The New African Woman: The Quest for an Independent Self in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981)

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Submission: 29/02/2024 Acceptance: 14/10/2024 Pulication: 15/12/2024

Abstract:

In Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough,* the protagonist Amaka isengaged in a quest for independence and self-discovery. She is first introduced as oppressed, childless, and being humiliated by her family in law. However, she ends triumphant; first, as a mother and later as a successful business woman. This paper explores the heroine's journey for emancipation where the writer, Nwapa, made her female character standas a heroine, the type described by Joseph Campbell's in *The Herowith a Thousand Faces*. Our analysis in this paper has used Joseph Campbell's concepts in relation to the hero's journey focusing on the different stages such as: the "Call to Adventure", "Meeting the Mentor", and the "Return". Along her journey, Amaka faced difficulties and problems; yet, she

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EISSN :2602-5353 / ISSN : 2170-0583

finallyemerged as aheroine who has successfully overcome all the imposed societal norms and expectations of the patriarchal system. At the end, she achieved a "self-actualization", becoming economically independent and a significantvocal member of her society to incarnate the new African woman, expressing Flora Nwapa's voice.

Key words: Heroine, Journey, Economic Independence, Self-actualization, New Woman

Introduction:

Flora Nwapa was the first African Nigerian woman to publish her works in English. Her creative writings highlight the distinct image of the African womanhood. She sees herself as anAfrican woman writer whose artistic responsibility is to re-create a positive image of an African woman portraying her as a heroine with an audible voice that is actively resisting male subjugation. In the novel *One is Enough,* the author narrates the story of a woman who struggles to lead an economic independentlife. Nwapa reveals the self-actualization of women in general and of African women in particular; using her female character. The Nigerian critic Mary E. Kolawole Modupe well expressed this when she states,

> [Nwapa] has identified women's voices as voices of social transformation, self-recovery, self definition and this she does through collective self-portraits. Centering gender issues has enabled her to raise new questions and to interrogate conventional images of African women's voicelessness. Reifying the role of women in diverse cultural settings and socio-political situations has foregrounded the changing nature of African women's consciousness as opposed to the prevalent Eurocentric and "malestream" depictions[1].

As the above quote shows, this paper explores Nwapa's new portrayal of African woman raising new social questions to interrogate African patriarchy

system. She invests her female character with heroism features. To explore this heroism investiture, we refer to Joseph Campbell's concepts to outline the importance of the emergence of the New African Woman.

Joseph Campbell in his work entitled *The Hero with Thousand Faces* (1949), outlines an archetype of the "Hero's Journey". The hero is "the protagonist, or the central character, whose primary purpose is to separate from the ordinary World and sacrifice him-self for the service of the journey at hand-to answer the challenge, complete the quest and restore the Ordinary World's balance"[2]. The hero's journey typically consists of several stages including: "Departure", "Initiation" and "Return". Each stage represents a phase in the hero's transformation journey. Campbell's concept of Departure, also called separation, includes the step of "The Call to Adventure", which is a key element in the hero's journey framework. It marks the beginning of his transformative journey. The "Call" can come in various forms, such as an opportunity, a challenge, a discovery, or a significant event that sets him/her on the path of adventure. It symbolizes the hero's departure from his/her ordinary world and sets the stage for his/ her personal and heroic growth. Second Initiation, refers to the stage in the hero's journey where the protagonist embarks on the journey, leaving behind the ordinary world and entering into a realm of challenges and transformation. "Meeting the Mentor" is a pivotal moment within this stage where the hero meets a wise and old figure who helps him/ her to gain confidence, insight, advice, training or magical gifts to overcome the initial fears and face the threshold of the adventure[3]. Furthermore, "Return" is the final Reward earned on the hero's journey[4]. It involves the hero returning to his/ her ordinary world after undergoing profound transformations and completing his/ her quest. This stage emphasizes the hero's ability to bring back the experience, knowledge or treasure gained from his/ her journey to create positive changes in his/ her own community or society.

The female protagonist journey in *One is Enough* aligns with Joseph Campbell's hero's journey in several ways. Amaka undergoes a "Call to Adventure" as she faces and challenges societal expectations. The "Call" occurs as she starts her quest and leaves the ordinary everyday life. She steps into unfamiliar territories, challenging traditional gender roles. Throughout her journey, she faces trials, meets mentors, and experiences herself-discovery. Ultimately, her "Return" to her homeland makes her be a new woman having self-reflective of herself and her place in her society.

1- Amaka: The "Unconventional" Woman

Amaka, stands asa prototype of a contemporary Nigerian woman. She is portrayed as an educated, strong and determined woman who represents the younger generation of post-independent Nigeria. She embodies the modern archetype woman who skillfully negotiates her position beyond the margins of power and confidently expresses and asserts her authority. All through the story, she is presented as a strong and individualized woman who is determined to break away from the restrictions of traditional gender roles and cultural obligations. At the opening of the novel, Amaka is portrayed as a traditional figure, appearing as a submissive and dependent woman to fit the traditional/ conventional gender role

> Amaka had always wanted to be married. She envied married people and when at last Obiora decided to marry her, she was on top of the world. She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish and children to crown the marriage[5].

When being married, Amaka does everything possible to succeed inher wifehood at Obiora's home. Her relationship with her husband is full of mutual

love and respect even if Amaka fails to give birth to a child in the six years of marriage. Her first social problem as a married woman is her repeated confrontation with her mother-in-law, who humiliates and mistreats her because of her infertility.As a barren wife, Amaka cannot expect to be respected by her family-in-law. "'Mother, forgive me', she heard herself saying. It will not happen again. I should not have replied to what you said. I am very sorry, mother. Do not throw me away, mother"[6]. The preceding quote illustrates Amaka's condition of being submissive and experiencing humiliation.

However, Nwapa also depicts Amaka as a strong-willed and defiant woman by making her stand against her husband patriarchal practices. Amaka rebelliously places herself outside the context of family violence and chooses to fight back. On one occasion, Amaka defends herself by hitting Obiora on the chest with a hammer. She confronts him and rejects the role of the victimized wife by battering her husband in a self-defensive attack[7]. Her reaction is not accepted at all, for it is believed that "A woman who tries to win an argument over her husband was regarded as 'he' woman"[8]. Through Amaka, Nwapa shows the unfair mistreatment of the African women in their family and in their society. Through this incident she insists that women should fight back for respect and not let their husbands humiliate or dominate them.

The end of Amaka's marriage to Obiora marks a turning point in her life and signals the beginning of her transformation that she will undergo through her journey. Nwapa makes her heroine an active woman who refuses mistreatment and humiliation and makes her leave "the place where" she has "suffered most"[9] and moves to Lagos "to start life again"[10]. The protagonistchooses to forge a new life for herself without the restrictions of a husband or a mother-in-law. She realizes that she is free and able to achieveher self-fulfillment. The narrator reveals that:

One thing was certain now, after the fight with Obiora is her self-fulfillment, she would leave and set up house somewhere. She would live a single and respected life. No one would point an accusing finger at her and call her a whore as her husband often had. She would find fulfillment, she would find pleasure, even happiness in being a single woman. The erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved[11].

The above passage shows that by leaving her marital home, Amaka symbolically escapes the diverse forms of oppression. She moves to Lagos to seek for better opportunities, looking for a successful carrier, and showing a determination to take in charge her future by herself.

2- "Departure" For an Economic Independence

Amaka's "Departure" to adventure can be seen in her decision to leave her marital home and her desire to seek for an economic independence and self-autonomy. "The Call to adventure" for Campbell, "is an atmosphere of irresistible fascination about the figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage, in the biography"[12]. The "Call" manifests itself when Amaka decides to end her marriage and starts a journey of self-discovery to assert her individuality. For Nwapa, this assertion can be attained through an economic independence. Therefore, she uses market-place as a means where women assert their agency and their economic independence to control their lives and decisions. Traditionally, the market-place was an exclusive reserve for women. According to Kamene Okonjo, "In traditional Igbo society marketing was the woman's domain … The *omu*, in her capacity as the head of the female side of the community, with her cabinet determined the rules and regulations under which the market —the domain of women —was to function"[13]. The women are actively

engaged in trade, including "attack trade", seeking more viable and more rapid routes for making profit and empowering economically themselves; so that, they will ultimately gain economic independence and then freedom from men. Florence Stratton, the market-place presented in *One is Enough*, is presented as the agentic or productive nature of African women. For us, Nwapa presents her female protagonist as a significant agent and share holder in the market forces and values of change and power. As it is stated in the novel, "It is through trade that Amaka is born-again to become the new woman that is educationally aware and economically astute, strong and powerful"[14].

According to Florence Stratton, it is with "Amaka's participation in the 'attack trade' during the war —purchasing commodities from Nigerian soldiers and selling them to fellow Biafrans —[…] makes her development commences"[15]. 'In the "attack trade", she rediscovered her capacities and all what she can accomplish. Flora Nwapa highlights the importance of attack trade in Amaka's self-development,

> The implication here is that it is through trade that Amaka is born again to become the new woman that is educationally aware and economically astute, strong and powerful. Furthermore, if Amaka received her "baptism" and "first sacrament" through Western education, it is by trading that she earns the requisite "confirmation" to become economically and socially empowered for her independence and fulfillment. And in this matter, even more than acquiring Western education, Nwapa's women gain economic and social prominence by engaging in trade as channels for promoting and advancing self-esteem, fulfillment, and absolute independence[16].

As Onwueme, Osonye Tess well formulated the central positions of women in the market place, Nwapa, too, empowers economically the female character so that she gains her independence from men. Thus, trade, including "attack trade",

aremore rapid means for making profit and empowering themselves economically[17]. Thanks to trade, then,Amaka gains control, power, place, voice and admiration in her community. Even though Amaka experienced humiliation, guilt, physical and emotional despair, the author showed it as positive.

In her quest for self-actualization, Amaka's "attack trade" serves as a powerful tool to assert her independence, strength and identity. Her financial autonomy in Lagos creates a disempowerment of male counterpart like her former husband Obiora and Father McLaid, thereby, challenging conventional gender roles and reshaping the narrative of women as silently oppressed victims under the dominance of men. In this context, Onwueme, Osonye Tess argues that In this new stage, the tables are turned over —and it is no longer men who control the power and value of the new market-place, but women. The paradigms have shifted. While the images of men become diminutive as they experience tragic loses in trade, power and position, the images of women become magnified as they celebrate their new profit in trade, power, and position[18].

In her novel, Nwapa employs the metaphor of "trade-attack" to reveal the underlying ideology of the market-place. Through this metaphor, she aims to reconstruct, reinterpret, and redefine the role of women and their power, particularly within the context of the Igbo marketplace and society.

In *One is Enough*, economic independence is given high priority by the author. It is defined as the means for women to regain freedom and power. If women empower themselves economically, according to Nwapa, they will gain independence from men. She reaffirms this position in her interview with Marie Umeh in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*: "I feel that every woman, married or single, must have economic independence"[19].

3- "Bottom Power": An Instrument of Female Empowerment

"Bottom Power", defined by Katrak Ketu H "as one type of exchange value where a woman gets paid for sexual services"[20], is considered as a source of power which women generally exploit in a male dominated society. In her article entitled *Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa*, the critic Katherine Frank states that "bottom power, sexual bargaining, prostitution are all woman's tool towards economic independence and selfhood"[21].

In *One is Enough*, Flora Nwapa explores the theme of sex workas another means of self-reliance and fulfillment for women. She uses it as a narrative tool to challenge, resist and rebel against social norms and patriarchal control over women's bodies. In this narrative the protagonist, Amaka uses the erotic power as a means to have power on men. This activity will allow her to gain money and control over her own body.

In Lagos, Amaka puts into practice "all that her mother taught her" and decides to abide by her advice. Her mother urged her to not hesitate to use men to achieve independence. It is very important to mention that Amaka's relationship with her mother can be seen as a representation of the "Meeting the Mentor" stage in the heroine's journey towards self-actualization. Her mother plays the role of the mentor by offering support, guidance, and wisdom to Amaka: "Her mother inoculates and immunizes Amaka against any form of identification and empathy for men, so that, like a good soldier, she can go into the battlefield to conquer and to win, without ever losing"[22]. Looking back at all her sufferings in Onitsha during her years as a wife Amaka reflects that "she did not realize how hurt she was until her eyes were opened in Lagos and she began to see what she could do as a woman, using her bottom power as they say in Nigeria"[23].

Amaka's first important person that she meets during her journey to Lagosis Alhaji, whom she meets through her sister's lover, a Permanent Secretary. He is the first man who helped her finds her sense of freedom and self-esteem as a woman. Her collaboration with him is very fruitful. She starts her successful

business journey by taking the help of Alhaji by taking the first contract by him. In fact, Amaka's friendship with Alhaji is only to receive contracts; there is no significant intimacy between them. It is narrated that "It was the Alhaji who had helped her get that first contract"[24]. Actually, Alhaji is instrumental in helping her get contracts. Through these contracts, she is able to become financially independent and rent her own apartment, buy a car, build a house in her hometown: "Amaka buys her freedom formally and legally by returning Obiora's dowry with her own hard-earned money"[25].

Amaka's second conquest is the man of God, Father McLaid (Izu, also an Igbo from Eastern Nigeria) whom she met through Adaobi and Mike. Her relation with him is even more profitable than the one with Alhaji. She uses him for fun and profit. In fact, Nwapa intends to say that women, in most cases, are forced to submit their bodies to men for different reasons, and the main one is that they want to prove that they are capable of securing a promising future for themselves.

Furthermore, Nwapa's novel offers some ironic parallels between prostitution and marriage. Prostitution is considered as a partial solution for women who are suffering in their marriages. Prostitution is not a choice for Amaka. It is a reaction against an oppressive patriarchal society which is punishing women for not producing a child. Prostitution, therefore, seems to be Nwapa's strategy to challenge and question prevailing social structures and norms. By portraying her protagonist engaged in sex work, Nwapa explores the theme of autonomy, empowerment and resistance against oppressive social constraints.

Florence Stratton perceives the strategy of prostitution as a valid method to achieve success within the cultural framework. She accurately views this tactic as a crucial element in Amaka's journey to establish her identity and secure a powerful position as a business woman. Working as a prostitute enabled Amaka

to discover her independence and value as a woman. When she met Alhaji and father McLaid, who played crucial roles in assisting her in securing contracts, with the income from these contracts, she achieves financial stability that enabled her to pay back the dowry to her former husband Obiora and validate their divorce.

Through the power of women's sexuality, Nwapa inverts the idea of prostitution as an indication of female inferiority and as a stereotypical image of women from the male perspectives by rejecting and subverting the status figures like Jagua Nana in *Juga Nana,* Iriyise in *Season of Anomy* and Wanja in *Petals of Blood.*Commenting on Nwapa's use of Bottom Power, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi explains that Flora Nwapa "revises this traditional, sexist opinion against women's use of eroticism to gain power. She rewrites the Nigerian novelist Cyprian Ekwensi's negative treatment of bottom power in *Jagua Nana* and *JuguaNana*'s *daughter*[26].

By using "bottom power" to negotiate for the power of acknowledgement and empowerment, Nwapa skillfully reshapes the stereotypical portrayal of women as oppressed and reverses the roles by making men the targets of victimization. Amaka manipulates male desire for her advantage. Each man however, becomes a victim of disempowerment by his own male demands and desires. Nwapa consistently argues that for Nigerian women to attain self-actualization and liberation, they must confront prevailing beliefs that their bodies are not under their own authority.

4- Motherhood and its Power: Becoming A "Complete Woman"

One of the aims to attain during her journey is to have children and never mind who the father is, as her mother recommends her, "[…] remember, make men friends and start thinking of having children. Marriage or no marriages, have children"[27]. Her mother has deeply influenced her and makes her follow the

extramarital practices to achieve her goals, to be a mother. She has instructed her to have male friends while waiting to get married and to have children: "I told you, four years ago, to leave him, go to other men and get pregnant. You are my daughter. We are not barren in our family, never".[28] She adds: "your children will take care of you in your old age. You will be very lonely then if you don't have children. As a mother you are fulfilled"[29].

Amaka's mother believes that a woman becomes only 'complete' when she gets married and bears children. She stresses the importance of 'self-determination and motherhood'. To uphold this belief, her mother keeps persuading her daughter to have children. The essence of her teaching, as Florance states it,is that female sexuality is a resource which a woman must exploit if she is to get what she wants in a male-dominated society[30]. Thus the influence of her mother makes her think that"The doctors are all wrong. I will have babies, boys and girls.She saw babies in her dreams.She was given both baby boys and baby girls in her dreams by unknown people. She did not reject them. She took them, cleaned them and put them in baby cots to sleep"[31].

Being a mother with her twins she felt a kind of victory over her society who considers her as an incomplete woman. They believed that she would end up childless, but now she has two sons. When her mother learns that her daughter is a mother of twins, she affirms: "whoever the father of the twins is a man […] Amaka is a woman, she is a mother, and that's all that matters right now." [32]

Transformation is fully accomplished when the new and strong Amaka refuses to marry the priest Father McLaid. While Amaka decides that one marriage is enough, she acknowledges fully the part that Father McLaid plays in transforming her life: "…I shall forever remain grateful to him for proving to the world that I am a mother as well as a woman"[33]. Amaka makes it clear that she will not marry the priest even though she enjoys being with him as her lover and father of her twin boys. She "had told him that she was not going to change her

mind. She cherished the relationship all right, but marriage, no. she was through with it. She might have considered it as a means of having children, but now that she had the twins, there was no way."[34]

Amaka refusal to marry Father McLaid can be considered as the most important element of the protagonist self-reliance. This refusal shows Nwapa giving freedom to her protagonist, liberating her from any social constraints. She makes the narrator declares: "she would find fulfillment, she would find pleasure, even happiness in being a single woman. The erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved"[35]. Here, the author stresses on the fact that a woman can be sufficient and free without being married.

At the end of the novel, it is the sage advice of Amaka's mother who stresses the value of financial independence that protects her when she returns to Onitsha as a wealthy and independent woman. She even makes kinship between women when she makes Amaka working with her mother's advice. The end of Amaka's journey makes her aligns with Joseph Campbell's concept of the Return phase in the hero's journey. Amaka's return to the village could symbolize her completion of the journey which marks her growth and transformation as a hero figure in the story.

5- Conclusion:

Through Amaka, Flora Nwapa portrays the African woman as a "new" woman challenging the social norms of the African society. The main female character is depicted as a strong woman facing theharsh system of patriarchy. The heroine, to a considerable extent, proves that a woman's position in the African society is not limited to amere house wives, an object of sex and procreation. By depicting Amaka as a strong, educated and industrious woman, Nwapa deconstructs the image of the traditional woman and constructs a new woman,

investing her with male characteristics, as strength, power and sexual appeal. She makes her worship trade and profit to stand as a modern and "new" woman as her counterpart, a man. She stands as a heroine even if her behavior does not fit the patriarchal social norms of gender roles. In *One is Enough,* Nwapa ends her story making her female character a liberated woman who avows her feminine side that stirred her to be an empowered woman living a full independent life.

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