

Flora Nwapa's Women are Different : Autofiction ?

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to investigate whether Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* is an autofiction or a mere product of imagination. To carry out the research, the work has been divided into three sections. In the first section entitled definitions of terms, there have been definitions of terms such as biography, autobiography, fiction, and autofiction. In the second section whose title is Flora Nwapa's school life, there has been the investigation of the school life depicted in the novel under scrutiny and the author's school life painted in her biography by Marie Umeh. After the scrutiny related to school life, it has been discovered that there is an autofiction because of the similarities of facts between the school life depicted in the novel and the one in the author's biography. The third section is Flora Nwapa's marital life. After the scrutiny of both the marital life painted in *Women are Different* and the one in the author's biography, it has been discovered that there is an autofiction in Flora Nwapa's marital life as well.

Keywords : Biography, autobiography, fiction, autofiction

Résumé

Le but de cet article est de chercher à découvrir si l'œuvre de Flora Nwapa intitulée *Women are Different* est une autofiction ou un produit de l'imagination. Pour mener la recherche, l'article a été divisé en trois sections. Dans la première section intitulée définitions des termes, il y a des définitions des termes tels que : biographie, autobiographie, fiction, et autofiction. Dans la deuxième qui a pour titre la vie scolaire de Flora Nwapa, il y a l'analyse de la vie scolaire peinte dans le roman et celle de Flora Nwapa décrite dans sa biographie afin de savoir il y a des similitudes des faits. A la fin de l'analyse, il a été conclu qu'il y a une autofiction relative à la vie scolaire de l'auteur. Dans la troisième partie intitulée la vie conjugale de Flora Nwapa, il a été découvert il y a aussi une autofiction dans la vie conjugale de Flora Nwapa.

Mot clés : Biographie, autobiographie, fiction, autofiction

I. Introduction

To produce their opuses, writers do not rely on a single origin of information but on a wide range of sources. As a matter of fact, they can either paint what they imagine ; what they have been told or what they have witnessed. While reading Flora Nwapa's biography by Marie Umeh entitled : *Flora Nwapa: A Pen and a Press*, there is the recurrence of the name of the school called Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' school (ACMGS) Elenenwa, the school the three main characters of *Women are Different* went to. Because of the ubiquitousness of the name of the school in both Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and her biography by Marie Umeh, the purpose of this article is to discover the origin of Flora Nwapa's inspiration to write *Women are Different*. In other words, where did Flora Nwapa's inspiration to write *Women are Different* come from? Was it a mere product of imagination ? Did her inspiration come from her own life experience ? These are the questions the analysis of this work will answer.

However, before getting any further in the completion of this work, it is germane to provide a literature review in order to shed light on what other scholars have argued about autofiction and how this present research fits in the scientific advancement. Talking about scholars who have dealt with autofiction or its closely related term autobiography, it is worthy mentioning that there are several.

Hywel Dix. In his essay entitled 'Autofiction : The Forgotten Face of French Theory', Hywel has been interested in discovering if autofiction is still a restricted genre first used by Doubrovsky in 1977 or it is being used all over the world. To carry out his research, Hywel has compared autofiction with other French critical theories used throughout the world such as structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, intertextuality. At the end of his scrutiny, Hywel has come to the conclusion that there has been a spread when it comes to the use of autofiction. As a matter of fact, autofiction has moved from being a genre to being a critical theory used all over the world like the other French critical theories mentioned above. Hywel is not the only scholar who has researched on autofiction. In fact, besides Hywel, there is Henri Delangue.

In his article entitled 'Autobiographie ou autofiction chez Amélie Nothomb ?', Henri Delangue has carried out an analysis related to the use of the first personal pronoun singular I. After researching on the use of I, Henri Delangue has discovered that the use of the first personal pronoun I is a puzzle. As a matter of fact, the first personal pronoun I does not always mean an autofiction in a literary work. Sometimes the use of the first personal pronoun stands for autofiction, sometimes it does not mean the author talks about himself or herself. To provide an example in which the first personal singular I does not mean that the author talks about his or her own life, he has given the example of Amélie Nothomb's book entitled *Le fait du prince*. In addition to Henri Delangue, other authors have tackled autofiction among whom Enrica Aurora Cominetti.

In her dissertation entitled 'In-between Wor(l)ds: Female Autofiction and Postcolonial Identity in Marie Cardinal's *Au pays de mes racines*, Marguerite Duras's *L'amant* and Isabela Figueiredo's *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*', Enrica has been interested in knowing Female Autofiction and its Postcolonial Identity. After the scrutiny, Enrica has found out that female autofiction is multifaceted. That is female autofiction is a body of several components that stem from its various components such as the narrators, the techniques that make a woman a changing entity. This multifaceted character of the female autofiction has been noticed through the three novels under scrutiny namely : *Au pays de mes racines* by Marie Cardinal, Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* and Isabela Figueiredo's *Caderno de memórias coniais*. Apart from Enrica Aurora Cominetti who has scrutinized autofiction, there is Marta Cuesta has dealt with autobiography in her article entitled 'how to interpret of autobiographies.'

Through her analysis, Marta Cuesta has argued that autobiography is life narrative which has two sides. On the one hand there is a story that a narrator writes, on the other hand the story is influenced by what readers imagine about it. Consequently, autobiography is made of both the real facts and the fictional ones.

To carry out this task, the investigation will be done through the lenses of autofictional approach. As for its organisation, this work is divided into three parts namely : definitions of terms, Flora Nwapa's school life, and Flora Nwapa's marital life.

II. Definitions of Terms

As the work has to do with autofiction, it is worthy defining terms related to autofiction for the sake of clarity. As a matter of fact, What is biography ? According to New Oxford American Dictionary, biography is an account of someone's life written by someone else. As for the Glossary of Literary Terms by M.H Abrams :

biography, Late in the seventeenth century, John Dryden defined biography neatly as "the history of particular men's lives." The name now connotes a relatively full account of a particular person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences. By reading both definitions of the term

biography, the definition of the term biography is account of someone's life written by someone else. (Abrams 22)

Through this definition above, biography is the history about somebody's life which is not written by himself or herself but by another person. After the definitions of biography, what is autobiography? The New Oxford American Dictionary defines autobiography as an account of a person's life written by that person. As for M.H Abrams, in his Glossary of Literary Terms, he states what follows about autobiography:

autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. Examples of the latter type are the seventeenth-century diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, the eighteenth-century journals of James Boswell and Fanny Burney, and Dorothy Wordsworth's remarkable Journals, written 1798-1828, but not published until long after her death. (Abrams 22)

According to Abrams, autobiography is a written account through which an author writes about his or her own life with little thought about its publication. Thus, autobiography has nothing to do with fiction. After the definition of the term autobiography, what is fiction? according to Abrams:

Fiction and Truth. In an inclusive sense, fiction is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened. In a narrower sense, however, fiction denotes only narratives that are written in prose (the novel and short story), and sometimes is used simply as a synonym for the novel. (Abrams 94)

In the definition of fiction above, fiction is sometimes known as a synonym for the novel. Apart from that, Abrams states that fiction is a literary prose narrative based on imaginative events. Consequently fiction is mainly based on what has been invented, not true events.

After the definitions of the literary terms related to autofiction, namely biography, autobiography, fiction, this research would not be exhaustive without defining autofiction. Consequently, what is autofiction?

Term autofiction was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. During an interview in Paris, Doubrovsky defined 'autofiction' as 'the meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call autofiction.' He goes on to add, 'You try to recapture phrases of oneself, but you know, you're aware that, to a large extent, it's only the way you tell the story to yourself. (Sunybroome.cc)

In reading Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction between lines, one can tell that according to Doubrovsky, autofiction is in fact the combination of fiction and autobiography. As a matter of fact, in the autofiction, its author tries to combine what occurred in his life and his mere invention. In other words autofiction is made of both imagination and reality.

After the definitions of the terms, as stated above, in the following section the investigation will focus on Flora Nwapa's school life. The purpose of this section is to find out whether while depicting school life in her novel, Flora Nwapa dealt with autofiction or fiction?

III. Flora Nwapa's School life

The school life is the period through which a human being goes to school to acquire knowledge. Consequently, in this section, the purpose is first to scrutinize Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and second to investigate her biography by Marie Umeh in order to find out whether the school life painted in the novel is similar to the one depicted in her biography. In case there is similarity of information, it will be argued that there is autofiction since, in depicting school life in her novel, Flora Nwapa told the story about her own school life. In case there is no similarity of information between the novel and her biography, it will be stated that there is no autofiction. As a result, does Flora Nwapa portray her own life while dealing with school life in her *Women are Different*? That is the question that will be answered in the following lines.

In reading Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different*, there is a mention of three girls also known as the three musketeers who had to take the entrance examination to Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' school (ACMGS) Elelenwa in the following way :

What luck therefore for the three of them to meet at the railway station in January of 1945! They had all passed the entrance examination to Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) Elelenwa, and they were now going to start their year. 'Isn't it wonderful that the three of us passed the examinations, said Agnes. 'And didn't I tell you that you were crying for nothing, that day, Rose,' said Dora. (Nwapa 3)

The extract above depicts how hard-working were the girls who passed the entrance examination to the girls' school called Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) Elelenwa. By the same token while reading Flora Nwapa's biography by Marie Umeh entitled *Flora Nwapa : A Pen and A Press*, there is a passage that talks about Nwapa's school life at Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) Elelenwa as well, as follows :

Competition for the few available seats at Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) in Elelenwa near Port Harcourt, while finishing her primary school education, was another one of life's tests that Flora had to pass. At the age of thirteen in 1944, she learned that she passed the entrance examinations in English and Math and gained admission into ACMGS. At the time, ACMGS in Elelenwa, near Port Harcourt was the only Anglican secondary school for women, set up by the Church Missionary Society in Eastern Nigeria... (Umeh26 :27)

As there is a mention of the same girls' school in both Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and her biography by Marie Umeh, one can argue that the reference to the girls' school in *Women are Different* is not a mere coincidence. As a matter of fact, Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* is her autofiction. Moreover, In taking into account the definition of the autofiction by Doubrovsky which means autofiction is a combination of reality and invention, even though there is no mention of Flora Nwapa's name in the novel, this passage still depicts autofiction because of the similarities of facts such as the name of the school and the entrance examination. Apart from the ubiquitousness of the mention related to Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) Elelenwa, in both Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and her biography by Marie Umeh, there are other passages that prove the autofictional character of *Women are Different* in the following way :

At the assembly in the evening, Miss Hill spoke to the girls. The new girls felt better. Agnes, Dora and Rose sat together wondering whether their parents did the right thing by sending them to the school. But in the few days that followed they adjusted to the routine of the school, and discovered that though it was hard, especially getting up at five thirty in the

morning to fetch water half a mile away; doing housework, and cooking the meals, they enjoyed their classes, their games, and reading.(Nwapa 10)

This passage first depicts how difficult it was for the three girls to get accustomed to Miss Hill's orders at Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls' School (ACMGS) Elelenwa. These orders contributed to the three girls's awareness as far as life is concerned. Through the tasks they had to carry out, although the girls did not like them at beginning, later on, they became part of the girls' lives. Besides what has been stated in the novel, Miss Hill's orders and the principal's name Miss Hill are mentioned in Flora Nwapa's biography by Marie Umeh as follows :

The principal, Miss Hill, and her assistants instructed the students in good behaviour, cleanliness, kindness, godliness and humility, in addition to preparation for O' level exams. Flora Nwapa, in her reminiscing days at ACMGS, is likely this character in her novel. In January, 1945 when Flora and Dora went to pay their school fees in her office, Miss Hill wore a pink check dress which well tailored. She had the white handkerchief over her belt as she did on the day of the entrance examination in Poedrt Harcourt.(Umeh 30)

In reading the passage above as well as this one, it is clear that *Women are Different* is the author's autofiction when it comes to her school life. In fact, there are recurrent facts in the novel as well as the author's biography by Marie Umeh such as : the good behaviours that the three girls learnt from their principal Miss Hill. Although in Nwapa's biography, the good behaviours are not stated as in details as in the novel, there is mention of activities namely fetching water, doing housework, cooking meals to name just few. Apart from the good behaviours which are part of proofs of autofiction, there is also recurrence of the name 'Dora' in both the biography and the novel. Albeit Dora is the name of one of the three female characters in the novel, there is the indication of Dora as one of Flora Nwapa's friends in her biography.

The concern in this section has been to know if in painting school life in her *Women are Different*, Flora Nwapa depicted her own experience at school. After the investigation related to school life, it has been found out that there is autofiction related because of existence of similar facts in both the novel and the author's biography. Thus, In the following section, the scrutiny will focus on Flora Nwapa's marital life to discover whether or not there is autofiction in the next section.

IV. Flora Nwapa's marital life

The marital life is a period through which someone lives with a partner who might be a husband or a wife. As a result, Is there any autofiction related to marital life in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* ? Other words, in painting marital life in her novel under scrutiny, does the author depict what occurred to her in her marital life as well ? Therefore, in this section, the purpose is to investigate the novel to discover whether or not there is autofiction when it comes to marital life in Nwapa's *Women are Different*.

While scrutinizing marital life in *Women are Different*, it has been found out the case of Dora's marital life. Dora is married to a man called Chris and she is a good wife to him. Unfortunately for Dora, despite her qualities, Chris did not confide in her. Thus, when Chris made a decision to go and study abroad, he did not inform her right from the beginning. Consequently, when Dora heard about Chris' journey, she reacted in the following terms :

Dora almost passed out when she heard the news from Chris. ' Three years Chris- you took the decision all alone ? You did not ask my opinion ? And the children ? Am I to bring them up all by myself ?' She wept.

' You can come along after six months ; or you can leave the children with your mother and come.'

‘And the business ? Leave that with my mother as well ? I have never heard such an irresponsible thing in all my life.

Leave five children with my mother ? You cannot be serious.(Nwapa 70)

Through this passage, one can tell the man’s lack of responsibility as far as the marital life is concerned. Thus, far from taking a marriage as a serious union, the man considers it to be worthless. As a matter of, when Chris takes a decision to go abroad, he does not consult his wife’s opinion. This act by Chris depicts the man as an irresponsible partner. Moreover, he takes the decision to travel without thinking of his marital burden which is to raise children. Accordingly, when Dora asks him what they were going to do with children if they travel, as Chris is irresponsible, he argues that they should leave them with Dora’s mother. Chris ignores that children should be raised by their parents so that they can get a good upbringing. Through this passage, the author paints the dichotomy between the man and the woman when it comes marital obligations. Nwapa argues that in the household, the woman is responsible whereas the man is irresponsible. Albeit this passage depicts the man’s irresponsibility related to the couple life, this passage is a tip of the iceberg as far as the man’s irresponsibility is concerned. As a matter of fact, the man’s misconduct did not limit at planning to travel with his wife without caring about children.

Chris’s lack of responsibility toward the household worsened. Thus, when Chris went abroad, there came a time that he did not write to Dora back home any more. As Dora became worried because her husband’s silence, she followed him abroad. Once in Germany, Dora went to Chris’s apartment where, unfortunately for her, Chris disappointed her as follows :

‘What do you want ?’ she recognised the voice. It was Chris who was standing in front of her. It was Chris who pretended that he did not know her. It was Chris, her childhood love, her husband, the father of her children.

‘Chris, it is Dora.’

‘I know it is Dora all right. What do you want ?’

‘I want you, Chris, I want...’

The door opened again and the German lady who opened it at first walked out and said something in German. She opened the door again, went in and banged the door. ‘I am afraid you have to go back to the airport. All I can do for you is phone a taxi which will take you to the airport. Here is not Nigeria. People don’t just visit without notice...(Nwapa 77)

Once again, the passage above depicts how irresponsible and immoral the man is. Thus, when Chris got to Germany, he forgot his wife and children back home. Without scruples, although Dora followed him to Germany, he first pretended not know her and then he sent Dora back to Nigeria as though Dora was stranger to him. After realizing the man’s irresponsibility painted in *Women are Different*, it has been found out that what the author depicted in the novel was an autofiction. In fact, Flora Nwapa herself witnessed men’s irresponsibility as well. In fact, in the author’s biography by Marie Umeh, Flora Nwapa is said to have been abandoned with a girl by her first husband called Gogo Nzeribe as follows :

A daughter Ejine Olga Nzeribe, was born the following year on June 28th 1959. Gogo continued to work in Lagos and found it difficult to travel to the East. Martha, Flora’s mother, along with her husband, Christopher, stood by Flora and visited her often, because “Flora and her child saw Gogo in dreams only. It was only after I stayed with my daughter for four weeks

that Gogo visited Flora with only a crate of soft drink. It now dawned on Flora that her parents' objection to marrying Gogo had started to actualize.(Umeh 50)

Like Chris who abandoned Dora with her children, through the extract above, Flora Nwapa is said to have been forsaken with her daughter Ejine Olga Nzeribe by her first husband Gogo Nzeribe. In the light of this passage, it is worthy stating that there is autofiction in *Women are Different*. Besides the mention in Flora Nwapa's biography by Marie Umeh, during an interview by phone from the Congo, when Flora Nwapa's only brother chief Christopher Nwapa Ijoma was asked whether his sister did not enjoy a successful marital life, he confirmed that she did not. In addition to that, he added that most of the stories she painted in novels related to marital life are what she witnessed herself.

In this section, the task has been to scrutinize *Women are Different* and the author's biography by Marie Umeh in order to find out whether or not in dealing with marital life, Flora Nwapa painted her own experience. After the investigation of the marital life in both Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and her biography, it has been discovered that in writing the novel, the author depicted her life. The autofiction has been proved by similarities of facts in both Flora Nwapa's novel and her biography. In the novel one of Flora Nwapa's characters called Dora and her children have been abandoned by her husband. By the same token, Flora Nwapa's biography states that she was forsaken with daughter by her husband called Gogo Nzeribe as well.

V. Conclusion

In this article, the purpose has been to find out whether in writing the novel under scrutiny, Flora Nwapa's inspiration was based on the imagination also known as fiction or her own life experience called autofiction. To carry out the task, the analysis has been completed through the use of autofictional approach. As for the organisation of the article, it has been divided into three main parts. In the first section entitled definitions of terms, there have been definitions of terms such as biography, autobiography, fiction, and autofiction. The purpose of this first section about the definitions has been for the sake of clarity as far as terms related to autofiction are concerned. The second section has been Flora Nwapa's school life. Through this section the main purpose has been to find out if in depicting school life in the novel, Flora Nwapa tells her own school life. At the end of the investigation related the Flora Nwapa's school life, it has been discovered that in talking of the school life, Flora Nwapa talks about her own experience when she was still at school. As a matter of fact there is recurrence of facts such as the name of the school, the principal's name to name just few in both her novel and biography. The third section has been entitled Flora Nwapa's marital life. Through this last section there has been autofiction as well. The autofiction has been proved by repetition of facts between the novel and Flora Nwapa's biography.

However, although autofiction has been investigated in the novel under scrutiny, it is worthy mentioning that there are still a wide range of topics related to the novel to be tackled namely : the impact of education in the woman's life in *Women are Different*, Flora Nwapa's writing in *Women are Different*, the relationship between men and women in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and others.

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