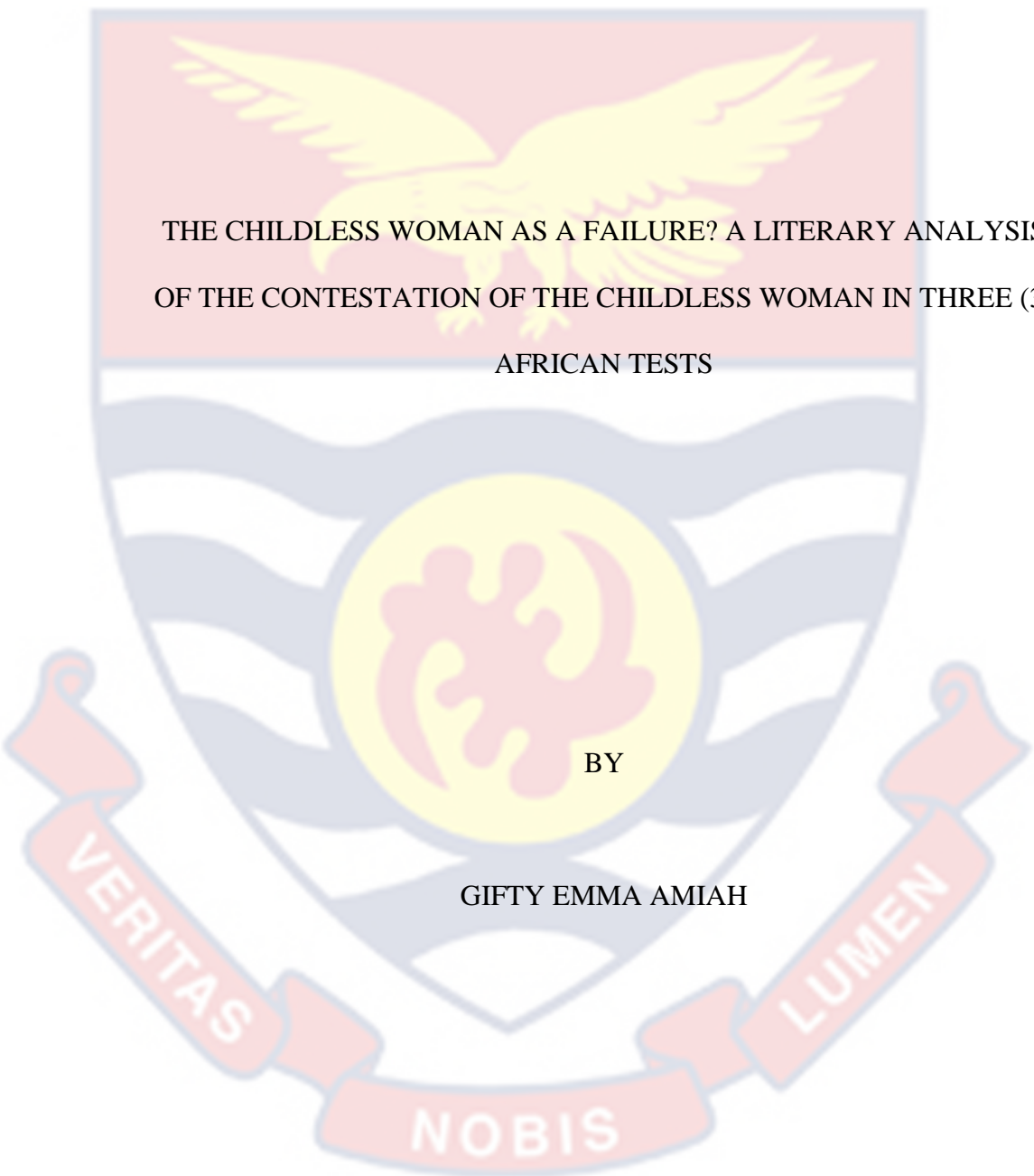


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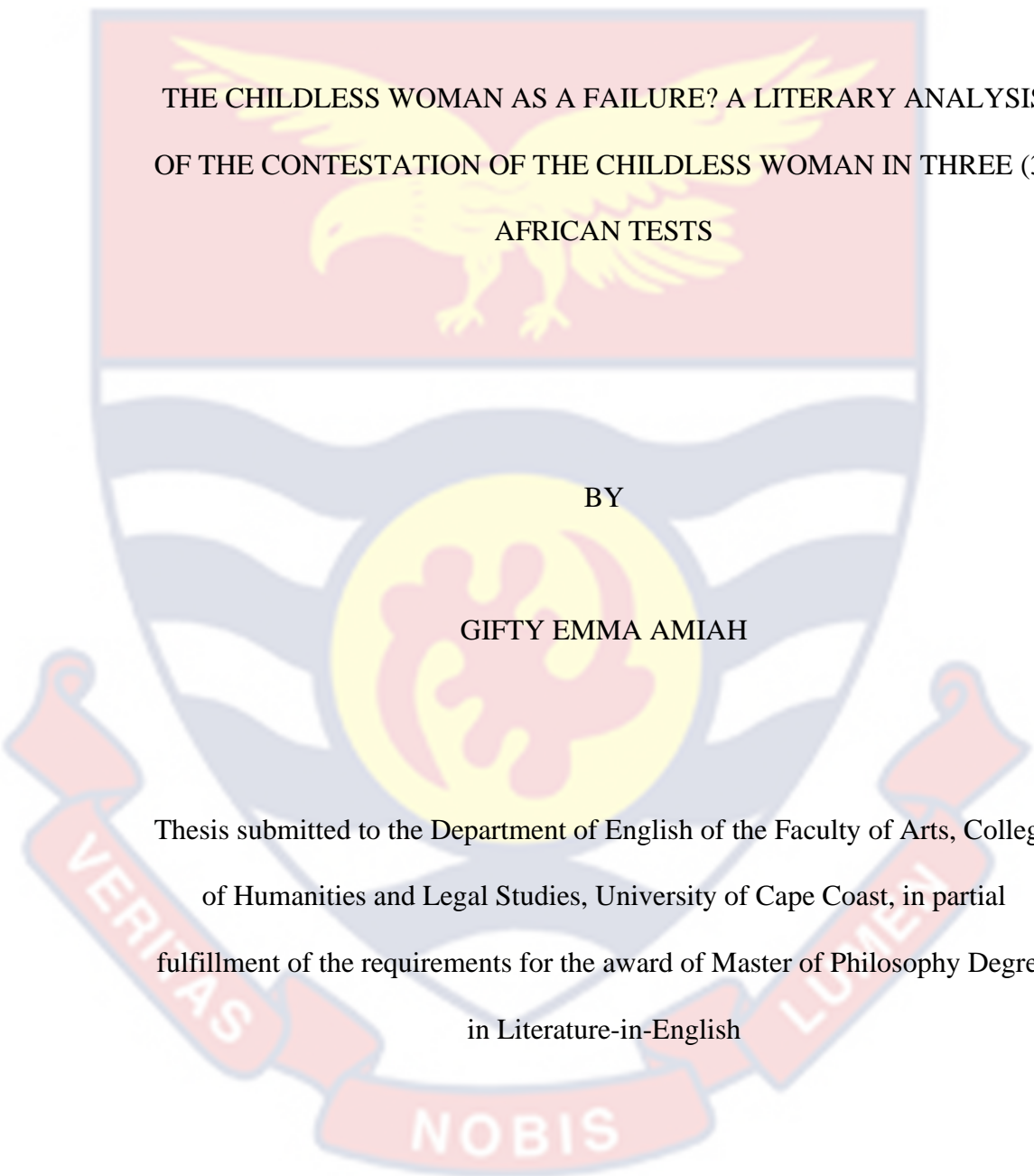
THE CHILDLESS WOMAN AS A FAILURE? A LITERARY ANALYSIS
OF THE CONTESTATION OF THE CHILDLESS WOMAN IN THREE (3)
AFRICAN TESTS

BY

GIFTY EMMA AMIAH

2024

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The background of the page features a large, faint watermark of the University of Cape Coast crest. The crest is a shield divided into three horizontal sections. The top section is red and contains a yellow eagle with its wings spread. The middle section is white with blue wavy lines and contains a yellow circle with a red stylized human figure. The bottom section is red and contains a white banner with the Latin motto 'VERITAS NOBIS LUMEN'.

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GIFTY EMMA AMIAH

This thesis submitted to the Department of English of the Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities and Legal Studies, University of Cape Coast, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy Degree in Literature-in-English

JANUARY 2024

DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.

Candidate's Signature: Date:

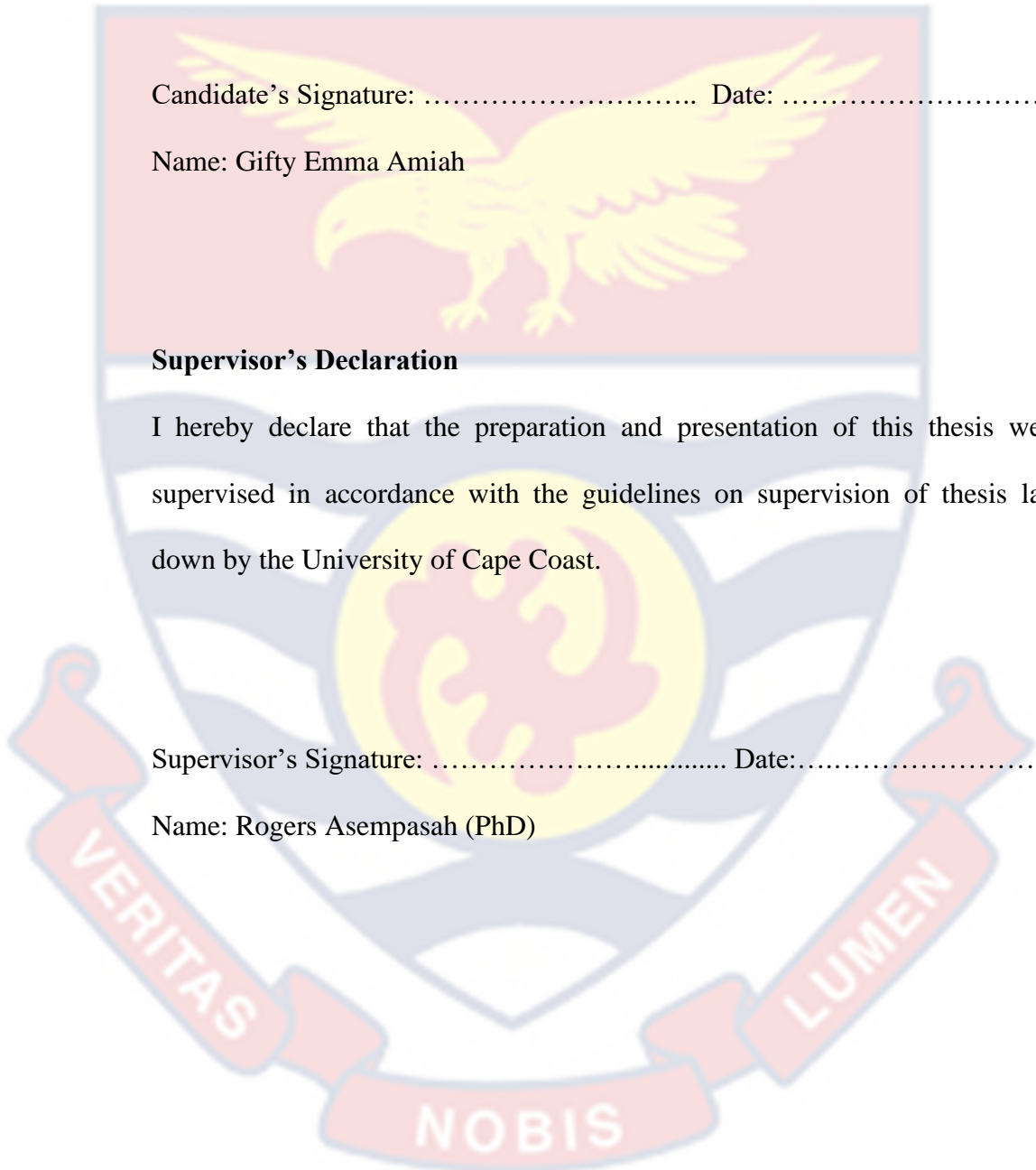
Name: Gifty Emma Amiah

Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast.

Supervisor's Signature: Date:

Name: Rogers Asempasah (PhD)



ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Flora Nwapa and Ayobami Adebayo construct marriage and represent the childless woman in *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Stay With Me*. The characters presented in the selected texts redefine marriage by confronting heterosexual norms and women's socio-political subjectivities in the African context. The thesis, therefore, focuses on how the heroines in these texts catalyse events that (re)define their fate and the fate of other women in the texts. The thesis frames the selected texts as provocative and nonconforming texts that aim at reinterpreting and contesting the conventional idea that the childless married woman is synonymous with failure. In re-reading these texts, the thesis examines how Nwapa and Adebayo explore the restoration of the dignity of the childless woman and the appreciation of her contribution to society. The study found that both Nwapa and Adebayo challenge and contest the cultural representation of the childless woman as a failure by constructing strong, fearless, financially independent, and successful women. The study also found that Adebayo shifts the burden of childlessness from the African woman to the African man by representing Akin as impotent. Furthermore, the study showed that Adebayo subtly proposes the deconstruction of oral narratives as the solution to a genuine African conjugal relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my profound gratitude to Dr. Rogers Asempasah who supervised this work with so much dedication. Thank you, sir, for being there every step of the way; offering your support, your suggestions, critique, and recommendations.

I am also grateful to Dr. Emmanuel Saboro of the Centre for African and International Studies for his encouragement and inspiration. Professor Moussa Traore, thank you for always urging me on. Thank you, sirs!

I am equally grateful to my family and friends for sticking around to encourage me. Rev. Fr. George Atta Baidoo, I am eternally indebted to you. Thank you very much.



DEDICATION

To that one woman who inspired so much confidence in me and pushed me beyond my limits; the late Mrs. Cecilia Wilson Amiah; my mother. I miss you still. To the memory of my late dad; Mr. Emmanuel Kwesi Amiah who left behind a library and a legacy.

To Harrison, Kojo, Nana, Ebo, and Efua - my family. During challenging moments, you have always been the pillars I have leaned on. True love conquers all barriers.

To my supervisor; Dr. Rogers Asempasah. Thank you for being with me every step of the way. Thank you, sir.

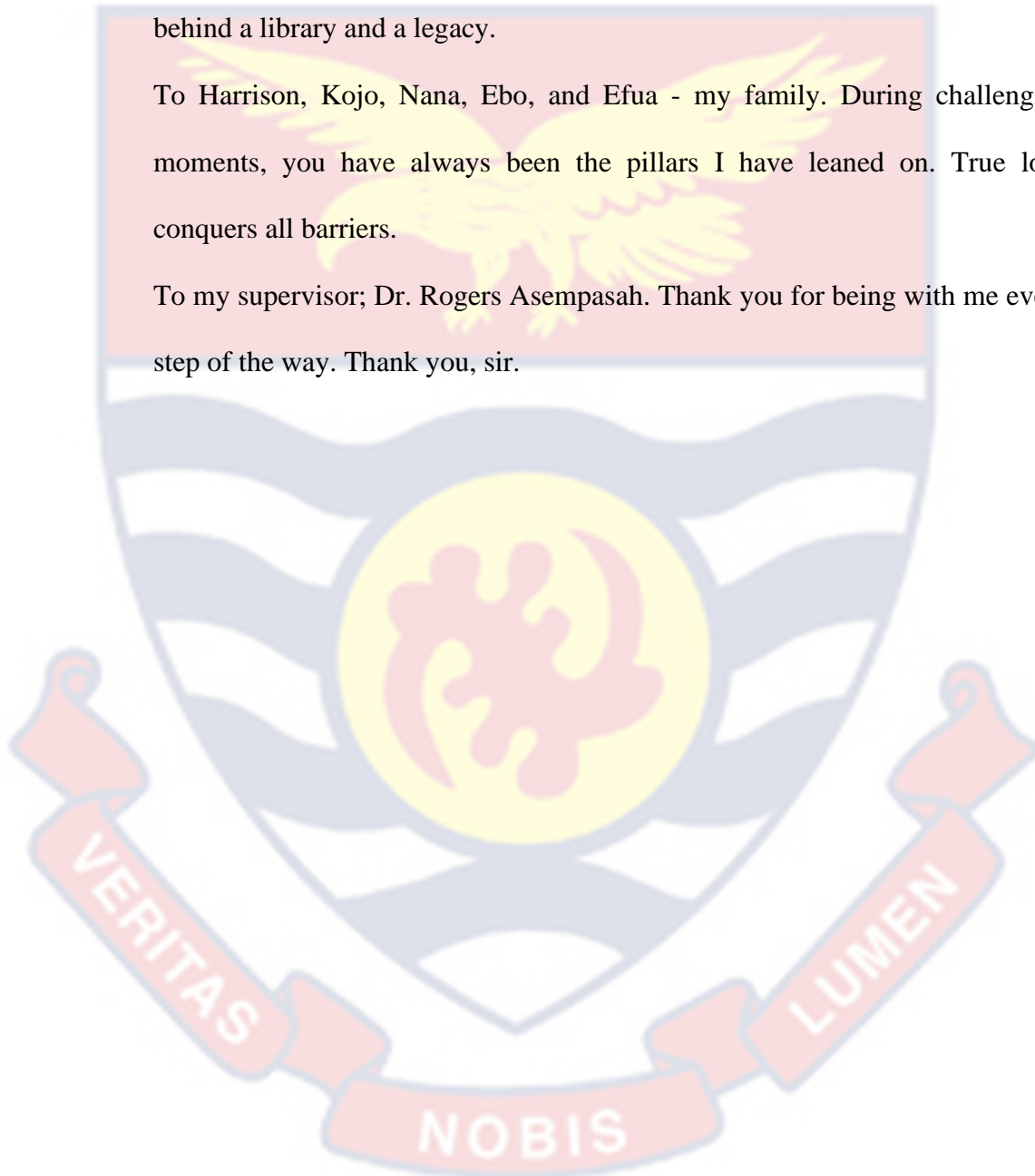


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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Childbirth or procreation is an integral aspect of conjugal practice, especially within the African context. Conjuality can be interpreted to mean all forms of (sexual) intimacies (Brooks, 2005). Broadly conceived, conjuality has to do with marriage and other forms of intimate relationships. According to Brooks (2005), conjuality is “about marriage and other intimate relationships” (p. 2). Broadly, conjuality encompasses weddings, divorce, living together, and same sex relationships (Brooks, p.2). In this thesis, I use conjuality in a rather restrictive sense to mean heterosexual marriage—the representation of conjugal marriage in African literature. More specifically, the thesis focuses on childlessness or barrenness as an important aspect of African conjugal relationships.

Premised on the conception of extending the family’s lineage, most, if not all contracted African marriages are understood conceptually as a procreation institution. Marriage, therefore, makes it possible for procreation to be customarily acceptable in the African context. Moreover, as a ubiquitous practice, marriage – or in its broader sense, conjuality – becomes a “union replete with the vestiges of coverture; it is accomplished through sexual performatives” (Brooks, 2005, p. 56). As a coverture, it is often the case that the male partner, through the influence of the society, hides behind marriage to suppress the woman. This suppression starts from a number of reasons including but not limited to childlessness. It is expected that the aftermath of sexual performatives within a heterosexual African marriage should result in

childbirth. However, in situations where this expectation is not met, the woman or the wife, more often than not becomes the conventional victim of ridicule from society. This has been amply explored in a number of African literary texts such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1970) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

Central to the realities of the childless married African woman is the hurtful bashing she could receive from society. Among other things, childless married couples are often tagged as failures in the African society. Revealingly, studies on gender role perceptions in Africa also suggest and confirm the harsh living realities of the childless married African woman (Azodo & Eke, 2006). These realities of the African woman are more often than not inspired by the strong patriarchal setup of the African setting. This is because, like any other patriarchal setting, much is expected of women, especially the married ones; and this makes them susceptible to all forms of ill-treatment from society (Dyer 2007; Fortes 1978; Hollos and Larsen 2008; Ibisomi and Mudege 2014; Ola 2009). As the thesis will demonstrate later on, prior to the emergence of the first wave of feminism, critical discussions and literary explorations of African marriage or conjugality had not emerged as a significant subject matter; it is precisely within this context that Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* gained prominence. The challenges that confront women, especially childlessness or bareness, in conjugality in Africa has continued to preoccupy many women writers of Africa. Emerging writers like Adebayo bring to the fore new perspectives, nuances, and realities that allow reader to pay attention to the subtle dialogue or continuities and discontinuities that permeate the writings of Africa women writers.

As Ohale (2010) intimates, the image of female characters in both past and contemporary African literature is very deplorable. Underneath this problem is the fact that most often, society denigrates and treats childless women as worthless (Dyer 2007; Fortes 1978; Hollos and Larsen 2008; Ibisomi and Mudege 2014). Moreover, these women are often compelled to leave their homes and live in despondency. They become a laughing stock within the societies they find themselves. This is because, as a pro-natal society, childbirth within the African context is viewed as ensuring or validating the socio-cultural progression of the tribe and the lineage of a family (Nukunya, 2003). Thus, in the conceptualisation of the African family, procreation or childbirth is equated to keeping the ancestral link alive (Acholonu, 2003). The predicament of the woman has not gone unnoticed in African literature. African women literary writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Ayobami Adebayo have all explored the centrality of childlessness and its consequential socio-psychological impact on individuals and the societies at large.

As an issue of relevance and urgency, some African male literary writers and composers have also explore the (mis)conceptions about childlessness in the African setting and its concomitant ramifications. For example, in his debut novel, *A Woman in Her Prime* (1967), Asare Konadu explores societal equation of womanhood to childbirth and motherhood; and the woman's attitude towards such conceptualisation of childlessness as a failure. Similarly, but in different medium, Gyedu-Blay Ambolley, turns the issue of childlessness in the African context upside down in his song, "Adwoa Amissah". In this song, Ambolley subtly critiques societal derision of the

infertile man. In so doing, Ambolley departs from the dominant cultural attitude by suggesting that infertility is also a male problem. All of this points to the fact that the issue of childlessness is still worth reflecting on in the African context. Hence, this thesis seeks to explore Flora Nwapa's and Ayobami Adebayo's representation of conjugality with a specific focus on childlessness in *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Stay with Me*. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, the selected texts, contest the long-held notion that in the African contracted marriage, the childless married African woman is a failure. It is precisely the different ways the three novels critique or challenge socio-cultural norms that are relevant to this thesis.

The African attitude towards childlessness or bareness can be understood within the context of sociocultural emphasis on procreation. In the Igbo worldview, as Seiber and Walker (1987) have observed, "one of the most pervasive concerns of African societies is continuity" (p. 26). Thus, the future of the family, these scholars argue, depends on the ability of the present generation to bear children. Additionally, an individual's sense of social and biological competence lies in his or her ability to become a parent. Thus, it is not surprising to find in "African thought and art ubiquitous emphasis on human fertility" (Seiber & Walker, 1987, p. 28). What we can glean from Seiber and Walker (1987) is that it is the emphasis of the Igbo worldview on fertility that also allows polygamy as men and women seek to ensure the process of continuity of the African family. Moreover, reflecting on the complex and emotive subject of childlessness among African marriages, Wilentz (1992) as well reveals that in African societies, once a marriage fails

to produce a child, it is always often perceived to be the fault of the woman. She is therefore subjected to all forms of indignities.

Childbearing is, therefore, prioritised in marriages above even companionship. Beside the fact that every childless marriage has a thin chance of survival, women appear to be the main objects of the childlessness pressure. Traditionally or culturally, the woman is always blamed whether the cause is from her or not. Childlessness has therefore been the greatest plague that continues to affect the (married) African woman (Morrison, 1999). Contributing to the subject of female subjectivity and childlessness, Chukwuma (1990) asserts that “the female character in African fiction is a facile lackluster human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not ...” (p. 133).

Similarly, affirming Morrison’s (1999) view regarding the issue of fertility and childlessness, Adebayo (2017) has shown that it is the woman who is traditionally held responsible for childlessness. This is evident in the situation where a man takes a second wife without seeking medical proof of his first wife’s barrenness (p. 3). Deductively, it appears to be the case that until this issue of boxing the childless African woman as a failure is radically confronted and contested, it will continue to be a bane that may continuously haunt the African woman. Herein lies the significance of the radical shift and the urgency that Nwapa and Adebayo, through their respective texts, *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Stay with Me*, bring to the sociocultural conception of the childless married (African) woman as a failure.

The childless woman in African literature is predominantly presented as one who does not only face family hatred but also societal derision,

mockery, and isolation. In these representations, the childless woman is considered a monster, a nuisance, a failure, and even a witch or someone who should be dispensed within the family (Akujobi, 2011). In this context, a woman automatically loses her respect, value, and regard, even among her women folks who should be more sympathetic towards her. This is so because in Africa, the prime expectation of every family is procreation. For this reason, childlessness becomes an everlasting stigma. This stigma shatters the woman's joy and renders her hopeless in the family where she is meant to attain fulfillment as a wife. In this regard, the anthropologist, Sarpong (1974) has argued that a childless woman has no place in the African society. He adds that:

“motherhood is the principal if not the ultimate end of a marriage. Fertility for the girl is, therefore, crucial especially in matrimonial societies, as it will ensure that the society will not die out. Bareness then is the greatest calamity that can affect an African woman” (p. 69).

Ruthven (1988), however, seems to disagree with Sarpong (1974) when he says:

“[i]f you want to change the way people think of women... you must first discourage the habit of defining women as an essence whose nature is determined biologically and whose sole identity is to reproduce. For that is precisely the ideology that makes women feel it is somewhat unnatural for them to place any activity above their reproductive role” (p. 36).

In contributing to this very issue of childlessness, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) subtly articulates the idea that the childless woman is considered a failed woman. She is quoted to have said that "[t]he Ibuza tradition defines womanhood by the ability to bear children" (p. 45). The novel seems to suggest that within the context of the African society, childbearing is the main marker of a successful maternal life. Thus, childbearing is the main activity that promotes the continuity of marriage between couples. Having children is a means of fulfilling a dream of being remembered after death; and presumptuously, a woman without a child is worthless. Having children in Africa is therefore seen as proof of manhood and womanhood (Seiber & Walker, 1987). However, it is important to stress that the central merit of *The Joys of Motherhood* is its refutation of the traditional myth that there is a correlation between a woman's joy in marriage and having children.

Essentially, childless women have had their fair share of maltreatment for a long time in African fiction. Thus, there has been and continues to be a proliferation of the predicaments of the childless African woman in a number of African creative works. For instance, Osofisan (2006) in *Wuraola Forever* demonstrates that a childless woman is nothing but a monster and as such, she is treated with so much disdain; and considered as a nuisance in her society. This is manifested in the cruel humiliating treatment meted out to Wura, the heroine of the novel simply because she is unable to bear a child for her husband. Through the ugly experiences of female characters on account of their childlessness, some African writers, especially female African writers have satirised the forces of oppression and injustice that enslave women in

Africa. These writers have persistently called for fair humane treatment for all women.

Statement of the Problem

The childless African woman as a failure is a recurrent theme explored in a number of African literary works. Marriage or issues related to conjugality have therefore dominated African literature. African feminists and women writers have variously contested the entrenchment of male-dominated cultural practices and ideologies that position women as peripheral subjects. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981), Buchi Emecheta *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017) have the distinction of putting African women's everyday struggles, experiences, and desires at the centre of creative writing. These selected texts have generated a significant number of critical responses.

Studies on Nwapa and Adebayo have tended to focus on women's solidarity as ways that contest male values and the rejection of male subordination (Azodo, 1998; Berrian, 1982); the plight of women within a complex interplay of marriage, tradition and superstition (Tambari, 2014); women and culture (Ahmed, 2012); women's resilience and the politics of survival (Mears, 2009); and masculinity in feminine writing (Ikonne, 1984). Osinubu (2014), however, departs from the trend to examine women, slavery, and African slavery networks in *Efuru*. Various studies have also pointed to the ways in which Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* rewrites Nwapa's *Efuru* (Larrier 1997). While these studies show that *Efuru*, *One is Enough*, and *Stay with Me* are complex explorations of women's solidarity and empowerment, history, and socio-cultural practices, an analysis of the

different ways the three novels contest childlessness as a woman problem has not been explored. As a result, the ways in which *Stay with Me* can be read as a rewriting of Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough* has gone unexamined. This thesis, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining the representation of the childless woman within the broader context of conjugality in Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough* and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of the childless woman within the context of heterosexual conjugality in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, and *One is Enough*, and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me*. The overall aim is to show how these novels contest the socio-cultural representation of the childless woman as a failure. It is also to show that Adebayo's text offers a radical rethinking of Nwapa's solution to the plight of the childless African woman.

Delimitation

The study mainly focuses on Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, *One is Enough*, and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. It reflects on how the heroines in these novels who are childless are represented by the authors in different ways and how these representations of conjugality and childlessness enable us to read the authors as social thinkers.

Research Questions

1. In what way is the childless woman (re)presented in Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981)?

2. How does Adebayo's *Stay with Me* rewrite and contest childlessness in Nwapa's *Efuru*?

Justification for the Choice of Texts

The three primary literary texts used in this study are Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), and *One is Enough* (1981) and Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017). These texts were purposively selected based on two criteria. First, both texts are written by women; second, both texts were written in different socio-cultural and historical periods. Even though set in two different African cultural contexts – Igbo context for Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* and Yoruba context for Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017) – the texts show, that first, the representation of conjugality has evolved in the African context and second, that there is a new sense of interpreting childlessness in marriage in the African context.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study can be looked at from four perspectives. Broadly the study contributes to the scholarship on the representation of childlessness in African literature. Specifically, it contributes to understanding the different ways Nwapa and Adebayo contest socio-cultural norms and suggest alternative ways of being or community. Also, it serves as reference material for understanding the phenomenon of how African women writers reimagine or rewrite and even challenge ideas put forth by their predecessors. In this way, the study contributes to the scholarship on intertextuality or influence in African literature. Finally, the study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between literature and society.

Methodology

The work is broadly located within the qualitative research paradigm. Specifically, the study adopts the textual analysis approach. This approach allows the researcher to undertake a close reading and analysis of aspects of the text that deal with the representation of childlessness. It also helps in making deductive reflections on the selected texts by specifically helping in answering the research questions. Nwapa's *Efuru*, and *One is Enough*, and Adebayo's *Stay With Me* are the primary sources of data. The analysis is done based on excerpts from the selected texts that respond to the research questions. These analyses are guided by the theoretical framework adopted for the work. As a scholarly enterprise, the study draws on secondary materials such as literary texts, scholarly books, and articles that have a bearing on the research objectives and analysis.

Biography of Flora Nwapa

Flora Nwapa was born in January 1931 in Oguta, Imo State, Eastern Nigeria. She had her early education in Oguta, Port Harcourt in Lagos. She had her college education at the University of Ibadan and continued at the University of Edinburg, United Kingdom. According to Chukwuma (2002), Nwapa's writing interest was in women; and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaging image of women in male authored novels.

Flora Nwapa has several literary works to her credit and notable among them are *Efuru* (1966), *Never Again* (1975), *One is Enough* (1981) and *Women are Different* (1986). Through her works, Nwapa has sought to challenge the narrative of African male authors whose works were full of

stereotypes about the African woman. Her works are directly opposite to that of her male counterparts. She tells success stories of African women.

Nwapa's novel, *Efuru*, for instance, challenges the traditional portrayal of an African woman who must always live under the shadows of a man because she is perceived as docile, submissive, and unproductive. This novel portrays a woman who empowers herself enough to financially support herself and other people. *Efuru*, the eponymous protagonist female character in the novel breaks anti-feminist stereotypes of the African tradition by showing that she has a mind of her own. She does what she feels is right rather than give in to the demands of society.

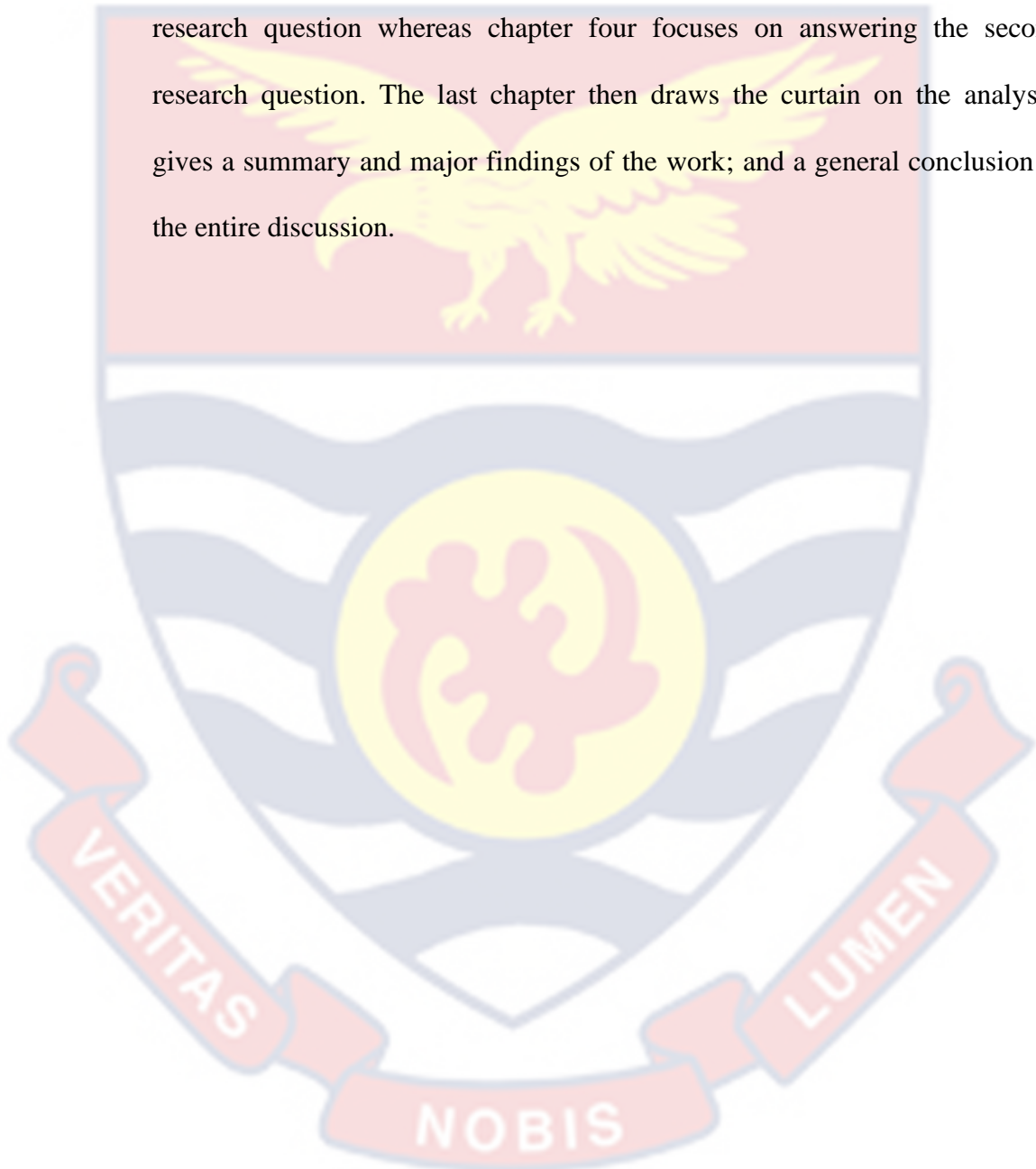
Biography of Ayobami Adebayo

Born to a middle-class Nigerian Yoruba parents, Ayobami Adebayo is a Nigerian writer who was born and raised in Lagos. After her undergraduate degree, she went to the University of East Anglia for an MFA degree. This was a step for her to get closer to her writing dreams. Described by many literary critics as one of the trailblazers of the new school of African literary writers, Ayobami Adebayo came to the literary limelight with her novel, *Stay With Me*, first published in 2017. She has as well written and published other novels and poetry collections including *Spent Lives* (2019) and *A Spell of Good Things* (2023). Prevalent in Ayobami Adebayo's works are the issues of love and loss. These critical issues are at the centre of the thematic issues in her debut, *Stay with Me*.

Organisation of the Study

The study is organised in five chapters. The first chapter introduces the subject of the thesis. It covers the introduction, background to the study, thesis

statement, purpose of the study, significance of the study, delimitation, methodology and organisation of the study. Chapter two reviews the existing literature on childlessness, critical reception of the selected texts, and explains the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter three answers the first research question whereas chapter four focuses on answering the second research question. The last chapter then draws the curtain on the analysis, gives a summary and major findings of the work; and a general conclusion to the entire discussion.



CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews related literature central to the thesis and also the theoretical framework for this work. The first part, a review of related literature, is further divided into subsections. The first subsection reviews literature on childlessness in the African setting. The second subsection focuses on the critical reception of Nwapa's novels, *Efuru* (1966), and *One is Enough* and Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017). The last major part of the chapter focuses on the theoretical framework which guides the study.

General Review on Childlessness in African Literature

The theme of childlessness in marriage is not new, especially, in African literary works. It is prevalent in African literature. Due to its urgency and sensitivity, childlessness remains a central issue in almost every African literary work; and the available literature suggest this. It is worth mentioning at the outset that, even though the issue is recurrent in the literary works, in this section, I engage with only the critical materials on this issue.

In her article 'African Motherhood: Myth and Reality', Ngcobo (1988) explores the idea of motherhood in the African context. She contends that in the African setting, "every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group" (p. 533). This suggests that motherhood is critical in the African traditional society and that there is no worse misfortune for a woman than being childless. Thus, a barren woman is seen as incomplete; she is what Mbiti

(1970) calls the “dead-end of human life, not only for genealogical level but also for herself” (p. 144). This shows that childbirth stands out as the main and primary objective of marriage in Africa. Once the African couple come together as husband and wife, the next thing to expect is pregnancy. Ultimately, Laretta Ngcobo appears to suggest that motherhood is defined in the African context on the basis of the woman’s reproductive ability. Thus, the ultimate aim of marriage is for the woman to bear children. She concludes that societal expectation from the married African woman to give birth is by no means a myth but a reality that dawns on the African woman once she gets married.

The merit of Ngcobo’s (1988) analysis lies in the reality of what seems to be the case in the African setting even though she appears to present a heterogeneous African setting as though it was a homogenous one. Significantly, however, Ngcobo’s (1988) argument supports the existing patriarchal normativity; that, the African woman is bound to give birth once she is married. This means that a rule is always already set for the African woman and when she departs from this sociocultural expectation or rule, she then falls into an already-defined identity of a “failure”. However, despite the issue of childlessness in the African setting being a reality, it does not in any way seem to suggest that the childless married African woman is a failure. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate with evidence, Flora Nwapa and Ayobami Adebayo strongly contest the position that the childless married African woman is a failure in their respective texts, *Efuru* (1966) *One is Enough* (1981), and *Stay With Me* (2017).

Emphasising the primacy of procreation as a prerequisite in African marriages, Gbaguidi, Dadja-Tiou and Gade (2022), quote Jomo Kenyatta thus: “the desire to have children is deep-rooted in the heart of both the man and the woman and on entering into matrimonial union, they regard the procreation of children as their first and most sacred duty” (p.67). Ngcobo (1988) again submits to this notion 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 to express her womanhood to the full” (p. 22). From this perspective, childbearing appears to be the sole responsibility of the woman. Ironically, the role of the man in this procreation process appears silenced.

There are critics who struggle with understanding Nwapa’s portrayal of women and the peculiar non-traditional roles she often assigns them, putting them at the crossroads of modernity and change. Others argue that Nwapa gives her women characters too much liberty, and too many choices and makes them too liberated to fit into their traditional Igbo society. Those who question her process of characterisation as well as her character portrayal argue that all Nwapa succeeds in doing is creating women who are responsible for communal and individual chaos (Frank, 1987; Palmer, 1972). Clearly, these critics demonstrate their lack of understanding of the literary agenda of this renowned writer. Her literary agenda was that of creating ordinary people in any normal society.

The characters created by Nwapa are not responsible for either communal or individual chaos. They are just ordinary people going about their day-to-day businesses. In his review of *Efuru*, for instance, Palmer (1972)

writes: “Flora Nwapa’s novel leaves the reader with the impression that its author has not mastered her craft. It lacks the fluency, effortless and economy of *Concubine*. It is too obvious a first novel” (p. 57). Palmer goes on to say that in parts, *Efuru* reads like a sociological treatise of the Igbo people and not a work of art (p. 60). It is the inclusion of unnecessary sociological details and the omission of significant ones that, according to Palmer, points to Nwapa’s ‘amateurism’ as a novelist. Palmer (1972) continues to say that Nwapa should have consulted renowned male writers like Chinua Achebe to see how they use artistry to make their works realistic.

It is clear that Palmer (1972) does not like Nwapa’s narrative skills because it contains so much “sociological content”. Stratton points out, however, that Palmer sees so many deficiencies in Nwapa’s work. Stratton claims that the review of works by men and women is influenced by patriarchal thought patterns. According to Jones (1968), “Flora Nwapa’s novels inform readers about Igbo village life while Amadi’s center on human nature. The gap is indeed wide.” Jones goes on to say that: “Amadi succeeds in conveying “the feeling of the Igbo community” because he uses the right proverbs and idioms whereas Nwapa fails because her ideas are full of small talks, and there are too many details” (p. 19).

Other critics like Susan Andrade and Lloyd Brown even emphasize the effect that colonialism and Western influence have had on African art. They see Nwapa’s works as very important in understanding African culture. Ojo-Ade (1983) for instance sees in African writers a male centered and chauvinistic art in which colonialism has energised traditional views that portray the male as the master and the woman as the flower, not the worker.

He sees colonial influences as the “trappings of capitalism”, Christian hypocrisy and civilised charlatanism” (p.164). Ojo-Ade also notes that women face many problems. He argues that women’s voices must be recognised and their roles in the struggle to decolonize must not be overlooked.

This presumptuous gender role in raising the African family are not just problematic but deliberate ways of apportioning blame to the woman who appears to be the other in a pro-natal patriarchal setup. Thus, if every (married) woman is encouraged to give birth to demonstrate her womanhood, then her unwilful inability to perform this single act as society demands becomes a pre-condition for her to be referred to as a failure of sorts in the society. This presupposes that the reason for marriage is primarily for procreation and therefore, children are the determinant variable(s) for the *motherness* of a woman in the African family. So, if the woman subverts this expectation deliberately or intentionally, then she is a failure. But contrary to this, and as this thesis will demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, the motherless woman is not a failure. She may appear *to be failing* – even though childbearing is a combined responsibility of both the man and the woman – but she is often likely to be succeeding in other aspects of her life.

Furthermore, the pivotal position of children in Igbo conjugality and especially for the woman has been stressed by Obianuju (2009). According to Obianuju “the birth of a child is a practical vindication of her womanhood. Children are the pride of their parents, a joy and inspiration in the family and the essence or foundation to every union”.

It can be deduced that children make their parents fulfilled in the African home. However, inherent in the fulfilment that children bring to their

mothers is the confirmation that children are the other parts that arrive to complete the *motherness* of a woman. Even though children add value and fulfilment to marriages such that childless situations in marriages constitute the bane of marital unrest, the point must be made that married women contribute to society in general and the family, in diverse ways. Therefore, it may not always be the case that the childless mother in the African family is a failure.

Furthermore, the role of women and feminine identity has been historically and traditionally constructed around motherhood. Childbirth is thus regarded as the rebirth of the woman. This is because it gives the feeling of being complete to both the woman and the man. For instance, while demonstrating the place children occupy in the life of a couple and the significance of marriage among Igbos, Agbo (2016) remarks that “the position of a wife in her husband’s family remains shaky and unpredictable until she begets a child...At the initial stage, she is especially welcome as a responsible wife in her husband’s extended family...” (p. 29). This observation, among other things, confirms again the seemingly skewed definition of who the African woman is. even though Agbo speaks within the context of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Her claim could be seen as an extension of the everyday misconstrued idea held about the African woman in general.

Furthermore, Chukwuma (1989) in her article, *Writing on positivism and female crisis: The novel of Buchi Emecheta*, affirms that in marriages, women attain the status worth of womanhood and come to be respected by society, but childlessness in marriages constitute the bane of their happiness. She further intimates that often, women are blamed and despised for not

giving birth for their husbands. In the African milieu, therefore, childless women are not only jeered at but are made to believe that they do not belong to the womenfolk.

According to Dyer et al. (2002), in their article, *Women's experiences with involuntary childlessness*, "all the infertile women experience negative social consequences including marital instability, abuse and stigmatization" (p. 6). They go on to say that infertility can have a serious effect on both the psychological well-being and social status of the woman. This notion is manifested in the life of Nnu Ego in Emecheta's (1976) *The Joys of Motherhood* where Nnu is deprived of every comfort and peace in her first marriage to Amatokuu simply because she is unable to have children. Her ugly experiences at Amatokuu's house make her submit to Nnaifi, her second husband, who eventually makes her a mother. Though she has no love for Nnaifi her husband, the marriage lasts because he is the man that makes her to attain the status which accords honour to a woman in a society. When she fails to have children, "she worries about how she is failing everybody: her husband, her own relatives and in-laws" (p. 29). Chukwuma (1989) further demonstrates that the true test of the woman continues to be the institution of marriage; but by far, the greatest test for a married woman is bearing children. She claims that the entire life of a woman depends on it. This is in sync with the projected idea of childbearing in Ama Ata Aidoo's short story, *The Girl Who Can*.

In Aidoo's collection of short stories, *The Girl Who Can*, Nana appears to be in favour of Chukwuma's (1989) assertion. In the story, Nana believes that the duty of every woman in marriage is to reproduce children. That is why

she expresses so much fear about her granddaughter's thin legs which she thinks will not support the hips that make babies. She exclaims,

“if any woman decides to come into this world with all of her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them; with good calves. Because such legs will support solid hips ... to be able to have children” (p.13).

Nana who knows the consequences of childlessness is worried even before her granddaughter gets married. Similarly, in Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, Ekwefi, among the wives of Okonkwo, is the only one living in agony and disdain because she is childless.

From all these accounts, we cannot but agree with Chukwuma (1989) that the “woman in the cultural context achieves status through marriage and becomes fulfilled through motherhood” (p. 133). As this study will show, however, Flora Nwapa and Ayobami Adebayo suggest something revolutionary. In their respective texts, *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Stay With Me*, their posture towards societal definition of womanhood and motherhood through children is in contradiction with what society obviously believes and teaches. In these texts, Nwapa and Adebayo redefine the married African woman by contesting the long-held notion that the childless African woman is a failure.

Critical Reception on Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966)

Considered as one of the canonical texts in African literature, Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) has received significant critical attention. The scholarly literature has largely focused on women's solidarity and empowerment, tradition and

modernity, masculinity, Igbo cosmology, slavery, domestic violence, eco-feminism among others.

In “Nwapa's *Efuru* and Toxic Masculinity in Igbo Nigerian Society,” Anidi (2022) examines the toxic masculine predispositions of the male characters in the text. Specifically, she examines how as a representation of the larger Igbo society, the lead male characters in the text – Adizua and Gilbert – through their characterizations, demonstrate as well as perform toxic masculinity. For Anidi, the predominantly patriarchal setup of the Igbo society sets the foundation for these males to perform their masculine roles which she defines as toxic. Based on Harrington's (2021) explanation of toxic masculinity, Anidi (2022) claims that the male lead characters in *Efuru* were underachievers as compared to the eponymous character, Efuru; hence, they performed toxic masculinity. Anidi explains toxic masculinity as the “harmful behaviours in men which are not only damaging to the men, but damaging too to the women, children and family in the men's lives” (p. 11).

Anidi further claims that the two successive husbands of Efuru were steeped in performing masculinity. Thus, both Adizua and Gilbert (Eneberi) could not stay with Efuru not because she was a failure in her attempt to give birth for them. On the contrary, both men, unlike Okonkwo in Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, were unsuccessful farmers; hence, their reluctance to stay with her as a wife. Even though Anidi discusses all the male characters in the text as toxic masculine figures, she appears to give a caveat that Ogene, Efuru's father, was a “a man of valor”. She therefore concludes that the attitudes of Adizua and Gilbert towards Efuru are indications of their

performance of toxic masculinity. Thus, they are underachievers and their male ego could not take it; hence, their inability to stay with Efurū.

From this insight that Anidi (2022) provides from Nwapa's *Efurū*, it can be gleaned that Efurū is not a failure at all as her society paints her. Instead, her inability to give birth for her second husband (Gilbert) is, perhaps, a way of demonstrating to the society that the woman is more than just a baby producing machine in the African setting. It is worth reiterating that this thesis is in no way an attempt to devalue the importance of childbearing in the African setting; rather, it seeks to demonstrate that Flora Nwapa shows in her text, *Efurū* that the childless married African woman is not a failure. She is definitely a success in performing other roles in the African family. This ultimately becomes a contestatory voice against childlessness in marriage as a shame.

Ojedoja (2018) adds a significant dimension to the critical reception of *Efurū*. In "An Eco-feminist Study of Nwapa's *Efurū*," Ojedoja specifically pays attention to the contribution of *Efurū* towards the ecological consciousness in Africa and African literature. Ojedoja claims that humans' treatment of nature is equivalent to how humans treat one another. Thus, as a feminist-inclined text, the argument is that the male characters' attitude towards the female characters in *Efurū* could be understood as a reflection of how they treat nature. Therefore, he discusses the people's relationship as well as their attitude towards the deity of the Uhamiri Lake in the text. The deity in this lake is revered as a female goddess who is symbolic of beauty and reproduction even though she has no child. Ojedoja's (2018) conclusion is that as an eco-feminist text, even though the Uhamiri Lake deity does not have a

child, she is not impotent or a failure in the eyes of the community and therefore, her motherliness is not defined on the premise of having a child. However, her motherliness is premised on the fact that, among other things, she is potent enough "...to give women beauty and wealth".

Beyond the eco-feminist insight Ojedoja (2018) gives from Nwapa's *Efuru*, he covertly hints at a redefinition of motherhood in the African setting, a perspective that is still lacking in the literature on Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. This is important because there is a lack of radical shift from defining and tagging who the failed woman is within the African family structure. This dearth of knowledge is worth exploring because it provides an alternative means of understanding the larger role of the woman within the African family system. Moreover, it will be an addition to our growing understanding of the connection between literary works and society.

Similarly, Hogan (1999) argues that *Efuru* is an unusually powerful exploration of women's tradition on the sources of women's strength, autonomy, and security in the Igbo society. Hogan (1999) indicates that Nwapa disentangles the strands of Igbo customs, isolating what is patriarchal and what is anti-patriarchal, what is masculinist and what is feminist. What this means, therefore, is that Nwapa in her fiction is not demanding for equality; but what is deserving of the woman must be due her, and this is herein referred to as the quest for equity.

On the other hand, Nnaemeka (1995) is of the view that Nwapa's novels are truly feminist novels because the protagonists exercise their feminism within the constraints or the dictates of the culture. Here, there is a demonstration of 'womanism' where the eponymous character in *Efuru* does

not downplay what tradition demands while fulfilling her personal interest as a woman who wishes to get married to the man she truly loves. She does not consider herself properly married until they work hard and her bride price is paid to her father and his people. She sets boundaries between her personal achievements and the demands of the culture. This is what makes Nwapa's novels a truly African feminist piece.

Tobalese (2002) also expresses a similar view as Hogan (1999) when he shows how Nwapa depicts masculinity in *Efuru*. This, Tobalese says is done with the view of appraising the representation of different types of masculinity or patriarchy in terms of sexist notions of power, emotion, and poverty. According to Tobalese (2002) therefore, what Nwapa seeks to achieve in *Efuru* is to simply create a self-opinionated female character and promote female freedom of some sort. Providing further insight into Nwapa's first novel, *Efuru*, Hogan (1999) suggests that patriarchy is neither a matter of tradition nor modernity; it is also not a matter of some character flaw in men or women but a practical domination found in all cultures across Africa and the world. Hogan (1999) further suggests that *Efuru* provides an analysis of Igbo tradition which he contends is parallel to patriarchal norms. He concludes that Nwapa analyses Igbo culture and patriarchal norms in a lucid, and in many ways, an inspiring manner.

In a similar argument, Arndt (2002) puts up the argument that *Efuru* offers a partial criticism of the gender and power structures of Igbo society. For one thing, Arndt claims, "the criminalisation of the free choice of a partner is criticised, for another, the belief that womanhood is defined by wife and motherhood is challenged" (p. 101). It is plausible for the single woman to be

truly happy and fulfilled in other ways. However, leaving the issues of childlessness and the definition of motherhood as peripheral issues rather complicates our understanding of the very details and the ramifications associated with how we conceive the idea of who the woman is within the African family. Thus, interpreting *Efuru* as just a presentation of the culture of the Igbo people does little to help our full and better understanding of the text. Essentially, and as this thesis shows subsequently, *Efuru* goes beyond the presentation of the culture of the Igbo people of Nigeria to re-present as well as contest the patriarchal influenced ideology that the childless African woman is a failure.

Another central critical perspective to Nwapa's *Efuru* is the historical-mythological understanding we could glean from it. The belief in deities and spirits is a very important part of most African traditional systems; most especially in the Igbo land, in spite of the over hundred and fifty years of the presence of Christianity in the region (Asogwa, 2008). It is no wonder then that Nwapa presents the Igbo people as having strong beliefs in the activities of deities and spirits in her novel *Efuru*. In their article, *Uhamiri Deity and Women: A Study of Nwapa's Efuru and Idu*, Mohammed and Usman (2018) claim that the female deity is depicted in the novels as participating in the day to day activities of women. Since this supernatural deity is able to participate in the activities of women, she is able to inflict pain through the act of oppression on her followers. They suggest that gods and goddesses in the African setting in general and in Igbo land, in particular, are potent and influential in the everyday activities of their worshippers. It is, therefore, no

wonder then when Ogunyemi (1998) refers to the goddess in *Efuru* as an example and a mentor to victimize women.

Mohammed & Usman (2018) further assert that when a woman is unable to bear a child, other members of the community, especially women, deride and victimize her. The misery and humiliation that such women often endure are better imagined. They add that in *Efuru*, Uhamiri occupies an important position that is not comparable to any human since she is in a position to know the future. It is in this light that Taiwo (1984) refers to this deity as “an omnipresent god who directs the affairs of women” (p. 56). They conclude that the closing paragraph of the novel reiterates Nwapa’s ambivalence about how a childless woman is treated in a traditional Igbo culture. Mohammed and Usman’s (2018) analysis, however, leaves the text inconclusive. Thus, it begs the question of why women continue to worship Uhamiri when she herself has no children and inflicts pain on her worshippers. Contrary to Mohammed and Usman’s (2018) argument, the efficacy as well as the symbolic representation of Uhamiri, the goddess in *Efuru*, could be reinterpreted as a subversive trope to the idea that the childless woman is a failed woman. This way, Nwapa’s characterisation of Efuru through the goddess becomes more meaningful. This is because, if the text is to be read as a feminist text, then it is appropriate to interpret it as an empowerment of sorts for the potency and agency that the female has.

Furthermore, Theodora Ezeigbo, in *Myth, History, Culture and Igbo women in Flora Nwapa Novels* (1998), has a different view of the lake goddess. Ezeigbo (1998) notes that the worshippers of Uhamiri are both males and females, but Nwapa has modified this practice in her novel allowing only

women to function as devotees and worshippers of the deity. Uhamiri, in *Efuru*, is described as an Oguta woman par excellence, who embodies the best qualities of Oguta womanhood; being beautiful, rich, assertive, independent, hard-working and married. The modification allows Nwapa to empower women and uplift them.

Ezeigbo (1998), however, argues that the deconstruction and (re)construction of the Uhamiri myth allows Nwapa to create and remodel the goddess to achieve the purpose of exploring female existence in her cultural tradition. Ezeigbo's critique of Nwapa's deliberate attempt to plot the narrative of *Efuru* to suit her feminist agenda is not all that incriminating. Contrary to what it may superficially suggest, Ezeigbo's contestation presents a rather subtle alternative means of repositioning the woman in the African setting. Thus, the female deity—Uhamiri—who wields enormous power in the Igbo setting becomes the medium through whom Nwapa contests the idea that the childless woman is a failure. In other words, Uhamiri becomes the archetypal figure through whom Nwapa redefines womanhood within the African setting. However, as the analysis of *Stay With Me* will show, it is precisely this unquestioning dependence on orality that Adebayo contests.

Another important contribution to our understanding of *Efuru* is provided by Ogunyemi (1996). In *The Nigerian Novels by Women*, she explains the dominant concern in Nwapa's novels as communal or national transformation; the liberation of all people from attitudes and practices that retard growth, and the use of the released energies for social and spiritual development. She claims the muted, who is often the female, operates on a personal level, and is specifically gender-oriented. Ogunyemi's thrust is

the role of women in the family. She concentrates on the disabling gender arrangements that prevent women from performing optimally in the private as well as the public spheres. She further adds that the literary concerns of Nwapa are interwoven as the personal merges with the public in communally-oriented cultures where boundaries are not sharply defined.

Ogunyemi (1996) concludes that the person must, therefore, be liberated to enhance development in the public arena. As a novelist, Ogunyemi continues, Nwapa re-presents her public (cultural/communal) and personal (gender) issues through oral tradition and religious belief in the river goddess, *Uhamiri*. She presents the religious or mythic belief in the lake goddess as a model for female empowerment and communal transformation. That is, the river goddess wields immense spiritual power, and symbolises the elemental storm in male/female relationships. The river goddess as well symbolises the candour, humility, and economic independence of African women. She “douse(s) all the insidious flames of the filth fire which, left alone, will establish new heaps of rubble for future generations” (p. 339). She also represents an external conflict implicit in the marriage institution of patriarchal societies.

Furthermore, Ogunyemi reflects on the artistic and socio-cultural relevance of *Efuru*. In *The Invalid, Dea(r)th, and the Author: The Case of Flora Nwapa*, Ogunyemi (1995) comments on Nwapa’s artistic search for relevance through cosmic belief and practices. According to Ogunyemi, Nwapa, through *Efuru*, carves a feminine space out of this cultural imagery by placing the female water deity known as the “Woman of the Lake” or “Mammy Water” (*Uhamiri*) at its centre in order to resolve the female identity

conflict. Also, Uhamiri's mystical and complicated relationship with her irascible husband, *Urashi*, is built up controversially around gender relationships and is transported into a national and literary discourse. It is in this line of reasoning or reflection that novels of African women are interpreted at two levels: the dominant (national) and muted (personal). Again, Ogunyemi (1995) posits that the novel, *Efuru* focuses on developing selfhood and finding empowerment through mothering in the community, but the novel has two parts; the first part concerns an individual woman trying to make herself useful and independent in the society.

In a comparative appraisal of Amadi's *Concubine* and Nwapa's *Efuru*, Palmer (1972) also observes that, having been chosen by the goddess of the lake as one of her worshippers, Efuru will be rich, but will not have children. Palmer concludes that Efuru will end where she begins – in her father's house – except that her father is dead. She is childless, husbandless and fatherless. In his reading, Efuru's predicament was already a predestined one; a situation where her fate is synonymous to that of the lake goddess, Uhamiri. Palmer, therefore, claims that Efuru's condition is made possible by Uhamiri's evil qualities and the victimisation of women. Shockingly, Palmer's essay appears to only confirm the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance over females in the African setting. Beyond what Palmer (1972) might have not reflected on, the African woman, for instance, who through no fault of hers, cannot bear a child is not doomed or accursed by fate which may subsequently be the premise for her to be tagged as a failure by the society. Instead, the goddess' choice of Efuru to serve her, as Palmer (1972) claims, could be rather re-interpreted as a covert way of drawing the society's attention to the fact that the childless

African woman is still not a failure. In other words, if the society finds nothing wrong with worshipping a childless Uhamiri, why fault Efuru for not having Children?

Apart from the thematic issues, other scholars and critics have focused on character analysis and characterization in *Efuru*. Nnaemeka (1995), for instance, refers to Nwapa's heroines as reformers, and not rebels. This is because she perceives them as negotiating choices within the context of their culture; and since women have been the primary focus of her literary journey, they become central in her texts. Based on this feminist background to Nwapa's texts, Nnaemeka claims that the women in Nwapa's text are presented in such a way that they are able to succeed when they manage to negotiate their way within the complex African cultural space. Specifically, she claims that in *Efuru*, as the story unfolds, Efuru is able to maintain her respect in society even though she is childless. She argues that Efuru does not live her life pitying herself. Rather, she moves on, despite her two unsuccessful marriages, to do things that benefit the society within which she finds herself. Despite the simplicity with which Nnaemeka (1995) presents the issue that Nwapa engages with, she gives room for a complication of these seemingly simple issues.

In his article, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Practical Resistance and Reform of Culture in Nwapa's Efuru*, Lu (2019) also discusses Nwapa's novel with an intent to critique the idea of tradition and modernity within the Igbo setup. Using *Efuru* as a counter example, Lu (2019) shows the ways in which Nwapa's text, by narrating the life of the common Igbo woman, enables the reading of women in her culture as active agents of change. Nwapa's

representation of Igbo women's agency, seen clearly in the protagonist, Efuru's pragmatic resistance of her constraining condition, is what elevates the texts to a universal relevance that transcends the modernity paradigm. In Lu's view, *Efuru* is a female Bildungsroman – a woman's change and growth from subjugation to a reasonable way of life that is suitable and comfortable. Efuru gives a voice to women, and contributes to an ongoing change in women's culture. Efuru, according to Lu (2019), represents the complex realities facing women at the time in which the book is set, and explores possible ways to respond to them. The growth of Efuru is an in-depth study of womanhood. Her development occurs both in physical as well as psychological spheres where she looks for self-actualisation. Efuru thus, begins her journey by accepting the traditional roles that define the woman's identity and gradually moves towards ways of defining a sense of self. But finally, she stands on her own, and keeps her individuality outside the experiences of wifehood and motherhood.

Osinubu (2014), however, departs from the usual trend in the literature on *Efuru*. He examines women slavery and African slaving networks in *Efuru*. The paper illuminates neglected connections between women's subordination and the dispersed meta-system of enslavement and dependency in *Efuru*. Thus, the paper departs slightly from the existing criticism of women solidarity by situating *Efuru* in a genealogy of West African fiction on the relation between Atlantic African slaving systems, family sagas and communities' histories which locate women within an Atlantic world system undertaken by colonialism.

Osinubu (2014) reads *Efuru* as a dialogue in which the author deploys strategies of indirection in order to narrate the disrupted historical relations of the lost Atlantic spheres in which Atlantic and domestic African slaveries were *worlded*. Such indirection, in turn, responds to the chagrin of African implication in Atlantic network. Osinubu claims that the relation delineated between the past and present slavery in *Efuru* applies to the relational dependencies of women. That is, Efuru fails in her attempt to secure a niche with the right of the first wife within the patriarchal system but succeeds within the emerging capitalist order. The outcome of her success and her failure reveals a differential and joint constraint imposed by the patriarchal social order in its capitalist claim on women.

Osinubu emphasises that though the novel is often read as a narrative of women solidarity, it actually expresses the potential and the limits of women's agency. It introduces a perspective on women's location and implication within the Atlantic world during the long transition from the slave trade to colonisation. Above all, Osinubu claims that *Efuru* uses feminist historical knowledge to express the politics of dependencies related to slavery.

Ojo-Ade (1983) also adds that colonialism has energised traditional views that the male is the master and the female a flower, not the worker. He identifies colonial influences as "the trappings' of capitalism, Christian hypocrisy and civilised charlatanism" (p. 164). He also notices that the African woman faces many problems such as cultural expectations that women must keep. Ojo-Ade argues therefore that a woman's voice must be recognised and her role in the struggle "to decolonize must not be overlooked" (p.159). He argues that Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* reflect society's confusion

about the roles of women. For instance, he discusses the difference between Efuru's relationship with her first husband, Adizua, and the traditional societal expectations about her marriage in contrast with her relationship with her second husband, Gilbert, and the mixed societal expectations and responses.

Oje-Ade sees the character, Efuru, as the mouthpiece for Nwapa's personal notions of life and believes she (Nwapa) creates great empathy for her heroines. However, he goes on to say those same qualities that cause the reader to empathize with Efuru also set her up as a victim of tragedy. Ojo-Ade points out that Efuru breaks several traditional rules such as marrying without a dowry and refusing to work on the farm with her husband. He believes that Nwapa's use of tradition and modernism cannot be separated; it rather creates confusion. For him, Nwapa's *Efuru* represents both the past and the present modernity. It suffices to say that Ojo-Ade's (1983) argument is still relevant in the literature on Nwapa's *Efuru*. Essentially, he points out the voice and agency that Nwapa gives her heroine, Efuru. However, beyond this voice and agency lies the very details of the exact radical shifts that Nwapa proposes in this text, *Efuru*.

Gay Wilentz, on the other hand, in *From Africa to America: Cultural Ties That Bind in the Works of Contemporary African and African American Women Writers* (1986), provides an eclectic commentary on Flora Nwapa's literary accomplishment. Wilentz admires Nwapa's integration of tradition and change as well as her language. Nwapa, she intimates, tried to find choices for her female characters that allow them to respect and uphold tradition while still making other choices that do not coincide with traditional Igbo habits. Wilentz maintains that, Nwapa, "in her works, illustrates dialectically that, as

upholders of tradition, women are powerful figures, economically secure and socially vibrant, yet are limited in their choices by the restrictive cultural milieu” (p.16).

Unlike Eustace Palmer and other critics who see Nwapa’s dialogue as a “ceaseless flow of talk,” Wilentz (1986) asserts that “Nwapa focuses attention upon the sounds and voices of women” (p. xxiv). Wilentz shows that Efuru protests mildly throughout the novel when she circumvents traditional customs such as selecting her own husbands without any advice from elders and family members because she is determined to have her own way to a degree. According to Wilentz, “women are caught in a bind because too many traditions are not to their best advantage, yet they must honour them if they want to be accepted and respected in the community” (p. 32).

Brown (1981) also adds in *Women Writers in Black Africa*, that Efuru “tries to be a conventional wife while she shows a “respectful” disregard for norms that seem irrelevant or unduly restrictive” (p.142). He considers Nwapa’s novels as female novels of growth. Brown concludes that Nwapa never completely resolves the question of how women may achieve independence while supporting and functioning in a close-knit communal system. She, however, gives her characters’ other alternatives. For example, Efuru chooses to worship Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake while Amaka chooses to make money in the long-run. Brown mentions that the characters do satisfy their personal need rather than accept the community’s criteria. He calls this choice as Nwapa’s balancing act between modernity and tradition.

From the review so far, it is apparent that Nwapa’s *Efuru* has received significant scholarly attention. These perspectives reveal that the text plays a

central role in reflecting on, among other things, the subjectivities of the female character in the African setting.

Critical Reception on Nwapa's (1981) *One is Enough*

Like *Efuru* (1966), *One is Enough* (1981) occupies an important place in African literature. It is Nwapa's second most critically acclaimed novel. Like *Efuru*, *One is Enough* explores childlessness and its implication for marriage and women's empowerment. Since its publication the novel has received significant critical attention. This section reviews some of these works with the aim of establishing what has been done and identifying the gap or justification for the present study. In study of *One is Enough*, Wilentz (1998) situates the text within the broader context of the problems of post-colonial Nigeria. Wilentz identifies the key issue as the clash of traditional values versus the contemporary lack of values (p. 146). She explains that the action of each character in *One is Enough* shows their want at the expense of the traditions in the society. Wilentz argues that this cultural difference brings about conflicts in the community values and also causes problems in the notion of generational continuity and women.

Amouzou (2006) also focuses on the main character, Amaka and her struggles for fulfilment and independence. He argues that Nwapa represents "the woman as a very active and formidable being who contributes to the making of her life (p. 99). Amouzou's discussion is relevant to this thesis in terms of what he says and what he leaves unsaid about *One is Enough*. First, he is correct in his assessment of Amaka's "success in both physical and professional life as a powerful and independent woman (p. 99). However, because Amouzou's focus is on showing Nwapa's departure from male

centered representations of women in African literature, he does not undertake a vigorous analysis of conjugality in Nwapa's *One is Enough*. This thesis therefore builds on Amouzou's work by broadening the context of analysis and putting Nwapa in dialogue with Adebayo's *Stay With Me*. This will present a broader perspective on conjugality in African literature and its relationship with barrenness rather than Amouzou's limited focus on womanist ideology in Nwapa's text.

Furthermore, Ifejirika (2018) examines Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Nwapa's *One is Enough* from the perspective of two strands of feminism. He specifically argues that *One is Enough* falls under the category of revolutionary feminism which calls for a fight with men, a struggle with men, a demand for unlimited freedom for women and an exaltation of single motherhood. Ifejirika characterises this type of feminism as "degenerating from realism to absurdism to mysticism" (p. 1). Ifejirika claims that Nwapa's exploration of women who would live fulfilled and comfortable lives without men and marriage is based on imagination and consolation instead of reality. He criticises Nwapa's representation of the independent woman. He also attempts to show how African female writers contest cultural representation of the barren woman.

On the other hand, Uko (2013) in his article, "Affirming the Humanity of Oppressed Women: Female Roles in Nawal El Saadawa's *God Dies by the Nile*, Nwapa's *One is Enough* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," discusses the reactions of the women characters in oppressive systems from which they cannot escape. She states that "each woman's response is to affirm her humanity as a strong, independent and effectual entity" (p. 190). Clearly,

this relates to the focus of this paper. However, it does not necessarily focus on the relationship between conjugality, bareness and the desire for empowerment.

Nnoka et al. (2022) as well examine the traumatic effects of childlessness. This is an important contribution to the literature on *One is Enough*. One major defect of this paper is the overwhelming focus on the pains and trauma of Amaka and the other women in Nwapa's novels. As this thesis will show, Nwapa is not only interested in the emotional and physiological trauma of the childless woman; she is also interested in how these women overcome oppressive cultural representations of the childless woman. This perspective of Nwapa's novel is what this thesis seeks to explore.

In addition, Eluke and Nkpolu-Oroworukwo (2022) assert that, "the stories of Nigerian women are replete with sorrow, subservience, subjugation, slavery, relegation, thingification" (p. 13). These were the lenses from which patriarchal agents viewed the African woman. He goes on to say that male writers of the past and some of the present always portray in their works bad images of women; either women were relegated, objectified, or tools of procreation. It is at this point that women like Emecheta Buchi and the rest sprang up to defend the woman's cause. These women have moved forward and "negated" the negative picture painted of womanhood by male chauvinists. The 'new' woman like Amaka in *One is Enough* is now very assertive, very productive, and entrepreneurial. It is within this scope that the author sees the heroine, Amaka to be a contemporary Nigerian woman.

The review of *One is Enough* has shown that *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981) have received significant scholarly attention. The review also reveals while their studies that read each of these texts in relation to other texts, there is yet no study that combines any of Nwapa's novels and Adebayo's novels. This is not surprising since *Stay with Me* (2017) is relatively a new novel. As the study demonstrates such a study is justified in order to build on the existing scholarship of on how Nwapa's novels continue to generate literary responses. Only within this context can the argument on canon formation, especially in relation to African women writers be established.

Critical Reception on Adebayo's (2017) *Stay with Me*

Ayobami Adebayo's debut, *Stay with Me* (2017) has received a few critical reception. Reviews of the novel have focused on central theme of the ordeals of the married African woman.

One of the reviews that *Stay with Me* has received is from the New York Times. After its publication in 2017, the New York Times reports that Adebayo's debut is "a portrait of a Nigerian marriage". This portraiture is better understood in line with the parallel realities that the novel shares with the (contemporary) Nigerian society, especially the Yoruba context, even though the story is purely a creative work. Essentially, and true to its observation, the novel attempts to paint the contemporary understanding of conjugality within the African context. Specifically, the novel, among other thematic concerns, explores new and older definitions of conjugality, shame associated with childlessness, and self-identity. Moreover, the New York Times describes the novel as "a gothic parable about pride and betrayal".

Replete with deaths, abjections, and lessons, it is not out of order that for the reviewer, Adebayo's debut is a story of Gothicism. This insight has some reflective significance. Essentially, it points to the fact that subjecting the story to a more rigorous theoretical discussion, especially from the psycho-feminist perspective will provide alternative insights on Adebayo's concerns.

Similarly, but in a more specific directional review, the Guardian online portal also touches on the issue of childlessness in Adebayo's debut. It describes the novel as "a woman's desperate attempt to get pregnant and the subsequent agonies of loss..." These ordeals of the woman are understood to be the singularly willful act of the man – Akin, the husband of Yejide – who is supported by patriarchal conformists in the likes of his mother and his other clan members even though these supporters are oblivious of Akin's secrets to hide his impotence from his wife, Yejide. This betrayal is the genesis of the frustrations of the protagonist. Again, this review gives insight into exploring in detail the issue of childbirth and its attendant contemporary conceptualisation within the Yoruba context to be more specific, and the African space in general.

Another review on Adebayo's debut worth mentioning is Alexander (2017). Joseph Alexander draws conclusion on a number of things that are essential in the novel. He comments on the literary onomastics of the text. He explains, for instance, the meaning of all the dominant Yoruba names in the text including Akin, Yejide, Funmi and the children of Yejide and Datun. Whereas Yejide – the shortened form of Iyejide – is a name given to a female child whose mother died during labor; Akin means "the brave one". Funmi (Funmilayo) also means "give me joy" and Olamide, Sesan (Oluwasesan) and

Rotimi mean my wealth has come, God has rewarded me and stay with me respectively. Each of these names speak to the subject matter of marriage, and childbirth in the text. This review is important as it sheds light on the how onomastics or naming practices in the novel is a not a fortuitous process but a conscious activation of cultural ideology and worldview that contribute to the development of theme and characterisation.

Another issue that Alexander draws attention to is commensality. She intimates that while food is commonly understood in the African context to be an expression of hospitality, *in Stay with Me*, it is understood as a means of expressing rejection. Thus, Yejide uses the idea of serving her in-laws to reject their role in her marital ordeals. Alexander's review suggests that patriarchal expectations of women turn them into caricatures of sorts who are manipulated by patriarchal norms. She concludes that *Stay with Me* is "a potpourri of everything that is good (and bad) about the Yoruba people of Nigeria".

Beyond the positive reviews, there are a few critical essays on Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. In *The representation of women dominating women in Adebayo's Stay with Me*, Azizah (2019) proposes an anti-feminist women solidarity reading of *Stay with Me*. She wades into the argument that women are their own enemies by suggesting that in Adebayo's debut, the women in the text are the architects of the female protagonist's woes. Thus, these women are perpetrators and villains who execute patriarchal norms to the detriment of females. She argues that in the novel, "a childless woman's condition (is) being oppressed, objectified and subordinated by other women in her surroundings" (sic). She substantiates her claim by citing instances from the

characterizations of Moomi and the other women folks from the text. She concludes that the novel shows that women not only promote patriarchal norms but also perpetuate women's oppression by adhering to traditional gender ideologies and supporting men to vilify other women. Even though Azizah's (2019) observation is insightful, perhaps superficially, Adebayo's characterisation of these women folks in the text can be read as a rather subtle way of critiquing the foundations of Yoruba cultural practices that suppress the woman. So, these women folks who appear as perpetrators of patriarchal norms are rather victims of the situation. Beyond this, it would be rather more insightful to read the novel especially from how it ends as Adebayo's way of suggesting a new definition for conjugality and childbirth in the Yoruba setup.

In contributing to the discussion on *Stay Me With*, Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni (2020) interpret the text as a call for the disavowal of hegemonic masculinity. Using Akin as the antagonist, they claim that he is a prototypical African hegemonic masculine figure who conforms to the toxic and oppressive dictates of the society. They further explain that as a toxic masculine figure, Akin performs his hegemonic masculinity by going against his own words when he accepts to marry Funmi even though he had agreed with Yejide, prior to their marriage, that he abhors polygamy. They therefore conclude that the freedom of the woman especially in the African context is largely dependent on a rigorous confrontation with hegemonic masculinity.

Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni's argument is consistent with Gleibermann (2020). While commenting on a re-envisioning of masculinity in Nigerian fiction, Erik Gleibermann submits that as part of the Nigerian millennial writers, Adebayo suggests a radical redefinition of patriarchal

norms that suppress the woman. Based on Ben-Daniels and Glover-Meni's (2020) argument, it will be worth exploring in detail how Adebayo specifically suggests a redefinition of marriage and childbirth in contemporary times. This is the objective that this thesis ultimately seeks to achieve.

Conclusion

It is clear from the review that many writers, males and females have delved into most of Nwapa's and Adebayo's characters and have brought out thematic issues such as female marginalisation, segregation and motherhood. However, attention has not been paid to the dialogical or intertextual relations between Nwapa's *Efuru and One is Enough* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. This research seeks to fill this gap in the scholarship by looking at how the two novelists empower the childless woman. Most importantly, the study seeks to demonstrate that *Stay with Me* may be read as literary engagement with Nwapa's two novels. The next section outlines the theoretical framework that guides the thesis.

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis. It introduces as well as explains the Psycho-feminist theory as a theoretical tool that combines ideas from psychology and feminism to reflect on issues pertaining to the female gender. The section also engages with some of the criticisms leveled against the Psycho-feminist theory.

Psycho-feminism

Psycho-feminism as a theory has its foundation laid in the 1920s and 1930s. It began as essays on femininity that critiqued Sigmund Freud's works on the female personality. Key figures like Karen Horney, Kate Millet, Helene

Deutsch, Karen L. Kerber, Nancy Chodorow and Alexander Gabin spearheaded this movement, describing a model of women with “positive primary feminine qualities and self-valuation” as opposed to Freud's model of women as “defective and forever limited”. The term "psycho-feminism “refers to an intellectual framework that combines the ideologies of feminism, psychoanalysis, and psychology. This theory examines a variety of topics, including gender, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, as well as feminist psychology and the psychology of women.

Kerber (2011) asserts in her work *Psycho-feminism, Conceptualization, and Criticism* that psycho-feminism “developed in opposition to the mainstream of psychology, a discipline deeply implicated in the patriarchal control of women” (p. 1). She writes in the foreword of her book that psycho-feminism introduces a new way of conducting psychology that is based on a set of concepts known as social constructionism which is becoming more and more in vogue. According to Kerber (2011), feminist socialists and psychologists spent their time in the 1970s criticising, changing, and correcting the prevalent theories about the psychology of women at the time. Emphasis was on how Sigmund Freud depicted the psychological makeup of the female personality. Later, the paradigm shifted to include the study area known as psycho-analytic feminism.

According to Chodorow (1989), psycho-analytic feminism is not sensitive to the inequalities in class, color, ethnicity, inexperience, identity, or place among women. Theorists contend that male dominance was brought about by women's mothering. In contrast to Freud's emphasis on the father and the Oedipus Complex, they place more emphasis on the mother and the pre-

oedipal stage. The assertion is, because women mother both genders, they have primary parenting responsibilities, which have significant social and cultural implications.

Karen Horney, one of the first female critics of Sigmund Freud's ideas on the female personality, completely backed up Chodorow's claim above. She explains that Freud's Penis Envy account of psychology is an insult to women's self-esteem. Women's psychology, she believes, is determined by innate identification with the mother not the disappointed identification with the father. Although she did not create the theory of "psycho-feminism" per se, Horney's critiques of Sigmund Freud's work set the stage for subsequent research in the field.

Horney (1933) argues that, "societal expectations and cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping women's experiences of motherhood" (p. 68). She adds that women are subjected to unrealistic expectations set by patriarchal systems and conventional gender roles that make childbearing appear to be the main source of fulfillment and happiness. She disputed this idea and underlined the significance of taking into account the various demands and preferences of women. Horney (1933) subsequently acknowledged the importance of maternal duties but emphasised that women should make the decision about having children on their own. The societal pressures on women to conform to a specific ideal of motherhood often lead them to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, or frustration for those who do not desire or are unable to have children.

Another aspect of psycho-feminism that Karen Horney talks about is the psychological impact of childlessness. She recognises that women who

desired motherhood but were unable to have children could experience emotional distress, societal judgment, and a sense of loss. She argues that it is crucial to validate and promote these women by promoting alternative forms of fulfillment and self-realisation beyond motherhood. According to psychoanalytic feminism, Freud was sexist and neglected female norms while writing from a male perspective. Sigmund Freud always found himself at odds with his own theories, methods, and beliefs. Proponents of psych-feminism emphasise how anti-woman Freud's methods and pronouncements are and how they are not fundamental to psychoanalytic theory, theoretical modes, or even clinical interpretation. They contend that Freud used ad hominem remarks against women.

Chodorow's (1989) work for instance, challenged the assumption that gender differences are solely biologically determined and highlighted the significance of the civilisation process. According to her, the mother's role in child-rearing influences both boys and girls differently. Boys, she argued, must psychologically separate themselves from their mothers to establish their masculine identity. In contrast, girls are encouraged to identify with their mothers, re-enforcing the connection to care-giving roles. Although psycho-feminism aims to refute Freud's Oedipal narratives, it is employed in this study to examine how Flora Nwapa and Ayodemi Adebayo radically redefine marriage and the notion that the childless woman is a failed woman.

Womanism

Women of all strata of society living in every part of the world have been subjected to physical and mental violence at the hands of patriarchy. The first and second waves of feminism focused on the rights and needs of the

white upper-class and middle-class women of color excluding women belonging to the socio economically oppressed section of society. It is in this vein that Alice Walker propounded the theory of *Womanism*. This theory highlights the oppression of Black women. In this study, womanism is used as a variant of African feminisms such as motherism, and *nego-feminism*. Feminism in the broader sense is the advocacy for autonomy, or women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes.

Feminism is thus, a collective term used for all concepts that address the social equality between men and women. On its part, womanism is all-inclusive and in this sense, it stands for the emancipation and wellbeing of women and the total liberation of all African and coloured people on the African continent and those in the Diaspora. As Omolade Barbara would articulate it, "black feminism is sometimes referred to as woman-ism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty". Alice Walker thus defines womanist as:

Womanist is to Feminist as Purple is to Lavender. A black feminist or feminist of colour. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist... (Walker, 1984, p. 45)

From the inception of womanism from Alice Walker, it has been subjected to many interpretations. It has had many contrasting meanings. The

Nigerian critic, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi has given her kind of version of womanism. She sees in the womanist vision a response to the crucial question of how to justifiably share power among the races and between the genders. Although her notion differs from Alice Walker's definition, there are some overlaps between the two ideologies. In connection with Walker's definition, Ogunyemi (1996) opines that "Black womanism is a perspective that applauds Black principles and an unbiased depiction of the black woman" (p. 56).

I shall now focus on some arguments that will point us in the direction of this study and clarify the positions of Alice Walker's *Womanism* and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's *African Womanism*.

Ogunyemi (1996) sees in womanism a "black feminist or feminist of colour committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (p.113). However, Alice Walker in her delineation of womanism focuses on sexual issues and incorporates racial, cultural and political considerations. According to Alice Walker, a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1984, p. xi).

Subtly, womanism is a theory that lambasts a patriarchal position that sees the female as weak and subservient, replacing it with the idea that women have strength, audacity, ability, courage and sense of obligation and awareness. Ogunyemi's theory is focused on the specific needs of the African people, especially the woman. It accommodates men, women and children of the African origin. It frowns on all forms of patriarchal tendencies and encourages women to be the way they want to be, and be accountable for their own lives. Obviously, Ogunyemi's ideas on feminism differ from Alice

Walker's in the sense that Ogunyemi rejects the lesbian love because of the "African...silence or intolerance of lesbianism" (p. 54).

Furthermore, African womanism is constructed on social problems and is concerned with the development of black women's identity in their patriarchal society. Ogunyemi contends that Black womanism is a "philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced womanhood. Its purpose is for black unity where every black person has a trifling amount of power and so can be a brother or a sister or a father or a mother to the other" (Ogunyemi, 1995, p. 72).

For the purposes of this study, I shall employ Ogunyemi's womanist theory as the other theoretical framework for the analysis of the texts chosen; *Efuru*, *One is Enough* and *Stay with Me*. These three novels are enriched with womanist features. The study highlights the most salient attributes of womanism which the archetypal African female characters exhibit. Since this work is a womanist analysis, it focuses majorly on the roles of the female protagonists.

CHAPTER THREE

THE REPRESENTATION OF CHILDLESSNESS IN NWAPA'S

EFURU AND ONE IS ENOUGH

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the representation of childlessness in the selected texts; *Efuru and One is Enough*. The chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which the characters are framed and constructed by the author, Flora Nwapa and the significance of this framing in examining the issues of childlessness.

Indeed, the concept of representation has been explored differently by different disciplinary orientations. Scholars have long articulated from specific disciplines how the term representation is used as an analytical tool for understanding society more generally. For instance, mathematicians say representation is a sign or combinations of signs, characters, diagrams, objects, pictures or graphs, which can be utilised in teaching and learning mathematics (Mainali, 2021).

According to Hall (1997), representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people. Young (1995), on the other hand, posits that representation is the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. In providing more insight into the nature of representation and its relationship to literature, Young postulates that the most important condition of something being a representation is that it stands for something. He says a representation is always about something.

When studying representation, one is concerned with how a phenomenon, a person, or a thing is talked about or constructed. While the concept of representation is now used in a range of scholarly fields, such as Sociology, Anthropology, Discourse Analysis, and Literary Studies, most of these applications draw from the theorisation of the concept by the French social thinker, Michel Foucault, who in his book, *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) defines representation as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. Foucault uses the term ‘object’ to refer to the phenomenon, the thing, or the person who is described on the basis of several instances of talk (spoken or written) which leads to the formation of a representation or construction of the ‘object’. As far as Foucault is concerned, the representation of an object reflects social action. Society and the people in it engage in a series of talks out of which a representation is teased.

Drawing on Foucault, Burr (1995, p.48) talks about representation as discourse, and defines it as “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on ... surrounding any one object, event or person”. Representation is therefore used in this work to depict the various images and imageries that are associated with females (characters) in the selected texts for this work.

Plot Summary of *Efuru*

Efuru, a young woman in her early twenties falls in love with Adizua who is too poor to pay her bride price. Because of the love she has for him, she elopes with Adizua. Efuru’s father becomes angry at this elopement and sends some hefty and intelligent men to go to Adizua’s house to fetch Efuru. On getting there, they discover that Efuru would be happier cohabiting with

her newfound love; and so, the delegation goes back to convince Efuru's father to let her be. At the beginning of her marriage, she has a very beautiful and happy marriage blessed with a child but suddenly, the husband begins to keep her at arm's length. Efuru makes consistent efforts to get along with her husband but to no avail. After some time, Adizua elopes with another woman; and this marks the beginning of Efuru's travails. While her husband is still away, her only child takes ill and dies. Efuru buries the child without her husband's presence at the funeral. To save her face from shame and humiliation, she leaves for her father's house and later remarries another man called Gilbert Eneberi who treats her not better than Adizua. Unable to give her new husband a child, Efuru marries another woman for him after he has already taken one for himself; but this does not make him treat her any better. At last, Gilbert leaves her in the same manner Adizua did without attending Efuru's father's funeral. When Gilbert finally reappears, he accuses his wife, who is now sick, of adultery.

Representation of the Eponymous Character, Efuru

Wilentz's (1992) assessment of Nwapa's character is worth beginning with. She thinks Nwapa's portrayal of the childless woman is more excellent than her male counterparts. She states that "Flora Nwapa herself compels us to have a fresh look at women in the Igbo society which is different from the stereotypical portrayal of women ..." (p.46). Amouzou (2006) also examines how Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* contributes to the restoration of women's images and dignity and the redefinition of the female gender. He states thus: "Nwapa's creative sense must have been gingered by the realisation that it is women's responsibility to reconstruct the woman and recreate her image" (p.

99). He states that Flora Nwapa's description of her main character, Efuru reflects the changing realities of African women, especially because it represents a sort of contradiction with the Nigerian traditions. Through his analysis, Akoété Amouzou proves that Flora Nwapa's projection of female characters as being strong, ambitious, courageous and hardworking is a strategy that shows that women's voices should be ideological voices and not covered voices.

Efuru is a beautiful, intelligent, hardworking and very independent-minded young woman who is successful in everything except the one thing that matters most in her society; which is bearing children. In most African societies, it could be said that motherhood defines womanhood (Davis, 1986, p.234). The identity of women is determined by their ability to bear children. If for any reason the woman fails to fulfill this social role, her female identity is threatened as traditional beliefs dictate that if a woman is childless, she ceases to be a woman. Despite the fact that Efuru does not bear children, Nwapa constructs her in ways that make her stand out positively in her community. This can be explained as Nwapa's strategic way of debunking the long-standing notion that childlessness is a failure. As various studies show, the childless woman is in most African societies regarded with scorn and ridicule (Hollos and Larsen 2008; Ibisomi and Mudege 2014; Ola 2009). Therefore, Nwapa's positive portrayal of Efuru subverts or challenges Igbo cultural stereotypes of the childless woman as worthless and a failure.

The narrator introduces us to the character as a beautiful and a distinguished person. The protagonist, Efuru, we encounter at the opening of the novel is a determined woman who rebels against tradition, by deciding on

the one hand to marry her first husband, Adizua, the man of her choice without the permission of her father and on the other hand to be married to a man who is unable to pay her dowry. When Adizua, confesses to Efuru that he does not have the money to pay the dowry, she resolves that they are “going to proclaim themselves married” (p. 7) in spite of all odds. Implicated here is the fact that Efuru undermined traditional conventions by affecting her inborn tenacity. The main action of Efuru, we must remember, centers on her rejection of the tradition of mandatory marriage and on the freedom of choice of spouse. Critics will not fail to point out that Efuru’s womanism stands out because she is able to get a man of her own choosing and refuses to bow to patriarchal demands of parental choice. We find an instance of this feminist rebellion in Ama Ata Aidoo’s play, *Anowa* (1970) where against the dictates of tradition, Anowa, the eponymous character, chooses her own husband. Although in the end Anowa life ends tragically, it is the freedom to choose her husband that constitutes the site of subversion.

Despite the fact that Efuru does not meet her society’s marker of success for a married woman, she is nevertheless presented in the text as a trader and the daughter of Nwashike Ogene. Her accomplishment does not totally emanate from the she comes from a good home, she herself is a distinguished person. This implies that she is a woman who is remarkable not because of her father’s name but as a woman of her own. As the narrator puts it; “Efuru was her name, she was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family” (p.1). Surprisingly, her husband has no social standing. Therefore, “people wondered why she married him” (p.7). This presupposes that Efuru was better off than her husband in all ways and

the folks of the village were surprised by Efuru's choice of a husband. On one occasion, this is what some of the town folks were discussing.

Don't you know that he has married a very beautiful woman. How the woman agreed to marry him still remains a mystery to everybody (p. 11).

From the very beginning of the narrative, the reader encounters a determined woman who does things that make her happy regardless of what the society might think. She is assertive and defies patriarchal authority to satisfy her own needs. In fact, Efuru chooses her own husband, Adizua, and marries him without seeking permission from her father. Adizua's inability to pay her bride price is a depiction of poverty. In this way, Nwapa shows how some traditional values such as the man paying the bride price may actually hinder true love. Efuru's development as a character is sustained through her actions. It is seen that Nwapa creates economically empowered women characters. From the narration, "Adizua (Efuru's husband) was not good at trading. It was Efuru who was the brain behind the business (p.36). By focusing on women's world in the sense that little attention is paid to men "who are cast in the roles of collaborators" (Stratton, 1994), Nwapa's text recreates the social, political and religious life of the Igbo people:

Of all the many novels that are coming up in Nigeria ... Efuru is one of the few that portrays vividly the woman's world, giving only peripheral treatment to the affairs of the men (Stratton, 1994, p.81).

Efuru is also portrayed as a wealthy woman. Her economic status affords her some level of respect and recognition within her society. She takes the initiative to engage in businesses when her husband is farming. "Efuru

refused to go to the farm with her husband. “If you like, she said to her husband, go to the farm. I am not cut out for farm work. I am going to trade” (p.45). Efuru chooses not to go to work on the farm with her husband but to stay in town and trade at the market. Her actions here indicate a sense of independence. Efuru therefore symbolises the economically independent woman. She is a good trader and shows women economic independence. This consolidation of power that Nwapa gives her character suggests that her character is a force to reckon with. Efuru succeeds in breaking the dependence on a husband. She takes the initiative to engage in businesses. She is the one who introduces the business of cray fish and yams to Adizua, her first husband. By this Nwapa is suggesting that women emancipation lies in being financially independent of men and not necessarily having children, especially if the woman has no control over why she is barren. In fact, Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* amply demonstrates that the societal belief that the joy of a woman lies in having children is a myth.

Nwapa presents various instances to portray her heroine as a hardworking woman. For example, contrary to society’s expectation that after circumcision a woman must spend several months feasting and enjoying herself, Efuru chooses to cut short her celebration to a month and start work so that she could get more money for herself and her family. The narrator makes this clear when she says:

Efuru feasted for one month. Her mother-in-law wanted her to continue feasting for two months, but refused saying that the life was a dull one. She wanted to be up and doing... (p. 17).

This sets Efuru apart; she is not the lazy type who would fancy entertainment and feasting all the time. She knew the essence of moderation in all things. By this portrayal, Nwapa is subtly hinting at the emergence of the new childless modern woman. The modern “childless” woman’s perspective is well articulated by Stegeman (1974) who contends:

the new woman represents a theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than in her kinship relations where she has a responsibility to realise her potential for happiness rather than to accept the norms and roles (p.78).

Efuru is much more interested in engaging in productive ventures rather than what people would say about her. She does not care about the gossips that would spread about her. All she is interested in is making money to do things she has not done. Even though her mother-in-law is worried, she is not.

...her mother-in-law told her one day. But if I were you, Efuru, I should continue for another one month...When I did mine, I feasted for three months... No mother, one month of confinement is enough. We have not much money and I want to start trading... Never mind what people say...Who can please the world... (p. 18)

Nwapa here puts her heroine in an intelligent and level-headed position where what the society says means less to her since it is not going to be beneficial to her. This does not mean that Efuru is disrespectful of tradition. On the contrary, Efuru is respectful of tradition. She manages to adapt to the customs by maneuvering them to suit her without breaking the rules.

Despite her success in various areas of social life, Efuru suffers the painful problem of childlessness. As a result, the members of her society

consider her as a man while living with Adizua. The narrative reports thus about their thoughts: “two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce” (p. 23). Her barrenness leads Adizua to abandon her for another woman. Even when their child dies, he refuses to visit her, leaving her to endure the pain alone. As a man, he fails to share in the burden of the death of their child. Ostensibly, Efuru is not the one to submit to such degradation. She demonstrates the strength of character and intense independent spirit throughout the course of her adult life. As a womanist, she does not define herself by marriage or by just being an appendage of her husband. She validates the fact that she has an identity of her own.

Efuru is very innovative and far-sighted. She knows which businesses to venture into at a particular time and which not to do at another time. The town folks respect her so much because of her business prowess despite the fact that she does not have any child. The narrator says this about her business prowess:

She was the first to discover the trade that year... It was a risky business ... four trips gave Efuru and her husband a huge profit. The fifth trip was not good. Many women had gotten to know the business and had rushed into it and spoiled it ... We won't go again, Efuru told her husband. We shall have to look for another thing to do. (p. 21).

Efuru knows the tricks of the business. She innovates an idea of a business, trades in it for a while and other women join in because they know she is making a lot of profit. She would quickly think of something else to do once the business becomes less lucrative for her. So, other women look up to her. Moreover, Efuru's decision to go into trading rather than farming reveals her remarkable understanding of her abilities and what she is best suited for.

She is described as a woman “whose hands make money. Anything she touches is money. If she begins to sell pepper in the market, she will make money out of it” (p. 156). Efuru does not live for herself only. She commits herself to the mission of helping others. She keeps helping and lending money to Ogea’s (her maid’s) parents. She helps the people of the community a lot and severally. She either assists them to get treated at the hospital or gives them money to do their planting and harvesting. In one instance, this is what transpires:

I don’t know how to begin, Nwabata went on “we owe you”. And we are not able to pay. We thought we could pay off our debt. But it was not possible. Our harvest was bad. Let me cut a long story short. Its 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 come to. You know us well and our nakedness (p. 56).

So, of all the people in the village to lend money, Efuru is the one the couple; Nwosa and Nwabata resort to because of her generosity despite their misfortunes and inability to pay back. Even though she gives them money over and over again, she never hesitates to address an issue that does not go down well with her. On one occasion, Efuru ridicules them because they are not committed to their promises. This is what she has to say:

You don’t know the value of goodness, she said sternly. Poverty does not affect the reasoning power or the innate goodness in human beings. Poor people do not behave foolishly. I gave you money last year without interest. You Harvested your yams without paying and did not

bring me yams... What I heard next was that you had taken a title...It is planting season and you have come to me, hoping, to get some money. Have I a tree that bears money as its fruits? (p. 67)

Efuru is never intimidated to speak the truth to anyone. She could not let her generosity be taken for granted at any point in time. Regardless of the situation, she manages to talk some sense into them. It is not only money that Efuru gives to people in her community. She occasionally attends to the sick by sending them to the hospital to be treated by her doctor friend. Nwapa produces a heroine with a classic charisma and with a positive attitude that defines her. She is always in the position to help if she could. For instance, she helps an old woman she knows as a child who had always had a bandage on her legs. This is a discourse that transpires between the doctor and Efuru. She says:

I have another case now. It is an old woman this time. She has a bad leg. Since I was a little child, she has always had a dirty bandage on the leg... I won't be staying long so bring her to me tomorrow, the doctor said...Nnana was overjoyed... one of the children could go with her to the hospital because she would need someone to cook for her ... it was arranged, and Efuru had to buy them a few things that they needed. She paid the bus fare to Onicha and gave Nnona a few shillings for her pocket money (p. 78).

This shows how Efuru, despite her inability to have a child, does not drown herself in pity; but channels her effort into helping the people of the town. Again, Efuru is portrayed as a strong woman and a wise one for that matter. She does not give up though she has had a bad experience with her

first husband. Efuru does not leave her husband immediately. She gives him chances because she is committed to the marriage. She is self-willed and only tolerates Adizua because she loves him. But when she realises he is taking her for granted, she makes up her mind.

Our ancestors forbid that I should wait for a man to drive me out of his house. This is done to women who cannot stand by themselves, women who have no good homes... And besides, my face is not burnt. I'm still a beautiful woman (p. 68)

This internal monologue brings out her true feelings and shows that Efuru, despite everything, knows her worth and that there is a limit to human endurance. Efuru marries twice and she leaves both marriages when these men do not treat her right. It is clear that Nwapa does not agree with the assertion that without a child, the woman is nothing. Efuru chooses independence and freedom and lives a life of economic success. Nwapa, through the characterisation of Efuru, molds new personalities for the childless woman that subverts traditionally inscribed ones.

Other characters also comment on Efuru's good qualities. Her mother-in-law speak of Efuru's good traits when her son leaves her for another woman:

My life has been one long suffering. The bright part of it when my son married Efuru. But Adizua hated me. He did not want me to be happy, and so denied me that marriage with Efuru. My son left his wife and ran off with a worthless woman (p. 157)

Even Adizua's mother knows that Efuru is the best thing to have happened to her 'worthless' son. Efuru's mother-in-law recognises that even though Efuru is childless, she is accomplished in ways that Adizua's new wife

who will give him children is not. Efuru understands that she is not a failure because she is childless. In this rationalization, Nwapa stages a critique of societal values that demeans a woman simply on the basis of her infertility. Despite her barrenness, Efuru is strong, respected by her society and has great wealth; and she is beautiful. She accepts her fate and fulfills her dream of being a mother by being a mother to all the children around her. She normally gathers them and tells them stories that would educate them; and eats with them. She finds fulfillment in treating everyone well in the society.

As Adiewere and Efuru were eating, a troop of children with skinny tummies in front of them were seen approaching. These children are just in time. The way they time themselves is admirable. If you have a late lunch, they are sure to be there to have it with you. If you have an early lunch, it suits them best. Ogea, she called, bring enamel plates for the Children, bring more soup from the pot also... (p.93).

We can therefore say that the new African woman is selfless, hardworking and successful as in the case of Efuru who makes her own choices and determines to “live life fully”. This study gains significance as it sheds more light on how Nwapa’s novel, *Efuru*, is rooted in the ideology of womanism, a model which is shaped by feminine concerns and experiences of the black woman. To be sure, womanism as a conception, applauds the principles of black life and at the same time gives a well-adjusted illustration of black womanhood and gendered struggles, as well as the freedom and independence of women. Employing the approach of womanism, Nwapa’s novel points African women in a new direction by urging all marginalised women to collaborate in creating their own paradigm, which derives from their

own social reality and mirrors their cultural independence and veracity. The work too offers a close reading and in-depth analysis of *Efuru* which leads to a rational and practical analysis of the novel. A significant benefit of close reading, as an interpretative method lies in the possibility of the objective reading of a text.

Suffice it to say that the female character *Efuru* counterattacks, as it is, the stereotypical identity of African women in literary works which has been projected and known over the years. A cursory reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) shows the extent to which Nwapa's female characters rewrite the almost domestic role of Achebe's women. *Efuru* shows that African women are moving to assert their positions in the male dominated settings which restrain their potentials. *Efuru* has risen above her limitation in marriage which has procreation as its core idea. *Efuru* is an epitome of a redefined and a regenerated woman in the traditional society where men lord over women.

Nwapa believes that the African woman is articulate, has strength, independence and competence to perform well in any sphere of life. In this connection, she constructs positive images of the childless African women and how they develop themselves in the patriarchal society. She also highlights their contributions to the development of their society, which were played down or neglected by the society.

Amaka and the representation of the childless woman in *One is Enough*

Nwapa's *One is enough* (1981) has been described by Stratton (1994) as a female Bildungsroman because Amaka, like her counterpart *Efuru* in the eponymous novel, becomes self-assertive and a self-authenticating woman.

Amaka's transformation begins to take place by as a result of her failure to meet the expectations of her society. From the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the stereotypical expectations that traditional Igbo has of women. It is obvious that nothing Amaka does as a person by way of her creative business or her mental agility can cause society to appreciate her because she has no child of her own. Nwapa pays tribute to the resilience and innovativeness of women like Amaka who demonstrate the ability to transform both motherhood and childlessness into a positive, self-defined and powerful experience (May and Lesniak, 1989).

Fertility is the major criterion throughout the novel by which the Igbo society judges the heroine in *One is Enough*. Amaka is the heroine and she shows personal development and overwhelming prowess despite her perceived failure in the eyes of her community. According to Stratton (1994, p.89), "Nwapa's heroines run counter to literary stereotypes and societal norms of female development". In the very beginning of the story, it is realised that all Amaka wants and desires is to be married and be happy in her marriage – happiness meant having children. She envies married people and when Obiore wanted to marry her, she was on top of the world. This traditional understanding of the conjugality or marriage is summarized as follows;

...Amaka had always wanted to be married. She envied married people and at last when Obiora wanted to marry her she was on top of the world. She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish and children to crown the marriage... (p. 83)

There is no doubt that there are many things that are involved in the process of being accepted in any kind of society; and child bearing in the novel is paramount to the society. From the outset, the novel articulates the stereotypical expectations that traditional Igbo society has for women who do not have children. The anthropologist, Agbasiere (2000) claims that the link between a mother and her child is “the keystone of Igbo social structure” (p. 85). In *One is Enough*, it is understood that a marriage is no marriage without children. Ostensibly advising Amaka on childbirth, her own mother tells her that “marriage or no marriage, have children” (p. 11). This is to attest to the fact that having children is more important for her society and that is the essential value of a woman.

After Amaka’s failed relationships with other men, her mother advises her to think of having children if the men were not forthcoming with marriage. Her mum tells her that children are utmost in the life of a woman. She emphasises that marriage is secondary and that marriage without children is a doom. This is what she says, “...marriage or no marriage, have children. Your children will take care of you in old age. You will be very lonely then if you don’t have children as a mother...” (p.45). Right from childhood, the African parents inculcate in their children that motherhood is the principal, if not the ultimate end of marriage, therefore, the fertility of the girl is crucial as it ensures that the lineage does not die. ‘Barrenness’ is the greatest calamity that can befall an African woman. The contempt in which a childless woman is held or treated in many parts of Africa explains the importance attached to maternity. Marriage without children is seen as hollow. According to Aidoo (1965), “men and women marry because they want children” (p. 41). Berrian

(1997) hints at the issue of childbirth and the significance of childbirth in Africa and cites Ama Atta Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* as an example.

She recounts thus:

...In the West African concept of marriage, parenting is dominant and is seen as the supreme Expression of conjugality. In other words, the African marriage is Child – centered and family oriented. In the play, when Ato and Eulalie decide to postpone having children as long as they please, there was a clash. It was no surprise when Ato was summoned to a family meeting to find out why his wife had not conceived after a year of marriage... (p. 84)

When Amaka's mother learns that her daughter has given birth to twins out of wedlock, her reaction is that; "whoever the father of the twins is, is a man... Amaka is a woman, she is a mother and that is all that matters..." (p. 117).

Arndt (2002) argues that women's identity and the justification of their existence is rooted in their motherhood (p. 38). This is so because womanhood is assessed by the ability to produce children. Amaka's mother-in-law at the beginning likes her because she is industrious; but she becomes fed up when she realises that the sole aim of marriage is not being achieved by her daughter-in-law. In *One is Enough*, Nwapa beautifully reframes the hero from the norm of the society towards childbirth. Amaka, in spite of her misfortune, is doing very well for herself in the society. Not having children weighs her down but that notwithstanding, she keeps her businesses booming and flourishing. Perhaps what the writer wants to communicate is that regardless of being barren, the woman can come up with positive things. The narrator has

this to say at one point: "...in spite of all these misfortunes, Amaka was doing marvelously well in her business ... soon she bought a plot of land and began planning a house of her own" (p. 10). When Amaka goes through hardship, she is able to leave her husband and be free. She even goes ahead to pay the dowry which according to their custom would ensure the total breaking of her marriage with her husband.

Nwapa's *One is Enough* is seen as a female Bildungsroman (Stratton, 1994). This is because Amaka's transformation and growth begin as a result of her failure to meet her community's expectations. Amaka is a strong and competent woman, very good at business. Her childlessness does not prevent her from fulfilling her objectives. Her struggle for self-image begins when she is engaged in a fight that brings her husband Obiora and his mother to hospital. After she had been sent out of the home by her husband's mother, Amaka the protagonist wanted to restore her self-esteem at all cost. She moves to Lagos where she finds an environment appropriate to foster her desires. Her will to find self-realisation as a single woman and her desire for dignity through economic success become the centre of her life's goal. Nwapa is thus re-presenting the woman as a very active and formidable human being who contributes to the making of her life. Amaka happily succeeds in both personal and professional life as a powerful and independent woman. From the outset of the story, we are made aware that Amaka was educated and industrious.

Like Efurū, *One is Enough* explores conjugality with particular focus on the contestation of the representation of the childless woman as a failure. In the novel, the fate of the childless African woman is presented as characterised by abuse, scorn, shame and pain. The first section of the novel presents the

travails of Amaka in her relationship with Obiora, her husband and her mother in-law. Amaka's predicament derives essentially from her barrenness or her inability to give her husband and her in-laws children. At this point, the novel suggests that the Igbo cultural understanding of conjugality focuses more on the woman's reproductive abilities than on romance and intimacy.

Nwapa registers the nasty attitude of the culture in society through the behavior of Amaka's mother in-law and Obiora. It is important to emphasise that Obiora's disrespect of Amaka is influenced by his mother. This puts a lot of pressure on Amaka and heightens the blame game against her. She is shocked by the husband's wicked transformation as she comes to believe that "demons are talking to her husband (p. 20).

Nwapa shows through Amaka's fate how the romance of conjugality can so quickly turn into a disastrous adventure once the woman is unable to produce children. For example, Obiora insults Amaka; "You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you will not raise your voice in this house if you were sensible" (p. 20). In this quotation, we are confronted not only with the dehumanisation of Amaka but also her portrayal as a person without a voice. In other words, the barren or childless woman is equated to silence and therefore cannot participate in domestic and social discourse. As Obiora goes on to warn Amaka, "but let me warn you, that if you step out of this house when my wife and two sons arrive, you will stay out forever" (p. 20). In this quotation, the position of the childless woman is insecure. So far as the woman fails to produce children, her position and entitlements can be easily displaced and taken over by another woman who is productive.

It is important to note that other members of Obiora's family also humiliate and disregard Amaka's womanhood. Her mother-in-law ignores her repeated pleas for more time to allow her to get pregnant. She tells her:

“and you, with lek talk of my son, my lovely son who saved you from shame and from humiliation. How many suitors had you before my son came to marry you? I told Obiora not to marry you; that you were barren; But he did not listen to me” (p. 5).

All of this shows that barrenness or childlessness poisons conjugal relationships within the Ibo culture. As a result of Amaka's humiliation, she begins to wonder whether womanhood or mothering is what defines her as a woman. It is precisely at this point that Nwapa begins to contest the representation of the childless woman as a failure. As Amaka ponders, “was a woman nothing because she was unmarried or barren... was there no fulfilment for her? Could she not be happy, in the real sense of the word, just by having men friends who were not husbands? (p. 22). At stake here is a crisis of the normative definition of woman in a marriage. Amaka's rumination suggests that there should be other yardsticks for measuring success apart from the biological ability to produce children. Hence, Amaka begins to doubt that marriage is the best option. As the narrator says, Amaka considers the possibility of a single life;

to live a single and a respected life, no one will point accusing fingers at her and call her a whore as her husband often had. She would find fulfillments, would find even happiness in being a single woman. *The erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved* (pp. 23-24; my emphasis).

The italicized sentence above captures the focus of this study. This is because the argument advanced in this study is that Nwapa contests the phenomenon of the childless woman as a failure by presenting us with Amaka who finds fulfilment outside marriage. Reflecting on life outside marriage, the narrator provides additional insight into Amaka's thought processes,

[w]as that really the end of the world? Was she useless to society if she wasn't a mother? Surely not, why then was she suffering these indignities both from her husband and her mother? She could adopt a son or a daughter. She could play mother to them. She would go different places, maybe Ghana or even Zaire and adopt a boy or a girl (p. 20).

In this quotation, we are introduced to other modern legal means of getting children. However, as I will show, Amaka opts for financial independence and personal freedom. In other words, she abandons conjugality or marriage and moves to Lagos to start a new face in her life. To rebuild her life, Amaka goes to settle in Lagos. In this town, she continues her activity as a contractor with the help of her brother-in-law (the husband of her sister Ayo) who put her in touch with an Aladji working at the Ministry. If the collaboration with this man has been very fruitful for the protagonist, it also marks a change process for the woman.

To begin with, the Aladji gives Amaka a contract for the supply of toilet rolls worth ten thousand naira from which she earns three thousand naira. Then, he helps "her secure more contracts and...in the execution of them." (p.66). Besides, whereas it usually takes people two or even three years to get their companies registered in Lagos, Amaka had hers registered in a

matter of days; and thanks to the Aladji. Finally, with the help of this man, the heroine buys a site where she stores timber and blocks and where she later builds a house. Her friend, Adaobi, could not help expressing her admiration, “[y]ou have arrived. You are about to conquer Lagos” (p. 68); and then, to continue seeking more contracts, she begins a relationship with Fr. McClaid. She no longer has any interest in marriage even when the priest gives her that option. Her focus now is on other avenues of success.

With Amaka rejecting Izu’s marriage proposal, Nwapa questions and challenges the excessive importance that society attaches to marriage for a woman. Nwapa does not incite women to reject matrimony but she indicates that women, from Amaka to her sister, Ayo, in addition to their mother, have begun to see marital union differently from the vast majority of the society. It is noteworthy that (Fr.) McClaid is young, handsome, has a high position in government and, therefore, is influential. These, plus the fact that he is the father of Amaka’s twin boys, should have coaxed the heroine to accept his proposal without hesitating. Yet, she does not change her mind. Even Izu’s resort to Amaka’s mother and her sister who are in favour of the marriage does not move the heroine either. She tells Ayo:

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 (1981, p.127). One can see here that a woman must not accept to be engaged in anything whatsoever against her will, she must not keep quiet when she has to express her opinion. In the novel, Nwapa has also shown that it is possible for a woman to find fulfilment outside marriage and having biological children. One can also see an illustration of Valerie

Bryson's observation that: "Women should be free to follow the career of their choice, and should not be forced into marriage through economic necessity. (p. 56).

From the above Amaka emerges as Nwapa's spokesperson for the freedom of women from traditional misconceptions of what constitutes a woman. Amaka's movement to Lagos registers Nwapa's attitude towards tradition and modernity. The village is trapped in patriarchal ideologies of conjugality where the woman is merely a reproductive machine.

As a cosmopolitan centre, Lagos represents a worldview and way of life that are different from the narrow cultural setting that Amaka has left behind in the village. As various studies on post-colonial urbanism have shown, the city represents a melting point of culture, a breakdown of the stranglehold of tradition on individuals and an opportunity for reinvention. This means that, Amaka's movement to Lagos, represents her radical break with traditional conceptions of marriage and woman. It also represents her attempt to prove to Obiora and her in-laws that the childless woman is not a failure. Hence in Lagos, she is looking for relationships that will make her financially independent.

The novel explores in detail Amaka's focus on using the Fr. McClaid to secure a permanent contract. Although the relationship results in twins, Amaka is not interested in marriage even when the priest gives her that option. She is more interested in acquiring wealth, personal freedom and demonstrating to her ex-husband and in-law that their initial perception about her future is false. She returns to Onitsha and confronts her husband, and mother-in-law, who are now old and poor, with her wealth. The biggest slap to

the traditional conception of Amaka is that it turns out that she is not a barren woman as they had thought. In fact, the problem between Amaka and her ex-husband was one of incompatibility rather than infertility. The villager's failure to grasp this is an indication of the limitation of the basis some traditional norms. Amaka's return to the village to flaunt her wealth is Nwapa strategic way of shaming the people and giving the lie to the traditional attitude of blaming the woman for the lack of children in a marriage. This is why Ezeigbo (1998) reads *One is Enough* as "a forthright encouragement for childless women to look for other ways of living a self-fulfilled and profitable life" (p. 65).

Flora Nwapa has also demonstrated through her novel that a woman can be happy and fulfilled outside marriage. She has proven wrong the belief that a married woman is luckier than the single one. Amaka is filled with happiness in Lagos and yet she does not have a husband. Her happiness stems, on one hand, from her economic independence which has given her very good living conditions and enabled her to move "in very high circles in Lagos" (p. 92). The protagonist even admits to her mother that she is quite contented. It is true that she has a lover (the priest) but when he goes to Dublin, she does not feel his absence, she does not miss him. Her fellow "Cash Madams" are also doing very well in Lagos; thanks to their wealth. If they have children, none of them has a husband. On the other hand, the heroine's happiness results from the fact that she has finally borne children, escaping the misfortune which barrenness brings to a woman in her society. Therefore, with economic independence and/or children, a woman can be happy outside of marriage. It is precisely here that womanism as a theoretical framework becomes relevant.

As noted in the theoretical framework, womanism focuses on the oppression of black women. Womanism is cognizant of the cultural and traditional systems and attitudes that oppress the African woman. Consequently, the black woman's freedom lies in negotiating or contesting the existing cultural scripts and view that consign her to a position of ridicule. As the analysis of *Efuru* and *One is Enough* shows, Nwapa situates the predicament of the Ibo woman within patriarchal conception of the purpose of conjugality. She there crafts women who are determined, successful and appreciate the cause of their domination. Through the awakening of the characters (Efuru and Amaka) to the sources of their disempowering circumstances, they map a new course for their lives by engaging in activities that redefine their role in society.

Ultimately, as the analysis has shown, *One is Enough*, not only dramatises the challenges that face the childless woman; it also contests the representation of the childless woman as a failure. The novel ends with Amaka better placed than when she was married. It must be stressed that Nwapa is by no means devaluing marriage. From the analysis, it can be argued that she is suggesting that there are other possibilities open for the childless women other than having children. More broadly, Nwapa is suggesting that African women should be attuned to other criteria for measuring success other than simply bearing children. Perhaps, it is important to stress that although eventually Amaka has children which will suggest that Nwapa ironically succumbs to the centrality of the Igbo cultural insistence on children, this does not deviate from the crucial point that the childless woman can succeed in other ventures of life. Indeed, as argued above, Amaka's eventual ability to have children should be looked at from the perspective of its technical relevance rather than as

succumbing to the ideology of the primacy of children. Amaka's fertility disproves the villagers' perception of what constitutes a barren woman.



CHAPTER FOUR

(RE)PRESENTING AND CONTESTING CHILDLESSNESS IN

ADEBAYO'S *STAY WITH ME***Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed the representation and contestation of childlessness in Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough*. It showed how Nwapa redefines and presents female characters who do not have their destinies tied to marriage and cultural insistence on procreation. This chapter discusses childlessness in Adebayo's (2017) *Stay with Me* as an aspect of African conjugality. The aim is to show how Adebayo's representation of childlessness rewrites or contests Nwapa's vision in *Efuru*. The previous chapter has shown that childlessness is usually blamed on the woman. This chapter shows that childlessness is also attributable to the man. It will also show that childlessness within the African context cannot be limited to discussions on conjugal relationships, especially marriage. The chapter argues that *Stay with Me* shows that there can be no progress in attitudes toward childlessness unless the sources of these ideologies or the stories that foreground and legitimise childlessness as a cultural deviance are dismantled or reconfigured to reflect changing realities. The chapter proceeds along the following lines. It begins with a synopsis of *Stay with Me*. The second section analyses and discusses how *Stay with Me* contests childlessness and rewrites Nwapa solution to the problem of childlessness in marriage. The analysis will show three things. First, unlike Nwapa, Adebayo complicates the traditional understanding of childlessness by shifting the blame from the woman to the man; secondly, Adebayo traces the negative cultural attitudes towards the

barren woman to traditional forms of socialization that can be found in proverbs and storytelling; thirdly, unlike Nwapa, Adebayo suggests that creating economically independent women or showing other avenues of success for women is enough. The real solution lies in new forms socialization that dismantles or rewrites the founding proverbs and tales.

Synopsis of *Stay with Me*

Stay with Me is set in Ilesa, Nigeria. It explores the relationship (marriage) between Yejide and Akin. The novel is narrated by Akin and Yejide and is structured in three parts. There is love at first sight. Prior to their marriage, they both agree that polygamy is not acceptable to them. Four years into their marriage, after several attempts to get a child fails, Yejide takes the drastic step to consult a friend who introduces her to a prophet. She is persuaded by the prophet that she will get pregnant after his prayers. She returns home and begins to develop symptoms of pregnancy. Nine months later, when doctors demonstrate to her that she is not pregnant but rather suffering from pseudocysts, Akin's family, especially his mother, desperate for a grandchild, decides to give him a second wife.

Convinced that this second wife is going to destroy her marriage, a desperate Yejide decides to sleep with her husband's brother who had paid them a visit. This results in a pregnancy which leads to the birth of her first son called Olamide. However, Yejide's joy was cut short when Olamide dies as a result of sickle cell. She sleeps with Akin's brother the second time and this leads to the birth of Sesan who also dies. Her third sexual encounter with Dotun leads to the birth of Rotimi. At this point, doctors inform Akin that he is not the biological father of the children because he has a different blood group.

Akin's brother Dotun informs Yejide that the husband had actually contracted him to make her pregnant. This revelation does not only lead to a sense of betrayal; it also leads to the revelation that the cause of childlessness in the marriage was not the woman but rather the husband. It also affirms Yejide and the reader's initial perception that Yejide was cheating on her husband as false. In other words, Akin has orchestrated the brother's visit and the illicit romance. All attempts by Yejide to get her husband to confess to her fails. Fearing that Rotimi will die just as the other two children, Yejide decides to emotionally detach herself from her daughter. Finally, she abandons her marriage and moves to Jos but she is later shocked to realise that Rotimi had survived. The novel ends with Yejide having a conversation with the daughter who is now a university student. Overall, *Stay with Me* is a novel about love, betrayal, jealousy and sacrifice. Interspersed in this story are historical memories about Nigerian politics, especially during the military regimes of Babangida.

Childlessness in Ayobami Adebayo's (2017) *Stay with Me*

The central merit of *Stay with Me* is its dissolution of the myth that childlessness is the woman's fault. It asks the reader to rethink social attitudes, values and the politics of blame in marriage. It is precisely in this context that I will show that *Stay with Me* can be read as a contestation of childlessness, and forms of masculinity.

The novel contests traditional assumptions and attitudes about childlessness through the representation of Akin and Yejide's marriage. The first part of the novel presents the problem of childlessness as the fault of Yejide. We get this impression from Yejide's narration of events. Yejide has

been culturally educated by society and especially her step-mothers into believing that a woman is most fulfilled and successful when she is able to reproduce. As her mother-in-law tells her: “a good mother’s life is hard...a woman can be a bad wife, but she must not be a bad mother” (p. 10). As Ogede (2011) argues, in the African society “childlessness is coded as a moral crime committed by a woman” (p. 33). This quotation is the first indicator of what Yejide’s society holds as dear in a marriage. This is because a distinction is made between a bad wife and a bad mother; a distinction which hinges on childbirth as a determiner of difference and subjectivity. This distinction is important for two reasons: first, it points out the means by which society defines what constitutes a “wife” and a “mother” and secondly, it hints at the ramifications of not being a mother.

The above excerpt draws the distinctions between being a wife and a mother. It presents us with the society’s view by weighing these two roles in Yejide’s conjugal relationship. Through the deployment of the modal “must” in the quotation, the mother-in-law gives a hint to Yejide that motherhood by childbirth is a compulsory act within the Yoruba context. The mother-in-law’s utterance is affirmed by Ngcobo’s (1988) observation that in Nigeria “every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full” (cited in Akujobi, 2011, p. 3). Failure to perform an act that is considered a “must” in society then suggests that there are consequences awaiting the individual. Ngcobo’s observation is made implicit and bare in Yejide’s marriage.

As Yejide comes to understand, a woman is a wife in a marriage as long as she has no children and a mother is the one who has her own

biological children. This is reinforced in the mother-in-law's words: "She must ask God to give her a child, and "the grace to be able to suffer for that child" (p.10). It is this social and cultural construction of motherhood and mothering which becomes the driving force behind Yejide's repeated attempts to get pregnant. She comes to believe that without having children of her own, she will simply be considered a "bad wife" and her position occupied by another wife.

Encapsulated in the tag "bad wife" is a woman who has failed to perform her responsibility and is therefore not fit to be considered as a "good wife" in the society thereby bringing disgrace and dishonor to one's family. As such, every woman wants to avoid this disgrace and stigma associated with childlessness. This urge and drive to become a mother, a symbol of a fulfilled woman is seen when Yejide asserts that "I wanted to be a mother, to have my eyes shine with secret joys and wisdom" (p. 10). By desiring to be a mother, Yejide paints the joys derived from motherhood in a dual epistemic sense: personal joys and joy which has its basis in recognition from society. In fact, Yejide's craving and longing for the joys of motherhood reiterates critics' observation of childbirth as a source of happiness for women in marriage (Akujobi, 2011).

As already stated, this desire to have children is also to fulfill or meet the expectations of society or her in-laws. In fact, in an encounter between Yejide and her mother-in-law, the latter asks her the question; "Why won't you allow my son to have a child?" (p. 40). It is here that Adebayo presents the cultural view of the cause of bareness in marriage. In the above quotation, the cause of bareness in the marriage is attributed to Yejide. The mother-in-

law blames Yejide as the source and cause of childlessness in her (mother-in-law's) son's marriage. Interestingly, the husband's role as a possible cause goes unremarked. Yejide refutes the mother-in-law's view by asserting that "I don't manufacture children. God does" (p. 40). In her attempt to refute her in-law's claims, Yejide resorts to the belief in God as the creator of beings and giver of life and children. In fact, her refutation of the in-law's claim is finds expression in Psalm 127:3 where the Psalmist asserts that "... children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward". Thus, to Yejide, children are gifts from God and therefore should be regarded as such. Yejide, in this scene, then resonates with the Biblical narrative of Hannah who cried onto God as a result of her bareness (1 Samuel 1:7). However, Yejide fails to realise the ambivalent nature of her reference; that, the quote, whilst recognising childbirth as a gift from the Christian God, also implies that childbirth is a "blessing", a "reward" which ultimately crowns one's marriage.

To be married and barren (even within the Judeo-Christian context which Yejide seem to be referencing) also constitutes a curse; a situation similar to what she (Yejide) faces within the African socio-cultural context. For within the Yoruba context, the existence of children in marriages is a sign of approval by the sacred Other or ancestors (Masenya, 2019). Yejide's utterance therefore highlights' Masenya's (2019) observation that certain African narratives and insights on motherhood and childbirth are similar to Biblical references and insights on the same subject matter, thereby establishing the similarity that exists between cultures, worldviews, thinking and ways of being and existence. Her attempt to resort to Christian metaphysics and faith to refute the in-law's accusation proves futile as she is

quickly rebuffed by her mother-in-law: “Have you ever seen God in a labor room giving birth to a child? Tell me, Yejide, have you ever seen God in the labor ward? Women manufacture children and if you can’t, you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman” (p.40).

It is clear that beyond the blame game, what is at stake in the above extract is the very definition of womanhood and the contingency of marriage. The mother-in-law assumes that by being the carriers or childbearing agents, women become the sole agents or individuals responsible for biological conception. To sum, she (Yejide’s mother-in-law) believes that the woman is the one responsible for childbirth. It is this belief and assumption that childbirth is the sole responsibility of the woman that Adebayo contests in *Stay With Me*. By laying the failure of childbirth at the doors of the woman, the mother-in-law not only ignores the possibility of the existence of other biological factors which may be the apparent cause of childlessness, but she also neglects the possibility of the son being the cause of the childlessness in his marriage. Adebayo’s staging of the encounter between the mother-in-law and Yejide, therefore, becomes a critical site for rethinking causes of childlessness and a means to engender discourses that do not view women as the sole cause of childbirth.

In her outburst against Yejide, the mother-in-law in the excerpt above also attempts to suggest that a barren woman can be equated to a man. Entrenched in her outburst, then, is the contestation of Yejide’s womanhood and the depiction of her plight: as a woman who has not only fallen out of favor with her mother-in-law, but one whose marriage is contingent on her ability to reproduce and procreate. In this context is the depiction of Yejide’s

existential crisis and her plight as a subaltern within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. By virtue of being a woman, her existence, ontology and subjectivity are therefore reduced to, in Deleuzian terms an “apparatus” (Asempasah, 2019) for the reproduction of children to ensure the continuity of the husband’s lineage and family line. This reduction of women’s existence to gender roles such as childbearing not only limits the potentials of the woman, but also denies the realisation of the capabilities of the woman within the African system of living.

The reduction of women to disposable childbearing objects also renders them as shameful subjects. The encounter between Yejide and the in-law hurts Yejide to the extent that she sheds tears. As she says, “I closed my eyes, but tears still forced their way past my eyelids” (p. 41). Through the dialogue between the mother-in-law, we are made to see that by virtue of not having children, Yejide’s subjectivity and womanhood are brought under siege. This expression of emotion, by Yejide, then, is not only a reflection of feelings and sentiments but also a reflection of her realisation of her socio-cultural positioning as a shameful subject who has been fixed within “regimes of difference” (Ahmed, 2002) by virtue of her inability to give birth. Yejide’s sense of shame is exemplified in what Levinas terms as the “sheer visibility of our being, of its ultimate intimacy. Intimacy is our presence to ourselves, which reveals not our nothingness but rather the totality of our existence” (cited in Janz, 2011).

To Yejide, the totality of her existence is revealed to her as one who is considered as a plague in her society’s existence. This depiction of Yejide’s crisis becomes an arena for depicting the existential crisis women go through

within the African society. Yejide's narration, therefore, becomes a testament and Yejide herself a synecdoche for writing the experiences of women within a patriarchal society which renders them as objects. It is here that Adebayo's forte as a writer who is committed to unearthing the plight of women is brought to bear in *Stay With Me*. By making Yejide narrate her own story, she (Yejide) emerges as what Agamben calls a *superstes* (witness).

According to Agamben (1999), "a witness (*superstes*) designates someone who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it" (p. 17). In the creation and enactment of Yejide as a witness, Adebayo joins her fellow feminine writers who create independent feminine characters to tell their narratives like Mara in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*.

It is crucial to note that it is this reduction of the value of women to childbearing apparatuses and machinery that ignited the feminist critiques of the 70's and 80's against the institution of motherhood (Nnaemeka, 1995). Feminists critiqued the institution of motherhood because they found it dangerous as it "continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free" (Nnaemeka, 1995). To put this differently, these feminists articulate what they term as "the philosophy of evacuation", thus, the total rejection and evacuation of the institution of motherhood by women, thereby rendering it null and void (Nnaemeka, 1995).

In her critique of motherhood in *Stay With Me*, Adebayo however does not call for a total rejection of the institution of motherhood for motherhood constitutes an integral aspect of the Nigerian society. This, she suggests

through the reunification of Yejide with the daughter in the concluding scenes of the novel. However, her staging of the plight of the childless woman is crucial as it does not only serve as a means of rethinking what constitutes womanhood and feminine experience within the African socio-cultural context but it also portrays the conundrums of female ontology and existence.

In her depiction of the conundrums of feminine existence, Adebayo also reflects on another issue postcolonial feminine writers articulate in their literary writings: the role of women in the sustenance and perpetuation of patriarchal oppression. Rather than becoming a tower of comfort and encouragement, the in-law becomes a figure of oppression and terror. Yejide's in-law's attempts to even console her are described as having no "warmth" while "her words sat in... Yejide's stomach, cold and hard, where a baby should have been (p. 41). As in Nwapa's *Efuru*, in her anxious quest for grandchildren, Yejide's in-law subjects her to emotional torture and abuse. In the excerpt above which stages the encounter between Yejide and her in-law, the in-law's views reinforce patriarchal norms of gender roles, thereby becoming a symbol of oppression within *Stay with Me*. In the process, the in-law parrots traditional anxieties about feminine infertility.

Unlike her fellow feminine characters (Kaye in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Mama Beatrice in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and Penyin in Yankah's *Dear Blood* (2016) who help to emancipate their fellow women from patriarchal subjugation, marginalisation and bondage, Adebayo, like Nwapa, employs the in-law to show that oppression within a patriarchal system is not only associated with men. This depiction of the in-law is not surprising. As observed by Mutunda (2007), female writers are not only

concerned with male-female oppression which arises as a result of the underlining power relations which exist within and create the oriental Self/Other relationship in a patriarchal system, they are also concerned with female-female oppression which not only reinforces patriarchal oppression, but undermines and subverts feminist attempts at advocating for liberation and emancipation. Yejide is therefore reminiscent of Aunt Nabou in Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter* who is portrayed as a diabolical character who causes the downfall of Aissatou's marriage.

This form of ill-treatment and pressure from society causes women psychological torture and mental pains. In other words, these treatments do not only put the women under duress, but also affect their psyche and may be detrimental to their health and emotional wellbeing and stability. Such actions by the society produce negative "affect" such as despair, guilt, and shame which stem from the recognition and awareness of their status within their society. Thus, characters like Yejide do not only feel unfulfilled as a result of the fact that the joys of motherhood have eluded them (Nnoka et al., 2022), but also risks losing her marriage to another woman. In fact, her expression of such emotional torture is seen in the tears she sheds during the encounter with the in-law. Such actions by in-laws and society (insults, insinuations) though not violent in nature have the tendency of affecting the psyche of characters like Yejide.

As succinctly put by trauma expert and psychologist Laura Brown, "the traumatogenic effects of oppression ...are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the moment but ...do violence to soul and spirit" (cited in Craps and Buelens, 2008, p.3). Yejide is made to realise

that her childlessness is a mark, a signifier of her status within the society, by which she must bear till she attains the fruit of the womb. For such women whose childlessness has been made into a daily reminder, their suffering and mental agony and anguish are laid bare. Thus, for such characters, “current hurt, future hurt and past hurt collapse into an always already ongoing injury that is embedded in their lives with such constancy it feels like a metaphysical inevitability” (Bost, Bruce and Manning, 2019).

The survival of Yejide’s marriage as a monogamous one is dependent on her ability to have children. It is not surprising therefore that the mother-in-law tells her:

This life is not difficult, Yejide. If you cannot have children, allow my son to have some with Funmi. See, we are not asking you to stand up from your place in his life. We are just saying you should shift, so that someone else can sit down...You have had my son between your legs for more than two months, and still your stomach is flat. Close your thighs to him, I beg of you. We all know how he feels about you. If you don’t chase him away, he won’t touch Funmi. If you don’t, he will die childless. I beg you, don’t spoil my life. He is my first son, Yejide. I beg you in the name of God (p. 41).

The point to note in the above excerpt is the social pressure on the childless woman. Yejide in this instance suffers marital instability and the threat of sharing her spouse with another woman, thus the possibility of being relegated to the periphery within her own marriage is brought to light. This frightens Yejide because it will mean the repetition of her mother’s peripheral status in her father’s polygamous empire. Yejide’s traumatic situation can be

understood within the context of psycho-feminism. As Horney (1933) argues, societal expectations and cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping women's experiences of motherhood" (p. 68). Yejide is not only marginalised in her own marriage; she becomes a subjugated being who must make way for another woman to dominate her marriage. Adebayo, within this context, paints Yejide's condition in two sad ways: as an outcast within her own marriage and by extension an outcast within the society. This act of becoming an outcast by virtue of her childlessness, foreshadows the impending future that awaits Yejide in her old age should she fail to give birth: as a woman who lost her marriage to another woman and as a woman who dies as an outcast, a bane to society's existence.

This impending fate is highlighted by Tabong and Adongo's (2013) observation that "among the Ekiti of Southwestern Nigeria, infertile women are treated as outcasts, after they die, and their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town with those of people experiencing mental ill-health" (p.8). However, it is also important to note that on the basis of socialisation, women come to believe that pregnancy and having children is not only an accomplishment but a badge of honor. This pressure not only makes women search for alternative modes of childbirth, but also drives them into doing the unthinkable.

In African societies, to be precise, this social pressure forces women to resort to other means (specifically the supernatural) by which they can give birth. This is because the belief in the supernatural and metaphysical beings as having the ability to intervene in the human world with wonders and miracles is integral to both the African and Christian culture (Greene, 1991). This belief

is evident in Adebayo's *Stay With Me* already in Yejide's reference to the Judeo-Christian God. It is this belief coupled with the intensity of the social pressure to give birth which makes Yejide visit a prophet who makes her breastfeed a goat:

He tugged at the front of my blouse. "Breastfeed the child". After he whispered those, it was natural for me to reach behind my back and unhook the ivory lace bra I wore. To lift up my blouse and push up my bra cups. To sit on the ground with my legs stretched out, squeeze my breast and push the nipple to the open mouth in my arms" (p.45)

As reflected in the above quotation, Yejide's desire and longing to be a mother (and by extension become a woman, by society's standards) makes her vulnerable as she falls victim to the whims and caprices of Prophet Josiah. In the excerpt, we are presented with a vulnerable Yejide who by virtue of societal pressure and demands goes to the extent of breastfeeding a goat.

Condensed in this scenario is Adebayo's reflection on the impact and effect of such societal pressure on women. It not only makes them vulnerable, but also drives them to resort to extreme ends and measures just to attain childbirth. Her vulnerability is thus made bare and therefore leads to exploitation by charlatans who parade as messengers of God or seers and prophet. Such women become or serve as prey or end up being exploited sexually by religious charlatans. In the end, Prophet Josiah assures Yejide that "even if no man comes near you this month, you will be pregnant" (p. 45). This assertion, however, is proven otherwise as she does not become pregnant on account of the given prophecy. Thus, Prophet Josiah is hereby exposed as a charlatan, and nothing but one who exploits the vulnerable. He therefore

echoes the prophet Jero in Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* (1963) and the "men of God" in Amma Darko's *Not without Flowers* (2007) who employ intrigues and tricks to deceive unsuspecting and vulnerable individuals, especially women. Like these writers, Adebayo is also interested in unveiling how religion becomes a means and tool for manipulating the vulnerable as well as depicting the modus operandi of these tricksters disguised as prophets.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that Adebayo depicts the plight of the childless woman in *Stay with Me*. However, Adebayo's forte as will become apparent in the next section, lies in her contesting the notion of childlessness which is not raised in Nwapa's *Efuru*.

Adebayo's *Stay with Me* in Dialogue with Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

Since its birth into the African literary space, Nwapa's *Efuru* has emerged as a ground breaking text which has paved the way for the realisation of the feminine voice within what was a masculine dominated sphere (Jell-Bahlsen, 1995; Hogan, 1999). It immediately became the pacesetter for articulating feminine sensibilities as well as contesting existing patriarchal representations of women which had pervaded the African literary space. Several critics have lauded Nwapa's attempt at creating a woman whose worth is beyond her fecundity (Jell-Bahlsen, 1995; Osinubi, 2014) thereby contesting society's notion of women as apparatuses for childbirth and reproduction and showing alternative possibilities for the realisation of the potentials of the woman. Despite this success, however, Nwapa's *Efuru* is fraught with a fundamental limitations. The novel leaves intact the perception that women are the sole cause of childlessness. Simply put, this oversight seems to reinforce the view traditional view the novel seeks to challenge: that the

childless woman is not only made synonymous with bareness but is the cause of childlessness and is therefore relegated to the margins of the society. This is particularly evident in Efurú's attempt to encourage the husband to marry a second wife:

Eneberi, I am thinking of getting a second wife. For you. "Why?" Gilbert asked surprised. You know why. This is the fourth year of our marriage and I have not had an issue for you. We have lived happily these years. And I am worried. If we get another wife, a young girl, she will have children for you and I will love the children because they are your own children (p. 65).

It is obvious from the extract that Efurú suggests polygamy to the second husband (Gilbert) because she has not been able to conceive his seed. Within the excerpt, Nwapa portrays Efurú as a loving wife who thinks about the husband as she is willing to make him marry another woman in order for him to be able to have children. Thus, Efurú is seen as considerate, loving and accommodating as she wishes to see the continuity of the husband's lineage (Jell-Bahlsen, 1995). Here we find womanism at play; Efurú learns to negotiate the challenges and opportunities available in her culture.

What is problematic, however, is the characterisation of Efurú as the cause of childlessness as well as the novel's silence on other possible causes of childlessness in the marriage. To wit, childlessness in *Efurú* is equated to a woman's problem. Thus, in *Efurú*, the shame and onus of childlessness rests on Efurú. This suggests that though *Efurú*'s feminist ethos is to articulate the potentials of the woman outside the confines of fecundity, the novel's failure to complicate childlessness or infertility beyond the woman haunts the text.

I will submit that it is this specific politics of blame within the African conjugality space that Adebayo attempts to dismantle and contest. Specifically, by resorting to polygamy as the solution to her childlessness, Efuru encourages the tradition of blaming the woman as the main cause of childlessness in marriages. This is so because rather than insisting on quizzing the possible cause of childlessness within her conjugal space, Efuru proffers polygamy as other solutions, thereby reiterating and reinforcing societal stereotypes and conventions regarding the woman's body as a problem. By so doing, Efuru's actions raise two problems: first, by failing to contest this notion, she becomes complicit in the reproduction of the ideologies that continue to suppress and oppress women in the order of things. Secondly, proffering of polygamy as a solution does not only suggest that the woman's body is a problem but becomes a means to an end and a depiction of her interpellation by patriarchal ideology; that the only way to solve or escape the blame of childlessness is through polygamy. I argue that it is this notion that Adebayo contests by pointing to other causes of childlessness other than the woman as a way of redressing the cultural bias against women.

Unlike Nwapa's *Efuru*, there is a conscious attempt in *Stay with Me* not only to indicate the cultural bias against barren women but, more importantly, to expose the falsity of this cultural attitude. So, when Yejide manages to convince people that she is pregnant (even though it turns out she is suffering from pseudocyesis) one of her clients points out the implications of her pregnancy. First, it puts her enemies to shame. Secondly, and most importantly, it contests the view that the woman's body is a problem:

Congratulations, my sister. Those men, they don't understand, but thank God all your enemies have been put to shame. *Every time they will be blaming the woman and sometimes it is their own body that is the problem.* She hugged me tightly as if we were teammates in some unspoken game and I had just scored a winning goal against the opposing side (p. 53)

The woman's utterance is not only a recognition of the cultural bias against women, but a reflection of the woman as the sole cause of childlessness. In other words, she articulates what Butler terms the "differential allocation" of recognition (Butler, 2004)—recognition of who is the cause of childlessness and who is not. By this observation, the woman draws our attention to the fact that within the Yoruba patriarchal society, there is a differential allocation of culpability or responsibility with regard to the cause of childlessness within the conjugal sphere. This is so because the African context of socialisation is framed around gender roles and the superiority of the male gender over the other. This differential allocation of recognition is hinged on the premise that the society recognises the man as an always already viral or potent being, capable of making the woman pregnant and at all times. This falsely implies that with regards to childbirth within the African sphere, the onus lies on the woman. This may be partly be due to the shrouding of the woman's body in mystery.

As observed by Masenya (2019), African proverbs pertaining to women and fertility are embedded in metaphysical descriptions (deification of the woman). Thus, though these descriptions are essential in highlighting the African society's view of women as important beings in society, the resort to

mythical and metaphysical descriptions also suggest that the woman's body has always been a mystery that has eluded society. The result is that its system and ways of production and being has been a source of contemplation and an issue society has struggled to grapple with. Therefore, by pointing to the body politics in the above quotation, Yejide's client not only draws our attention to the cultural burden and bias against women, but also depicts the woman's role and status within the society.

The woman in her utterance, however, does not only point to the differential allocation of recognition within the patriarchal system but, most importantly, she contests the notion that the woman's body is a problem. By asserting that "sometimes it is their own body that is a problem", she not only emerges as Adebayo's mouthpiece in contesting the societal notion of the woman's body as a problem; she also points to other causes of childlessness within marriage: the man. Read from this tangent, then, the woman's articulation becomes Adebayo's means of asserting that the cause of childlessness within the conjugal space may not necessarily be the fault of the woman. Put differently, her suggestion does not only contest the view that the woman's body is a problem; it also suggests that the cause of childlessness within the marriage, is the husband.

This daring suggestion by the woman is important because it shifts the blame of childlessness onto the man; it also disarms patriarchy. Through her provocative insinuation of the man's body as the possible cause of childlessness, she highlights the social bias against women in terms of recognition, and also deconstructs the woman centered approach to Yoruba conception of childlessness within the marriage. This suggestion, then, is

daring because the woman contests society's notion of the "man" as an always potent being. This contestation is essential as it disarms and dismantles the notion of phallic masculinity. This is so because the very foundations of patriarchal societies exist on the ideological conception of man as "penetrating, outward thrusting, forging ahead into virgin territory, opening the way, swordlike, able to cut through, able to clear or differentiate, strong, erect" (Haddon, 1988, cited in Amisah-Arthur, 2014).

To contest such notions and ideology, then, constitutes Adebayo's refutation of the patriarchal institution itself; as an institution which to borrow Ahmed's (2002) felicitous phrase "violates and fixes others within regimes of difference" and is therefore crucial in her axial rethink of such notions of man, and masculinity. In other words, if society thinks that by virtue of being masculine a man is always potent, then it should think otherwise. Here, man is decentered and deconstructed as the character who escapes the blame of childlessness within the African conjugal space. Thus, Adebayo not only renders Akin impotent in order to suggest the need to rethink childlessness within African societies but also as a way of rejecting the notion of the phallic man.

The client's assertion also points out the need for women solidarity in combating societal norms and stereotypes which relegate them to the margins. By portraying Yejide's pregnancy as a win for all women, she not only highlights the plight of women in society but also the importance of women solidarity in the face of oppression. This, Adebayo suggests through the deployment of the term "teammates" to suggest that the battle for liberation from such subjugation and torture as well as the struggle against such

dominating, devastating stereotypes is a common cause for all women. Adebayo in this vein joins her fellow feminine writers who call for women solidarity as a means of empowering women and disarming the oppressive arm of Patriarchy.

Like Kabria in Darko's *Faceless*, Aunty Ifeoma in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, who share the sentiments of their fellow women and also encourage them to escape patriarchal subservience and bondage, she shares in Yejide's joy and shows the potential of her pregnancy. Adebayo therefore emerges as a writer who articulates feminist concerns. As argued by Chukwuma: "[f]eminism means ... a rejection of inferiority and a shining for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, and effectual, and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity (cited in Ifechelobi, 2014).

As previously asserted, the contestation of the woman as the cause of childlessness is at the heart of Adebayo's novel. This is explored in the second and third sections of the novel where our views about the nature of the relationship between Yejide and Dotun are shown. The initial part of the novel suggests, that Yejide herself believes that either she or Dotun seduced the other. However, when Dotun finally drops the bombshell that he had been contracted by Akin, his brother, to make her pregnant, the nature of the relationship is now redefined and the issue of betrayal becomes prominent. It emerges, then, that Yejide is not to be blamed at all. In fact, Akin had known all along that he was infertile and therefore incapable of making Yejide pregnant. This revelation is central to Adebayo's contestation of the childless woman as a failure. She radically shifts the blame onto Akin. However, as a

result of the societal conception of the man as virile, Akin's in-laws do not at any point consider the possibility that he could be the problem. Dotun's revelation also clarifies the cause of Femi's death. Akin killed her to hide his impotence and therefore maintain his false image of masculinity. In the next section, I shall discuss Adebayo's solution to the problem.

Orality, Storytelling, and Rethinking Childlessness and Masculinity in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*,

As the discussion in chapter two shows, Nwapa contexts cultural representation of the barren woman as a failure by crafting strong and financially independent women who succeed in other areas of life other than childbearing. In other words, Nwapa broadens the criteria for defining a woman. Adebayo supplements Nwapa's views by focusing on traditional forms of socialisation as the site for redressing the biased attitude towards the childless woman.

The pertinence of orality, particularly oral narratives in African literature has been widely acknowledged (Essuman, ResCue, and Yeboah, 2021; Yankah, 1989). Oral narratives continue to frame or function as "narrative, proverbs", conceptual, and theoretical sites for exploring African experiences, philosophies, and socialites. In other words, oral narratives are not just cultural markers or traditional rhetorical forms of narrations of the self. In recent African novels, like *Stay with Me* written by women, orality, especially oral narratives have become the site of intense criticisms and reformulation. Rather than reading oral narratives as sites of cultural values and instruments of education, writers like Adebayo alert us to the insidious ways oral narratives function as conveyors of patriarchal values inimical to

both men and women. Writers like Adebayo are interested in ways by which orality, especially tales serve as arenas for interpellation and indoctrination, as well as perpetuation of ideologies that not only place burdens and limitations on individuals, but also have drastic consequences on the psyche of the individual. Therefore, Adebayo shows that Akin's conduct can only be understood within the context of the tale about tortoise and his wife.

The tale revolves around Ijapa the tortoise and his wife Iyannibo. Their happy marriage is beset with Iyannibo's bareness. As a solution, they entreated "Eledomare for a child for many years but none came" (p. 215). As a result, Iyannibo became emotionally distraught. She also became a laughing stock in her community: "Iyannibo cried every day. Everyday people ridiculed her wherever she went, pointing fingers at her wherever she went in the market" (p. 215) Tired of seeing his wife cry, Ijapa embarked on a journey to:

"a faraway land where there was a powerful Babalawa. After listening to Ijapa's request, the Babalawa prepared a meal and put it in a calabash for Ijapa to take it back to his wife. The assurance was that, once Ijapa's wife consumes the food, she would get pregnant. However, the solution came with a warning; Ijjapa himself must not taste the meal at all or open the calabash before he gets home" (p.218).

However, Ijapa was unable to keep to this promise and so, after tasting the meal, he suddenly realised that he had become pregnant: "His stomach was as big as a woman who was pregnant for nine months" (p. 217). So he decided to run back over the 5 mountains and four rivers that he had crossed to Babalawa. The most important scene on this issue is seen in Akin's narration

of the story of the tortoise to his daughter, Rotimi, a story he had been told by the mother as a child: Moomi often began each tale with a saying.

For this story, she always started by saying: “*Olomo lo l’aye*—He who has children owns the world” (p.215). Akin realises the opening formula to his mother’s story encapsulated a false ideology on masculinity and the place of children in a marriage. The tale shows in traditional African societies, the medium of education and socialisation is orality. The opening line of the tale was used by Moomi to educate Akin on what constitutes “ownership”, possession or Yoruba hegemonic masculinity.

By referring to the politics of ownership, the mother is educating him into thinking and reflecting on what constitutes masculinity and manhood. The mother in this instance, then echoes Achebe’s (1958) articulation in *Things Fall Apart* that a man was judged by his barns, his titles, and above all his family (especially children). Thus, we are made to see that a man’s recognition within the Igbo society is contingent on his ability to reproduce or father children. Thus, Adebayo supplements Achebe’s observation that the significance of proverbs lies in their ornamental value, by showing that proverbs also function as ideological sites for the transmission of cultural values that turn out to hurt people. So from a very young age, Akin was made to understand that, his status as a man will be dependent on his ability to have children.

It is this ideology that Adebayo attacks and contests in *Stay with Me*. As seen in the text, it is this ideology that drives the whole plot and makes Akin hide his impotence and shifts the blame of childlessness on the wife. Akin comes to this realisation that all along he acting the role set out his

mother's tale. Per the socialisation, Akin attains a form of consciousness which stems from his awareness of his status and gender role in the society. His status as a man is contingent on his role as a man. To prove otherwise would mean an attack on his manliness, a rejection of his gender role, and a consignment to a life of disgrace and apathy. Adebayo in this instance then reveals the impact of such socialisation on the male psyche. To be a man is to be the head of the family, a producer of children; therefore, to be deficient in this regard is to be less of a man. This implies an attack on the manhood and the patriarchal system. It is this system that reproduces and serves as a machinery that oppresses individuals by restricting them to defined biological and cultural roles. By deconstructing the tale and exposing the underlying ideology, Adebayo reflects on the impact of such ideology on the masculine figure within a hegemonically defined and structured socio-cultural African context.

Adebayo in this context also portrays the trauma and shame this has on the masculine individual. Given that most African literary texts have focused on pain of infertility in relation to women, Adebayo's exploration of the social pressure that the African man goes through as a result of impotence is a seminal contribution in African literature. Because traditionally the social prestige of the man is contingent on his ability to father children, impotence is a closely guarded secret. Where it becomes public knowledge, the man is ridiculed and euphemistically called a "woman". This fate of the impotent man is dramatised in Aidoo's *Anowa* where Kofi Ako is mocked and disparaged because of his impotence. Kofi Ako goes to all lengths to conceal his impotence by channeling his resources and energy into the slave trade by

buying and selling fellow Africans. In other words, he tries to redefine his culture's definition of a successful man.

As Connolly et al. (1991) point out, infertility in men is “a complex life-crisis, psychologically threatening and emotionally stressful” (Connolly et al., 1991). It is therefore not surprising that Akin resorts to all manner of means in an attempt to cure himself. As he admits, “I bought herbs and miracle drinks that purged me but did not harden my penis...I must have watched every pornographic movie that was available in Nigeria” (p. 239). This resort to other means unveils his distress and his desire to go to any length to reproduce and maintain his status within the society. Momentarily, he is able to shift the blame on Yejide and escape societal contempt and ridicule; he rides on the cultural bias against women to escape responsibility. It is here that Adebayo's ability to articulate the ethics of responsibility is unearthed. Through Akin's disgrace and awakening, Adebayo does not only contests traditional Yoruba masculinity, but also articulates the ethics of responsibility as a precondition for the existence of a harmonious mutual conjugal relationship. To say this differently, the novel suggests that it is only by accepting responsibility can genuine trust, love, and affection be built in a relationship. Thus, Adebayo shows that Akin's burden is synonymous to Yejide's suffering at the hands of the mother-in-law. Adebayo thus suggests that infertility in marriage has a devastating impact as individuals are subjected to ridicule. In their desperation to have children in order to fulfil sociocultural expectations, both men and women are likely to take desperate and abominable measures.

Akin's emotional struggle are also a reflection of his sense of shame as an impotent man who is incapable of producing his own offspring. His inner self is laid bare. Unlike the wife's situation, however, his situation reflects a mixture of both guilt and shame. He suffers a double reflex of shame and guilt for two reasons; first, because his inner nakedness as an impotent man or the source of childlessness in the marriage is exposed, and second because his lies to the wife have been uncovered. This difference between shame and guilt is made explicit by Morgan (2008):

...and while shame is akin to guilt, the two are not identical. We can be ashamed about what we have [or have not, we would add] done, just as we can feel guilty for what we have done, but in such cases, shame is about *who we are* for having done what we did; we are ashamed for having been the one who did what we did. Guilt is related but different. We feel guilty for having done what we did but not for being who we are. (pp.14–15, cited in Attwell, Pes, and Zinato, 2019).

It is this sense of guilt and shame as existential consciousness that makes Akin to avoid the wife's gaze upon being questioned as he "covered his face with both hands as though he could not bear my gaze" (Adebayo, p. 230). He is powerless at the moment against the wife as his character and actions are brought to light. It is now obvious, that his whole marriage "had been built on a lie" (p. 230). The closest Nwapa comes to their insight is seen in *One is Enough* where a nouveau rich Amaka confronts Obiora and her mother. But the flaunting of her wealth does not rise to the level of a radical undermining of masculinity as we see in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that Adebayo is interested in confronting and challenging dominant discourse and stereotypes. The overarching ethic which she tries to destabilise and overthrow in *Stay with Me* is societal biases against women and the blame for childlessness in conjugal spaces. The totaling effect, is achieved, in not only her overthrowing of masculinity, but also her rethinking of societal norms of parenting and fatherhood as exemplified in Akin's relationship with his daughter.

She said it two more times before she went back to sleep, as if she knew that I needed to hear that word again. Each time she said it, it was like an absolution. That simple word lifted the crushing weight of Dotun's letters and all and all my mistakes just a bit. I felt as though she'd given me a gift, something almost divine because it was perfectly timed. She'd claimed me as her father (p.215).

Herein lies Adebayo's rethinking and redefinition of parenting and fatherhood. By calling Akin "father", Rotimi does not only accept him as a fatherly figure but recognises his role in her life. Her calling Akin, 'father' suggests that fatherhood is not limited to the confines of paternity. Contrary to the societal conceptualisation of fatherhood as one that directly reproduces a child, Adebayo suggests that fatherhood transcends this ideology. To Adebayo, fatherhood encompasses more than reproduction. It includes the catering and nurturing of children as well as the acceptance of responsibility. Also, though oblivious of her parentage, Rotimi calls Akin 'father', thus, drawing our attention to the fact that parenting goes beyond reproduction and as such involves the ethics of responsibility. Here, parenting is redefined not on the basis of biological, direct relationships, but on the basis of love, care,

and responsibility. In other words, it is Akin's ability to cater for Rotimi and show her the care and love of a parent which causes the child to call him father. Her calling him father, regardless of the fact that he is not her biological father is Adebayo's means of suggesting alternative modes of childbearing and parenting (such as surrogate parenting as well as adoption of children) within the African socio-cultural context. She therefore affirms Warrington's (2013) observation that surrogate parenting in Africa not only challenges the parental status quo but also expands the frontiers of parenting in Africa. Thus, parent here does not refer to one's biological parents but to individuals who serve as fatherly figures or parental figures and guardians who play exceptional roles in an individual's upbringing, which is why Akin retells the story told him to Rotimi in a different manner:

I never began the story with Moomi's Olomolo l'aye saying. I'd believed her once, I'd accepted-like the tortoise and his wife-that there was no way to be in the world without an offspring. I had thought that having children who called me Baba would change the very shape of my world, would cleanse me...And though I told Rotimi the story many times, I no longer believed that having a child was equal to owning the world (p. 35).

Akin's intentional deletion of the proverb is Adebayo's way of calling for different forms of socialisation within the African society. As an adult, Akin now recognises not only the dangers and harm Moomi's education has caused him, but also the need for re-education. Thus, in this manner, the younger generation will be educated not on the basis of the old ideology, but with a new form of knowledge, which is out of experience. Thus, through this

education, the younger generation can grow up to assess an individual not on the basis of gender roles, but through individual competence and being. In this instance, Akin not only points to the significance and importance of socialisation in the home, but also suggests that it is the bedrock of every individual's make up. In this light, he echoes psychoanalytical perspectives of the home as the seminal foundation of every individual's psychological makeup (Tyson, 2006). Thus, Adebayo envisions the generation yet to come as individuals who will be accommodating and be different in their approaches to subjectivity, and the socialisation of recognition.

Like Ayi Kwei Armah in his debut novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Chimamanda in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adebayo imagines, and articulates the hope bestowed on the younger generation, that they will engender discourses that will enhance rather subjugate people. Thus, Adebayo imagines a society that will not be built on biases based on gender, but on inclusivity and equality for all.

It would be wrong to assume from this analysis that Adebayo abandons or calls for the rejection of culture or tradition. On the contrary, she suggests a form of living that recognises that tradition is always under change and it is those who recognise this that can really be called modern. It is therefore not surprising that Akin edits the tale by his mother. This perhaps, may be Adebayo's means of suggesting that in her attempt to challenge the existing status quo, she is not calling for a total eradication or overhaul of culture. Her (Adebayo's) maintenance of the tale as a discursive form suggests that like her predecessors Achebe, Okpewho, and Yankah, she views the African culture as essential to the formation of our identity and historical consciousness. By

editing Moomi's tales, Adebayo suggests that certain aspects of our culture must be modified not only to meet the ever-changing needs of our society which arise in time, but also to create an inclusive and egalitarian society.



CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION, SUMMARY, KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The previous chapter examined the representation and contestation of the childless woman in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. This final chapter of the thesis focuses on the following: summary of the objective of the study, summary of the entire work, key findings, implication of the study, and recommendations for further study.

Summary of the Objective

The aim of the study was to examine how Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me* represent and contest the traditional phenomenon of the childless woman as a failure. Consequently, the study drew on Womanism and Psycho-feminism as the main theoretical frameworks. Womanism was chosen because it provides an Afro-centric perspective on feminism which is considered too Eurocentric and because the texts under study are written by Africans. I found womanism appropriate as it socialised the experiences and subjectivities of African women. I also drew on Psycho-feminism because it provides a broader context for understanding cultural attitudes toward childlessness.

The study was structured into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study and focuses on the following key issues; background to the study, thesis statement, purpose of the study, delimitation, research questions, and justification for the choice of the texts. Overall, chapter one sets out to identify

the gap in the literature, suggest a solution to the gap identified, and place the entire work within a scholarly and dialogical context.

Chapter two focused on the literature review and the theoretical framework. The reviews showed that while the three texts have been variously discussed, the specific issue of how these texts contextualise the representation of the childless African woman has not been explored. Finally, the chapter also elaborates on womanism and psycho feminism as theoretical frameworks.

Chapter three was devoted to answering research question one. It focused specifically on *Efuru* and *One is Enough*. The analysis showed that in these texts, Nwapa is concerned with challenging childlessness as a failure by positioning women as successful in other areas of life. Chapter four was devoted to answering research question two. It therefore focused on the representation and contestation of childlessness as failure in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. The chapter also showed that Adebayo takes the contestation of the childless woman to a radically new level by relocating the problem to the man as impotent. She also attacks oral forms of ideologies or promoters of the false conception of childlessness in African societies.

Implication of the Thesis

The findings of the study have a number of implications. First, that conjugality continues to be an important issue in African literature. Secondly, the representation and contestation of the childless woman as a failure takes different forms. As the study has shown, there seems to be a gradual shift from an emphasis on success and independent women, to a critique of socio-cultural foundation and socialisation as the problem. Following Adebayo, the findings

imply that perhaps, scholarly attention should be focused on texts that explore male impotence as a form of critique on childlessness in African marriages.

Key Findings

The key findings of this study relate to the two (2) research questions that guided the study.

- i. In what way is the childless woman (re)presented in Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981); the study reveals that Nwapa presents her childless woman in the Igbo culture as an object of scorn and derision. This is exemplified in the fate of the characters, Efuru in *Efuru* and Amaka in *One is Enough*
- ii. The study also found that Nwapa challenges or contests the cultural representation of the childless woman as a failure by constructing a strong, fearless, financially independent, and successful woman. The analysis showed that the success of the heroines in *Efuru* and *One is Enough* is Nwapa's way of contesting traditional views of the childless woman as a failure.
- iii. Adebayo contests the view that the woman's body is always a problem. It turns out in the story that Akin, Yejide's husband is rather infertile and this constitute the epiphany in the novel and it dismantles the traditional representation of the man as always already fertile.

Recommendations

The present study focused only on the representation and contestation of childlessness in Nwapa and Adebayo's texts. The analysis, key findings, and implications of the study provide indications or directions for future studies. I therefore recommend the following:

1. A comparative study of Nwapa and Adebayo's representation and contestation of the childless woman.
2. A broad and expansive analysis of African texts across time and region that pays attention to emerging forms of conjugality such as LGBTQ.



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