, eds, Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986);

Ernest Emenyonu, "Who Does Flora Nwapa Write For?" African Literature Today, 7 (1975): 28-33;

Aeola James, "Review of Idu," African Literature Today, 5 (1971): 151-153;

Bernth Lindfors, "Achebe's Followers," Revue de littérature comparée, 48 (1974): 577-578;

Kenneth Little, The Sociology of the Urban Woman's Image in

Chidi Ikonu, "The Society and Women's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels," Kunapipi, 6, 1 (1984), 68-78.

## Interviews:

John Agetua, "Flora Nwakuche," Sunday Observer, 18 August 1975: 6;

Allison Perry, "Meeting Flora Nwapa," West Africa, 18 June 1984:

1262;

Austa Uwechue, "Flora Nwakuche, nee Nwapa, a Former Cabinet

Minister and One of Africa's Leading Women Writers Talks to

Austa Uwechue," Africa Woman, 10 (1977): 8-10;

Gay Wilentz, personal interviews, March-July 1984; "Interview

with Flora Nwapa," Okike <sup>2</sup> (forthcoming).

## Bibliographies

Brenda Berrian, Bibliography of African Women Writers and Journalists (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1985);

Bernth Lindfors, Black African Literature in English (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1979); supplement 1977-1981 (New York: Africana Publishing, 1986).

## Biography

S. A. Ormoloye, Biographia Nigeriana: A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Nigerians (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977).

## References

Change in entry on FLORA NWAPA:  
BOOKS

Never Again (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press,  
1992);

Wives at War and Other Stories (Enugu: Tana Press, 1980; Trenton,  
NJ: Africa World Press, 1992);

One is Enough (Enugu: Tana Press, 1981; Trenton, NJ: Africa World  
Press, 1992);

Women are Different (Enugu: Tana Press, 1986; Trenton, NJ: Africa  
World Press, 1992)

(in other words, delete Three Continents Press as U.S. distributor)

11/5/1992  
R.S.

llb125 / nwapa. chp  
10/23  
ts pdn  
MASTER  
ed.

# Flora Nwapa

(13 January 1931 - )

Gay Wilentz  
East Carolina University

- BOOKS: *Efuru* (London & Ibadan: Heinemann, 1966);  
*Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1970);  
*This Is Lagos, and Other Stories* (Enugu, Nigeria: Nwankwo-Ifejika, 1971);  
*Emekka* (~~Driver's~~ *Guard*) (London: University of London Press, 1972);  
*Never Again* (Enugu, Nigeria: Nwamife, 1975; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1992);  
*Mammywater* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1979);  
*Wives at War, and Other Stories* (Ogui & Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1980; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1992);  
*The Adventures of Deke* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1980);  
*Journey to Space* (Enugu, Nigeria: Nwapa, 1980);  
*The Miracle Kittens* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1980);  
*One Is Enough* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1981; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1992);  
*Women Are Different* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1986; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1992);  
*Cassava Song and Rice Song* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1986).

I |  
— |  
\* |  
I |

Flora Nwapa, a novelist, publisher, short-story writer, and author of children's books, is best known as the first female novelist in Nigeria and the first African woman to write and publish a novel in English (*Efuru*, 1966). Although early critics of African literature did not recognize the significance of her work, Nwapa is now widely praised for her ability to adapt the English language to capture the flavor of the Igbo idiom. Nwapa offers to readers a fresh perspective on traditional West African culture and modern Nigeria, by exploring a woman's point of view; furthermore, her use of the oral tradition and the folk language of village women reflects a commitment to create literature from the orature of her foremothers.

Nwapa, the eldest of six children, was born in the lake village of Oguta, ~~Imo State, East Central~~ Nigeria, the area in which most of her fictions are set. As a child she was surrounded by women who

in Eastern |

Ben, explain to Jack ~~the~~ again that giving ~~the~~ in Nigeria doesn't make a lot of sense.

told tales and sang songs, and she freely admits that these women, including her mother, have informed her art. This influence is evident in all of Nwapa's work, which has been summarized by critic Prema Nandakumar as "an expansion of an African tale." Nwapa left Oguta to finish her schooling, first in the coastal town of Port Harcourt and later in Lagos, the capital. In 1957, after receiving her B.A. from the University of Ibadan, she went to Edinburgh University in Scotland for her diploma in education, which she earned the following year. After her return to Nigeria she served as an education Officer in Calabar and began teaching English and geography in Eastern Nigeria. She is married to Gogo Nwakuche, an industrialist.

All Nwapa's fiction for adults centers on the role of women in Nigerian society, whether urban or rural. Her earliest works are based in the rural village of her childhood, but later works have branched out into the hectic world of Lagos. Nwapa's concern for women's rights and their position in Nigerian society is apparent in her comments on her reasons for writing (in an interview with Gay Wilentz): "Flora Nwapa writes stories about women because these stories are familiar to her. If I'm trying to prove something, it is that women are first and foremost human beings!" Nwapa views women dialectically in both traditional and modern society. On the one hand, they are powerful figures in traditional culture, economically secure and socially vibrant; yet, on the other, they are bound to a system of male dominance that limits their choices. In facing this dilemma, Nwapa's women confront both pre- and postcolonial Nigeria in their search for self-determination within the confines of their culture.

Nwapa's attention to women's lives, particularly in the villages, gives her writing an oral quality in which the voices of women define the pattern and structure of her novels and short stories. Nwapa, like many of her male counterparts, relies heavily on African orature in the form of proverbs, parables, songs, and tales, thus creating a distinctly African quality to her written work in English; moreover, her writing reflects the oral tradition in another way. Nwapa's style is rarely descriptive; information is passed on by dialogue. As in an oral culture the characters in her novels and short stories find out important news through contacts at the marketplace, at the farm, in town, or around the family compound. The presence of confiding conversations, sexual banter, child socialization, value judgments, and community palaver marks Nwapa's



literature as both "Afrocentric" and women centered.

*Efuru*, Nwapa's first novel, is set in the village community of Oguta, where Nwapa was raised. Efuru, the protagonist, is a remarkable woman: beautiful, intelligent, and successful as a trader. Yet she has one severe flaw—she cannot have a child. Although she respects her village traditions, she does not always follow them. She chooses both her husbands without familial approval and both marriages end disastrously. Yet, even though she cannot, as wife and mother, meet the conventional requirements of the society, Efuru is given another option in which to serve her community—as the worshipper of the lake deity, Uhamiri. As a child Nwapa was fascinated with the stories of Uhamiri, and through this powerful female god Efuru takes her place as a full citizen of her society. Throughout the novel Efuru wrestles with her situation and, by the end, finds a path different from the conventional one for women, yet her choice is within the framework of the community structure. The problem *Efuru* poses is that this option is not open to all women who, for biological or other reasons, do not fit into traditional West African society. Moreover, even though the ending seems a positive one for Efuru, readers are left with a question: "Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches... She 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?"

The themes present in *Efuru* surface in the majority of Nwapa's works, as she examines the relationship of the individual—in particular, the individual woman—to the community, an important motif in contemporary African literature. Furthermore, she explores the theme of women's central roles, as mothers and educators of children, as well as the painful theme of childlessness. As critic Juliet Okonkwo comments in her 1971 essay, "Adam and Eve," "Since the primary purpose in the Igbo marriage is to raise a family," the childless Efuru can neither be what society expects of her nor can she fulfill herself within that context. Even though she is wealthy, beautiful, generous, and kind, the childless Efuru is seen as deficient within her cultural milieu. While there is another option for Efuru, the questions that this issue raises are left open, and Nwapa returns to this theme in her next novel, *Idu* (1970). At the time *Efuru* was published, critical response tended to be negative or indifferent at best. Nwapa was seen as a mediocre copy of Chinua Achebe, or as a writer overly concerned with unim-

— |

— |

~

— | — | a | (?)  
 ) |

check original: is only the  
 "since" clause in quotation  
 marks?? This would be  
 strange.

portant things, such as women's lives. Ironically one of her harshest critics, Eustace Palmer (*African Literature Today*, 1968), addressed in his review one of her greatest strengths as an African writer, although he saw it as a fault: "It is as if Flora Nwapa has set herself the task of writing an East Nigerian epic and wants to ensure, whatever the subject matter, her novel should embody the culture and spirit of her tribe." What Palmer failed to realize, although it has been acknowledged by recent critics of Nwapa, is that her subject matter—the place of women in a communal village society—is inextricable from her representation of her culture and its oral traditions. Today *Efuru* is seen as an early classic of African literature, since it explores a world close to its precolonial roots and women's important roles in that world. In 1983, Adewale Maja-Pearce (writing for the journal *Okike*) called *Efuru* an "indisputable masterpiece ... which will, I'm sure, come to be recognized as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century."

As evinced in *Idu*, Nwapa had not in *Efuru* fully addressed all the issues that concerned her. Even with the contradictions implied in *Efuru*, it is not a gravely serious novel; *Idu*, on the other hand, is somber in tone and subject matter. Like the character *Efuru*, *Idu* is a successful trader, well thought of in her community, and known for her good deeds, but the protagonists differ in one respect: *Idu* is happily married to *Adiewere*. *Idu's* conflict comes because she, too, is apparently unable to have a child, and her husband refuses to marry a second wife. This conflict between the needs of the individual and the demands of the community is more intense than it is in Nwapa's earlier novel. The somber tone of the novel comes from the personal disasters that take place in an environment of natural calamities and disturbances. These incidents foreshadow the tragic deaths of *Idu* and *Adiewere* at the end of the novel. *Idu*, who has finally conceived and given birth to a boy, is again pregnant when *Adiewere*, who has suffered from an unnamed illness throughout the novel, dies. In an ending that has disturbed both readers and critics, *Idu* wills herself to die, thus ending her own life and that of her unborn child. *Idu* states: "I am going with my husband. Both of us will go to the land of the dead. It will be even better there." For *Idu*, death is not the worst alternative; she sees no alternatives in life. *Idu's* choice is tragic, not only because of the useless death of her unborn child but because she could see no life-giving options. Although *Efuru* has a more positive approach in dealing with the conflicts of women in a male-domi-

unclear; needs revision?

— | — |  
 > |  
 evidenced | (??)

nated society, Idu's choice has also been a historical option for women unable to fit into society.

Critical attitudes at the time *Idu* was published appear to have been based on moral outrage: critics did not find the ending acceptable. African critic Adeola James commented in *African Literature Today* (1971) that, although the theme—which questions the dominant attitudes of Africans toward children as the sole basis of marriage—is important, Nwapa leaves the deep moral questions surrounding Idu's actions unanswered. In response to James and others who called the ending of *Idu* fantastic and morally unacceptable, Ernest Emenyonu has stated that their judgments were indicative of a larger problem: how to judge African literature without being limited by Eurocentric prejudices. He calls *Idu* a successful novel in terms of "validity of content as well as appropriateness of form." Nwapa, responding to the critics who questioned the validity of the novel, told Wilentz that the story is "authentic," one Nwapa heard from her mother. Nwapa returns to this issue of childlessness and the demand for children in her third full-length novel, *One Is Enough* (1981).

Both *Efuru* and *Idu* were published in Heinemann's African Writers Series; Nwapa's next book, a collection of short stories *This Is Lagos* (1971), not only changed the direction of her approach and her material—moving for the most part from the rural village to the urban capital—but it was also published by a Nigerian company. Although this situation helped bolster Nigerian readership and the Nigerian publishing industry, it did cut back on critical response to the book. Unfortunately the majority of critical writing on African literature still tends to focus on materials published in the United States or Great Britain. *This Is Lagos* centers primarily on young people from the villages in Nwapa's Igboland who move to Lagos, although the last two stories focus on the time preceding the Biafran war. The title story is about the breakdown of traditional culture and family systems in Lagos. Soha, a quiet girl from a village in eastern Nigeria, goes to live in Lagos with her aunt. Her mother warns her that "Lagos men do not just chase women, they snatch them." Soha, swayed by the materialism of the big city, falls for a young man with a big car and is soon out of her aunt's control, living the high life in Lagos. Other stories revolve around female narrators and are concerned with, for example, an adolescent on "we we" (marijuana), a Lagos man trying unsuccessfully to seduce a woman in the provincial capital (Enugu), and a young woman with two small children who loses

— |  
— |

— | — |

logic?

her husband and then is accused by his family of stealing his money. The last two stories in the collection recount the days after the 1966 military coup, which eventually plunged Nigeria into a devastating civil war.

Like Achebe and other Nigerian writers, Nwapa turned away from writing novels at this time, since the upheaval in their country did not offer the leisure to write at length—only snatches of time for short stories and poetry. The aftermath of this turbulence may also account for the brevity of her next two adult-oriented works after *This Is Lagos*. The first is a novella about the civil war, *Never Again* (1975), and the second is another collection of short stories, *Wives at War* (1980). Like other Igbos during the war, Nwapa (who was then assistant registrar at the University of Lagos), her husband and their family were forced to leave Lagos and return to village country, in their case Oguta. Reflections on this disruption as well as on the disaster that followed are dispassionately detailed in *Never Again*. Nwapa was well suited to write this novella on the Nigerian civil war, not only because of her past career as a writer and her personal experience during the fighting but also because she was involved in the administration of the former Biafra after the war as a member of the East Central State Executive Council. Her experiences before, throughout, and after the war inform *Never Again*, which is probably more important for its documentation than its literary merit. The novella is a mixture of personal vindication and social commentary, and it clearly reflects Nwapa's antiwar sentiments.

After the release of *Never Again* Nwapa made a big change in her writing career; she became a publisher. Early in 1975 she had left her position as government commissioner and planned to devote her time to writing, but she was unable to write in the isolation of her house; she needed interaction with others outside the home environment. Moreover she saw her publishing role as enhancing her position as a writer, not limiting it: "I have to be very busy to be able to write," she told Wilentz, "You have greater freedom as writer and publisher in terms of what shape your book will have; you are in control of these things." Still, the relative freedom of publishing her own work (with the Tana Press) as well as ~~others'~~ has posed some problems for Nwapa. First, import-duty and currency changes have often left her newly published books stranded at the docks. Second, a small editorial staff has not had the resources with which to produce error-free publications. Thus the books have typographical mistakes and suffer from the want of careful editing.

in the |

— | something missing here? sentence structure doesn't work.

? at the outbreak of | (?)

??

that of others |

Finally, because of the lack of communication between Nigeria and other African countries and the West, there has not been much distribution or critical response to her later publications. However, three of her recent works for adults (*Never Again*, *Wives at War*, and *One Is Enough*) and her children's book *Mammywater* (1979) are now being distributed by Africa World Press in Trenton, New Jersey, which may ameliorate the lack of response.

*Wives at War* is much more somber and angry than *This Is Lagos*, perhaps because of her experiences during the civil war. Most of the stories in the collection concern war, the aftermath of the war, and the social disintegration of the society. Nwapa's emphasis—which differs from that of many male Nigerian writers—is on the participation of women during the war, illustrated in the title story, "Wives at War." Moreover Nwapa explores the devastating effect of the war on women's lives. Three other stories deal with women's roles in a changing Nigeria; one, "Man Palaver," foreshadows Nwapa's most recent novel, *One Is Enough*.

In *One Is Enough* Nwapa returns to the plight of the childless woman; yet the novel exposes a more radical feminist stance than her earlier ones. The protagonist, Amaku, wants nothing more than to have a home and family, yet she cannot have a child. Ridiculed by her mother-in-law and humiliated by her husband, Obiora, she chooses to leave her matrimonial home to strike out on her own in Lagos. In the capital she quickly becomes rich working as a "cash madam" (a woman who sells building contracts) and becomes sexually involved with a priest. Eventually she becomes pregnant by this priest and gives birth to twins. The priest decides to give up his vocation to marry her, but she refuses him even in opposition to her mother, making it clear that, indeed, one husband is enough: "As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working for me. I don't want go back to my 'wifely' days. No, I am through with husbands."

Unfortunately there has been little critical response to this novel, though it poses some interesting questions about the Nigerian woman and Nigerian society in general. Amaku appears as the independent modern woman who denies community rules and familial advice to chose her own path in life. Yet, as a heroine, Amaku is a strange choice because she is obviously a powerful woman in an illegal trade that is clearly injurious to the economic health of her country. When questioned on this issue, Nwapa told Wilentz that "it is Amaku's story and it is her *own* story. There are many people who

— | — |

— | — |

~

do this in our society. If the evils are relevant to the stories I am telling, I will include them; it does not mean that I approve of it." Amaku is attractive to readers because she takes positive steps to liberate herself from the unjust restrictions placed on childless women by this West African society; yet the way she succeeds is based in a system that eventually bankrupted Nigeria. Since she tends to record rather than reform, Nwapa does not make a moral judgment on her character's actions; therefore, the reader may feel uncomfortable with Amaku's triumph. Still, in light of Amaku's position, there are few other options open to her to support herself and preserve her dignity.

Nwapa's reflections on the role of women in both precolonial and modern Nigerian society place women at "the heart of the turmoil of their continent," as Condé notes. From rural women such as Efuru and Idu to the new urbanites Kate and Amaku, these women make choices about their lives, taking what they can from both the traditional and modern cultures to try to forge a life for themselves and their communities.

Of the early writers in anglophone African literature, Flora Nwapa has been perhaps the least acknowledged; probably this lack of attention has a simple explanation: Nwapa is a woman writing about the lives of women, a situation that makes her even further removed from the attention of the literary mainstream than the already-marginalized male African writers. With new approaches to African literature and with more women critics, Nwapa's works—particularly her first two novels, *Efuru* and *Idu*—are receiving more of the recognition they deserve. She is continuing to work with her publishing house, Tana Press/Flora Nwapa and Company, and her novel *Women Are Different*, which further explores the place of women in Nigerian society, was published in 1986. She has also published *Cassava Song and Rice Song* (1986), and is working on a collection of short stories. For most contemporary critics of African literature, Nwapa's position as a foremother of modern African women's writings is secure, for through the voices of her classic novel *Efuru* and her other works the previously undocumented women storytellers in African villages are heard.

**Interviews:**

- John Agetua, "Flora Nwakuche," *Sunday Observer*, 18 August 1975, p. 6;
- Austa Uwechue, "Flora Nwakuche, nee Nwapa, a Former Cabinet Minister and One of Africa's

— | — |

italics)

needs at least one descriptive sentence

nee)

- Leading Women Writers Talks to Austa Uwechue," *Africa Woman*, 10 (1977): 8-10;  
 Allison Perry, "Meeting Flora Nwapa," *West Africa* (18 June 1984): 1262;  
 Gay Wilentz, "Interview with Flora Nwapa," *Okike* (forthcoming).

#### References:

- Brenda Berrian, "African Women as Seen in the Works of Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo," *CLA Journal*, 25, no. 3 (1982): 331-339;  
 Maryse Condé, "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa," *Présence Africaine*, 82 (1972): 136-139;  
 Ernest Emenyonu, "Who Does Flora Nwapa Write For?" *African Literature Today*, 7 (1975): 28-33;  
 Chidi Ikonné, "The Society and Women's Quest for Selfhood in Flora Nwapa's Early Novels," *Kunapipi*, 6, no. 1 (1984): 68-78;  
 Kenneth Little, *The Sociology of the Urban Woman's Image in African Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1980);  
 Adewale Maja-Pearce, "Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*: A Study in Misplaced Hostility," *World Literature Written in English*, 25 (1985): 10-15;  
 Prema Nandakumar, "An Image of African Womanhood: A Study of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*," *Africa Quarterly*, 11 (1967): 136-146;  
 Femi Ojo-Ade, "Female Writers, Male Critics," *African Literature Today*, 13 (1983): 158-179;  
 Ojo-Ade, "Women and the Nigerian Civil War: Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa," *Etudes Germano-Africaines*, 6 (1988): 75-86;  
 Juliet Okonkwo, "Adam and Eve: Igbo Marriage in the Nigerian Novel," *Conch*, 3 (September 1971): 137-151;  
 Okonkwo, "The Talented Woman in African Literature," *African Quarterly*, 15 (1975): 35-47;  
 Harold Scheub, "Two African Women," *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, 37, no. 5 (1971): 545-558;  
 Mineke Schipper, "Women and Literature in Africa," in *Unheard Words*, edited by Mineke Schipper (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), pp. 22-58;  
 Nancy Schmidt, "Children's Books by Well-Known African Authors," *World Literature Written in English*, 18, no. 1 (1979): 117-118;  
 Gay Wilentz, "From Africa to America: Cultural Ties that Bind in the Works of Contemporary African and African-American and African-American Women Writers," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Texas, 1986);  
 Wilentz, "The Individual Voice in the Communal Chorus: The Possibility of Choice in Flora

has this appeared?

is it really who?

:

|| )

)

|| )

Nwapa's *Efuru*," *ACLALS Bulletin*, 7, no. 4  
(1986): 30-36.