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Women in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* Delineated in a New Avataar

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Abstract:

This study reads Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* through the lens of gender performativity. Nwapa is a renowned Nigerian woman writer who occupies a seminal place in African literature. She addresses Nigerian women's social, economic and political issues within a patriarchal Igbo society in her novels. The study is an attempt to trace the gradual development of Nigerian women from their essential feminine identity constructed and disciplined as the effects of discourse, institutions and practices to a resignified identity both within their families and nation. Through Flora Nwapa's novel, the study heteronormative gender identity can be destabilized and women can be resignified as intelligent, successful and independent business women, patriots and officers, to name a few. In essence, the female characters of *Women are Different* in their new avataar are a clarion call to all Nigerian women to ameliorate their status and redefine their identity as empowered individuals.

Keywords: Flora Nwapa, Gender performativity, Judith Butler, Nigerian women, Performative.

Nigerian women, even today, persist to be defined in pre-determined feminine roles as obedient daughters, dutiful wives and nurturing mothers. They are relegated to subservient positions in social, economic and political spheres and are compelled to reiterate their feminine identities without fail. This article is an attempt to fathom the performative dimension of gender in order to explain that gender is flexible and multiple. Comprehending it as a plural concept, the gender identity of Nigerian women can be resignified different from heterosexual expectations. In order to understand the plurality of gender identity, the study reads Flora Nwapa's novel *Women are Different* through Butlerian lens of gender performativity. The study first examines pre-determined roles of Nigerian women and the effects of discourse, institutions and practices that constitute and discipline their traditional gender identity. The study, then, continues to focus on how heteronormative gender identity is destabilized and Nigerian women are resignified as intelligent, successful and independent business women, patriots, and officers, to name a few. The growth of female protagonists from the victim to the survivor demonstrates that identities are plural and are always in the process of becoming. The study seeks to answer the central question: Why are Nigerian women still identified in pre-determined roles? Nwapa's female protagonists in the novel exposes the necessity for Nigerian women to rearticulate their gender

identity in order to build a better world for themselves today and tomorrow that does not marginalize and oppress them.

Gender is no longer perceived as an essence with fixed or stable meaning. It is, on the contrary, considered a polysemic word which can be taken out of prior contexts and cited in an indeterminate number of contexts signifying different meanings. The interpretation of gender as a flexible and free-floating artifice can be found in Judith Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler argues that a woman is not "a coherent and stable subject" with common characteristics and interests but is different from other women as each one has her own way of comprehending and enacting feminine roles in varied contexts (7). Consequently, the varied or plural meanings ascribed to the subject 'woman' expose gender as a performative- a *doing* rather than a *being*. To put it differently, gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" that constitutes an identity it purports to be or, in other words, it brings into being that what it names (45). It is the plurality of gender, argues Butler, which contributes to diminishing the power of the rigid gender ideology and opens the possibility for resignifying gender identity in new ways within a compulsory heteronormative matrix of power. Though Butler suggests that gender has fluid or multiple identities, she assumes that the 'female' body across cultures and time periods identify themselves with the category of 'woman.' Her assumption can be proved right as majority of women in a patriarchal society reiterate inherited feminine norms not only to avoid punishment but also to enjoy respect and to be recognized. Consequently, it is from this light that Nigerian women who are strong, educated and independent individuals also conform to traditional feminine norms and practices. They do so in order to avoid being a victim of severe criticism and punishment.

Though Nigerian women conform to the rigid gender ideology which bestows a lot of importance to Nigerian men, women scholars and activists of Nigeria criticize the binary gender system and attempt to resignify the norms and practices ascribed to their bodies. Flora Nwapa, a renowned Nigerian women writer, for instance, contributes in altering the misrepresented gender identity of Nigerian women. From the Igbo oral stories narrated to her by her grandmother, she discovers that her ancestors are strong, aggressive and contended warriors who are respected and accepted by both Nigerian men and women. On analyzing the traits of women of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, she understands that gender of a Nigerian woman is not fixed but is rather a flexible category that undergoes alterations when reiterated in different periods and contexts. Consequently, she populates her world of letters with women that are not trapped in the feminine mystique. Her female protagonists liberate themselves from traditional feminine expectations and relish the freedom to be educated, to be employed, to marry, to have children, and to get a divorce from an unhappy marital life.

Nwapa's *Women are Different*, for instance, presents realistic and authentic images of Nigerian women that shift from the position of a victim of patriarchal definitions to the survivor

of redefined identities. The author's attempt to transcend her Nigerian female characters from traditional categories to self-possessed and self-reliant individuals that are respected and accepted in the community they reside echoes Butler's insights on 'gender' as a flexible and free-floating artifice that can be taken out of its prior context and be reiterated in an indeterminate number of contexts. Like Butler, Nwapa enquires the category of woman in genealogical terms: How does a woman come into existence? How can regimes of power/knowledge and power/discourse constitute and discipline a female body? And, how can female bodies be resignified? *Women are Different* is, therefore, a manifest choice to subject to a Butlerian analysis of plurality of gender identity.

Briefly, *Women are Different* is an interesting read that offers an insight into the lives of three Nigerian women friends- Agnes, Dora and Rose- that are angry and frustrated over blatant gender intolerance. Believing in the necessity for women to be versatile for their own survival, the author rearticulates the gender identity of her female protagonists as individuals that have control over their lives and procure self-fulfillment extraneous to such essentialist images as a wife and a mother that define a woman. However, the characters do not cross-dress as a man or pass as a white woman to overcome the traditional feminine norms and practices attached to the system of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality. Instead, the author delineates women characters that critique and transcend the essentialist images of Nigerian women that are misrepresenting and hurtful and puts forward resignified gender identity as a way out of patriarchal power structures. In doing so, Nwapa is clearly offering us a novel that anticipates Butler's arguments on a 'woman' as an unstable identity category open to plural interpretations.

Women are Different delineates a number of characters that are metaphorically the agents or defenders of heterosexual matrix that hail Nigerian women into traditional feminine existence. These agents insist on the perpetuation of gender norms and constantly remind and pressurize Nigerian women to reiterate the characteristics of femininity ascribed to the female body. Consequently, Nwapa presents female characters that are taught lessons of traditional feminine norms and practices which begins at home and are strengthened and disciplined in schools, religious institutions, workplace, and law offices, among others. However, unlike the women misrepresented in the literary works of male writers, Nwapa's female characters do not submit themselves completely to the institutions of marriage and motherhood. In addition to reiterating their duties as a wife and mother, they realize their dreams as an educated woman and a successful entrepreneur.

Nwapa illustrates how the essentialization of the identity of a Nigerian girl occurs not only at home but even at school. The girls at Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School, Elelenwa, for instance, are instructed to do the chores attributed to the female body. The girls had to get up at five thirty in the morning to fetch water, cook meals and wash clothes (10). In addition to performing household chores, they are taught to be "gentle, humble" and obedient (33). Like the dog in Pavlov's experiment, the girls are taught to follow the rules of the school

which represents an agent of heterosexual matrix at the ring of the bell. The Principal Miss Hill, for instance, teaches the girls to obey the rules without any argument: “‘The rule of the school must be obeyed which is that when the ... bell goes the first time, all girls are expected to go to their dormitories and prepare for bed. When the second bell goes, all lights are out, and everybody lies down ... [and] there should not be any talking from anybody. You should set a good example, ...’ (39)

Nwapa also illustrates the sexist discrimination Nigerian women are subject to in workplace. She points out that even if women are educated and proficient for a job they are either denied employment or are appointed in a low level post. Agnes, for instance, is petrified with the political changes happening in Nigeria. She observes that job, money, privileges, and power are accorded to men relegating women to the periphery. Consequently, Nigerian men squander money, sexually exploit young girls and their mothers, drive cars, slack in their responsibilities towards their job, and ignore the work of their female colleagues. Thus, like other educated Nigerian women, Agnes is a victim of sexist discrimination at workplace as her reports are ignored and her work is not appreciated by her superior, the Assistant Chief Inspector of Education.

In the midst of various fetters of heterosexual norms and practices, Nwapa's female characters- Agnes, Dora and Rose- attempt to critique the power structures that define them and celebrate their transition from the traditional gender identity that victimize them to self-possessed and self-determined individuals that liberate them. In doing so, Nwapa expresses the notion that plurality of gender identity is powerful and liberating, while at the same time causes them so much trouble.

Agnes dreams of pursuing higher studies and getting a job. However, her determination to study is perceived as her stubbornness and her right to education as a waste of money. Consequently, under the compulsion of her mother-in-law Cecilia, Agnes agrees to marry Mr. Egemba. She reiterates all the feminine duties ascribed to the body of a married Nigerian woman, nevertheless not at the cost of her dreams. She registers herself with Wolsey Hall in England for the Advanced General Certificate of Education examination. She studies each lesson thoroughly at night when her husband sleeps. Being one of the best brains of her class, Agnes fares well in the exams. However, her desire to attend a night school causes trouble. Mr. Egemba becomes apprehensive at her request. He denies permission as he thinks it inappropriate for a woman in Lagos to go to a night school: “‘A night school? In this Lagos? I don't think it is right,’ he said” (58). The determined Agnes does not give up. She approaches her father who tries to convince her husband to allow her to study. Thus, with the support of her father, Agnes enrolls at the University for evening classes in Yaba. Attaining a proper education, Agnes has a bright future. She works in a number of institutions like a private school and Ministry of Education, and purchases a house and a car for herself. She is “proud of her achievements” and

realizes that nothing can upset her (65). In doing so, Nwapa emphatically asserts that women have begun to express themselves.

Dora hears about Agnes's success and is quite impressed. So, she decides to be like her friend Agnes who studies and works despite being a mother. She realizes that Agnes is able to live a life of her own because she is educated and economically independent: "Agnes was her own mistress now. Agnes could do what she liked, and there was no one on earth going to stop her" (73). So Dora stops lamenting about being betrayed and abandoned by her husband Chris. She gathers all her strength and moves ahead in life resuming her baking business and educating her children.

Dora meets Chris- her senior- at school. She falls in love with him and decides to marry him. So, when she finishes school, she trains as a nurse, works for a short time and then marries her boyfriend Chris who works in the High Court. Unlike Agnes, Dora cannot manage both work and family. So she resigns her job as a nurse and starts baking cakes and doughnuts.

Dora succeeds in her baking business thereby rearticulating her identity as a businesswoman. With the profit of her business, she buys a piece of land and builds a house. Dora, however, pays a heavy prize for her accomplishments as a businesswoman. The money she earns causes trouble to her and her children as her husband becomes greedier and lazier. While Dora works and makes the money, Chris spends the money on best shirts and expensive things. In addition to it, he becomes rude to his colleagues and takes bribes. The splendid life Chris enjoys is envied by his colleagues. They complain to the Head Office about Chris's arrogance and practice of taking bribes. Consequently, Chris applies for three years leave and goes to London in order to escape from imprisonment. Dora and her children are at the receiving end of the trouble Chris causes. She is left all by herself at Ikot Ekpene with five small children to look after.

Dora works hard to look after her children. When the Biafran civil war breaks out she shifts her work to Aba. When she goes to the house she had built she learns that her husband has sold it. Dora is angry and heart-broken. She realizes that she is jilted by "her childhood love, her husband, the father of her children" that she blindly trusted (77). However, Dora belongs to the generation of Nigerian women who believes in the power of survival in times of crises. She realizes that it is not necessary to be the essential woman that society defines. Consequently, she takes her first "step towards survival" by going to her own home in Orlu to buy a piece of land and build a small bungalow of four bedrooms (74). The flames to survive in a patriarchal society ignite high in her that she relates the national struggle of Nigeria as her personal fight for freedom and independence. She decides to support the Biafran soldiers and hence bakes for them in a 'win the war' oven. By participating in war time activities, Dora resignifies the identity of a Nigerian woman as the silent sufferer of a war. She has made the impossible possible by contributing in the domain of work that has been exclusively male-dominated. It is Dora's

determination to survive that enables her to come “out of it, with her five children, and lost not even a pin and regained her house and two property deeds into the bargain” at the end of the war (75).

Dora's success as an industrious business woman inspires her daughter Chinwe to pursue a career in business. Though Dora wants her daughter to study, Chinwe prefers to be as successful as her mother. She “not only baked, [but also] ... went into full catering business” (76). It is from one of Chinwe's official trips that she gathers information about the whereabouts of her father. Dora soon catches the next plane to Germany in search of her husband. Her determination to bring back her children's father causes her trouble. Chris refuses to come along with her and sends her back to Nigeria. His indifference shatters her. In anger and frustration, Dora goes to his home in Nigeria and divorces him by native law and custom. She returns to her work as she believes in forgetting the past and looking towards the future.

Though Dora is angry at Chris for betraying her and deserting their children, she still wishes that her marriage had worked. Her desire to be Chris's wife is not because she loves him but because she wants a father for her children. Moreover, she believes that only a married woman will be accepted in society. She shares her feelings on saving a marriage with her friend Rose. She says: “in Nigeria today if a woman marries a difficult husband, and if she wants the marriage to last, she has to be prepared to take a lot. She has to be prepared to receive insults from all and sundry. She has to ignore all her husband's shortcomings. She has to give and give and continue to give” (102). It is for the same reason of security and acceptability that Dora insists Chinwe works on her marriage which is falling apart. She reasons that Chinwe must not leave her husband though he has cheated on her with his cousin because her decision will cause trouble to her siblings that are unmarried. She fears that “people will say that ... [her] daughters are incapable of marriage, that they are following ... [her] footsteps” (113). Such a thought compels Dora to accept Chris when he returns from Germany. To celebrate her complete family she throws a party to her friends and business associates. She is relieved as “her children have a father. No one will ridicule them any more” (130).

While Dora believes in the necessity of being a married woman so as to be recognized and respected as a virtuous woman in society, her daughter Chinwe thinks quite the contrary. Chinwe refuses to be the possession of a man that is authoritative, controlling, deceitful and adulterous. She has learnt from her mother's life that however good and faithful a wife is to her husband, she is treated shabbily and with contempt. Hence, Chinwe does not work on her failed marriage. As an act of defiance, in Comfort's (mother's friend) words, Chinwe leaves her husband as he “neglected his own children while she was married to him” (118). Nwapa comments that Chinwe has done the right thing to divorce her disloyal husband. Her generation highlights the vital argument that loyalty, responsibility towards family and sacrifice are not solely ‘feminine’ characteristics, but are traits to be observed by both men and women. Similarly, women can also reiterate ‘masculine’ traits viz. independence, strength and courage.

They can also enjoy the freedom to have a choice- “a choice to set up a business of their own, a choice to marry and have children, [and] a choice to marry or divorce their husbands” (119). In doing so, Nwapa anticipates Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble* that “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts” that are not fixed and stable, thereby opening the possibility of a woman to display ‘masculine’ traits and a man to possess ‘feminine’ traits (45). In other words, it is possible to have a masculine female and a feminine male.

While Dora finds unhappiness in her marriage with Chris and is confused about her relationship with her lover Tunde, Rose craves to have someone to share her feelings with. Rose admires Dora for having a good business, children and a husband and rebukes her for being dissatisfied with her life. She does not understand why her friend complains because she finds her friend lucky as she has both a lover and a husband, while she has neither. Rose explains to Dora that spending time with one’s husband, and listening to music and having breakfast with him are “little things which married women take for granted, but which ... single women value[s]” and desires (*Women are Different* 106). She describes to Dora that the short time she had spent with her lover Olu is “the greatest pleasure” in life that she wishes to relive once again (105).

Rose feels inadequate at the age of forty two because she has neither a husband nor a lover. The reason for remaining a spinster even in her early forties is not because she is a man-hater but because she has not been successful in choosing the right man. Her first lover is Ernest whom she meets at school. Ernest goes to Yaba Higher College to read medicine after his schooling thus leaving Rose behind. However, Rose like an essential Nigerian woman reiterates the feminine roles of patience, obedience and faithfulness. She waits patiently for his letters and does not get upset or angry when he fails to reply to her letters. She understands his responsibility as a studious student. Hence, as a loving and caring girlfriend, Rose “would continue to write him every week whether he replied or not” (44). She promises him that she will work hard and enroll herself in his college as his desire. However, with time Rose loses all contact with him. He fades “out of her life after all the affectionate letters at school and Yaba” (91). With thoughts of Ernest still lingering in her mind, Rose tries to move ahead in life. She graduates from the University College, Ibadan and gets appointed as Woman Education Officer in Queen’s College. Though Rose celebrates her achievements as a successful career woman she feels incomplete without a man in her life. It was in such a state of dejection and solitariness that Rose meets Mark.

Impressed with Mark that loves, respects, and supports her, Rose accepts his proposal of marriage. Both believe in a low-profile marriage ceremony. Hence, they get married in a Register Office in Lagos with one of the clerks as the witness to the marriage. After enjoying a glorious honeymoon week in Rose’s flat, Mark travels to Harvard for higher studies. Since Mark does not have enough money to buy his air ticket and pay his fees, Rose offers to fund his

expenses. "So Rose withdrew all her savings, and handed it over to him" (81). Mark leaves for the States asking Rose to join him soon.

As per the advice of Mark, Rose requests the Principal of the Queen's College to keep her maiden name in the records though she is a married woman. The Principal explains to her that if she prefers "to be referred to and called by her maiden name" then she will be "treated officially as a single woman" (82). Despite the Principal's advice, Rose resolves to keep her records straight thereby remaining a single woman officially. Birth certificate, school/ college certificate, marriage certificate and work experience certificate are agents of heterosexuality that hail a subject into being or existence. While the birth certificate assigns a sex to the body, the college, marriage and work experience certificates attribute marital status to the body. Like the interpellation of the female body into existence with the articulation of the utterance "It's a girl!" by the doctor or mid-wife on the basis of the genital organs and the birth certificate to confirm the gender/sex identity of the infant, the marriage certificate or college certificate of a married woman hails into existence her identity as a married woman. Like the shift in the identity of an infant from an "it" to a "she," the girl/ unmarried woman undergoes a change in her identity from a "Ms" to a "Mrs." This is exactly what Butler asserts in *Bodies That Matter* when she explains that the act of interpellation constitutes a gender identity: "Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he', and in that naming the girl is 'girded', brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender" (7). Consequently, Rose's decision to remain a single woman officially in her records thereby failing to conform to the norms of heterosexual matrix that constitutes the identity of a subject causes her trouble. It deprives her of the rights to fight for justice when Mark jilts her. She can do nothing but feel miserable and sorry for herself.

After eight years of schooling the only thing Rose feels she can boast of is "a degree and nothing else"- "no child, no Ernest, no husband and no lover" (*Women are Different* 82, 112). It is not once, but twice that she has been cheated by men. Literally heart-broken, with great efforts Rose controls her emotions and consoles herself that "Mark ... [is] not the end of the world" (82). There are other things that makes one's life full and fruitful (119). Consequently, like her friend Dora, Rose decides "to look to future and turn her back on the past" (83). She realizes that it is the only way that will make her life successful and meaningful again.

Keeping future prospects in mind, Rose works hard and becomes an executive officer full of ideas and vigour. She keeps in touch with her friends and offers them help in whatever way possible. She helps Janet in releasing her children from jail and getting her a job. She also advises Dora's daughter Chinwe when her marriage falls apart. Though Rose realizes that "[m]arriage is not THE only way" she longs to be in a relationship because she believes that "it is better to marry and be divorced, than not marry at all; it is better to have a bad husband than none at all" (119, 99). It is this sense of longing to be in a relationship that urges Rose to romance her business client Mr. Olu. However, from her previous experiences, Rose learns not

to be emotionally attached to him but merely enjoy and “make the best out of it while it lasted” (87).

Rose meets Olu in one of her business assignments. He is a successful businessman that has offices in London and New York. He comes to Rose to help him set up a small business for his wife. Olu’s taste for Nigerian writers, dramatists and artists impresses and attracts Rose towards him. She finds him different from her previous lovers. “He did not keep her. He did not buy her expensive girls, [and] so she did not feel indebted to him in any way” (87). With no strings attached she cherishes every minute she spends with him.

Her redefined gender identity of having relationship with a man outside marriage provides her with “the most wonderful time of her life” (87). Nevertheless, her newly found happiness is short lived and causes her trouble. Olu’s wife finds out his extra-marital affair and threatens Rose to stay away from her husband. Once again Rose goes back to singlehood. She tries to forget her past and resumes her work seeing it as the only way to move ahead in life. It is in the midst of her struggle for survival that Ernest- her school time lover- returns into her life.

Rose is agitated with Ernest’s comeback. She reminds herself that it “was Ernest who ignored all her letters” and so refuses to remember them when he reminds her of the letters they wrote to each other at school and Yaba (92). Rose’s act of refusal to remember is her way of forgetting the past and looking to the future. Consequently, she decides not to accept Ernest’s proposal for marriage. Time and experience has taught Rose the lesson the hard way. She realizes that marriage does not mean holding hands, going to the cinema and dancing together as they did in their school days (96). Marriage is also not a relationship where the wife is expected to be loyal, obedient and faithful that cooks food and looks after the children while the husband goes for work, gets drunk and beats her because she does not stay awake to serve him food (104). Rose, on the other hand, looks for a relationship that does not define the couple in essential terms. For her, both husband and wife must share a good understanding. She wants a man who will remain loyal and faithful throughout his life, a man who shows love and respect to women, and a man who does not shirk from financial obligations. Rose longs for a lover and a husband but not at the cost of her freedom and individuality. Her broken heart did mend with time, but it grew into a strong one which refuses to forgive Ernest for his disloyalty and irresponsibility towards her and accept him into her life.

The reading of Flora Nwapa’s *Women are Different* through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity communicates the message that the ‘gender’ of a Nigerian woman is not a universal truth or a fixed category but is plural and is always in the process of becoming. In other words, the performative dimension of ‘gender’ identity exposes ‘woman’ as a fluid and unstable concept and opens the possibility for resignifying the identity of a Nigerian woman as educated, self-possessed, self-reliant and successful individuals. However, unless Nigerian women get support and encouragement to make bold and determined choices and

decisions they will cease to believe in themselves. It is therefore necessary to accept and recognize their new gender identity. Nwapa, thus, through her female characters spreads the message of “forgetting the past” of traditional gender identity that revolve around wifhood and motherhood and “looking towards the future” of liberating and powerful resignified gender identities of Nigerian women. She underscores that women should no longer be victims of the effects of heterosexuality, but instead through acts of defiance and refusal to remember their sordid past they must emerge as survivors. In doing so, Nigerian women can move ahead to make their life successful and meaningful.

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