



## **Barrenness as A Weapon for The Women Oppression in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough***

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### **Abstract**

The hideous and shapeless treatment of infertile women in African cultures and the negative portrayals of these women in literary works represent an important issue that should be deeply discussed. The picture made of these childless women in African fiction is so miserable that they are submitted to critical mistreatment and mortification. These women experience the torments of both social and cultural oppression which originate from the patriarchal nature of African societies. Using Flora Nwapa's novel *One is Enough*, the article analyzes the repulsive cultural and social stereotypes that threaten the attachment, love and satisfaction that ought to have solidified a cheery relationship of married couples. The article also explores the extent to which contempt, segregation and differentiation influence the psychological and emotional stability of barren women and how this barrenness becomes a weapon for the oppression and abuse of women by their husbands and mothers in law and how women defy these beliefs that affront, mortify and disconnect them so as to reach at last a measure of freedom and self-realization in life.

**Key Words:** Childlessness, freedom, marriage, oppression, stereotypes

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In the African society, as depicted by Flora Nwapa, an Igbo woman is considered a cursed woman if her marriage is not fertile. Barrenness is the worst stigma a woman has to endure because motherhood is very interesting in a woman's life; it is viewed as a sign of glory "motherhood defines womanhood"<sup>1</sup> (Boyce 1986, 243). Society excludes the barren woman who does not invest the seeds of her husband and reproduce his race because a woman should bear many male children to accomplish her stereotypical roles towards her husband and if, by misfortune or bad luck, she fails to be a mother, she experiences a painful life; no pity is shown to her even by her sweet husband; she can be insulted and disregarded, abused and even expelled from her house, Mbiti says in the African view of infertility: "If there is not yet a child in the marriage there is no guarantee that the marriage will endure"<sup>2</sup> (Mbiti 1991, 41).

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<sup>1</sup> Boyce-Davies, C. (1994). *Black Women, Writing and Identity*. New York: Routledge

<sup>2</sup> Mbiti, J.S. (1991). *Introduction to African religion*. Heinemann: Johannesburg.

In *One is Enough*, Where marriage and procreation are intertwined and inseparable, childlessness is a problem that prompts serious traumatic anxiety and collapse in the relationship of Amaka, Obiora as well as her mother-in-law.

In the beginning Amaka was very puzzled between missionary values and her mother's teaching. The missionary teaches her the importance of pureness, marriage and children. However, her mother teaches her to be independent and have children whether inside or outside marriage. Her mother says:

"But remember, make men friends and start thinking of having children. Marriage or no marriages, have children. Your children will take care of you in your old age. You will be very lonely then if you don't have children. As a mother, you are fulfilled"<sup>3</sup> (Nwapa 1981, 10).

Amaka's mother believes that children serve as wonderful companion to their parents and bridge the feeling of isolation and loneliness among married couples. They assist at home and work and serve as powerful security at old age.

In the beginning, Amaka is linked to the missionary teaching, but in the end she skives it and keeps track of her mother's advice. The judgment of Amaka's aunt about motherhood is similar to her mother's. She tells Amaka that marriage is not as interesting as children, as interesting as being able to have children. According to her aunt, "A marriage is no marriage without children. Have your children, be able to look after them, and you will be respected" (Nwapa 1981, 8). Amaka's aunt considers marriage as a means of having children.

Ngcobo submits to this idea when she remarks that: "Marriage among Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full"<sup>4</sup> (Ngcobo 2007, 533). From this point we can say that Motherhood is a sacred and a powerful spiritual component of the woman's life; this is why Amaka's dream as a teenager had been to get married and have children of her own. "She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage" (Nwapa 1981, 1). However it is the eagerness for children that destroys Amaka's happiness, peace and marriage. So, the novel portrays the pitiable situation of an educated, respectful and brave woman who is plagued with childlessness in a society that sees their child to be a source of power, pride and an assurance of family continuity; Amaka expectations and desire to get pregnant are obstructed as she waits for six years without bearing a child. This status of fruitlessness boosts a great nervousness in Obiora's family and smashes the beautiful and quiet climate that exists amongst Obiora, Amaka and her mother-in-law. Basden accounts for this in his book '*Marriage Among the Ibos of Nigeria*' when he asserts that: "A childless marriage is a source of serious disappointment and sooner or later leads to serious trouble between man and wife"<sup>5</sup> (Basden 1966, 1) Because of the dread and fear of losing his name and obstructing the family progression because of his wife's infertility influence, Obiora changes his behaviours and feelings towards Amaka, the woman who was so successful in her trading activities that she used to earn more than her husband and had even gifted a Peugeot car to him. Quite, Obiora's unexpected deviation leads to a terrible psychological and emotional trauma in the life of the miserable woman. He starts by breaching the law of marriage loyalty by engaging in a

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<sup>3</sup> Flora Nwapa. (1981). *One is Enough*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

<sup>4</sup> Ngcobo, Lauretta. (2007). *African Motherhood- Myth and Reality/ African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed. Olaniyan, Tejumola & Ato Quayson U.S.A: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> Basden, G.T. (1966). *Marriage among the Ibos of Nigeria*. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.

secret marriage with another woman, a relationship that outcomes in two children, The Second is that Obiora chooses not to discuss his second wife and two sons with Amaka, that is to say, Amaka is not asked or told about the second wife before Obiora marries her and before the birth of children. Thirdly Amaka is not respected from her husband or mother-in-law when they tell her that the second wife and the two sons are coming to live in the house with them. So, this sudden declaration makes Amaka trembles. "She could no longer control her emotions. She holds on to the bed, so she does not faint" (Nwapa 1981, 14). Obiora does not feel for her, instead he goes further to threaten Amaka saying: "but let me warn you that if you step out of this house in protest when my wife and my two sons arrive, you stay out forever. You must not come back"(Nwapa 1981, 20). Amaka expresses her melancholy to her husband saying:

"Congratulations. I thought that in this sort of thing, a wife, even a barren one should have been taken into confidence. It beats me how you should do all this behind my back, be involved with a woman, have sons by her, marry her without breathing a word to your wife. You have changed a good deal my husband" (Nwapa 1981, 25).

After the spouse and sons arrive, Obiora keeps on offending Amaka by requesting that she perceive the new relatives according to his desires. We can notice that Amaka makes some efforts to be kind additionally to stand up for herself. She asks, "Where is the mother of your sons? " and Obiora reacts by saying, "You mean my wife? " (Nwapa 1981, 25). Along these lines he reveals to Amaka that she should call her as her wife. Amaka praises him and advises him that a spouse, even a fruitless one, should be consulted before the husband weds and has two sons with another woman. This incidence justifies Helen Chukwuma's claim that:

"The female character in African fiction...is a facile lack- lustre human being, the quiet member of a house hold, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife, and mother even when the decisions affect her directly"<sup>6</sup> (Chukwuma 1990, 131).

Amaka states, "You have changed a good deal, my husband. I too could change you know" (Nwapa 1981, 26). These words prompt a physical battle between Obiora and Amaka. Felix Ibineweka says that:

"For the African, childlessness is the greatest traumatic experience in marriage. Childlessness in marriage can be the source of personal misery for the couple, the members of their extended families and friends and the community at large. Invariably it leads to polygamy or concubinage, or divorce, or marital infidelity or proxy sexual union "<sup>7</sup> (Ibineweka 1987).

A clear instance of this mistreatment is shown when Amaka reminds Obiora her commitment in purchasing him a car, giving food money and different needs at home, purchasing a land for building a house and also giving herself and her assets to her better half husband, Obiora answers her:

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<sup>6</sup> Chukwuma, Helen. (1990). *Voices and Choices: Literature and Black Aesthetics*. Ed. Emenyonu, Ernest N. Ibadan : Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

<sup>7</sup> Felix Ibineweka. (1987). *The Sacrament of Marriage and Childlessness in Edo, Pastoral Problems and Possible Solutions*. Rome.

"You are being senseless ...How many mouths were we feeding? You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you are childless. You would not raise your voice in this house if you were sensible. You should go about your business quietly and not offend anyone because if you do, one would be tempted to give you one or two home truths" (Nwapa 1981, 19).

Obiora's insults make a deep harm inside Amaka, this is why, in this incident, wife beating and insulting served the purpose of punishing the guilty. One man, while beating his wife was quoted as yelling: "All that comes out of your vagina is nothing but blood"<sup>8</sup> (Phoofolo 2007:381). This statement characterised a husband who was tired to see his wife continuing in her menstruation periods, which means she is not falling pregnant as expected.

Amaka's misery in marriage is not just because she is barren, but because her husband, who is assumed to protect her from her own pain and feelings of failure, is now her own executioner; he always seeks reasons to beat or insult her. When she lays her complaint to Obiora about his infidelity, Obiora puts the blame on the miserable woman saying: "What have you been doing behind my back? " (Nwapa 1981, 26). He says that he is a man. But when Amaka replies that she is also a woman, Obiora bursts with a great anger at Amaka and beats her violently. Amaka's so as to protect herself from his fury she hides in the toilet, yet, Obiora instead to try to control his anger, he bashes at the door saying:

"Open the door, you whore, you good-for-nothing woman, you prostitute. What have you been doing behind my back? Sleeping with other men? I am going to kill you today and take your corpse to your mother and nobody will ask questions... Open the door and I will tear you to pieces" (Nwapa 1981, 28-29).

Because barrenness is not only unacceptable, but also a shameful and disgraceful state, it turns into a weapon for the persecution and rebuff of the woman, mostly by her husband and even her mother-in-law who always interferes in his son's relationship with Amaka, she makes her suffer a great humiliation, indignity, and perplexity because her marriage is bereft of children. The short-sighted of the old woman makes her believe that the infertility of her daughter-in-law witch hunts her son's success in his personal and professional life; the old woman's blindly disregards that Amaka gifted her husband a Peugeot car in order to protect him from societal contempt and because her husband did not want to make it known to his family and friends that the car had been bought by his wife, so to save his reputation and also to appear superior to his wife, Amaka did not want any issues to come into her relationship with her husband so she did not tell the truth and went silent along with her husband in whatever he wanted. Equally, the old woman also disregards Amaka who has saved her son, Obiora from being separated from the ministry because of his carelessness and over trusting nature, it is Amaka who saves his interest and saves the situation by meeting with her husband's permanent secretary at Enugu and pleading his course. In the end, Amaka's care and efforts are turned down by Obiora's mother simply because Amaka is childless; it serves as a symbol of her societal and ultimately her own self-abasement, she kneels in front of her mother-in-law as if seeking forgiveness from an angry parent this later pines in grief seeing other women of her age carrying their grand children whereas she could not have any. In fact, the risk of having her son's pedigree ended because of his wife's childlessness and the pains of having her old age doomed to loneliness, raise the sorrow of the old woman and she becomes very mad. Her nervousness irritates her mental and psychological sides that she becomes so restless, feudal to everyone around her, particularly to Amaka. She sees Amaka as harassment and a useless woman who has come to

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<sup>8</sup> Phoofolo, P. (2007). *Holy weddings, unholy marriages: Christian spouses and domestic discords in early colonial Lesotho, 1870–1900*. *Journal of religious History* 31(4), 363–386.

hurt her ill-luck on her family. With this tone, Obiora's mother creates a psychological battle against Amaka, who she binged as the cause of bad luck in her family saying; "I have been sleeping badly for the past year. Don't you see how thin I am? Was I as thin as this when you married my son six years ago? So don't complain of sleeping badly for just one night" (Nwapa 1981, 3). To the old woman, Amaka's childlessness has caused her a lot of physical and psychological sufferings. This psychological reflection affects Amaka deeply and prompts in her dreadful feelings of bleakness and gloominess. According to Donkor:

"Childless women usually encounter unfavourable treatment from their society. A woman might be expelled from her husband's house either by the husband himself or by his family. A husband could be encouraged to take other wives if a wife is suspected of barrenness"<sup>9</sup>(Donkor 2008, 22).

Often, a childless woman is viewed as a deformation, an annoyance, a witch and as someone who should be abandoned. She is subjected to societal irony and segregation because of this singular problem. A common effect of a couple's infertility usually leads to the eviction of the woman from the husband's home with or without a formal divorce. A woman automatically loses her regard, esteem, and status even among her family who should be more comprehensive and sympathetic because barrenness is regarded as a curse that brings just the bad luck; Obiora's mother shows this idea when she upbraid Amaka for her son's tardiness:

"The next thing I want to tell you is that you have done nothing at all towards the advancement of my son since you married him six years ago. Look around and you see others married at the time you were married. My son has not started building a house yet, nor has he done anything for his age-grade in this town" (Nwapa 1981, 15).

Margaret Mead gives this descriptive image of a childless woman in this pitiable manner:

"The figure of the witch who kills living things, who strokes the throat of children until they die, whose very glance causes cows to lose their calves and fresh milk to curdle as it stands, is a statement of human fear of what can be done to mankind by a woman who denies or is forced to deny child bearing and child cherishing"<sup>10</sup> (Mbiti 1991, 2).

Despite the cruel disposition of Obiora and his mother towards Amaka, they are seriously affected both psychologically and physically; their offensive reactions towards Amaka can be explained by the depression caused by societal ridicule and isolation, their poor psychological states affect not only their actions but also their physical appearances. According to the mother: "Obiora is getting older and older everyday while Amaka is getting younger and younger everyday" (Nwapa 1981, 15). The mother has a strong desire of grand children who keep the home warm and serve as powerful companions to her at old age, the same thing for Obiora who was a caring and loving husband but suddenly he turns treacherous because of societal pressure from his immediate family. This dramatic reaction creates a strong feeling of alienation and disconnection in Amaka; she is seen most of the time meditating, mourning and bearing her burden all alone in silence, the people that are assumed to support and help her turn out from her sadness, Even her own mother disappointed her because she accused her for failing to play her card well when she found that Obiora is enable of impregnating her. Because Amaka firmly

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<sup>9</sup> Donkor, E.S. (2008). *Socio-cultural perception of infertility in Ghana*. Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery 10(1), 22–34.

<sup>10</sup> Mbiti, J.S. (1991). *Introduction to African religion*. Heinemann: Johannesburg.

refuses to adhere to her mother's suggestion to look out for men outside her marriage this disagreement creates a strong tension between Amaka and her mother, she says:

"I told you, four years ago to leave him or if you did not want to leave him to go to other men and get pregnant. You are my daughter. We are never barren in our family, never. Even in your own imbecile father's family, there was nothing like barrenness. But you refused to take my advice. You were being a good wife, chastity, faithfulness my foot. You can go ahead and eat virtue. Here are your belongings sent to me in this disgraceful manner, my daughter humiliated in this way. You are not my daughter" (Nwapa 1981, 32).

From her advice, Amaka's mother shows that the need of children and family offspring are the objectives of every family in the society. She advises her daughters to find men who will impregnate her within or outside marriage. For her, a man is valueless if he is incapable to fertilize his wife. She believes that a woman without a child has nothing to be remembered for and will have her days doomed to loneliness. She recalls that a childless woman leaves nothing behind when she dies and so can easily be forgotten unlike a mother who has her children behind to mourn her and be remembered through them. In fact, childless women are treated with great contempt as people who deliberately deny the unborn children their right of existence. They are seen as evil people and branded as witches no matter how virtuous they might be. According to Hyer, S.J. in his article: "Women's Experiences with Involuntary Childlessness" 'All the infertile women experienced negative social consequences including marital instability, stigmatization and abuse'<sup>11</sup> (Hyer 2002, 6). He posits that these findings demonstrate that infertility can have a serious effect on both the psychological well-being and social status of women in the developing world .

Fleeing from a violent husband, broken marriage and a severe mother, it was to Lagos that Amaka repaired to find her fulfilment and identity; she abode by her mother's advice:

"forget men, be pregnant, have your children and live an independent life. Take your sister Ayo as an example; even though she is not married, she has four children with a wealthy man (already married) who is in charge of their welfare. And indeed doing it well, it is far better to be a mother than to be a wife"(Nwapa 1981, 10).

In Lagos she experiences some adventures that are expected to influence women's life in a changing urban society. Her beauty and charm attract men to fall in love with her and help her. She was engaged with various men who helped her with important contracts from the government; thereby she made money hand over fist because she was motivated by her sister who is a mistress of a wealthy Nigerian business man. In a discussion with her friend Adaobi, she thus portrays life in urban Lagos: "You know Lagos. No man can do anything for a woman, without asking her for her precious possession-herself. I must confess to you, I have slept with the Alhaji" (Nwapa 1981, 68). Nwapa demonstrates that when Amaka amuses Alhaji she does not do that as a whore; rather, it is because she finds herself in a society where it is the only means by which a woman can achieve her objectives. Because Amaka's friendship with Alhaji is just to get contracts; there is no clear intimacy between them. The relationship is completely sexual, a method for compensating Alhaji for giving her contracts and through them she can turn out to be fiscally saved and lease her own flat, purchase a car, construct a house in her hometown, and divorce her husband legally and traditionally as well as give money to her

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<sup>11</sup> Hyer, S.J. (2002). *Women's Experiences with Involuntary Childlessness*. Journal of Human Reproduction. Vol. 17, No.6, (1663-1668).

family, bearing in mind that the two do not meet each other in public nor do they have any future plans together.

Frank's position raises much interest for the Nigerian novel. She holds that: "bottom power, sexual bargaining, prostitution are all woman's tools towards economic independence and selfhood"<sup>121</sup> (Frank 1987).. After that, Amaka fascinates Izu, yet she contends that Izu oppresses her, yet that Amaka has deliberately chosen her oppressor and she utilizes her bottom power for financial prizes. She embarks to bait the Catholic priest with all that she has, including sexual pleasure for material benefits. She knew she had made an impression on the man of God from the first day she met him and plan to take advantage of the situation. Father McLaid was an orphan who had been adopted by an Irish family and he had never possessed the capacity to overlook this first treason of being deserted by his own family. He feels that he has found his soul mate in Amaka and falls deeply in love with her. Amaka achieved her goal of getting pregnant through tempting the priest to achieve her long desired pregnancy in order to prove to the whole world that she is not sterile, after that she rejects to marry him because she prefers to stay unmarried, by doing this she has achieved self-satisfaction; she has denied the deep rooted social customs, including marriage and admitted the defy of leading a life of her own. According to Ezeigbo: " One is Enough is Nwapa's forthright encouragement of childless women to look for other ways of living a self-fulfilled and profitable life"<sup>13</sup> (Ezeigbo 1998). The most important sign of Amaka's freedom happens when she decides she does not want to and will not marry Father McLaid just because she has children by him, despite the fact that he wants to marry her to protect his ethical reputation in the society. Amaka's words reflect her freedom:

"As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. . . . No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos. (Nwapa 1981, 127)

According to Amaka, there is something in that word marriage that enslaves a woman. Consequently, she never wants to sacrifice herself again for any married life. Her reason remains that one marriage is enough in a woman's life.

In the above cases, Nwapa shows that women characters do not see being unmarried as the apocalypse, but rather as a start of a better world. This shows that they are not subordinated to men and that they have confidence in their force as women. That is why Amaka moves from an oppressed to a liberated, independent life. Yates states that "a woman should never do anything that will make her uncomfortable with herself- she has to live herself, no matter who else may be around"<sup>14</sup> (Yates 1976, 225). It should be refined that this female character is depicted by Nwapa to fulfil Yates's idea of women free from male chauvinism and from all unfavourable perceptions of barren women. She does not want to get married and be unhappy or have her voice ignored because she is a woman; she portrays a desire for transcendence; crossing high to relocate herself in order to participate in the public sphere which she not only achieves but exceeds society's expectations as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Frank, K. (1987). *Women without men: The feminist novel in Africa*. African literature today, 15, 14- 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ezeigbo, Theodora Akachi. (1998). *Myth, History, Culture, and Igbo Womanhood in Flora Nwapa's Novels. Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Ed. Marie Umeh. Trenton, NJ: Africa World P. 51-76

<sup>14</sup> Yates, M. (1976). *Coping: A survival manual for women alone*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Nwapa uses the traditional environment as a symbol of persecution and dependency. In that environment marriage and procreation are the norms whereas singleness and barrenness are seen as the plagues. However, the city life is depicted by this writer as a portrayal of new start where barren and independent single women are welcomed, accepted and live without any guilt or shame. It is an icon of freedom and self-realization and self-assertion. Cutrifelli states that:

"The new characteristically urban figure of the male-unprotected, husbandless single woman has significantly taken shape: and in the light of the traditional view of celibacy as a social failure, even a crime against society, the consciously deliberate rejection of marriage on the part of an increasing number of urban women appears to be a courageous, indeed daring deed" <sup>15</sup>. (cited in Jones & Palmer 1987, 3)

Through *One Is Enough*, Flora Nwapa tries to express her great interest towards the sufferings of barren women. While trying to enroll her disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal society, she says that:

"The problem that a woman faces in the world is the pain of not being able to bring forth a child from her womb, a feat no man can (yet) perform. The pain is great if she is denied this function and this is why the theme of barrenness is explored by many African writers particularly the female ones". (Nwapa 1998, 96).

She wants to educate the women that the social status of a society or a nation could be measured by the standing conditions of its women. She motivates and inspires the barren women to revolt against their reality, reject all subjugation and male oppression and protesting against the second position of their gender through educating themselves; she shows education, economic independence and self confidence as important ingredients for liberation since there is a strong relationship between women's education and their overall success including their economic development and this empowerment of women is the need of society.

## CONCLUSION

It is so aching for a woman to be rejected by her own society, mother and mother in law, but it is even worse if the rejection is also being made by her husband; the one who is supposed to be her protector and supporter. Both the immediate family and entire society contribute to the torment suffered by childless women in African traditional culture. However, despite the oppression on her because of her childlessness, the protagonist succeeds through ambition, braveness and strong will to survive. Having endured for long, the insult and abuse, Amaka decides to take her destiny in her hands; she quits her marriage and decides firmly to survive in life without depending on any man breaking away from the barriers of culture and religion by asserting her identity and freedom in her society. Amaka's reaction to the unjust or biased culture of her society depicts Nwapa's view that barren women should learn to be self reliant in or outside marriages.

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