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# Anthropology Book Forum

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Paula Uimonen. 2020. *Invoking Flora Nwapa: Nigerian Women Writers, Femininity and Spirituality in World Literature*. Stockholm, Stockholm University Press, 250 pp., DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bbe.licence:cc-BY> 4.0.

Review by Thomas Ndaluka

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In *Invoking Flora Nwapa: Nigerian Women Writers, Femininity and Spirituality in World Literature*, Paula Uimonen does not only invoke the spirit of Flora Nwapa but also carefully unravels the discursive situation of African women—dead and alive—whose literary contribution has either been long forgotten or largely taken for granted. Specifically, Uimonen comparatively and carefully elevates African women’s literary prowess and huge potential in order to underscore their proper and deserved position in the global literature of the contemporary world as well as in the familial, societal, and work spaces.

After abandoning the feminist approach in order to embrace womanism (the theory which is based on the history and everyday experiences of black women [Rousseau, 2013]), Uimonen poses an important question: Who is an African woman? In her attempt to address this pertinent question, she ignores the colonial mentality of space and location, which tends to demystify and distort things and reality. Instead, to her credit, she echoes a critical argument about who is an African or an African woman in a much more enlightening and enriching manner as will be exemplified in the following arguments.

Using her African experience gained particularly during her many travels to Tanzania - that she considers as her second home - and Nigeria where she conducted her field work in 2016, Uimonen presents the image of African women as a homogeneous group regardless of their color, creed, or

origin. From such a perspective, any woman can be an African woman (Tanzanian or Nigerian, for example) if she subscribes to the understanding of the societal-imposed role on an African woman in addition to identifying and sympathizing with the plight and struggles of African women as a collective and as individuals in a society still defined by die-hard social norms and values - issues of modernity notwithstanding. This type of classification resonated with Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1972, p. 40) where an African woman was expected to exhibit prescribed societal roles and dispositions. Such matters of identity are not limited to geographical spaces of Africa and Europe— North or South—since they transcend to other aspects of the multiplicity of roles ascribed to women as mothers, workers, wives, daughters, and writers. However, caution must be exercised when addressing women as a group since there are several fractions that can be best understood if the women's group is disaggregated as workers, [un]educated, farmers, and businesswomen, to mention but a few.

In this book, Uimonen's examination of the portrayal of African women is twofold. To begin with, she looks at contemporary Africa women as both writers and audience, and how they have played and continue playing different roles in society. Second, she treats them as spiritual women, who ought to oversee the spiritual and moral stability of the society. In this regard, Uimonen invokes the spirit of Flora Nwapa. Flora Nwapa lived physically as a woman and was a mother of three children and has assumed the role of a spiritual guide for young female writers in her society in Nigeria, her home country, and Africa as a whole. This role befits her as one of the pioneering modern African women writers in the anglophone tradition.

Uimonen's methodological approach is one largely informed by a constructivist view, which works on the assumption that reality is constructed through experiences and participation of different actors in each social setting. This perspective acknowledges how a researcher and those involved in the research process can jointly create knowledge.

Moreover, her analytical approach does not only embrace the anthropological analysis but also borrows from other related disciplines such as literature and linguistics, thus challenging the colonial established boundaries between the disciplines of anthropology and literature [and fusing them together in a complimentary manner]. This fusion is evident from the outset of each chapter where she narrates a story in the context from which she gathered her information. This inter-

subjectivity and reflexivity help to deconstruct dominant narratives of information gathering and, in so doing, decolonizes anthropological methods of data collection and analysis.

This presentation of combining storytelling and contextualizing the substance under review at the beginning of each chapter resonates well with the African mode of knowledge transfer as amplified by Chinua Achebe (1958) in his famous book, *Things fall apart* and echoed in the responses of Miriam Makeba to an interview with a Finish journalist in 1969 that knowledge in Africa is transferred orally from one generation to another through storytelling. The only difference with Uimonen's mode of presentation is that the stories covered in this book were recorded whereas a typical story in Africa relies on oral transmission.

Also, evident in her presentation is the shift from the broad-based or rather exoteric feminism to much more specific and esoteric womanism when addressing socio-cultural issues pertaining to Africa under a gendered lens that takes cognizance of African nuances. Indeed, this critical approach is informed by a socio-ecological and discursive practice, which reproduces the relationship between women and men, young and old, and people and nature in an African setting. Womanism considers not only women's struggles against patriarchal structures but also adds different spiritual, cultural and social roles that women in Africa ought to play not only under traditional but also modern values.

The book further underscores how Flora Nwapa's literary mothering navigates through the marginalized and, mostly, neglected areas in addition to challenging the patriarchal hegemony that ignores oppressed men, women, and children. Such a candid approach has largely and often been neglected in much of African literature in favor of prevailing political conditions. In this book, Uimonen highlights how different women have used their pen to reflect not only their own social experiences—of struggles against powerful patriarchal institutions—but also their resilience in unfavorable environments that largely work against their gender.

Since a literary work is dynamic, Uimonen urges African women writers to be innovative and dynamic. She proffers that world women writers ought to understand the rule of the game including adopting skills that provide an advantage to survive in a competitive and often male-dominated environment. This thrust can be twofold. They firstly can venture into the publishing industry, which has the desired effect of empowering women to challenge the structural limitation imposed

by the publishing industry. In this regard, Uimonen uses Flora Nwapa's publication firm—the Tana Press—to illustrate this power of influencing the literary discursive practice.

Secondly, the book implores women to engage actively in the fourth industrial revolution (i.e. digitization and/or Information and Communication Technology), failure of which might work against their efforts. In this book, Uimonen insists that digitizing women's literary works can break the hegemony and limitation otherwise imposed by policies and market forces as well as patriarchal institutions. Digitization can also facilitate reaching a wider audience and breaking entrenched structural boundaries. Furthermore, digitization can break intergenerational barriers and empower young people to engage with the past via digital media.

Overall, the book is rich and informative on African womanism, African women's literary works and African women's struggles generally. Its empirical analysis evokes critical thinking in terms of decolonization of erstwhile colonized anthropological methodology in addition to bridging disciplinary boundaries. The book is a necessary staple for anyone interested in diverse but interdisciplinary fields of literary criticism, discourse analysis, womanism, sociology, history, gender studies, anthropology, and religious studies.

## References

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