

Black Women Writers Across Cultures

An Analysis of Their
Contributions

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CHAPTER FIVE

The African Response to American Feminism: A Reading of Flora Nwapa and Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT

Feminism as a concept seeks to better the lot of women who are perceived to be sidelined by men in the prevailing scheme of things in the society. It also views issues from the woman's angle. Putting it in other words, feminism alleges that woman as "the other" of man, has (since the genesis of human beings) been at the receiving end of society's injustices such as oppression and suppression. Now, through that movement, a sustained effort is being made to right the perceived injustices. Feminism thus aims to establish or assert equality between men and women in a world which it regards as male-oriented.

The feminist movement or trend has been most vocal in the United States, but its impact has been felt almost everywhere.

This study compares the response of two Black scholars to the concept of feminism as ably manifested in their literary creations. The two scholars, Flora Nwapa from Nigeria (Africa) and Alice Walker from the U.S.A. (America), are avowed feminists who strive to propagate the concept with a "humane face" unlike other scholars and critics who advocate an overthrow of the prevailing dispensation without first of all suggesting a sustaining and pragmatic alternative.

Thus, the study (though strictly with an African focus) explores the concept of feminism from the perspective of Black women in Africa and America. It also criticizes some apparently divisive trends by feminist scholars

and critics in their response to a concept whose impact has become virtually universal. ^{***}
101-08.99

It appears that Black women are now at the forefront of the feminist movement. Increasingly, they have become very vocal on issues that, years ago, would have been viewed as taboo. From the kitchen to the boardroom, they are challenging the status quo and instituting reforms in a bid to provide new models. The women seem to have suddenly discovered a fresh leverage—a new found freedom to express and do things.

African-American women more than any other group, have been behind this trend. By virtue of their living side-by-side with Whites (White women especially) who have espoused feminism for quite a while, in addition to their history of oppression and suppression through slavery and racial discrimination, Black American women have become very vocal and assertive. With this empowerment, they seek to liberate not only themselves from perceived social injustices and deprivations, but also to free other women (especially Black women) in all parts of the world.

In Africa, the response to "American feminism" initially was moot. However, as more and more women embraced western-styled education, their attitudes altered and new hungers were felt within their fold. Old mannerisms bordering on local traditions suddenly ceased to sustain these African women. With time, yawning gaps appeared and old solutions to problems ceased to sustain and, upheavals in social relations ensued as the women began to question everything ranging from their status as housewives and mothers to their roles as providers, servants and midwives. In a nutshell, women perceived that they had been subjected to a lot of unfreedom in the past so they began to assert their independence and resilience.

Feminism as an orientation is not new to African women. From all accounts, it is apparent that Flora Nwapa arrived on the literary scene before Alice Walker, having published her renowned novel, *Efuru* as far back as 1966. But,

while Flora Nwapa as an African female, more or less pioneers, Alice Walker situates her efforts amidst a tradition of assertive Black American females who blazed the trail before her. There is for example, Margaret Walker—the author of *Jubilee*, who appeared on the scene before Alice Walker. However, Alice Walker pioneers in another area by initiating a variation of the feminist aesthetics which she subsequently tagged "Womanist Theory."

Both Nwapa and Walker believe and actively advocate the effective application and realization of the full potentials of women in all societies and especially Black women who are seen as oppressed and downtrodden. They believe that since women are equal partners with the men, all efforts should be channeled towards the fruition of such a dream. In all of their writings the two writers express an unflinching commitment to the upliftment of fellow women. They also believe firmly in the equality of women with men and their ability to attain excellence in favorable conditions. Theirs can therefore be described as "responsible feminism."

In *Efuru*, *Idu* and especially *One is Enough*, Flora Nwapa employs her creative talent to blaze the trail of feminism for African women. First of all, contrary to previous fictional works by Nigerian and most Black African writers, Nwapa projects a female protagonist who not only matches males in the society in their endeavors, but excels and actually fends for the menfolk, issuing monetary loans and grants regularly to assuage their plights. In some cases the men are afflicted by occupational disasters (such as very low farm yields, flood, or general incompetence on the part of the farmer). In *Efuru*, the heroine, Efuru grants monetary loans to Nwosu to assist him recover from a farming set-back. However, Nwosu is incompetent and cannot repay the loan to Efuru. He is even too dumb to speak for himself and it is his wife, Nwabata, that rescues him upon their second visit to seek another loan assistance from Efuru:

Efuru, "we have come to your house. My husband and I have come to your house," Nwabata said unexpectedly ...

"I don't know how to begin," Nwabata went on. "We owe you. And we are not even able to pay. We thought we could pay part of our debt after this harvest, but it was not possible. Our harvest was poor. Let me cut a long story short, it is planting season again and we have no money to buy yams to plant. That is why we have come, Efuru, Please help us. There is nobody we can go to. You are the only person we can go to. You know us well and our nakedness."¹

Similarly, in *One is Enough*, Nwapa depicts a female protagonist who progresses to the point of nullifying her marriage and charting an independent but industrious life which yields great dividends to not only herself, but to her family and friends. Amaka (the protagonist) thus becomes the modern Efuru who refuses to rot in her husband's house but initiates an alternative that pleases her mother and ultimately yields very great dividends. Like Efuru, Amaka finds it very difficult to become pregnant and give birth to children.

But unlike Efuru who eventually delivers a child while in her initial husband's house, Amaka never puts to bed while in her husband's domicile. It appears that she and Obiora (her husband) are diametrically opposed to each other and cannot jointly make a child. Amaka is presumed barren, more so when Obiora cheats on their marriage and begets two male children out of wedlock. It is later when she has asserted her independence by setting herself up in business that Amaka gives birth, not to a child, but to twins, both of them males!

Thus, the women depicted by Nwapa, like those projected by Walker, increasingly exhibit resilience and independence in their initiatives. Most of all, these women are very humane and humble, showing that even folks (Black female folks) can rise above their peculiar surroundings and limitations to attain excellence. In the process of striving in their societies, the women often excel their male folk to attain fulfillment or self-realization. In fact, owing to their humanity, e.g. their ability to forgive injustices, the women plough back their resources in their societies so as to benefit the less fortunate ones—males and

females alike. Generally however, they actively complement the men in sorting out issues entangling their individual and collective consciousness.

In Walker's *Meridian*, a youthful, Black, female protagonist attempts to unravel the mysteries which seem to engulf her and her people (folks) in their Southern U.S.A. society. Racism by Whites on Blacks is at the core of the society shown here. So, Meridian finds herself in a doubly disadvantaged situation—first as a Black person in a predominantly White racist society and then as a woman in a strictly sexist or gendered society. Initially she is naive and illiterate. However, as the novel progresses, the heroine also progresses in her academic attainment—and this becomes her greatest tool for self-empowerment as events unfold.

Walker's perspective here is essentially western just as Nwapa's perspective is African. But their stories are about Black people. Most of the people portrayed are also ordinary Black folks working hard to earn a living.

Meridian Hill embarks on an early marriage in view of her having become pregnant while still in school. She and her boyfriend (later, husband), Eddie are very young and fun experienced about life. So they are full of dreams and expectations—which however, prove elusive. She separates from him and eventually overcomes her academic set-back and goes to college having won sponsorship. Prior to this, she engages in Civil Rights work and becomes more sensitive to the racial situation in her society. This devotion ultimately prepares her for subsequent Civil Rights campaigns while in college and after her graduation.

In her dealings with her friends and colleagues (both male and female), Meridian progressively asserts her individuality or independence. Indeed, eventually, she derives more joy and fulfillment from fellow females since her male friends appear ready only to exploit and abandon her. Eventually, she becomes a rallying point for other folks oppressed by their society. These include males and females (Truman Held and Anne-Marion), Blacks and Whites (Tommy Odds, Lynne Rabinowitz, and Scarlet O'Hara).

Truman tells Meridian:

"I hate to think of you always alone."

And, Meridian replies:

"But that is my value", said Meridian.

"Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness may be we will know the truth."²

A recurrent theme in Nwapa's and Walker's fiction is "motherhood." In *Efuru* as in *Meridian* (both named after their protagonists), in *One is Enough* and in *The Color Purple*, the theme of motherhood prevails and the ability of the women to produce and nurture children is the "litmus test" of womanhood in the novels. Thus, women are tainted in one way or the other by their inability to bear and bring up children. Indeed, the accompanying traumas to the women for their inability to bear children is so grave that their whole psychology becomes unbalanced. The presence of children acts as a balm which soothes not only their nerves but prevents them from slipping into mental retardation. *Efuru* and *Amaka* become extremely worried and afraid as they patiently wait to get pregnant and procreate. In fact, at some point, their society views them as men since they (as women) are yet to bear children. It is only the birth of their children eventually that brings succour to them- although in *Efuru*'s case her husband, *Adizua* deserts her and her child (*Ogonim*) dies, leaving her totally disillusioned.

Similarly, *Meridian* and *Celie* dispose of their children to their relations owing to their inability to sustain themselves and the children. However, they are always worried about them. The ultimate thing to do would be to retrieve those children and fend for them. Peace of mind eludes them continually as their children are separated from them.

In *Meridian*, *Lynne Rabinowitz* is happiest when with her daughter *Camara*. It is *Camara* that binds *Lynne* to her husband, *Truman*. As soon as *Camara* dies, *Lynne* loses both her mental balance and her husband. She subsequently becomes dejected and tries to get succour from her friend, *Meridian*.

Her husband, *Truman* equally desires *Meridian*!

Just as *Flora Nwapa* in *One is Enough* achieves her vision of full female empowerment through her projection of *Amaka* who rises from nothing to become something, *Alice Walker* in *The Color Purple* attains similar status for Black women by her portrayal of *Celie* and *Shug*. In an essay, "Alice Walker's women: In Search of Some Peace of Mind," *Bettye J. Parker-Smith* argues that Walker "lifts Black women off their knees, uses love as a defense mechanism, and raises Black women to a level of royalty,"³ in *The Color Purple*. She further states that women in Walker's initial novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, "are cruelly victimized by their men and they move about from day to day exposing their shame to themselves and to their world."⁴ She then adds that the situation in *The Color Purple* differs from Walker's previous fiction:

The Color Purple operates on a different plane. It shows *Alice Walker*'s growth as a writer. And, in this masterpiece that exceeds its limits as a work of fiction, she elevates Black women to the height of sovereignty. They wear the royal robe of purple. In her early works, women used their fragile strength to love everybody and anybody except themselves. Now, robed in purple, they receive and accept the right to love themselves and each other. Love of self energizes them to the point that they break their chains of enslavement, change their own worlds, time and Black men. They are prepared to fight-eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. And they remain women-cry when they need to, laugh when they want to, straighten their hair if they take a notion. They change their economic, political, and moral status, with love.⁵

Parker-Smith thus lends full support to *Walker*'s depiction of Black females who turn lesbians because they cannot succeed in their heterosexual relationships. *Celie* and *Shug* mirror this trend in *The Color Purple*. Through *Walker*'s portrayal and *Parker-Smith*'s analysis also, women tend to argue for a return to the Old Testament's Mosaic laws from the New Testament's laws of

Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Bible-and by extension, Creation-is overturned and replaced with a new world dominated by females.

A major observation or point to note in Nwapa's and Walker's fiction is the predominance of effeminate males. They are weak men who do not love or care for their wives but who are brutal and cannot achieve as much as their female folks. Thus, both writers progressively emasculate males and empower females in the societies they depict. However, in spite of this apparent displacement, the women still run finally to the men for anchor and support, knowing that it is impossible to run the world on their own. Adizua in *Efuru* can be likened to Truman in *Meridian*, while Obiora in *One is Enough* can be compared to Mr. _____ (Albert) in *The Color Purple*.

The Color Purple and *One is Enough* establish Alice Walker and Flora Nwapa as core feminists in their various societies. More importantly, these novels aptly show their authors' feminist orientations: their characters all emphasize the need for mutual co-existence unlike some shades of feminists that tend to desire a female-only universe. However, though the writers argue for such mutually ordered societies, they tend to argue strongly for a revolutionary reordering of the society to empower women while at the same time disfranchising or emasculating men. This trend is clearly displayed in *The Color Purple* and *One is Enough*.

Mary Helen Washington who has described Alice Walker as an "apologist for Black women," suggesting therefore that Walker "speaks or writes in defense of (the Black woman's cause or position)." believes the "liberation of Black womanhood" is the cause the novelist is vouching for. Washington also feels that Walker "as an apologist ... demonstrates this position basically in the sense of acknowledging."⁶

Both Walker and Nwapa are keen followers of history, especially as it applies to women. Their writings therefore mirror this history vividly. In analyzing Walker's fiction, Bettye J. Parker-Smith argues that:

Historically, Black women have been directed into feelings of guilt about responsibility for the emasculation of the Black male. Guilt, as demonstrated in Walker's women, breeds a weakness that cripples. Women understand that despite the troubles their men see, men are actually able to get along very well together. Their ability to enjoy and maintain a camaraderie is an element of beauty in their strength. Black women not only digest the hurt and pain, they feel it their duty to become a repository of the Black man's rage. This theme is especially paramount in Walker's first two pieces of fiction but is perhaps more openly woven in the fabric of *Third Life*. Black men, by the same token, understanding this weakness and, hence, vulnerability, use Black women as their "punching bag." They are easier to knock out than are the dominant powers ...⁷

Alice Walker, believing that the revision or rewriting of such history was long overdue, set out in *The Color Purple*, female characters who begin to exhibit a different understanding of their hitherto dominant history. In the novel, Walker depicts Black females who resist male aggression to the point that they actually overpower and overwhelm Black males. Harpo is a Black male that marries Sofia-a Black female, and attempts to make her obey him, so he seeks advice from his father, Mr. _____ (Albert):

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. _____. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always back talk ...

You ever hit her? Mr. _____ ast.

Harpo look down at his hands.

Naw Suh, he say low, embarrass.

Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating .

Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache.⁸

Apparently, Sofia (Harpo's wife) has the upper hand as she overpowers and beats her husband mercilessly. This incident recalls Obiora's and Amaka's "fight" in *One is Enough*, where Amaka, with the aid of a hammer hits and numbs her husband, Obiora, thus overpowering and emasculating him:

He rushed at her. He was a very strong man. He had beaten her once during their six years of marriage and she did not recover from that beating for a week. Her face was swollen, her head ached. She had bruises all over her. Obiora was sorry and contrite ...

Amaka learnt one thing from that incident and it was that she would never helplessly watch a man, least of all her husband, beat her. She must defend herself. She arrived at this conclusion herself ...

She armed herself with a hammer, and waited ...

Then all of a sudden, without warning, the door was open. Amaka dodged as her husband came after her barehanded. Then she sprang up quickly and landed a heavy blow on her husband's chest with the hammer. He simply sprawled down on the toilet floor, unable even to cry out.⁹

Through such portrayals, Walker and Nwapa categorically state their firm belief that Black women, given the chance, would not only rise to the level of their men, but would match and then overpower or excel them. Interesting as this may sound however, such manifestations in real life are rare and extraordinary. Therefore, such an avowed preoccupation by feminists ultimately could prove counter-productive as it could spur females into greater violent confrontations with males which in turn would make the males more ferocious or aggressive. In real life, the deed beckons much more than the preachment.

Although the emphasis in this essay is on key fictional works by Nwapa and Walker, the personal lives and essays by these two writers further reflect their firm belief in freedom and empowerment for women—especially Black women.

For example, both writers worked very hard to economically empower themselves, overtaking even many of their male colleagues in the process. Therefore they determine their own affairs. They do not believe in wives depending on their husbands for every form of economic support. Such dependence they note, serves to enslave women to men. Nwapa and Walker also had marital problems which ranged from divorce on the one hand, to such related intra-family traumas, and just a child—a daughter to Walker. Both of these writers also draw extensively from their traditional backgrounds to creatively project characters and situations.

Equally illuminating, are essays such as *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and *Living By the Word*, which further anchor Alice Walker's faith in the creative ability of Black women (mothers) and her commitment to nature. Walker believes that most of the current problems afflicting mankind would not exist if mankind properly drew inspiration from nature instead of consistently and progressively destroying it. Hence, it is only in a rural, natural setting that she succeeds in "conjuring" characters and settings for her masterpiece—*The Color Purple*. She admits that her characters preferred a serene, unpolluted, rural environment:

"What is this tall shit anyway?" they would say.

... all the people in the novel promptly fell silent—I think in awe. Not merely of the city's beauty, but of what they picked up about earth quakes.

"It's pretty," they muttered, "but us ain't lost nothing in no place that has earthquakes"...

They also didn't like seeing buses, cars, or other people whenever they attempted to look out. "Us don't want to be seeing none of this," they said. "It make us can't think".

That was when I knew for sure these were country people.

Seeing the sheep, the cattle, and the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak ...¹⁰

Walker extends this admiration of nature to her short story, "Am I Blue?" in *Living By the Word* and to *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*.

It is therefore very clear that Alice Walker and Flora Nwapa are pillars and champions of the cause of women's emancipation from the perceived lopsided male-dominated society. Their writings bear lavish testimony to this attestation and there certainly would have been a yawning gap in the American and African settings if these two female writers did not appear on the scene at the time they did.

A major point of divergence between the two artists however, is the prescription of a panacea to some of ills afflicting the females they explore or portray in their writings. Whereas Nwapa falls back on the African ethos to actively advocate heterosexual relationships especially through marriage, with economic independence for both the female and male partners in the union, Walker relies on the American consciousness to suggest lesbianism as an alternative to heterosexual relationships. However, lesbianism (or homosexuality) does not sustain in the long run and is therefore not a good alternative:

Celie's sexual desire for (fellow) women and her sexual encounter with shug (another female) is never a controversial issue even though it is the catalyst for her resistance to male domination, for her coming to power. Walker makes the powerful suggestion that sexual desire can disrupt and subvert oppressive social structure because it does not necessarily conform to social prescription, yet this realization is undermined by the refusal to acknowledge it as threatening- dangerous.¹¹
[Brackets added.]

This stance on the part of Walker tends to confirm the notion of the inherent looseness about sexual matters which has debased human relationships to the level of lesbianism and homosexuality in the west-a sharp contrast to the situation in Africa (the so-called dark continent) where heterosexual relationships and decorum regarding sexual issues still largely prevail. In her depiction, Nwapa

only depicts men and women who relate sexually to each other. She never projects females who relate sexually to females or males who relate similarly to males. She however portrays females and males who engage in extra-marital sexual relationships. For example, Adizua and Eneberi (Gilbert) in *Efuru* and Obiora in *One is Enough* are culprits in this pastime. Amaka on the other hand, seduces a catholic priest who is sworn to celibacy and chastity, to the point that she conceives and bears twin male children.

Nwapa also creatively depicts an African woman in a modern urban setting who refuses to marry but begets as many as four children. Amaka's sister, Ayo relies on her "boyfriend" who is married with children, to beget children and also to obtain sustenance. Ayo "was not very happy with her permanent secretary boyfriend of late, whose four children she was looking after. It was not his attention that she cared for, it was the money to take care of the children..."¹²

From this brief analysis, it is apparent that women from both sides of the Atlantic share a lot of commonalities as can be discerned from Walker's and Nwapa's experiences and creativity. It is also clear that the women (owing to differing world-views and orientations) have differing attitudes and views of issues paramount in their environments. Generally, the problems may appear to be synonymous, but the women shown in works by the two artists have slightly dissimilar prescriptions for a cure. The level of sophistication of the society involved tends to complicate attempts to proffer enduring and practical panacea to problems.

However, it is beyond any doubt that Black women in Africa and America share a lot of attributes and are teaming up under the umbrella of the feminist movement to voice their experiences, views, hopes, and yearnings for themselves, their fellow females and males and the society at large.

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