DISSECTING THE FEMALENESSES AND MALENESSES IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU

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Abstract

Gender relations and the unequal positioning of men and women within African societies have remained a central concern in literary discourse. Nwapa's *Efuru* provides a rich narrative through which issues of patriarchy, gender roles, and women's subordination can be examined. The analysis is guided by Wollstonecraft's 1792 feminist theory, Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation to examine male's superiority, authority, materialism, and women's submission, and commodification. Against this background, this study investigates the representation of Malenesses and Femalenesses in the novel, with a view of understanding how patriarchal dominance and female marginalisation are constructed and sustained. The study adopts a qualitative research design and utilises textual analysis based on a close reading of the novel to analyse the comparative construction of masculinity and femininity in *Efuru*. The findings affirm that *Efuru* critiques patriarchal structures by exposing how male dominance and women's internalised compliance sustain gender imbalance in society. The study concludes that the novel, as a medium of information and education plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of gender and, in doing so, possesses the capacity to reinforce or distort women's identities within society. The study recommends a deliberate commitment to positive representations of women, alongside increased visibility of women's capacities and achievements in ways that actively challenge patriarchal narratives and contribute to the promotion of gender equity within textual media spaces.

Keywords: Femalenesses, Malenesses, Dissecting, Patriarchy, Efuru

Introduction

Gender relations and the construction of masculinity and femininity remain central concerns in African literary criticism, particularly in texts that engage with traditional social structures and cultural practices. In many African societies, patriarchy operates as a dominant system that privileges men while marginalising women socially, economically, and politically. Literature has served as a critical medium through which these power relations are interrogated, challenged, and reconceived. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), widely regarded as one of the earliest African novels written by a woman, presents portrayal of women's experiences within a patriarchal Igbo society.

The novel focusses women's lives, desires, and struggles while simultaneously exposing the cultural norms that shape gender relations. Through its characters and narrative structure, *Efuru* reveals how masculinity is associated with domination, authority, material ambition, and control,

while femininity is constructed around submission, endurance, and sacrifice (Stratton, 1994, Walby 1990).

While several studies have examined *Efuru* from feminist and womanist perspectives, limited attention has been paid to a comparative analysis of Malenesses and Femalenesses as mutually reinforcing constructs. Understanding masculinity alongside femininity is crucial, as patriarchy is sustained not only through male dominance but also through women's internalisation and negotiation of oppressive norms. This study therefore situates *Efuru* within broader feminist discourse by examining how gender identities are constructed, performed, and sustained through cultural expectations and power relations. Existing studies on *Efuru* have predominantly focused on themes of womanhood, tradition, resistance, and female fragmentation (Stratton, 1994; Ezeigbo, 1996; Akongo, 2022).

Whereas these studies provide valuable insights, many focus exclusively on female experience without sufficient attention to male activity or the relational nature of gender power (Kolawole, 2002). Few studies adopt a structured comparative approach that analyses masculinity and femininity side by side. This limitation justifies the present study's focus on Malenesses versus Femalenesses as mutually reinforcing structures within the novel. With particular emphasis on patriarchy, masculinity, femininity, Nwapa's *Efuru*, thematically reflect scholarly debates on African feminism, representations of women, constructions of masculinity, and symbolic annihilation (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, Anidi, Ezeh & Ogor 2021).

Representation of Women in Efuru

Within the cultural context of *Efuru*, women are represented as industrious, resilient, economically enterprising, and intellectually capable. Despite these admirable qualities, however, they occupy a marginalised and subordinate position within the patriarchal structure of the society depicted in the novel. Their relationships with men are frequently characterised by neglect, emotional deprivation, and systemic subjugation, reflecting deeply entrenched gender hierarchies (Akongo 2022). This representation suggests not only the historical reality of women's oppression but also the continuity of such patterns into contemporary African societies.

Efuru herself embodies this paradox of empowerment and marginalisation. Although divinely favoured, financially successful, and a source of prosperity to both families she married into, she is denied the culturally defined "joy of womanhood," Her value is equally measured against her ability to bear a male child, illustrating the society's intense preference for male offspring. Notably, despite experiencing betrayal and emotional trauma, Efuru goes as far as arranging additional wives for her husbands in pursuit of a male heir. This act highlights the depth of internalised patriarchal expectations and the extent to which traditional African society privileges male lineage over women's emotional well-being (Anidi, Ezeh, & Ogor, 2021). Through these portrayals, Nwapa's *Efuru* presents women as powerful yet constrained actors, whose strength operate within and are often limited by rigid cultural expectations.

Every activity undermined the women. They were thus deprived, denied, disappointed, deserted and demoralized. Polygamy is a feature that is inherent in the society as the women themselves canvass for wives for their husbands/sons, the women initiate this to show their loyalty and love to their husbands even this cannot be said of the men canvassing for another husbands for their wives under their roof. It depicts superiority and inequality which is not only biological. Critical

studies on Efuru largely focus on the portrayal of women's lives, marriage, motherhood, and economic independence (Dick 2024; Ezeigbo, 1996).

Scholars have praised Nwapa for stressing female experiences and exposing male-centred narratives in African culture/literature (Stratton, 1994). Nwapa's Efuru has often been interpreted as a symbol of female strength resilience and economic independence; however, critics note that her worth remains measured by cultural expectations surrounding marriage and fertility (Dick 2024, Ezeigbo, 1996; Kolawole, 2002).

This contradiction highlights the limits of female autonomy within patriarchal structures and highlights the complexity of women's negotiation of power in the novel. Gender studies emphasise the importance of analysing masculinity as a socially constructed identity rather than a natural condition (Connell, 1995). In African literature, masculinity is frequently associated with authority, material provision, and decision-making power (Lindsay & Miescher, 2003).

Akongo (2022) in citing Umeh (1998) opines that

> However, while reading Flora Nwapa's interview with Marie Umeh, Flora Nwapa argues that she does not agree with male writers' description of women in their works.in fact, women are neither prostitutes nor never- do -wells. Consequently, she would like to correct male writers by depicting the true image of the woman. According to Flora Nwapa, women are very, very positive in their thinking, independent and very, very industrious. Thus, what is the true image of women in the household and the society when it comes to their relationship with the men in Flora Nwapa's fiction. (p.60)

In *Efuru*, male characters exercise authority over women's social and economic lives, reinforcing patriarchal norms and benefiting from culturally sanctioned privileges (Nwapa, 1966). This gap highlights the relevance of examining Malenesses and Femalenesses as interconnected constructs.

Symbolic Annihilation and Gender Representation

The concept of symbolic annihilation, introduced by Tuchman, refers to the absence, trivialisation, or marginalisation of women in representational systems. Although originally developed within media studies, the concept is applicable to literary analysis, particularly in examining exclusion (Tuchman, 1978). In *Efuru*, women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, and their identities are defined in relation to male-centred cultural expectations (Nwapa, 1966). Symbolic annihilation therefore, provides a useful point of view for understanding how gender inequality is reproduced through both presence and absence within literary narratives. This study addresses this gap by examining how Malenesses and Femalenesses interact to sustain patriarchy, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of gender issues in relation to the annihilation of women in *Efuru* (Ukpokolo 2016; Tuchman, 1978)

Theoretical Framework Feminist Theory:

The study adopted feministic theory. Feminist Theory is a critical social theory that examines the ways in which gender-based power relations, patriarchy, and structural inequalities shape social, political, economic, and cultural life. Feminist theory seeks to expose and challenge the

systematic marginalisation of women, while advocating for gender equality, social justice, and the empowerment of women in all spheres of society, including politics, media, and governance.

The earliest formal proponent of feminist theory is widely traced to Mary Wollstonecraft, her works laid the philosophical foundation of modern feminist thought. Wollstonecraft (1792) argued against the exclusion of women and discrimination against them, contending that women's subordinate status was socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Her work challenged prevailing patriarchal ideologies and called for women's equal participation in civic and political affairs.

In the twentieth century, feminist theory evolved into a more systematic analytical framework through the contributions of researchers such as Beauvoir (1949), who superbly asserted that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasising gender as a social construct. Later feminist scholars expanded the theory to interrogate institutions such as the media, highlighting how representation, language, and imagery reinforce male dominance and marginalise women's voices (Tuchman, 1978 & Zoonen, 1994).

Within this study, the femalenesses of women through feminist theory provides a critical lens for analysing how women are portrayed, silenced, or stereotyped, and how such representations shape public perceptions and reinforce gendered power relations. (Tamale, 2020).

METHODOLOGY.

 The study employs a textual analysis approach, focusing on close reading and interpretation of the novel. Textual analysis facilitates the examination, given the interpretive nature of literary studies aiding the understanding of the context of the book and investigate what it says about its subject matter. ((Roberts 2000; McKee 2003 & Zulfiya 2024). This design allows for a critical engagement with Nwapa's *Efuru* in order to analyse the comparative construction of Malenesses and Femalenesses. of characterisation, that reveal underlying gender ideologies. This approach is particularly suitable for analysing how masculinity and femininity are constructed as relational and mutually reinforcing categories within a patriarchal context.

This study adopting a qualitative textual analysis**,** focuses on uncovering the ideological, cultural, and representational meanings embedded in a literary text. Given the interpretive nature of literary studies, this design allows for a critical engagement with *Efuru* (1966) in order to analyse the comparative construction of Malenesses and Femalenesses. of characterisation that reveal underlying gender ideologies within a patriarchal context.

RESULT

The integration of symbolic annihilation further justifies a textual methodology as the marginalisation of women also operates at the level of representation rather than explicit exclusion alone. Through close reading, the study examines narrative emphasis, silences, omissions, and character positioning to reveal how women's identities and capacities are diminished or trivialised in *Efuru*..

Therefore, textual analysis enables the study to examine how women's apparent submission functions as strategic adaptation within patriarchal constraints by dissecting the femalenesses and malenesses from the feministic point of view.

Femalenesses versus Malenesses

Malenesses

1. The oppression and subjugation of women by men are rooted in distrust and materialism (commodification), as symbolised through the characters of Adizua's father, Nwosu, Adizua, and Gilbert.
2. These male characters exhibit an excessive preoccupation with satisfying their material desires, often at the expense of ethical considerations and human relationships, as represented by Adizua's father, Nwosu, Adizua, and Gilbert.
3. They internalise and enact the dominant patriarchal ideology that legitimises male superiority and authority, a dynamic symbolised through Adizua's father, Nwosu, Adizua, and Gilbert.
4. Male characters exclude female voices from critical decision-making processes, particularly in matters driven by material gain, as illustrated by Adizua and Gilbert.
5. The men embody the "alpha male" concept of masculinity, which marginalises femininity and relegates women to the periphery of social and power structures, as seen in Adizua's father, Nwosu, Adizua, and Gilbert.
6. Male identity is affirmed through dominance and control, with misogyny operating as an underlying factor, particularly in the character of Adizua's father.
7. The men benefit from culturally entrenched privileges that reinforce gender inequality and sustain patriarchal power, as symbolised by Adizua's father, Nwosu, Adizua, and Gilbert.

Femalenesses

1. Female characters recognise and internalise masculine dominance, responding with submission and compliance to patriarchal authority. This internalisation of male power is evident in the experiences of Efuru, Adizua's mother (Ossai), Amede, Ogea, and Nkonyeni.
2. Misogynistic practices are normalised and implicitly accepted by women, who adapt to patriarchal constraints rather than actively resisting them, as exemplified by Adizua's mother (Ossai).
3. Women passively support the material ambitions of their sons and husbands, often to their own emotional, social, and psychological disadvantage, leading to disillusionment and marginalisation as portrayed through Efuru, Ossai, Amede, and Nkonyeni.
4. Cultural and traditional structures systematically disadvantage women, yet these inequities remain largely unchallenged, reflecting a deep internalisation of patriarchal ideology, as symbolised by Efuru, Ossai, Amede, Ogea, Nkonyeni, and Nwabata.
5. Female characters are excluded from meaningful decision-making processes that directly affect their lives, reinforcing their subordinate position within the social hierarchy, as illustrated by Ogea, Nkonyeni, and Ossai.
6. The subjugation and commodification of women by men are not only externally imposed but also sustained through women's internalised acceptance and compliance, demonstrating how patriarchy reproduces itself through both overt dominance and internalised oppression. This is symbolised in Ogea, and Nkonyeni.

Comparative Table: Malenesses vs Femalenesses

S/N	Malenesses	Femalenesses
1	Men exercise power and authority within a patriarchal structure.	Women internalise male dominance and respond with submission.
2	Male characters prioritise materialism and self-interest.	Women passively support male material ambitions at personal cost.
3	Men dominate decision-making processes.	Women are excluded from decisions affecting their lives.
4	Masculinity is associated with control, dominance, and privilege.	Femininity is associated with compliance, silence, and endurance.
5	Patriarchy is enforced through overt dominance.	Patriarchy is sustained through internalised oppression and acceptance.
6	Men benefit from culturally sanctioned Privileges	Women suffer marginalisation legitimised by tradition.

Dissecting the Classification of Female Characters in "Efuru"

S/N	Category	Symbol	Outcome
1	Married Female	Ajanupu, Nwabata	They were in want, lack finance- means of livelihood
2	Divorced/separated Female	Efuru, Ossai	Unfulfilled dream and destiny
3	Widowed Female	Ossai, Amede	Lonely yet unbothered
4	Out of school Female	Nkoyeni	To procreate and preserve lineage but ended up unwanted
5	Commercialized female	Ogea	Have no self-decision or resolute, commercialized commodity
6	Wealthy Female	Efuru	Successful in business, pays her bills and helped others
7	Opinionated Female	Ajanupu	Alpha woman
8	Busybody Female	Omirima	Deceitful, wangling tongue
9	Intelligent Female	Efuru, Nwabata,	Have acumen, protected their husbands from losses
10	Resolute, truthful and kind	Efuru's mother, Efuru	Respect and high regard within their community.

Discussion on the Classification of Female Characters in Efuru

Item 1 in the table reveals that although Ajanupu and Nwabata were married and remained within their husbands' households, the men failed to perform their culturally sanctioned role as economic providers. As a result, these women experienced persistent material deprivation and insecurity. This finding challenges the patriarchal assumption that marriage guarantees

economic stability for women, exposing instead the vulnerability of women who are structurally dependent on unreliable male providers.

Item 2 focuses on divorced or separated women, exemplified by Efuru and Ossai (Efuru's mother-in-law). Their marital breakdowns are associated with emotional dissatisfaction, unfulfilled aspirations, and the collapse of the idealised promise of marriage. Nwapa thus interrogates marriage as an institution, revealing that its failure disproportionately burdens women with loss, stigma, and unmet destinies.

Item 3 examines widowhood, represented by Amede and Ossai. Despite their loneliness, these women appear relatively unbothered, largely because of their children, asnd social security derived from male offspring and continued residence in their marital homes. This suggests that women's stability in widowhood remains contingent upon patriarchal validation through sons rather than personal autonomy.

Item 4 highlights the plight of out-of-school females, symbolised by Nkoyeni. Her withdrawal from education emphasizes how schooling for women is perceived as a threat to patriarchal ideals of loyalty, submissiveness, and domesticity. Although her brother Sunday recognised the value of education, his eventual consent to her marriage reveals complicity in patriarchal practices. Nkoyeni's commodification through marriage culminates in her rejection when she questions her husband's movements, leading to the introduction of Ogea as a rival wife to suppress her resistance. Nkoyeni ended up unwanted.

Item 5 presents the most explicit case of commodification through Ogea, who never attended school and was traded by her parents to settle debts. Deprived of education and decision-making capacity, Ogea functions as a passive object within male-controlled transactions. Her compliance in marrying Gilbert illustrates how prolonged social conditioning normalises women's objectification, reinforcing their role as commodities rather than autonomous individuals.

Item 6 identifies the wealthy and industrious woman, embodied by Efuru. Her success in trade affords her financial independence and social relevance, enabling her to assist both men and women without reinforcing male subjugation. Efuru's wealth disrupts patriarchal economic hierarchies, demonstrating that females' wealth, and generosity can coexist without emasculating/undermining men or destabilising communal harmony.

Item 7 discusses opinionated women through Ajanupu, portrayed as assertive, vocal, and resistant to male excesses and injustice. Nwapa's deliberate silence about Ajanupu's husband symbolically foregrounds her autonomy. Ajanupu's outspoken condemnation of male irresponsibility including that of her nephew Adizua and her unwavering support for Efuru positions her as an "alpha woman" who openly challenges patriarchal abuse and hypocrisy.

Item 8 reflects the busybody prototypical represented by Omirima, whose interference in others' lives is driven by envy and malice. Her persistent vilification of Efuru, including accusations of diabolism, illustrates how women can internalise patriarchy and weaponise it against other women. Omirima thus represents internalised misogyny that sustains patriarchal norms through female complicity.

Item 9 portrays intelligent women, notably Nwabata and Efuru, whose discernment and foresight prevent financial and physical harm. Nwabata's prudent safeguarded the borrowed money from Efuru when thieves invaded their home at night, and her resistance to her husband;s irresponsible chieftaincy ambition reveal her strategic intelligence, while Efuru's economic counsel to her husband demonstrates rational planning. These women exercise wisdom that protects male interests without overt domination, challenging stereotypes of female intellectual inferiority.

Item 10 highlights women characterised by resolute truthfulness and kindness, exemplified by Efuru and her mother. Their moral integrity, compassion, and resilience earn them communal admiration and spiritual recognition, as seen in Efuru's selection by the river goddess. Despite personal suffering particularly infertility and marital instability, these women maintain dignity and benevolence, reinforcing Nwapa's valuation of ethical strength over patriarchal validation.

Overall Analytical Insight

Collectively, these classifications demonstrate that *Efuru* is not simply a narrative of female suffering but a exploration of women's varied responses to patriarchal constraints reinforcing the ideology of feministic theory.s clarion call for change. Nwapa presents women as victims, collaborators, and negotiators thereby dismantling monolithic representations of African womanhood and affirming female complexity within oppressive social structures.

The findings demonstrate that Efuru offers a subtle yet profound critique of patriarchal social structures by revealing how entrenched male dominance, coupled with women's internalised acceptance of subordinate roles, perpetuates systemic gender inequality. Through its characterisation and narrative progression, the novel exposes the cultural mechanisms that normalise male authority while conditioning women to negotiate their bearing within restrictive societal expectations. which affirm Bouilly et al. (2016), Akongo (2022) and Dick (2024) studies. In doing so, the dissecting of the femalenesses and malenesses highlight the cyclical nature of gender imbalance, sustained not only through overt domination but also through deeply embedded ideological consent.

The study further establishes that the novel, as a literary medium of information, social reflection, and cultural transmission, plays a crucial role in shaping public consciousness about gender relations. Literature does not merely mirror society; it actively participates in constructing meanings, identities, and normative assumptions in relation to gender. Consequently, textual representations possess the dual capacity to either reinforce stereotypical and limiting constructions of women or to challenge and reconstruct them in more empowering ways.

In light of these insights, the study recommends a deliberate and sustained commitment to transformative representations of women within literary and broader textual media spaces. Such representations should foreground women's intellectual competence, economic agency, leadership potential, and emotional complexity. Increased visibility of women's achievements and multidimensional identities is essential in destabilising patriarchal narratives and fostering more equitable gender discourses. Ultimately, intentional and gender-sensitive storytelling remains a vital strategy for advancing social reorientation and promoting gender equity within contemporary African societies.

Conclusion

In essence, this study highlights that Efuru is not merely a novel about a woman's personal journey, but a critical exploration of gendered power relations. By analysing Malenesses and Femalenesses, the study reveals the persistence of patriarchal dominance and the complex, often subtle ways in which women negotiate, endure, and at times challenge the constraints imposed upon them. Nwapa's portrayal exposes how cultural norms, material interests, and male privilege converge to marginalise women while simultaneously shaping their responses to oppression.

The study set out to examine the comparative construction of Malenesses and Femalenesses in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, with particular attention to how gender relations are represented, sustained, and negotiated within patriarchal structures. Anchored in feminist theory, specifically informed by Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation, the analysis demonstrates how women's voices, activities, and contributions are often diminished or rendered invisible, even within narratives centred on their lives. At the same time, the text reveals culturally grounded forms of female resilience, negotiation, and survival that challenge simplistic portrayals of African women as passive victims.

In conclusion, *Efuru* offers a compelling literary critique of gender relations in African societies by exposing the mechanisms through which patriarchy is maintained and normalised. The comparative analysis of Malenesses and Femalenesses highlights the interdependence of male dominance and female subordination in sustaining unequal power relations, while also highlighting women's strategic activities within restrictive cultural frameworks. As such, Nwapa's work remains a vital resource for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to engage critically with issues of gender equality, representation, and social transformation in African contexts.

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