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**The Ambivalence Of Womanhood in the Postcolonial Igbo Society: Case
study of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966)**

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother Oudina Fadila. My Arcturus that shines brighter than any star. Thank you so much for everything. Words can hardly describe my thanks and appreciation to you. You have been my source of inspiration, support and guidance. You have tough me to be unique, determined, and to believe in myself. Mum you are the light in my life.

I love you so much. Thank you for being my main source of support and my best friend.

To MY FATHER Abd Allah God have mercy on him whom I promised to dedicate this dissertation before he left this world. The loss of my father was the most traumatic event in my life I cannot forget the pain. Dad is and always will be my superhero. The loss of my father will always sting, but now everything that I do is in honor of him.

I keep thinking about you dad, even though it hurts. I'd give anything to relive those memories again. Everyday without you is hard on me, but I cannot do anything but think how much I wish you were here with me. There is a special kind of feeling when I think about you Dad, it's a pleasure to remember all the happy times we've had and your special fatherly care. There's a forever place for you within my heart. Missing you always.

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the paradoxes of womanhood for women in the postcolonial Igbo society as manifested through the protagonist of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. The main argument is that the concept of womanhood carries with it different ambivalent feelings for women as they grow up and struggle against social expectations. At some times, women are weak and vulnerable and can easily be subjected to sexism. At other times, women are capable of incredible strength and can be resilient and strong. In the case of Nwapa's *Efuru*, the female protagonist in the novel, is an example of a woman with strong feminine consciousness who lives within a postcolonial society that imposes a lot of expectations as well as barriers that women must accept. As a result, even though Efuru has a strong personality and is self-dependent, she finds herself entrapped within a patriarchal society that exerts limitations on women's lives and choices. In this regard, the study will use both the feminist theories and postcolonial approaches to study the concept of womanhood and its implications for African females whose communities are affected not only by patriarchal norms but also by the inherited forms of hegemony, subjugation and domination exercised upon them by Imperial powers. The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical discussion of the concept and its representation in African Literature. The second chapter will examine the concept of womanhood as a set of notions and roles that weaken women and reduce their sense of selfhood as manifested in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. In the third chapter, the focus is placed on aspects of womanhood that empower women and strengthen their sense of self-esteem.

Keywords

Womanhood – paradox- Feminine consciousness -postcolonialism -patriarchy.

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Introduction

Postcolonial literature serves as a testimony to the human condition, offering a reflection of the state of formerly colonized societies after achieving independence. It captures the multifaceted effects of colonial practices on various aspects of society, including oppression, social traditions, and women's status. In addition, postcolonial literature serves a vessel to show the unique experiences, culture, and aspects of the ex-colonized people that was unknown before the experience of colonization. This highlights the significance of literature as a powerful tool that fights and speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves.

In the realm of postcolonial literature, there are several authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nawal El Saadawi, Buchi Emecheta, etc. Among them is Flora Nwapa, with her first novel, *Efuru* (1966) which contributed to postcolonial literature by her postcolonial feminist discourse through investigating the concept of womanhood and its reflection of the unheard experiences of Igbo women.

Womanhood is a complex and diverse concept that encompasses the experiences, identities, and roles of individuals who are identified as women. It has its implications for both western feminism and postcolonial feminism. While many feminist theorists associate it with weakness and attack notions related to it such as femininity, marriage, and womanhood can still be empowering

Flora Nwapa is a notable figure in African literature. Her novel, *Efuru*, delves into the ambivalence of womanhood by exploring the life of the title character that lives in the Igbo society. Nwapa challenges the gender expectations and cultural beliefs held by Igbo society regarding women through depicting Efuru as she defies societal norms by defining marriage in

her own terms and seeking her own path to happiness and independence. Nwapa's work sheds light on the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society and emphasizes the importance of female empowerment and agency. In addition, *Efuru* exposes the oppressive gender expectations and limitations placed on women that negatively affect Efuru and weaken her at several instances. Nwapa questions the deeply rooted beliefs and stereotypes surrounding womanhood in Igbo society by doubting their beliefs and advocating for change.

Accordingly, this study aims at investigating the ambivalence of womanhood in postcolonial Igbo society as manifested through the protagonist of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. Efuru, the female protagonist in the novel, is an example of a woman with strong feminine consciousness who lives within a postcolonial society that imposes a lot of traditions that must be followed. As a result, even though Efuru has a strong personality and is self-dependent, she finds herself entrapped within a patriarchal society that exerts limitations on women's lives and choices. This is, for instance, shown through her obsession with the idea of being a mother.

The study, hence, attempts to answer several questions. The paramount question is how does womanhood influence the identity of the Igbo woman and the way she thinks about herself? Then, we try to figure out what qualities of womanhood do Igbo women manifest and how these qualities affect their sense of identity within their patriarchal community. The study will be conducted through an examination of the concept of womanhood from the standpoints of both Western feminism and postcolonial feminism. Western feminism allows us to explore the concept from a general framework. It provides a definition of the term and exposes the different controversies around notions related to it. Postcolonial feminism helps us understand the concept in relation to the unique experiences of woman as determined by not only gender identity but also by other facts such as race, ethnicity and exposure to imperialistic domination. The approach

of postcolonial feminism is used to analyze how gender roles and oppression are portrayed in post-colonial literary texts. In our case study, it will enable us to explore how Efuru's experiences are influenced by the continued oppressions of gender and social expectations.

The study will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter, entitled "The Ambivalence of Womanhood in Postcolonial female Literature: An Overview," will deal with the concept of womanhood from both feminist perspective and postcolonial one. The first section will discuss the definitions of the term womanhood by different feminists as well as their perception of the notions associated with it. The second section will relate the term womanhood to postcolonial literature. The final section will address the implications of the concept of womanhood in African literature expressed in different literary works.

The second chapter entitled "The Perceived Weakness of Womanhood," investigates the vulnerabilities and challenges associated with womanhood. The first section will tackle the overlapping concepts of femininity and circumcision by addressing the cultural practices that impact women's bodies. Subsequently, the second section will explore the institution of marriage and its effects on women's social status. Lastly, the third section will examine the burden of motherhood and the responsibility placed on women through societal expectations.

The third chapter, entitled "Womanhood as Empowering in *Efuru*," comprises three sections that will analyze the empowering aspects of womanhood as depicted in the novel. The first section will explore the protagonist's journey in breaking the cycle of Igbo traditions by revealing her resistance against societal expectations. The second section will examine how *Efuru* challenges the Igbo perception of a woman's body by valuing her beauty, intelligence, and success. The third section will shed light on the shift in political support within Igbo society by emphasizing its impact on women's lives.

Chapter One: The Ambivalence of Womanhood in Postcolonial Literature: An Overview

Postcolonial literature plays a major role in the unveiling of the truth about the situation of women and their condition in the periods before, during and after colonialism. It addresses issues such as understanding postcolonial women, the exploration of their identity, and studying women's fight against colonial thoughts. This chapter is a theoretical examination of the concept of womanhood and its manifestation in postcolonial African literature. The first section deals with the concept of womanhood from a feminist perspective and the second section relates the term womanhood to postcolonial literature. The final section deals with the implications of the concept of womanhood in African literature.

I.1. Womanhood from a Feminist Perspective

Generally speaking, the term "womanhood" refers to the state of being a woman. It implies a set of qualities, both negative and positive ones that are ingrained in human societies and cultures since the origin of humankind. The Oxford dictionary defines the term womanhood as the "the state of being a woman, or the period of time when someone is a woman. The qualities that are considered typical of a woman and all women considered as a group: the womanhood of the nation" ("Womanhood"). That is to say, what makes a woman as a woman is the qualities that define women's femininity which include tenderness, vulnerability and the biological factors. It is limited perception that a woman can be a woman only at a certain time gets married and bears children. In the article entitled "Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center," Bell Hooks defines the term womanhood from a feminist perspective as that which refers to the embodiment of

women's social, cultural, and political experiences and identities (12). That is to say, whatever defines women has a direct link with beliefs.

Throughout history women were expected to assume certain roles such as caretakers, householders, child bearers and other roles that restrict them to house tasks. Men, on the other hand, are doomed to be breadwinners, land workers and leaders. Such binaries in determining men and women's roles are thought to be hindering for women and limiting for their potentials and aspirations. However, history has also proven that women are as capable of hard work and leading as men are. Thus, given their true abilities, societal expectations tend to confine women and restrict their ambitions and aspirations.

Some scholars believe that the two words femininity and womanhood are interchangeable. However, Feminists until the present day are still trying to agree on one definition of womanhood in the sense that does not undermine the value of women. The scholar Victoria Barker, in her article "Definition and the Question of 'Woman,'" Points out to the on-going debate that revolves around finding the most suitable definition for the term "woman". She states:

Within recent feminist philosophy, controversy has developed over the desirability, and indeed, the possibility of defining the central terms of its analysis "woman," "femininity," etc. The controversy results largely from the under theorization of the notion of definition; feminists have uncritically adopted an Aristotelian treatment of definition as entailing metaphysical, rather than merely linguistic, commitments (185)

The controversy arises because people have not thought deeply enough about what it means to define something. Feminists have mostly accepted a view that definitions involve more than just words and have metaphysical implications.

Evident enough, the term womanhood implies certain qualities that feminist deemed as negative and unfair. These include qualities Such as weakness, femininity, obedience.... Etc. For instance the scholar Claudia Card in her article “Against Marriage and Motherhood,” Points out to the fact that feminism is a broad and complicated theory with many different ideas. Its main goal is to fight against unfair treatment, prejudice, and inequality based on gender (22).

Feminist studies aimed at giving a fair understanding of womanhood since it is a complicated and multidimensional notion. The study of womanhood questions preconceived conceptions and emphasize the significance of gender equality. It began with Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal book *The Second Sex* and later developed with the work of contemporary feminist scholars such as Silvia Simone Stoller’s “De Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time,” in which she explores what it means to be a woman, looking at societal norms, cultural influences, and women’s empowerment (3). Simone Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex* states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (330). This quote, explains the idea that the nature of the existence of a woman is not predetermined neither by destiny nor by biological factors. Rather, it is the society and culture that construct women as women not their biological qualities.

Womanhood is seen as a dynamic progress that changes and gains different meanings over time. Judith Butler, in her article “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” views womanhood as a social construct that changes throughout cultures and historical times (24). Similar to de Beauvoir, Butler claims that gender is performative and is influenced by

society's norms and expectations (25). These ideas frequently place restricted roles and standards on women, maintaining gender inequity. Feminists challenge and question these notions.

Basically, many scholars, feminists and psychologists alike, have attacked and rejected the term femininity for it is mostly linked to submissiveness, weakness and the fulfillment of basic cultural and biological roles such as marriage and motherhood. In the article "Feminism is Rejecting Femininity" written by Audrey Yip shows how women felt oppressed by the conceptions of patriarchy that includes femininity. Some people believe that traditional feminine roles and behaviors, like wearing makeup and being nurturing, were demeaning to women. They felt empowered by rejecting femininity and embracing masculinity instead. However, this rejection of femininity has unintentionally strengthened the idea that masculine qualities are better than feminine ones, which goes against the true goals of feminism (1). However, the rejection of femininity has clearly continued since the time of second-wave feminism. Yet, some scholars do not totally reject the idea of femininity Yip suggests:

People should embrace feminine characteristics such as being forgiving or sympathetic without feeling like they are a spineless pushover; that is how femininity is presented in the 1960s. All humans naturally have these traits, not just women, and they are a fundamental part of human society. We can't live in a world where everyone are egocentric alpha males constantly trying to outcompete each other; we need these feminine traits to ensure cooperation and collaboration in society (1)

It is important for everyone, regardless of gender, to embrace feminine characteristics such as forgiveness and sympathy without feeling weak. These traits are inherent to all humans and play a vital role in society. We cannot have a world where everyone is solely focused on individual success; we need these feminine traits for cooperation and collaboration in society.

“Mystique Work by Friedan” written by Lindsay Blake Churchill criticizes the book “Feminine Mystique” by the Feminist Betty Friedan she is the one who coined the term “Feminine Mystique “she believes that a “true feminine” will not seek other sources to reach her fulfillment, but rather she should continue with her normal duties as a wife and marriage and that she should not seek satisfaction and self-fulfillment in other sources like success or economic independence (1). However, the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow rejects Betty Friedan work for he believes it denies women “their basic human need to grow and he reached the conclusion that women would remain unhappy, and children would grow up with unfulfilled and neurotic mothers [...] the feminine mystique hurt women both personally, and professionally” (1). This quote concludes that if women are not able to grow and develop as individuals, they will be unhappy. It also suggests that if women are unhappy, it can negatively affect both themselves and their children. So, when women are not allowed to fulfill their potential, it can lead to unhappiness and problems for them and their families.

Feminist literary criticism has also endeavored to change standard social and cultural expectations about women so as to change their situation. Dr. Paramjeet Kaur highlights that feminist criticism “focuses on woman’s position in literature, both as writer and character, subject and object, perceiver and perceived. In politics it refers to the approach which aims to have equal rights with men in all fields of life” (283). That is to say, the goal is to call for justice.

Actually, responding to social barriers imposed on them across history, women led attempts to change their conditions. Waves of feminist activism succeeded in granting women some rights that ranged from the right to vote, to equal access to work opportunities and education, to the right to own their own property. According to Gaelle Abou Nasr’s article “Feminism and Feminist Literary Theory”, women have faced struggles and fought for their rights for a long

time. The term “Feminism” represents their oppression and has been used in campaigns to end women’s sufferance in the late 1800s. Feminism is a powerful movement that has influenced literature, politics, and society as a whole.

According to George’s, feminism took a new turn to include the liberation movement against patriarchal beliefs. She attacks ideas such as sexualizing women’s bodies and referring to them as merely a tool for human reproduction. These concepts are connected to female experiences in different cultures in different times. Women, however, aimed at changing these preconceived notions about them through different ways. According to George, the literature of womanhood is more of a reflection of women’s strength to live independently in a society that is still objectifying women (44).

A number of feminist documents attempted to attack some of the institutions that they think are hindering for women. The first of these is marriage to which feminists had different perspectives. Some of them believe that it is necessary to assert declare that no one should control women’s marriages by choosing for them who to or not to marry. On that Claudia Card states “instead we would do better not to let the State define our intimate unions” (1). Other feminists such as Karen Blaisure and Allen Katherine, in their article “Feminists and the Ideology and Practice of Marital Equality,” claim that marriage should be based on equality. They argue that marriage should be free from gender inequality and that women should have the power to decide upon their own roles within marriage (7). Other feminists , like Rlshlka Baweja, she opposes the institution of marriage itself, questioning its intentions and the societal oppression placed on women to meet the traditional expectations(1).

The other notion that feminists have been scrutinizing is motherhood. They attack how biological differences have been used to explain behavioral disparities between women and men.

These differences have also been used to justify denying women political rights based on the belief that they are biologically unsuitable (“Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender”). The scholar Katherine Gieve, in her article “Rethinking Feminist Attitudes Towards Motherhood,” views motherhood as a restraining rather than a liberating role. She says, “The heart of women’s oppression is her child bearing and child rearing role” (38). This clearly shows that the author does not view motherhood as empowering, but instead as something that limits women’s freedom and that women’s duties as mothers hold them back from acquiring their rights.

In her well-known article “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf argues for the necessity of economic independence and creative space for women to thrive. She states “a woman must have money and a room of her money” (Woolf 4). Woolf declares that intellectuality leads to mental freedom. So, without owning her own money a woman can never realize her freedom. In other words, empowering women means recognizing their agency, amplifying their voices, and creating an inclusive society that values and respects their contributions and roles as members of a society.

To sum up, feminist studies indicate that womanhood is altered by societal standards and cultural settings. The goal of studies of womanhood is to oppose oppression and promote gender equality. Feminists acknowledge the scope of experiences that women have by looking at womanhood through a feminist lens. Feminism’s primary objective is to empower women in order to encourage the development of a society that is more inclusive and tolerant. Feminist perspectives on womanhood offer essential insights for imagining a world where everyone may thrive regardless of gender identification as the quest for gender equality continues.

I .2. Womanhood from a Postcolonial Perspective

Postcolonial feminists tackle the concept of womanhood from a peculiar perspective. They deal with it from the stand points of people who were exposed to colonialism as well as distinguished by their race and ethnicity. It is important first to discuss the emergence of Postcolonial feminism. According to Penney Debra, in her article “Iraqi Muslim Women and Primary Healthcare Providers’ Perspectives and Experiences in the Clinic Visit in the Western United States,” the theory of “Postcolonial feminism emerged as a reaction to the early proponents of postcolonial theory, men who were occupied with nation building after empire and colonialism had destroyed indigenous people’s history” (155). In other words, postcolonial feminism arose in response to male postcolonial theorists who primarily focused on rebuilding nations after the devastation caused by colonialism, disregarding the history of indigenous people.

There are several scholars who contributed to postcolonial women’s studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a well-known postcolonial feminist scholar who is famous for her work on subaltern studies. She examined how the voices of marginalized women were often silenced and advocated for their empowerment and agency within postcolonial contexts. Colonial officers and missionaries created a mystical fiction around the story of the sati by portraying sati as a dutiful act of religious preference. Spivak in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985), contends “The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’” (93). This describes how the British contribution to the abolition of a particular cultural practice has often been interpreted as an instance of white men portraying themselves as saviors protecting women of color from their own communities.

Another scholar who contributes to addressing women issues is Talpade Mohanty. In her article “Toward and anti-imperialistic politics: reflections of a Desi feminist,” she points out to “the experiences of women in the global South and the impact of colonialism and globalization on their lives” (72). That is, Mohanty considers the impact of colonialism and globalization on the lives of women in the global south. She criticizes Western feminist discourses for oversimplifying women’s experiences and advocates for an intersectional approach that recognizes diverse contexts and power dynamics.

In another article entitled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Mohanty criticizes western feminism for its capacity to normalize and alienate women from the Global South. She makes the case that it is important to see the ugly reality of western colonialism (63). She states “I was committed, both politically and personally, to building a noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders. I believed in a larger feminist project than the colonizing, self-interested one I saw emerging in much influential feminist scholarship and in the mainstream women’s movement” (503). Debra expresses her commitment to creating a feminist solidarity that goes beyond colonization and self-interest. She believes in a broader feminist project than what she observes in influential feminist research and the mainstream women’s movement, which she sees as becoming focused on colonization and personal gain.

Furthermore, Mohanty’s critical perspective of postcolonial feminism addresses inequalities by examining the relationship between those who colonized and those who were colonized. It also criticizes gender roles that emerged after colonization. This approach not only focuses on patriarchy as a source of oppression but also looks at how social inequalities are shaped by political, historical, cultural, and economic factors (70).

Indeed, postcolonial women have unique experiences. Amalia Sa'ar, in her article "Postcolonial Feminism, the Politics of Identification, and the Liberal Bargain," believes that postcolonial women often face various forms of oppression and marginalization due to the intersections of gender, race, class, and nationality. They struggle with the impacts of colonialism, cultural imperialism, and neocolonialism, which affect their social and economic status, political power, and access to resources. Postcolonial feminism, therefore, aims to address and raise awareness about these unique experiences and advocate for social justice and equality (688).

Penney Debra, in her article "Iraqi Muslim Women and Primary Healthcare Providers' Perspectives and Experiences in the Clinic Visit in the Western United States," claims that postcolonial feminist theory does not only criticize the colonial powers but also criticizes the dominant power held by indigenous men after the Empire dissolved. Besides, women in the Global South were completely stereotyped and entirely disregarded from the narrative of postcolonialism. As a result, these women expressed the need to speak up using their own voice and not having others to speak on their behalf. This shows that feminists from the Global South have different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds in order to reach the actual meaning of being liberal or libertarian (George 1).

This type of postcolonial woman not only fights injustice in her own country but also that of the colonizer. Women who live in third-world countries suffer twice as much as women living in European countries. In other words, African females, for example, face their ex-colonized communities that are affected not only by patriarchal norms but also affected by inherited forms of hegemony, subjugation, and dominance from western powers that are exclusively practiced on women. These influences have great impact on women's selfhood. "Postcolonial feminism has

never operated as a separate entity from post colonialism; rather, it has directly inspired the forms and the force of postcolonial politics” (Oxford dictionary). This suggests that postcolonial feminism has never existed outside of postcolonial politics; rather, it has directly influenced the power of postcolonial politics.

Additionally, postcolonial feminism has emerged out of the necessity to include other women of color who were disregarded by the first wave feminism. As a result, post-colonial feminism developed from the need of such women to make their voices heard, to talk about the oppression and suffering that they endured. Gorge says “Postcolonial feminism started with scholars of color applying a critical lens to mainstream feminism,” Accordingly, postcolonial feminism was initiated by writers and scholars of different color in attempt to project feminism from their own perspective which is totally different from the wildly western feminism.

However, postcolonial feminists argue that to achieve this, it is important to address the oppression in society on a larger scale. Studies, for instance should take into account the fact that race, religion, class, and gender identity can have a great effect on an individual’s experience. Above all, postcolonial feminism is exclusively tied to post colonialism and seeks to understand the many levels of oppression that can coexist (Gorge 56). Postcolonial feminism looks at how colonialism, racism, class, and gender are all interconnected. It aims to fight and overthrow the oppressive systems that postcolonial countries expose women to. Within this point of view, womanhood is essential because it emphasizes the specific difficulties and experiences of women

I. 3. The Implications of the Concept of Womanhood in African Literature

Many works in African literature deal with the concept of Womanhood and several authors tend to portray aspects of womanhood either to celebrate it or to challenge some notions related

to it. According to Ogochukwu Ikeagwuonu, the concept of womanhood in African literature suggests that a woman must submit to the subjugation of patriarchal society in terms of biological purpose, as if women are only made to give birth to children. Yet, the women of Igbo society are known to be strong and independent both socially and economically (3).

The concept of womanhood is frequently demonstrated and investigated in African literary works through a variety of themes, characters, and stories. Campbell, Françoise, and Beath Keamey in their article “Narratives of Selfhood and Ambivalence: Postgraduate and ECR Symposium at the IMLR,” claim that African female authors have been using literature as an effective tool to oppose patriarchy, colonial legacies, and gendered norms. The variety of experiences that African women have as well as their agency, resilience, and resistance to many types of oppression they face every day(12).

Ogochukwu Ikeagwuonu also deals with the concept of womanhood in his article “Women and Economic Independence in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Akchi Adimora Ezeigbo’s *the Last of the Strong Ones*.” He emphasizes the importance of women in every society since the beginning of time. According to him, women are seen as a precious element in society. Women are therefore highly valued for the crucial role they have always continued to occupy in societies.

He also points out that the status of women before colonialism is characterized by prosperity, and the situation of African women was much more better. Women have rights and powers Ikeagwuonu further states, “The erosion of the status of women occurred gradually but was significantly hastened by foreign invasions, particularly colonialism. It is important to remark that the stereotype often made of African culture as rigidly male-centric is stereotypical. “Africa of pre-colonial times and even colonial times had an auspicious place for women” (1-2). In other words, the status of women gradually declined due to foreign invasions, especially colonialism.

According to him, it is important to note that the common belief that African culture is a strictly male-dominated society is a stereotype, because in both pre-colonial and colonial times women held a significant position in African societies.

African women showed great will and persistence in claiming their rights despite the fact that there was no much literary work written in the past to display of African women's voices. On that matter, Adimora-Ezeigbo, in his/her article "Economic Independence in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Akchi Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*," points out to the 1929 Aba women's revolt, which is a significant event in Igbo society, showcasing the voice and bravery of women.

Early male-authored fictions like those by Chinua Achebe did not include or emphasize women's experiences. This suggests that Achebe's works and those of other male authors did not give proper attention to the perspectives and stories of women, thereby neglecting an important aspect of Igbo society and history. Still, women always fought for their rights, and as a result, they made a decision to highlight the strength of female characters (qtd. In *Women and Economic Independence in Flora Nwapa's Efuru and Akchi Adimora Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones* 3).

Nevertheless, African literature, written by women after colonialism, depicts the numerous struggles and experiences faced by women on the African continent, commonly questioning Western concepts of what it means to be a woman. The notion of womanhood has been reshaped and redefined by African women authors, who have also empowered women and brought attention to their frequently neglected beliefs (275).

One of the most influential female figures in African literature is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) Adichie explores the coming-of-age journey of a young Nigerian girl, challenging traditional gender roles and the restraints placed on women within patriarchal societies (30). Also, another known African writer is Tsitsi Dangarembga, who addresses issues of womanhood and identity in her novel "Nervous Conditions." The story revolves around a young Zimbabwean girl striving for education and independence, highlighting the difficulties of womanhood in a postcolonial African setting (9).

African women's voices in literature are strengthened as part of the discussion of how women are seen. The article entitled "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature," written by Krishnan Madhu, explains how the term "Third World Woman" describes women who live in developing or underdeveloped nations, emphasizing the specific struggles they face. Postcolonial feminist writing, which addresses subordination and different viewpoints, contributes to the growth of postcolonial literary discourse (1).

In his exploration of the concept of womanhood in African literature written by women and how it is viewed in African culture, Ogochukwu Ikeagwuonu claims that away from looking at the term womanhood from a critical feminist lens, the concept of womanhood turns into a superstitious way of discriminating against and underestimating women. Therefore, women will be considered nothing but a body for men to fulfill both their sexual imaginations and biological needs. Nevertheless, according to him, female characters in African literature authored by women suggest a totally different type of fulfillment; they reached it through her own self-assertion and not through giving birth to so many children like the ordinary African woman's fulfillment. Such female characters show that womanhood is not linked exclusively to

motherhood and that it is not always biological for women can definitely reach fulfillment by creating a social life for themselves, a sexual life, as well as a materially wealthy life (1).

Seemingly, female African writers seek to portray a woman who is uneducated but smart and resourceful at the same time. This is achievable due to the women's strength and power to stand out among all the African women of the Igbo society and cross their way through a culture that is full of challenges and stereotypes.

Significantly, to better address the specific needs and experiences of different groups of women, it is crucial to understand the cultural context in which womanhood is situated. Cherrie Moraga examines the connection between race and gender in her novel *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) highlighting the unique challenges faced by women of color (67). By recognizing and appreciating diverse cultural backgrounds, one can effectively support and empower women from various communities.

In summary, it is now clear that womanhood is a dimensional and complex concept when looking at it from feminist, postcolonial, and African literary viewpoints. Womanhood is seen from a feminist viewpoint as a social concept that is shaped by gender expectations and inequalities and aims to question and destroy patriarchal standards. In the postcolonial setting, concerns of race, class, and colonization connect with those of gender, highlighting the experiences of women who are doubly excluded. African literature, on its own, examines the significance of femininity within the cultural and historical contexts of the continent, illustrating the variety of experiences and difficulties African women encounter. These viewpoints highlight the significance of acknowledging the diversity and interrelationships of womanhood while encouraging the emancipation and empowerment of women in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Chapter Two: The Perceived Weakness of Womanhood

This chapter highlights the weaknesses associated with the concept of “womanhood” drawing on the prevalent notion that women are often considered weak or inferior in society. It explores the stereotypes and limitations placed on women through the study of Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966). Throughout the narrative, Efuru, the protagonist of the story, faces many challenges and obstacles that reinforce the idea of inherent female weakness. The theme encourages a reevaluation of society’s perception of women. The analyses of the themes call for the weaknesses and potential harm that womanhood inflicts upon Igbo women.

The chapter is divided into three sections that shed light on the perceived weaknesses of women in Igbo society. In the first section, we will examine the cultural practice of circumcision and how it relates to femininity. In the second section, we will focus on the institution of marriage and its impact on women’s status in Igbo society. Finally, in the third section, we will explore the burden of responsibility that motherhood places on women and the ways in which this shapes women’s roles and identities. By analyzing these concepts, we will gain a full understanding of the ways in which the concept of womanhood can have a negative impact on women.

II.1. Femininity and Circumcision

Generally, femininity is often related to qualities such as tenderness, nurturing, and emotional vulnerability. However, in Igbo society and culture, the meaning of the words woman and femininity is exclusively related to a very painful tradition, which is female circumcision. Sheldon et al., in their article "The Physical and Psychological Effects of Female Genital

Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) on Mothers and Children: A Systematic Review of Observational Studies." define circumcision, or what is known as female genital mutilation (FGM), as a process that involves the removal of the external female genitalia either partially or fully. The practice is carried out for cultural, social, or religious purposes, with the intention of controlling female sexuality and maintaining social norms (54). Indeed, such a tradition in Igbo society forces women to undergo such harsh and painful costumes that leave long-term physical and psychological effects.

In *Efuru*, which tells the story of Efuru who lives in Nigeria, the protagonist goes through the social norm of female circumcision. In the Igbo society that the novel features, circumcision is seen as a necessary practice for women to attain full womanhood and is mostly linked to the superstition that if a woman does not get circumcised, she will endure the unfortunate fate of death and loss. Therefore, the novel explores the physical and psychological traumas that result from such a practice.

Efuru's experience with circumcision is painful and traumatic, and the novel highlights the inhumane nature of the practice. The narrator says, "Efuru screamed and screamed. It was so painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. It will soon be over; my daughter don't cry" (10). Even though the practice of female circumcision is physically and emotionally distracting, Efuru chooses to undergo it in order to feel accepted and valued by her community. The narrator says, "Efuru decided she would go through this ceremony because she had seen other girls who had not gone through it suffer from an inferiority complex. They were made to feel they were not full women, and this hurt their pride" (23). This quote highlights the pressure that women face to conform to social norms in order to be accepted as "full women".

After going through the experience, Efuru realizes the hurt and the pain and starts to think about it. She becomes afraid of the idea not only for herself but also for her daughter and granddaughter. The narrator states, “Efuru had often thought of the day when she would have a child of her own, but the thought of circumcision always frightened her. She wished that her child could be born without having to undergo the pain and humiliation that all girls must bear” (31). It is obvious how the main character, Efuru, always dreams of having a child, but the idea of having to circumcise her daughter scares her.

O. C. Eke Vincent explains that in the Igbo community, cutting a girl’s private parts is a tradition that comes from their cultural and religious beliefs; they think it makes girls more feminine and pure (23). This tradition is unnegotiable and requires women to take it for granted. for women should not challenge society or community members. Okeke T claims that in Igbo society, being a woman is usually related to softness of speech, affection, tenderness, etc. Similarly, circumcision is viewed as one of the essential qualities that make a woman a woman (47).

What is more, is the society’s disregard for the risks and dangers that this custom may lead to. In extreme cases, it could even lead to death. The narrator explains, “The women of Okperi, like those of most other places in Ibo land, believed in female circumcision. They felt that an uncircumcised girl was not properly brought up and that her conduct would be bad” (46). To put it another way, they believe that a girl who was not circumcised is a girl who was not raised well by her family and that her behavior would be unacceptable while disregarding the huge pain and harm that this practice causes upon them.

In addition to that, in Igbo culture, female circumcision is viewed as a green ticket for girls. It is considered necessary for having healthy children. Ugochukwu C. Okonkwo states,

“Circumcision is viewed as a rite of passage for young girls in Igbo society, marking their transition from childhood to womanhood. It is a way to prepare them for marriage and motherhood and to ensure that they adhere to traditional gender roles and expectations” (65). In essence, circumcision is a long-standing tradition that is passed down from one generation to the next. It involves performing a procedure on young girls as they grow up as a sign of transition from childhood to womanhood. The purpose is to prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers and to ensure they meet societal expectations for their gender.

There are two opposing views about the issue of female circumcision. Some people think that this practice is a form of violence against women because it involves serious injuries and can cause extreme physical and psychological scars. Others, on the other hand, view the practice as an essential part of preserving society’s norms, culture, values, and beliefs. For example, Ejiagaa and Emmanuel claim that female circumcision is necessary to maintain the purity and honor of women, and so it is carried out to ensure that they will not cheat on their husbands. They believe that circumcision decreases a woman’s sexual desire and makes her less likely to cheat on her husband (89).

In summary, Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru* effectively explores how circumcision affects women’s sense of self. Through the character of Efuru, Nwapa reveals the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of this cultural practice. By telling Efuru’s story, Nwapa brings attention to the pain and trauma that women experience due to circumcision. Nwapa’s narrative initiates important conversations about the consequences of circumcision on women, highlighting the need for a call for justice and the fight against gender expectations and inequality.

II.2. Marriage and Women's Secondary Position

The second aspect that reduces women's status in society and makes them vulnerable is marriage. Marriage is often seen as a necessity in a woman's life. It is a societal expectation based on the pressure of fulfilling certain societal standards. In many cultures, a woman's worth and status are dependent on her willingness to marry and her ability to have children. However, the pressures and expectations surrounding marriage can also have negative consequences for women. Women who are unable to have children or choose not to marry are often alienated by society, which leads to feelings of disappointment and worthlessness.

In Nwapa's novel, *Efuru* is a strong and independent woman who is well-respected in her community. However, she faces challenges due to societal expectations about women and their role in marriage. Women are expected to be flawless when carrying out their duties as wives towards their husbands. One example of this perceived weakness can be seen when Efuru's mother advises her Efuru, she says, "You must remember that you are a woman. Your duty is to please your husband and bear children" (11). This emphasizes the expectation that women should put their husband's needs and desires first and above everything else. Efuru, however, refuses to conform to these expectations, stating, "I want to marry a man who will treat me as an equal" (15). Little does Efuru know that equality does not exist in her society. Thus, chasing it will only expose her to criticism.

What is more reductive to women's worth is the belief that the primary reason for marriage is productivity. A marriage can be seen as successful if the woman is productive and fulfills her biological purpose, which is to give birth to children, to obey her husband, to do household chores, to take good care of her husband, and to ask no questions. A friend of Efuru's second mother-in-law says, "Find out quickly, and if she is barren, start early to look for a black goat,

because at night a black goat will be difficult to find. Besides, there are other girls you will like to have as daughters-in-law” (174). This shows how marriage is placed on thin ice for every woman. Another quote that exemplifies this theme is, “It was only natural that a woman should be obedient to her husband, for he was her lord and master” (30). This quote indicates how important it is for a woman to do everything her husband says.

In *Efuru*, the weakness of womanhood is manifested in the relationship between marriage and women’s status. The novel portrays how women are expected to conform to societal expectations and remain submissive to men even at the cost of their own happiness and achievements. Furthermore, the novel depicts marriage as something based on a collective decision. It is not seen as a personal choice. One of the women talks about Efuru and says, “A woman, or a wife for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time and not fulfill the important function she is made to fulfill” (172). This shows the burden that comes with being a woman in Igbo society. It does not matter how successful a woman is if she is not married.

Nwapa’s portrayal of marriage in the novel also depicts the implications that it engenders on the relationship between men and women. Efuru’s second husband, Gilbert, is a loving and supportive partner who is different from her first husband. However, he still awaits certain things from Efuru, including obedience. For example, he tells Efuru that she should not be walking on her own in the village at night like a man. This shows how the expectations of society from women can still alter and shape the way things are normally carried out in an equal relationship.

Furthermore, equality between men and women is unacceptable according to the Igbo social norms. When Efuru is frequently seen swimming with her husband in the lake or walking together side by side, a woman asks, “Why must they go to these places together? It is your fault for allowing them to always be together. Are they companions? Don’t they know that a man and

a woman should not be seen together often, whether they are married or not?” (174). Later on, the woman complains about Efuru’s behavior with her husband. At that moment, Gilbert’s mother tells her son about her own marriage and eludes that Efuru’s way of walking with him is completely wrong and that a woman and a man should never walk side by side. The tradition, in Igbo culture, implies that “If they had to go to a place together, she allowed her husband to go in front while she walked behind him. But it was different now with her son and his wife “(174).

Obviously, things are different now with Efuru and Gilbert. They are not traditional partners; they are different due to their mindsets, and Efuru does not see this as something odd. This idea is recurrent throughout the whole novel. A certain line keeps appearing through different scenes in the novel: “Young people of this generation are different” (174). Indeed, since the beginning of the novel, it is clear how Efuru is criticized by her friends, strangers, neighbors, and even family for the way she is behaving, whether before or after her marriage. This is enough to have a great negative impact on Efurus’ life because people living in Igbo society fear change.

II.3. Motherhood and the Burden of Responsibility

Another important influence on the sense of womanhood is the issue of motherhood. Generally speaking, in certain societies like the Igbo community, motherhood is a burden that has negative consequences on a woman’s sense of her self. Motherhood is generally a happy and desirable experience, though it can also have major physical and psychological effects on women. Pregnancy and childbirth can indeed have an impact on a woman’s physical and mental health, leading to problems like stress and tiredness. Most of all, it is the Igbo society’s expectations about motherhood that can further contribute to cause women to suffer from feelings of anxiety and depression.

According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG),” postpartum depression affects about 1 in 7 women, and symptoms can include feelings of sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion” (2). This means that motherhood alone is a lot to handle for it requires a lot of responsibility. This can have a negative effect on the woman’s life. Moreover, the pressure to be the “ideal mother” can also be overwhelming. According to the author’s work “*Perfect mothers, perfect daughters, and the pursuit of perfection*” published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, mothers who face societal and familial pressure to attain perfection are at a higher risk of experiencing anxiety and finding it challenging to maintain a balance between their personal needs and the responsibilities of motherhood (Stewart and Power 56).

The novel explores how motherhood, which is normally a blessing, changes into a curse that clearly burdens the shoulders of every woman in Igbo society. Since the very first months she gets married, Efuru is expected, to have a child as having children is regarded an obligation for women. The narrator says, “In her heart, she knew that she had no choice but to accept her fate. She was a woman, and a woman was made to bear children, to feed and clothe them, to protect them, and to nurture them until they could stand on their own two feet” (32). This quote points out the traditional expectations women suffer from. Thus, as mothers, they are required to not only bear children but also provide for their needs and raise them. Efuru says, “no choice,” which confirms the burden of responsibility that comes with motherhood, as it is often seen as an obligation that women must perform.

Moreover, the women and men of Igbo society are rigid and intolerant when it comes to respecting their rules and traditions. In *Efuru*, the whole society, including women, does not sympathize with barren women and claims that a husband should replace his infertile wife even when the couple is happy without children. When she does not get pregnant early in her

marriages, women inquire about her ability to conceive and blame her mothers-in-law for not finding another woman for their sons to marry. This can be clearly seen in the following quote: “It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure” (207). Indeed, they blame the woman for not having children, not admitting that it is God’s will or that the problem is related to some biological factors; instead, it is directly seen as Efurú’s fault.

Efurú further talks about how women are burdened by unshared responsibility and are expected to do everything on their own without the help of anyone, not even their husbands. She says “a woman was made to bear children, to feed and clothe them, to protect them, and to nurture them until they could stand on their own two feet” (32). That is, women are expected to do everything with perfection. However, if they miss any task, they are the first to blame and are therefore seen as failing mothers.

Also, the pressures about motherhood that society places on women leaves the character Efurú in a state of continuous fear of being rejected. She is worried and tries to comfort herself saying, “I am still young; surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood” (24). Efurú’s mother-in-law loves her and defends her when she hears people say bad things about her. She says to Efurú, “A child would come when God willed it” (24). That is, if it were God’s will to give Efurú children, she would have children, and that it is no one’s fault. Yet, such defenses are rare and unlikely to have a great impact on women’s conditions in a rigid society like Igbo.

The Igbo society extremely priorities motherhood. For them, it is seen as a holy act, and for those who does not fulfill their duty as women, they are to be considered the cursed and the damned by God. They believe that “A woman’s duty was to bring forth children, to rear them, and to keep the house. That was the natural order of things, and any woman who failed in her

duty was not worthy of the name” (11). The phrase “natural order of things” suggests that this expectation is deeply sculpted in cultural norms and traditions. The use of the word “duty” suggests that motherhood is seen as an obligation rather than a choice, which adds to the burden of responsibility that women face.

Consequently, Efuru is never seen as a real mother, for she does not have children. For her people, nothing matters, neither her beauty nor her intelligence. In the following quote, a woman says, “Your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful, but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy, but riches cannot go on errands for us “(205). That is, regardless of whether Efuru is a good person with a good heart, she is never to be considered a true woman in the eyes of her society because she does not have any children. It does not matter to her people if she is pretty, smart, and rich. In her society, it is never enough to compensate for her lack of motherhood. Despite Efuru’s positive qualities and her good intentions, she is always to be judged and excluded because of her childlessness.

It is clear that the Igbo society, which oppresses women, being a woman is not easy. Women are forced to procreate as if their biological aim is the only reason for their lives. In the case of Efuru, it brings her a lot of sadness, self-questioning, and disappointment. The narrator says “Efuru had expected motherhood to be something more than what it was turning out to be... She wondered why motherhood was praised so highly when it brought such disappointment” (98). This means, even though she becomes a mother, Efuru’s loss of her child brings pain and disappointment. Therefore, she wonders about what fulfillment does motherhood bring if it can also bring pain, loss, and suffering after a child’s death. Her experience of fulfillment is only temporary.

Despite the fact that Efuru experienced the feeling of motherhood for only a few months, her joy was abruptly taken away when her daughter passes away due to a convulsion. Although the feeling of motherhood was temporary and she felt great grief at losing her only child, she still feels, the joy of being a mother. Efuru, nonetheless, is grateful, “Thank God I had this baby, and she was a normal baby. It would have been dreadful if I had been denied the joy of motherhood. And now when mothers talk about their experiences in childbirth, I can share their happiness with them, through Ogonim us no more” (207). That is to say, motherhood has two sides, it can either be a burden or a source of joy.

The key point is that even though Efuru is not able to have children in both of her marriages, it remains undeniable that she treats everyone else with love and affection and helps everyone who is in need or sick. She is motherly in her behaviors. “Her people called her mother, and that was enough. It did not matter to them whether she had children or not” (17). It suggests that Efuru’s identity as a woman is depicted by her pure love and her ability to nurture and care for others rather than by her ability to bear children. Despite this, societal pressure can be a source of weakness for women who do not fit into society’s’ narrow molds.

Significantly, the article entitled “Re-Writing Motherhood in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*,” written by Káyòdé Ògúnfolábí, examines the fact that motherhood can give women symbolic and material power, but it can also devalue and oppress them. In Nwapa’s *Efuru* the woman’s character is elevated economically, endowed with beauty, and given social exposure and respect; all of which redefine the worth of women (42). Ògúnfolábí says:

Dreams of a good goddess who blesses women with prosperity and beauty but does not give them children. In contrast to many books written by men, this one does not sexually objectify women in the name of beauty. However, objectifying women in *Efuru* is a

result of the physically grounded conceptions of gender created by patriarchy, which is pointed out in the following quote: “It is the biologically-based definitions of womanhood constructed by the discourse of patriarchy that objectify women in Efuru (4)

This quote mentions how the book avoids treating women as objects of desire. However, it also recognizes that women are still objectified in Efuru because of the traditional ideas about gender that still exist in a male-dominated society. This indicates how women are faced by the obstacle of gender inequality and the injustice women face daily. Since gender expectations are based on biological factors it would be difficult for women to overthrow what years of oppression has built.

Most importantly, on top of society’s pressures, women are so envious and jealous of each other to the point that pregnancy occurs early in marriage. Abdelsalam and Mohamed say, “When Nkoyeni, the second wife of Enebri, is pregnant early in her marriage, the village gossip, Omirima, spreads the news of her pregnancy with indifference, saying, “So what? Is she the only woman pregnant this season? It is expected that she should have a baby before the year is out” (938). This indicates that pregnancy and motherhood trigger jealousy among women.

After all, it is the women who gossip and talk badly about other women which adds a lot of negativity and despair to their lives. According to Talle, “In the end, it was the women who bore the weight of tradition, who carried it forward from one generation to the next. They were the ones who ensured that the customs and beliefs of their people remained intact, even as the world around them changed” (39). That is, women have the role of cultural and heritage transmitters. They are the ones who have the key for putting an end to the transmission of gender oppression and the suffering that Igbo women endure.

Finally, societal expectations in relation to femininity, marriage, and motherhood can have negative consequences for women. They can lead to feelings of worthlessness and emotional, physical, and psychological damage. It is important to recognize and challenge these societal norms and to support women in their choices and experiences rather than enforcing rigid gender roles and expectations.

Chapter Three: Unveiling the Strengths of Womanhood in *Efuru*

In *Efuru*, the title character is also a symbol of strength and challenge. Efuru fights against the expectations and rules set by Igbo society and the novel portrays Efurus' journey to discover her true self. She displays great confidence and strength when she deals with her cultural beliefs, traditions, and patriarchal expectations. Through this novel, Nwapa shows that women are not powerless and highlights their strength, resistance, and resilience. The novel is therefore a call for justice that unveils the ultimate power that women have within themselves leading readers to question the oppression that women undergo in the name of traditions.

In this chapter we will discuss how the power of womanhood pours out of Efuru and her extraordinary exhibition of strength. The first section will discuss the Igbo traditions and how Efuru was able to break the cycle of traditions through several factors such as education, success, and family support, which have played a major role in her transformation throughout the novel. The second section, then, will attempt to highlight the extent to which the character, Efuru, challenges the Igbo perception of a woman's body so that it will be valued as including more than just biological functions. Finally, the third section will endeavor to show how political support takes turns in Igbo society in the sense that postcolonial women are now able to gain a position in Igbo society.

III.1. Breaking the Cycle of the Igbo Traditions

Efuru is based on the character Efuru who defies patriarchal ideas as well as oppression towards women. Efuru is a character who challenges the Igbo tradition by being rebellious and fearless. She makes decisions on her own and takes chances based on her own beliefs and not those imposed by society. Efuru is a woman with a challenging spirit that inspires her to defy all

traditional gender expectations and a willingness to become an independent woman. Thus, she challenges her society's traditions showing the true power of breaking free from oppressive beliefs and norms and inspiring other women to reclaim their worth and fight against gender inequalities.

Unlike other Igbo women, Efuru is a woman with a voice. She makes sure her voice reaches beyond her own society. As it is depicted in the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Efuru is unique, as she has her own set of beliefs that form her own path in life, "Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She distinguished herself" (1). Efuru is a distinguished woman, as the quote indicates. She is admired by the entire village for her talent, beauty, and manners.

Most importantly, Efuru's distinctness lies in her defying spirit that is shown at different occasions. First of all, *Efuru* challenges the traditional costumes of marriage. She marries Adizuas against her father's wishes. Adizua is a poor man who cannot even pay the bride's dowry. So, Efuru marries without having her dowry paid to her father, and this goes against Igbo traditions. Recognizing the shame they bear, every time her mother-in-law would say, "Again, we have not paid the dowry yet" (15) and Efuru keeps on comforting Adizuas' mother every time she mentions the topic.

Another defying act lies in the fact that Efuru even refuses to listen to her father's words regarding her marriage and dowry. This shows Nwapa's disapproval of the dowry tradition. Reem Abdelsalam and Anwar Mohamed, in their work entitled "Breaking the Silence", proclaim that Nwapa is protesting against parents using their daughters as a way to gain money (922). A clear statement of Nwapa's criticism of the tradition when the narrator mentions how "a man who has four grown daughters counts himself a very wealthy man. Each daughter will bring to

the father at least a hundred pounds in cash, in raw cash” (191). That is to say, women are seen as a tool to gain quick profits. Abdelsalam and Mohamed comment, “As a forerunner to a generation of African women writers, Nwapa created a new way of writing to question some of the unquestioned traditions of her Igbo society, which oppress Nigerian women” (919).

Essentially, marriage is portrayed as a way for women to obtain respect in their community. However, Efuru’s experience shows that this is not always the case. After her first marriage fails and her infertility is seen as a major weakness, Efuru, however, does not let this bring her down. She says, “I am not less of a woman because I am not married or because I have not borne a child” (274). This sends a strong message to all women who are like Efuru, infertile or emerging from a failed marriage, indicating that a woman’s life does not end with the end of a marriage or the loss of the opportunity to have a child.

In addition to that, Nwapa is attempting to change traditional ideas about gender roles that most writers often tend to portray in their writings especially those related to productivity. As a result, the scholars explain that “in her novel, Nwapa tries to counter the image given by male writers in their writings: the so-called voicelessness of African women” (Abdelsalam & Mohammed 922). Indeed, Nwapa introduces a character through whom she speaks on behalf of all women living in Igbo society. On that matter, Abdelsalam and Mohamed state that Efuru represents the conditions of all Igbo women in her society and how Igbo women are treated either by men, the law, or family (919). Efuru is here a representative of the voice of women who is used to challenge and doubt her society’s beliefs and customs.

Efuru shows a lot of strength, independence, resilience, and courage when making decisions about her own life. Abdelsalam and Mohamed describe her as “a woman whose actions indicate a need for change within the community” (922). This is illustrated when Efuru help a woman in

her village feel better by taking her to the doctor, the woman's family thank and says, "You have done what only men are capable of doing, and so you have done it like a man" (164). It is clear that Efurú is like a man when it comes to trading or helping people. She gains the respect of her people, and regardless of the fact that she does not have children, many of the people of her village still see her as the extraordinary woman that she is.

Káyòdé Ògúnfolábí, in his work entitled "Re-Writing Motherhood in Flora Nwapa's *Efurú*," argues that Igbo women seek the need to break free from their traditional obligation. He says "breaking the hold of patriarchy through resistance to the institution of marriage and motherhood helps to relocate women onto another terrain of agency, where marriage, heterosexuality, motherhood, material possession, and non-heterosexual desires are options from which women can choose" (16). To put it differently, everything that is related to marriage, motherhood, etc. is only a few examples of the values that women need to challenge in order to improve their situation and conditions within society. Therefore, removing the hold of patriarchy by opposing these institutions helps women express their actual needs and finally start making their own decisions regarding marriage, bearing children, etc. This can be very empowering when breaking free from the chains of patriarchy that Igbo society tries to impose on African women.

Additionally, the character Efurú further questions another pertinent tradition which is circumcision. She refuses to attend the tradition of feasting, which is supposed to be a long period of rest that follows circumcision. During that period, women are offered food and many gifts for more than one month, then they are supposed to go outside and show off to the village people. In the case of Efurú, she does this for only a month, and then she stops performing this costume. She says, "No, mother. One month of confinement is enough" (15).

Moreover, unlike other Igbo women, Efuru is very smart and educated. When it comes to trade, she is very good at it and makes more money than her husband, and this is something that not all women are capable. She is never dependent on her husband. In one of the scenes of the novel, her husband admits that Efuru is better than him in trading. The narrator says, “Adizua was not good at trading. It was Efuru who was the brain behind the business. He knew this very well” (39). This shows that Efuru is not an ordinary woman who totally depends on her husband. Instead, she is smart enough to take care of herself.

Throughout the novel, her self-confidence allows her to overcome certain unfortunate events in her life. Efuru does not seem to have difficulty neither when her first husband leaves her nor when her second marriage does not work. She does not collapse like most women would. She is always quick to take choices that meet her best interests. In one of the scenes, after her first husband leaves and does not come back, she says, “I shall take my daughter with me. I shall go back to my father’s house” (73). Efuru’s friend says, “We say that a woman has left her husband, but we never say that a husband has left his wife” (111). This clearly portrays courage and the power that makes Efuru move on with her life and accept marrying again. Unlike Adizua’s mother, who has wasted her youth while waiting her whole life for her husband to come back, Efuru refuses to wait; instead, she chooses to move on with her life and marry again.

Efuru is a woman who can be independent on her own and does not need the support of her husband. “Efuru leaves her husband, realizing that she alone can make and unmake her own happiness”(940). For sure, Efuru has come to the realization that she is strong on her own, so she can definitely survive on her own without a man in her life. Later on, Efuru goes back to her father’s house and continues her life as if nothing has happened. Sabrina and Lydia suggest:

She never accepts defeat, and this reflects her desire to be independent and to rebuild her life, regardless of the rumors of Adizua's marriage to another woman. This does not restrict Efuru from engaging in another marriage with another man, Gilbert Eneberi, after the death of her baby born to her first lover (34)

Efuru is stronger than any other girl in her village. She refuses to stay when her husband leaves her or when her mother-in-law pursues her to stay and wait for her husband to come back. Even when she is a child, Efuru disobeyed her aunt and performs a play with the children, though she is told not to do anything without her aunt's permission. Efuru is, a rebellious, independent woman, and nothing in the world can break her mighty will.

III.2. Efuru Challenges the Igbo Perception Towards a Woman's Body

Throughout the years, women in African Igbo society have been defined mostly by their biological purposes. They were never seen as equal to men when it comes to several bodily roles, and they have been subject to oppression ever since. Efuru is one of the characters who stood in the face of all that was happening. Nwapa depicts Efuru as a symbol that represents all Igbo women as one entity. This is illustrated in one of the novel's scenes when Efuru says that what happens to her happens to all other women (4).

Most interestingly, *Efuru* challenges the idea that motherhood confines women and shows how one can be both a wife and a mother while being independent and successful. On that matter, Abdelsalam and Mohamed state, "Nwapa disapproves of limiting women's roles as wives and mothers. She gives a picture of women and their diverse roles and contributions to society. Efuru is successful in trading, helps the people in her community who come to her for loans, and is also a good wife for her husband's duties" (922). To phrase it differently, Efuru does not want

to be only a mother or a wife; she wants to be a businesswoman who shows how good she can be in her trading job. She does not want to be the traditional woman everyone expects her to be—a wife who cooks food and brings children but, instead, she wants to be able to support herself and her family. Moreover, Efuru succeeds in overcoming the sadness and despair she felt for not being able to have children.

Evidently, both womanhood and motherhood can be empowering in the sense that women should no longer be defined depending on their ability to fulfill their role as women. Women have a significant role in society apart from bringing up children. According to Ogunyemi, this has led several women writers and activists to take a stand against these beliefs. He believes that women are not only interested in the role they play as housewives, but they also seek economic stability (148). In the novel, Efuru is portrayed as a successful woman in life, despite her failure as a mother to show that women's success and happiness do not only lie in having children. It is true Efuru does not have children; she incidentally gives birth to one daughter who eventually dies, but Efuru's love for Ogea is a motherly one. Efuru's world does not stop turning after all. So, Efuru is not a failure as a mother after all.

Another sign of Efuru's strength is her owning of a strong personality that stands people gossips. Gossiping is one of the recurrent motifs in the story and Efuru is repeatedly the subject of the villager's gossips. However, Efuru's will is stronger than every gossip that is told about her. She wisely comes to the conclusion that pleasing people is something that could never be fully realized. Smiling, she says, "Who can please the world?" (17). Efuru is careless about what people say about her. She never cares about what the world or her society thinks of her when she says, "Never mind what people would say" (15). For instance, not being able to have children

does not stop her from being successful or working hard on developing herself. On the contrary, she is able to build her own identity and life.

It is evident that Efuru's will and endurance are strong to stand still in a society that does not tolerate infertile women. This is demonstrated when Efuru's mother-in-law is blamed for not finding another wife for her son "Did Efuru give you medicine that you have lost your senses? You see your only son married to a woman who is barren; this is the fourth year of the marriage, and you sit down and hope?" (175). Thus, regardless of the Igbo traditions, costumes of marriage, and people's gossip, Efuru makes her own path and she challenges her society's pressures by staying married to Gilbert for almost four years without children.

It is important to note here that female solidarity has its effects upon women's sense of strength and endurance. Efuru's first mother-in-law loves Efuru as a daughter. She always says good things about her. When her son disappears with another woman, she says, "My life has been one long suffering. The bright part of it came when my son married Efuru. But Adizua hated me. He did not want me to be happy, and so he denied me the happiness I found in his marriage with Efuru. My son left his wife and ran away with a worthless woman" (167). That is to say, Adizua's mother is able to see what a true woman Efuru is. Despite the fact that Efuru is not able to have children, only Adizua's mother is able to see the true value of Efuru as a woman.

Seemingly, Efuru is a living example of an Igbo woman whose ambition in life does not end with not having children in a marriage. Abdelsalam and Mohamed mention that "there are other ways for women to achieve their identities and that a woman is still complete if she is unmarried or barren" (923). Efuru is still considered a distinguished and unique woman, as well as gorgeous and intelligent, and all these qualities are what make Efuru's identity, not the number

of children she gives birth to or the fact she cannot have any. This means she should not be exiled or seen as less than what she is just because she has no children.

Nwapa's *Efuru* has become an influence on African writers since it was first published. Uchenna Ekweremadu, in his article "Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and the Empowerment of the African Woman," claims that Nwapa's work challenged the patriarchal norms of Nigerian society during the time it was written. The article highlights Nwapa's portrayal of women in a way that is different from the way male writers do. She shows women as strong and able to make their own decisions, which was new and exciting for readers (97). Another article by Ode Ogede, "Flora Nwapa and the Emergence of the African Woman Writer," discusses how Nwapa's pioneering novel paved the way for other African women writers to explore themes of gender and sexuality in their own works. The article notes that Nwapa's portrayal of women in "Efuru" and other novels "challenged the traditional roles of women in African society and helped to promote gender equality" (Ogede 1). This indicates that *Efuru* has brought positive ideas for women regarding identity and intelligence by subverting traditional expectations surrounding femininity, marriage, and motherhood.

III.3. Political Support and Its Impact on Women's Status

Politics has a great role in altering the course of freedom of the Igbo women. It can lead to either distraction or emancipation. Set during colonial rule, *Efuru* challenges different preconceived notions in the patriarchal Igbo society. First, it rejects the norm that women are not allowed to be better than men in trade and handling money. In his article "Gender and the Politics of War Historiography in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*," Sarah Jilin believes politics of Igbo society as a social power and a complicated system of social organizations. It

addresses societal expectations, challenges faced by colonialism and its impact on women's status (1).

Judith Van Allen, article "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women " she discusses the extent to which colonialism had a role in the current emancipation of women. She says " In the conventional wisdom, Western influence has "emancipated" African women through the weakening of kinship bonds and the provision of "free choice" in Christian monogamous marriage, the suppression of "barbarous" practices, the opening of schools, the introduction of modern medicine and hygiene, and, sometimes, of female suffrage" (164). In other words, female emancipation owes to the development that took place in Efuru's village and the incorporation of western beliefs, medical development that eventually affected the Igbo community and changed their mentality.

Igbo women were traditionally excluded from political participation and decision-making processes in their communities. However, with the introduction of colonial rule in Nigeria, new political opportunities emerged for Igbo women to participate in the political process and assert their rights. According to Gloria Chuku, "Igbo women played a prominent role in the politics of the Eastern region of Nigeria in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and their struggle for emancipation paved the way for their participation in Nigerian politics after independence" (54). Thus, politics played a critical role in the emancipation of Igbo women, both in the pre-colonial and colonial periods as well as in the post-independence era. The struggle for political rights and representation paved the way for greater gender equality and empowerment in Igbo society.

Igbo womanhood is something very powerful that lays in every gathering where women tell stories. Allen says "Their real political power was based on the solidarity of women, as

expressed in their own political institutions, their “meetings” (mikiri or mi:iri)” (16). In other words, there is a sort of solidarity between the Igbo women, which is portrayed in Efurus’ meetings with her clients when she goes out to collect her debts.

The theme of female solidarity, as one of the empowering aspects for women, is hinted to at the beginning of the novel. Thus, in the early pages of the novel we learn about a woman who did not obey her mother; as a result, she gets forced to marry a spirit. One of her sisters, named Nkwo, kills the spirit to protect her sister. This describes how Nkwo was so supportive to her sister in helping her to get rid of the spirit. That is to say, the pestle, stands for women’s solidarity, and represents women’s fight for each other to finally be free to live their lives independently. She says, “Nkwo brought a tin of kerosene. She poured it on the roof and set the house on fire. The house burned to ashes, and thus the spirit was killed” (137). Another image of solidarity in Efuru’s motherly care about her maid Ogea and the latter’s respect to Efuru. Ogea has always been like a daughter to Efuru, and Ogea herself is supportive to Efuru before and after the death of her only daughter. The novel points out to the idea when the narrator reports that Ogea “defended her everywhere she heard people say ill about her” (111). Indeed, we can notice that not all women are alike. Thus, while some tend to reinforce women’s inferiority and confinement as suggested in chapter two, other are very sympathetic and understanding as well as supportive. In *Efuru*, these women are Efuru’s mother-in-law, Ogea, and Efurus’ daughter, whose brief presence in Efuru’s life gives her much power and self-confidence.

It is important to realize that true power lays in womanhood and sisterhood. Both qualities empower women and inspire them to fight for their rights and others’ rights, and there is no other way that would best describe the conditions of women in Igbo society than in Flora Nwapa’s first novel, *Efuru*. In his article entitled “Between Tradition and Modernity: Practical Resistance and

Reform this Culture in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*," Allen claims that "[the] purpose in describing their traditional political institutions and source of power is to raise the question of why these women have been "invisible" historically, even though they forced the colonial authorities to pay attention to them briefly" (399). That is to say, the contribution women make is not taken seriously by the authorities for they believe that women's role does not lay in politics. This has weakened, consequently, destroyed women's political strength.

Chuku further notes that women's participation in the Biafran War (1967–1971) also contributed significantly to their emancipation as it highlighted the important roles that women played in the social, economic, and political spheres of Igbo society. Moreover, Judith Van Allen, in her article "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," points to the Igbo women's reality in Nwapa's novel *Efuru*. She calls attention to the issue that women do not speak as much as men do in assemblies that is held to discuss serious matters. However, she notices that "the women's base of political power lay in their own gatherings. Since Igbo society was patrilocal and villages were exogamous, adult women resident in a village would almost all be wives, and others were divorced or widowed "daughters of the village" who had returned home to live" (168). That is to say, women have their own gathering that gives them more control over their lives. In *Efuru*, they have their own elderly women to consult. Furthermore, according to the spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people, there are those who are given a greater responsibility in their society, believing they are the chosen one's; chosen by the women of the lake.

Another example of the changes that are portrayed in the novel is that old generations of Igbo women would not dare to go out without telling their parents. *Efuru*, on the contrary is a free person who goes and returns whenever she wants. *Efuru's* cousin is irritated by *Efuru* when she

sneaks outside when it is dark. He says, “I am tired of talking. I don’t know what is wrong with young women these days. I noticed that Efuru has been coming home late for quite some time. I asked her whom she was seeing so late, and she said nothing. She was so rude to me” (2). This shows that Efuru is the symbol of a modern woman affected by the politics of emancipation and liberated thinking. It goes back to another factor which is colonialism that has influenced Efuru with the notion of freedom of speech. Thus, she is now able to speak up her mind freely and that is something that not all Igbo women are cable of.

Most importantly, political openness and education can change people and push them to start questioning things they never thought of doubting before. For instance, Efuru believe in the idea of trying the White men’s medicine. The presence of a doctor and advanced medicine in Igbo society represents a moment of awakening to the Igbo people. This reflects their gradual realization that not every injury or death means that the ancestors are angry at the person. In the work entitled “Nwapa Choice and Discovery: An Analysis of Women and Culture in Flora Nwapa’s Fiction,” Mary D. Mears states:

Flora Nwapa notes in her fiction that people are changing constantly because of politics and education. In light of this constant change, she questions why roles and expectations for women have changed minimally in Nigeria. I think Nwapa is subtly advocating that women must have a wider range of choices and also be free to make traditional and nontraditional choices while living within a traditional community (13)

Thus, Nwapa believes that women should have more options and be able to make choices that are non-traditional within a traditional community.

Efuru is the voice of the necessity for change and the novel offers a simple manifesto for women to change their conditions. *Efuru* is the spokeswoman who dares to break the silence about traditions that have kept women undermining for centuries. In the article “Of liberalism and feminism: Celebrating *Efuru* at 50,” Admin TO argues “Heroes, incidentally, are not only those who impact nations and history in the political sphere and as founders of nations. Their impact can be felt in virtually all facets of life, generally as courageous pacesetters who produce groundbreaking work or lead in the radical modification or improvement of already existing work” (1). Indeed, characters like *Efuru* have great power when they are put into words, *Nwapa* is the heroine, and *Efuru* is the woman soldier.

Women should be seen as independent and intelligent human beings. They should be respected and given great value not only because of their biological qualities but also because of their true selves. In Chapter six of the book entitled “Choice and Discovery: An Analysis of Women and Culture in Flora Nwapa’s Fiction,” Mears explores the belief that “all women, married or single, must be economically independent. It becomes clear that many women in Oguta society have some type of business, whether it is selling vegetables at the market or sewing clothes for the village” (13). This means Igbo women are highly affected by the ideas of the west as an effect of colonialism. The effect is obviously manifested at the level of trade, as in the case of *Efuru* who ventures in trade, a job that was previously reserved for men.

In an article entitled “Stories of women and mothers: gender and nationalism in the early fiction of Flora Nwapa,” Elleke Boehmer claims that women need to figure out how to represent themselves in society. However, according to him, this can be very difficult because there is not enough theory or knowledge about how women can achieve political power and overcome forms of oppression (90).

Indeed, there is no change that happens overnight; it takes place gradually and through time and through generations. One day, these women will finally deliver their message and break the barrier of silence placed either by patriarchy or colonialism. Even though Efuru can never fully escape the pressures that her society places on her, but she is used to express a call for action for African women to rethink their situation within their society by questioning their social norms and traditional practices from a modern, global, perspective.

Conclusion

The study of womanhood as portrayed through the character Efuru in Nwapa's novel shows to what extends the concept is a paradoxical one. Its manifestations, be them strengthening or weakening, are more or less determined by several factors among which patriarchy, colonialism, and the growing feminine consciousness in African societies are the most notable. The theoretical investigation revealed how femininity is a multidimensional and complicated construct that is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts. Womanhood is seen from a feminist viewpoint as a social construct created by gender binary norms and inequality.

By addressing the interconnections of race, class, colonialism, and gender, the postcolonial viewpoint adds another depth to our knowledge of femininity as the basic aspect of womanhood. In postcolonial countries, women frequently encounter gender-based oppressive practices which create challenging experiences. Understanding the particular difficulties encountered by postcolonial women depends on acknowledging and addressing these interconnected oppressions.

The significance of womanhood within the cultural and historical circumstances of the postcolonial women is explored through African literature. The variety of African women's lives and the challenges they face are clearly reflected in literary works written by women and men alike. African literary works emphasize the hardships and also the resilience of African women, eradicating misconceptions and strengthening their voices.

The analyses of *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa demonstrated how complicated it is to be a woman. Efuru learns to be confident in herself and to not let society's expectations hold her back. Even though she cannot have children, which society sees as a weakness, Efuru does not let it stop her.

She sees it as a challenge to be overcome. With her determination, she stays true to herself and succeeds despite the obstacles her fellow people place on her.

The novel also shows that politics and literature can help to give a voice to those who are ignored. Efurú's story shows how politics shapes women's identities and life style. The book talks about the unfair rules that limit women's freedom and potential. But literature becomes a powerful tool that challenges these limitations. It helps women, who have been ignored, to tell their stories and show their worth. By telling Efurú's story, Nwapa gives a voice to marginalized women and brings attention to their experiences and struggles. The combination of politics and literature can change society and show the strengths of women while also addressing the weaknesses imposed by societal norms.

In addition, being a woman in a country that was once colonized has a great impact on Efurú. It makes her realize the gender expectations and backward traditions in her society. Through her experiences, Efurú starts to question what society expects from her and learns that not everything she hears is always true. This leads her to challenge the way things are and empowers her to make her own choices. Her journey shows how important it is to discover oneself and break free from society's expectations

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في مفارقات الأنوثة بالنسبة للمرأة في مجتمع الإيبو ما بعد الإستعماري كما يتجلى من خلال بطلنة رواية "إيفورو" لفلورا نوابا. الحجة الرئيسية هي أن مفهوم الأنوثة يحمل في طياته مشاعر متناقضة مختلفة للمرأة عندما تكبر وتكافح ضد التوقعات الاجتماعية. في بعض الأحيان ، تكون النساء سهلات التأثر ويمكن أن يتعرضن بسهولة للتمييز على أساس الجنس. في أوقات أخرى ، تكون المرأة قادرة على قوة لا تصدق أن تكون مرنة. في حالة "إيفورو" لنوابا بطلنة الرواية إيفورو هي مثال لامرأة ذات وعي أنثوي قوي تعيش داخل مجتمع ما بعد الاستعمار يفرض الكثير من التوقعات وكذلك الحواجز التي يجب على النساء قبولها. نتيجة لذلك ، على الرغم من أن إيفورو تتمتع بشخصية قوية وتعتمد على نفسها ، إلا أنها تجد نفسها محاصرة في مجتمع أبوي يمارس قيودا على حياة المرأة وخياراتها. في هذا الصدد ، ستستخدم الدراسة كلا من النظريات النسوية ومناهج ما بعد الاستعمار لدراسة مفهوم الأنوثة وأثارها على الإناث الأفريقيات اللواتي تتأثر مجتمعاتهن ليس فقط بالمعايير الأبوية ولكن أيضا بالأشكال الموروثة للهيمنة والقهر التي تمارسها عليها القوى الإمبريالية. تنقسم الرسالة إلى ثلاثة فصول. يقدم الفصل الأول مناقشة نظرية للمفهوم وتمثيله في الأدب الأفريقي. يبحث الفصل الثاني مفهوم الأنوثة كمجموعة من المفاهيم والأدوار التي تضعف المرأة وتقلل من إحساسها بالذات كما يتجلى في إيفورو لفلورا نوابا. في الفصل الثالث ، يتم التركيز على جوانب الأنوثة التي تمكن المرأة وتعزز إحساسها باحترام الذات

الكلمات المفتاحية

.الأنوثة-المفارقة-الوعي الأنثوي-ما بعد الاستعمار-النظام الأبوي

Résumé

Cette étude vise à étudier les paradoxes de la féminité pour les femmes dans la société Igbo postcoloniale tels qu'ils se manifestent à travers le protagoniste de *l'Efuru* de Flora Nwapa. L'argument principal est que le concept de féminité comporte différents sentiments ambivalents pour les femmes à mesure qu'elles grandissent et luttent contre les attentes sociales. À certains moments, les femmes sont faibles et vulnérables et peuvent facilement être soumises au sexisme. À d'autres moments, les femmes sont capables d'une force incroyable et peuvent être résilientes et fortes. Dans le cas de *l'Efuru* de Nwapa. Efuru, la protagoniste féminine du roman, est un exemple de femme avec une forte conscience féminine qui vit dans une société postcoloniale qui impose beaucoup d'attentes ainsi que des barrières que les femmes doivent accepter . En conséquence, même si Efuru a une forte personnalité et est autonome, elle se retrouve piégée dans une société patriarcale qui exerce des limitations sur la vie et les choix des femmes. À cet égard, l'étude utilisera à la fois les théories féministes et les approches postcoloniales pour étudier le concept de féminité et ses implications pour les femmes africaines dont les communautés sont affectées non seulement par les normes patriarcales mais aussi par les formes héritées d'hégémonie, d'assujettissement et de domination exercées sur elles par les puissances impériales. La thèse est divisée en trois chapitres. Le premier chapitre fournit une discussion théorique du concept et de sa représentation dans la littérature africaine. Le deuxième chapitre examinera le concept de féminité comme un ensemble de notions et de rôles qui affaiblissent les femmes et réduisent leur sens de l'individualité tel qu'il se manifeste dans *l'Efuru* de Nwapa. Dans le troisième chapitre, l'accent est mis sur les aspects de la féminité qui autonomisent les femmes et renforcent leur estime de soi.

Mots Clés Féminité-paradoxe-Conscience féminine-postcolonialisme-patriarcat.