



Reading Empowerment as a Feminist Politics of Sustainable Development of Africa in Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different*

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Abstract: This article examines the concept of women's empowerment as a prerequisite of sustainable development in contemporary African society in Flora Nwapa's fictional work, *Women are Different*. It is an attempt to document a democratizing vision of development seen through the lenses of the Nigerian woman writer. Postcolonial feminist approach is applied to the study to conceptualize traditional leadership in new light that encompasses the ideals of sustainable leadership which promotes an equalitarian agenda for both genders to take leadership positions. Findings reveal that women's empowerment through economic, social and political leadership will pay dividend to sustainable development in Africa. The work is expected to contribute to the growing volumes of literature that seeks alternatives to development issues for the emergence of Africa.

Keywords: Empowerment, Feminist, Politics, Sustainable Development, Africa.

Resume: Cet article examine le concept d'autonomisation des femmes en tant que condition préalable au développement durable dans la société africaine contemporaine dans l'œuvre de fiction de Flora Nwapa, *Women are Different* (Les femmes sont différentes). Il s'agit d'une tentative de documenter une vision démocratisante du développement vue à travers les lentilles de l'écrivaine nigériane. L'approche féministe postcoloniale est appliquée à l'étude pour conceptualiser le leadership traditionnel sous un nouvel angle qui englobe les idéaux d'un leadership durable qui promet un programme égalitaire pour les deux sexes afin d'occuper des postes de direction. Les résultats révèlent que l'autonomisation des femmes par le biais d'un leadership économique, social et politique contribuera au développement durable de l'Afrique. Ce travail devrait contribuer aux volumes croissants de littérature qui cherchent des alternatives aux questions de développement pour l'émergence de l'Afrique.

Mots clefs: autonomisation, féminisme, politique, développement durable, Afrique

Introduction

The issue of women's empowerment constitutes one of the central themes at the center of postcolonial debates creating a considerable volume of literature in social and political sciences as well as in humanities. It brings to the frontline of the discussion the thematic concerns of gender equality, female leadership, sexual division of labor and women's emancipation through economic, political, and social independence. Flora Nwapa, acknowledged as Africa's first internationally recognized female novelist, fighting for the emancipation of female citizenry, projects a particular image and vision of empowerment in her artistic productions. In her novel – *Women are Different* (1986) – Flora Nwapa represents the concept of empowerment under the banner of feminism as an innovative form of women's consciousness awareness and a prerequisite of social, economic and political development of her native Nigerian society.

In this study, empowerment is used as defined by Cheryl Czuba, a political analyst in the United States in his article, "Empowerment: What Is It?" as "a multidimensional social process that helps people gain over their own lives. It fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities and their society, by enabling them to take action on issues they define as important" (1999: 57). As we read Flora Nwapa's empowerment paradigm as a feminist vision of development in this article, we aim at studying how she empowers her female characters for their self-realization and self-actualization. We also intend to show how women's empowerment leads to social, economic and political development of the society. To achieve these set goals, we find it relevant to conceptualize the study within a feminist analytical approach to give credit to women's voice in development issues. The analysis attempts to answer the following questions: How does Flora Nwapa empower women in her feminist politics of development? What vision of development does Flora Nwapa portray through her narrative? To what extent does women's empowerment can trigger social changes?

1. Conceptualizing Empowerment in Flora Nwapa's Feminist Politics

Flora Nwapa draws an inspiring conceptual map of empowerment through a feminist politics of social development in her narrative. In *Women are Different*, she portrays the image of promising heroines highly distinguished by their courage, independence, competence and qualification to deal with the economic, social and political management of their Nigerian society. These female characters are struggling against all odds to change their plight in the

midst of developing Nigeria. Through the story of the novel, Flora Nwapa conceptualizes empowerment in new light by rewriting leadership, articulating female entrepreneurship as well as promoting female political inclusion.

1.1.Re-visioning and Rewriting Leadership Paradigm

Given the paucity of the historical profile of women in leadership roles all over African continent and particularly in Nigerian social setting, Flora Nwapa makes use of her literary work as a revisionary writing to conceptualize in new light leadership paradigm for women in contemporary times. She believes that because of the hegemonic network of power that operates in Nigerian society through the auspices of patriarchal gender education, privileged voice has been given to men. And this system of male privilege voice reinforces the stability of men ruling elite and maintains the social and political status quo. In this male hegemonic network, women's voices are overlooked, marginalized and silenced.

In her conception of empowerment as a feminist vision of sustainable development of Nigerian society, Nwapa outdates the theories of traditional or conventional styles of leadership promoted by the canons of patriarchy which confer power and leadership roles to male gender. She suggests new paradigms and models of leadership that promote the discursive practice of women's empowerment and feminist interest through the contestation of patriarchal totalizing ideas of male gender leadership. This transformational feminist-orientated theory of leadership suggested by Nwapa in her narrative is called by Jane Wakahiu and Mary Salvaterraas "sustainable leadership". According to them, sustainable leadership is "the ability for individuals and institutions to continue to adapt and meet new challenges and complexities in demanding and changing contexts" (2012:152). In their view, leadership is relational and non-hierarchical social process in which any people regardless of gender affiliation seeks change and development to the profit of the common good and interest. In this perspective, they see leadership as,

A concept that encourages shared responsibility to encourage human and financial resources improvement. It is self-sustaining because leaders recognize the need for change and community involvement to ensure growth (2012: 161).

Flora Nwapa captures this leadership paradigm in *Women are Different*, through the portrayal of female characters such as Agnes, Dora and Rose. They are portrayed as renegades due to the fact that they have struggled to forfeit their basic gender roles and distinguish

themselves as emancipated women to address societal needs. Agnes, Dora and Rose prove their abilities to adapt and meet the new challenges and realities of their developing country. Their new styles of leadership are displayed to compromise the conventional and traditional styles of leadership complying with patriarchal cultural assumptions. This is consisted in their seeking for economic independence, rewarding and successful careers as well as their commitment to political activities.

The deployment of Nwapa's new leadership paradigm for women in *Women are Different* is firstly premised on economic viability which constitutes one of the footholds of African feministic consciousness. In this novel, Nwapa's perspective on women empowerment is pertinently built on the economic leadership of female citizenry. She creates a decent space for her female protagonists, (Agnes, Dora and Rose) to enjoy economic opportunities through the handling of white-collar jobs and free business. This economic empowerment or leadership of women is called by Marie Umeh in her critical evaluation of Nwapa's fiction as "a poetic of economic independence and self-reliance for female empowerment" (1998: 664). This 'poetic of economic independence' is perceptible at different levels according to the typology of characters in *Women are Different*. Agnes was forced to get married in her tender age, but this does not hamper the trajectory of her ambition. In fact, with her yearning to be economically independent in order to exert control over her own life, Agnes defies the authority of her patriarchal husband; leaves him and goes back to university to update her knowledge, competence and get other degree and qualification. Armed with this strong and sophisticated power of intellectualism, she succeeds in securing a good job in the Ministry of Education. She is described as economically influential as regard to her living condition and standard in this way, "Agnes was lucky to secure a home in the famous GRA (Government Reservation Area) where those who had made it in the fifties and early sixties have live when the colonial masters had gone" (*Women are Different*: pp, 63-64).

The suggestive assumption of Nwapa through the writing of Agnes in such a way is to lay emphasis on the measurable social and economic gains and empowerment of Agnes that can create indelible marks of development on her community. Looking at Agnes's social and economic success and comfort, one can grasp Nwapa's feminist politics of development that complies with the ceaseless demands and requirements for economic leadership and empowerment engrained in the agenda of feminist movement around the black continent.

In addition to women's economic viability, another related issue on Flora Nwapa's agenda of rewriting conventional leadership, is women's searching for rewarding and successful careers in workplace. Gender bias attitudes within the workplace are detrimental to women's promotion to managerial and leadership positions. This underlying social and public discrimination of gender relationship that limits women's yearning for leadership roles catches Dora in her nursing career. Dora was described as a "mere nurse at the bottom of the ladder (*Women are Different*: p, 68), despite her determination to reach the top of the ladder in the context of nursing career. Dora's aspiration was blocked by a hurtful regulation which does not recognize women's dual roles in the society and negates women's incursion into the public sphere of workplace as a leading light. Dora's nursing experience is narrated as follows,

She was tired of nursing, and she felt she was not going to be promoted to a nursing sister even if she worked for six years. This was because the Chief Nursing Officer at the time was disgruntled spinster who lorded over married women. It was said that she made it known to all married nurses, that they could do either of two things, be a wife and stay at home or be nurse and work in the hospital full time. (*Women are Different*: p, 67-68).

The passage reveals that the nursing staff of the hospital of Ikot Ekpene was under the managerial hand of a Chief Nursing Officer who has no compassion for married nurse like Dora. Realizing this state of matter, Dora resigns and embraces carefree new career in the private sector in order to establish her own niche as an individual who has a capacity set up a liberal business to transform herself as well as her society. Agnes was confronted to almost the similar hindrance in the Ministry where she works under the Assistant Chief Inspector. One reads apropos,

Agnes threw herself into her job as if the job was her father's. She worked under the Assistant Chief Inspector of education who, sad to say, had not too much confidence in people like Agnes, her education notwithstanding. As a result Agnes' reports were ignored and her efforts not appreciated. But she persisted in putting into practice what she learnt at ACMGS (*Women are Different*: p, 63).

All the influences of her Assistant Chief Inspector get Agnes to be transferred to Lagos for a course on adult education. But the ongoing of the situation does not suit Agnes expectation. She gives up by handing in her resignation to hope for more rewarding career and leadership roles. She takes a leading post as the executive of the John Levis Production and Research Bureau's firm.

Rose's experience in her fighting for satisfying professional leadership career and white-collar job has been quite different. She gets a job in the firm of Public Relations, and with her determination and her hardworking talent she succeeds in imposing herself as a leader which makes her be rewarded the high executive post. Things have moved the right way for Rose without any interference and complication in her way towards leadership position. At that point, Rose's success in this milieu is very illustrative as regarded to the collective revolutionary movement of female to acquire status of empowerment through leading responsibilities. Rose was firstly "appointed as Woman Education Officer in Queens College, where she taught maths" (p.79), and later "she got a job with a firm of Public Relations. Rose worked hard and in eighteen months; she had become a high executive" (p.82). Rose's professional experience is an inspirational approach which echoes in the global African feminist's commitment towards women's empowerment and emancipation for societal changes.

1.2.Voicing Female Entrepreneurship

In the orchestration of *Women are Different*, Nwapa opens a window to develop the entrepreneurial and marketable aptitude and talent of women through the display of Dora. After school days, Dora embraces a nursing career in the domain of public health. But soon she discovers and realizes that her self-potential and talent can only be useful in leading commercial business. She resigns and invests herself in liberal business and entrepreneurship. She sets up an alimentary industry through the building of a bakery. The text reveals Dora's entrepreneurial flair and ingenuity in this way,

She bought the things she for the business, quit nursing and started baking cakes and making doughnuts. She sent them to be sold in the hospital, and because they were good, they were sold in no time. In a short time, people started placing orders the cakes and doughnuts and the business began to grow. Dora had to move to new premises, because she could no longer use her own house. Then, she started baking bread, and when that too was successful, she bought a van to transport her product (*Women are Different*: p, 68)

Depicting Dora in such a triumphant way, Nwapa is creating a new avenue for women to make free choice and exert power over their own destiny. Dora's inventiveness, self-reliance and self-sufficiency in pursuing her own business are inspirational qualities that the female generation to come must follow for their economic empowerment and independence to transform the society for the better.

Nwapa's perspectives on women's empowerment emphasize the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passive recipients of development strategies. She is adamant to the fact that the surest way to achieve economic, social and political development resides in investing in women's capacities and empowering them to exercise their own choices. Through Chinwe, the daughter of Dora, one of the central characters, Nwapa shows the premise of women's choice and vision of empowerment through free private practice of their own will. Chinwe divorces her husband to opt for more breathing space in setting herself as a free dealer in "beer-parlor business" (p.115); soon after she moves forward and gets a lucrative contract from the military rulers. With her determination and her head up, she can be perceived in some ways as a representative of women's capacity to conceive a plan of actions in regard to their free leading choices in terms of their liberation and empowerment. In connection with women's taking over their choices and empowerment through business leading by women themselves the text studied substantiates,

Chinwe had done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mother's own. Her generation was telling the men, that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They are saying that women have options. Their lives cannot be ruined because of a bad marriage they have choices to set up a business of their own, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry and divorce their husbands. Marriage is not THE only way (*Women are Different*: pp, 118-119)

In this light, it comprehensively comes out that the issue of women's empowerment be it in the political, economic and social environment is dependent on women themselves. For Nwapa, in her feminist vision of development, women's empowerment should lead to situation where all people regardless of gender affiliations, use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society. In such a context, women must be first of all the agent responsible for their empowerment to make choices and publicly speak out.

1.3.Reforming Political Leadership: Women's Incursion in Public Sphere

The patriarchalization of the African society has set up the politics of public and private sphere of social stratification. The structuring of the society through the dichotomy between private and public sphere of social life has mapped public life associated with men and conversely private life be identical with women. This situation is depicted by the feminist campaigner Ogundipe-Leslie Molar in these lines:

Women are "naturally" excluded from public affairs; they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when

serious matters of state and society are being discussed. Women are viewed to need tutelage before they can be politically active; politics is considered the absolute realm of men; women are not considered fit for political positions in modern African nation-states, though their enthusiasm and campaign work are exploited by their various political parties (Ogundipe-Leslie Molar, 1987: 130).

On the heels of the above, the patriarchal tendencies to downgrade women's true worth are given expression. The ideology stemming from this system of social organization posits men as loyal king of political activities and women as leaders of non-political activities. In this perspective, women are positioned as simple agents of domestic science such as cooking, ironing, and childbearing. In short, women are identified as household manager in the realm of home environment.

In *Women Are Different*, Nwapa breaks this patriarchal image of women by articulating women's voices in the public sphere through the incursion of Agnes into the state management leadership. As a first rate brain female scholar, Agnes is appointed as an officer in the Ministry of Education. Through the writing of Agnes character in this way, Nwapa has found a space for women to articulate "their scripts which envision alternatives ways of ordering political, public and private life." (Tripp A. Mari, 2000: 27). Agnes's incursion into the managerial staff of governmental affairs management, complies African feminist perspective promoted by such a feminist thinker as Akachi Ezeigbo who expresses the needs of women's participation in the business of state and public sphere. She writes "we need more and more women to speak out in public" (1996: 16).

With the creation of such a female character imbued with quality to distinguish herself as a pathfinder with a mission and vision, Nwapa casts the female yearning for political leadership in a new mould. She advocates the rise of female political Activism through Agnes's step in the realm of politics. She reconstructs and corrects women's denied opportunities of assuming supporting leadership at all levels of governance in the society's ruling set-up. Textual evidence indicates this yearning when the narrative substantiates, "But a year after she decided to join the civil service at Enugu, and there she was appointed a Woman Education Officer in the Ministry of Education" (*Women are Different*: p, 62). Agnes is given a chance to be at the helm of the affairs of the state. By making Agnes assuming such a responsibility in one of the ministries of the Nigerian government, Nwapa is raising the political consciousness of women. She is emphasizing that as individuals, women must show off their abilities in managing the state affairs through their participation in the business of the public sphere. In this context, there

is a need to reconstruct the public sphere by taking into account the voice and choice of female citizenry. It is only by acknowledging or taking into account the important wisdom of women that the Nigerian society in particular and African mainland, at large, will fracture the limiting bonds of development.

2. Women's Empowerment and Integration: a Holistic Vision of a Democratic Sustainable Development

Flora Nwapa's vision of development is built on the standard perspective of African feminist agenda advocating gender equality. This vision consists in democratizing the paradigm of power in gender relationship for the purpose to promote the full integration of both genders in the running of societal affairs to reach sustainable development.

2.1. Democratizing Development: A Dialogic Approach of Sustainable Development

Nwapa adopts in her narrative, a holistic vision of a democratic sustainable development that reflects the "polyrhythmic realities" (Venessa Sheared, 2006: 272) of her Nigerian society. Sheared states that "polyrhythmic reality reflects the wholeness, the uniqueness, and – most important – the connectedness of individuals to others in society, their both/and realities" (272). For the Nigerian author, as development is a social process, there is a need to acknowledge the voice that celebrates the polyrhythmic realities of both men and women. The celebration of these polyrhythmic realities recommends a dialogic approach to empowerment. This democratizing vision of development is based the concept of women's empowerment viewed by F. C. Enemuo as a,

Multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of the powerless. In the specific case of women, empowerment entails not only positive changes but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that devalue, disempower and dispossess women. The process must also necessarily also include the expansion of women's access to educational opportunities, facilities for skills acquisition and positions of authority (1999: 233).

The implicate of this politics of women's empowerment is to challenge the readily accepted cultural dogma that African women are passive and voiceless members of the society by revealing their societal and political audibility. As a woman writer in the vanguard of feminism, Nwapa demythologizes the traditional social and political leadership assumptions which set up male gaze as shaper of life's choice. She advocates the politics of inclusion through



participatory democracy and integration. She preaches a development agenda which challenges the marginality of women in the management of societal and political affairs of the Nigerian country. She strongly believes that the decentralization or democratization of power will bring about changes in a democratic environment or society where every citizen, regardless of gender affinity, enjoys plentifully all the social advantages and opportunities without any cultural and social discrimination.

Flora Nwapa's vision of democratic development is constructed through the idea of redistribution of power along gender lines. A close consideration of the dimension and way in which Nwapa has orchestrated her literary composition to side with her vision of democratic development, lead us to see the fundamental idea at the heart of her concept of women's empowerment. The critical voice of Nwapa in democratizing development revolves around a warm and vibrating calling for the female citizenry to take up challenges in order to exert power over their destinies. A stark formulation of this calling for actions and sense of responsibility developed throughout her narrative is reiterated in her article "Women In Politics" when she wonders,

Will society allow our women to outgrow the social stigma attached to women in politics? Is Nigeria society prepared to see the Mrs. Indira Ghandis, the Margaret Tchatchers, the Bandaranaiques? The nation and Africa as a whole have everything to gain by allowing women full play in politics. The Nigerian and the African mothers go for results, and this all politics is about. (Flora Nwapa, 1987: 121)

The yearning for actions and activism addressed by Nwapa in this excerpt goes hand in hand with the global assumptions of postcolonial African feminist politics according to which African women need commitment to empowerment in order to take part in the advancement of the society. The reference to these exceptional female leaders who have impacted the course of human history in their respective societies is appealing and constitutes roles model for young generation of female citizen to emulate. The suggestive idea behind Nwapa's politics of democratizing development is the expansion of discursive arena of public actions to women. It is at this cost, Nwapa believes that social changes will become a reality in the nucleus of socio-political schema. To side with her vision of development, she catalyzes the presence of unconventional heroines such as Agnes, Dora and Rose, all of them enlightened by the power of education, to bear the burden of change by shouldering the responsibility of changing traditional leadership paradigms for female societal recognition.

2.2. Educated Women as Figurehead of Societal Changes

Many studies worldwide have come to acknowledge the reality that the socio-economic development of human society depends on the caliber of women and their education in the social environment. In his article “Education: a Catalyst for Women’s Empowerment in Nigeria,” James Ojobo writes,

The benefits derivable from education include the following: enhancement of the quality of living-food, housing, health, transport, communication, entertainment and gainful leisure. If the vast majority of our women forks are educated, their personal development can be enhanced remarkably. Children and husbands also stand to gain tremendously. Women are likely to have more confidence in themselves and ability to contribute effectively national development (2008: 96).

Professor Ojobo elaborates a strategic plan for sustainable development through his idea of women’s education and their inclusion in development programs. He lists six (6) domains of competence where women’s contributions can pay dividend to national development. These areas include marital obligation, agricultural development, health, national reconstruction, social development and economic development. Some of these development’s strategies are married with Flora Nwapa’s feminist stance translated via her concept of educated women stand as agent of social development. In *Women Are Different*, Dora is described as educated businesswoman who sets an enterprise of bakery. Initially Dora is trained to be a nurse but after little moment of practicing, she realizes that she does make perfect use of her talents and skills. She creates her own private enterprise of bakery. This initiative of building a bakery is loaded with symbolic meaning to the extent that the bakery can be somewhat perceived as an enterprise which is a source of employment. She has engaged a manager for the running and management of the activities of the enterprise. The text gives evidentiary proof on this account in this line “her driver who was manager and storekeeper as well” (p.71). As one can observe through this excerpt, the enterprise of bakery provides job’s opportunity to people in the community. In so doing, Dora contributes to the reduction of poverty as well as the reduction of the high rate of unemployment in her society.

Additionally, Dora’s commitment to the upliftment of her society is shown through her determinations and actions in the distribution of the foodstuffs and alimentary products during wartime. The text substantiates that “she had started making dry pack out of green plantains which she sent to the fighting soldiers in the Front. She even supplied Government House, Umuahia” (p.74). Dora’s undertakings through these social commitments are very crucial to

save the population from starvation. A critical consideration of Dora's commitments to her society leads us to conclude that her school education has bestowed on her values, competences and skills for the emergence of her society. Dora's social activism in such a way meets the vision of Levine Ruth when she advocates that education is "vital in its own rights for the realization of individual capacities, the education of girls has potential to transform the life chances of girls themselves, their future families and the societies in which they live" (2006: 128).

To cap it all, we can argue that Dora represents a "productive labor force equipped with effective leadership and intelligent management" which is "necessary requirement for successful development" (KahalidHumla, 1990: 11). As first rate female brain, Dora is an indispensable agent of social development as regard to her capital role played in social problem solving and the improvement of the quality of life. All evidence in this context shows that investment in literacy for female citizenry yields high development dividends.

Conclusion

The analysis in this inquiry has consisted in examining the issue of women's empowerment in relation to the quest of sustainable development in contemporary African society in Flora Nwapa's fictional work, *Women are Different*. The study brings to light that women's empowerment is a prerequisite of sustainable development of modern Africa society. The investigation has also documented that Flora Nwapa advocates a democratizing vision of sustainable development through a feminist approach that "looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choices for women" (Carole Boyce Davies, 1986: 10). This feminist vision of development is translated by the conceptualization of traditional leadership in new light to encompass the ideals of sustainable leadership which promotes an equalitarian agenda for both genders to take leadership positions. The study concludes by stating that women's empowerment through economic, social, educational and political leadership will pay dividend to sustainable development in Africa.

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