

# Reversal of Gender Roles in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Visit*

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## Abstract

Writers assemble words to tell the story, develop the argument, dramatize the play or compose the poem in the process the themes which a reader finds convincing are developed. Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are African women writers from the East of Nigeria who have used the literary art at their disposal to portray women's experiences in the contemporary world. Although Nwapa is the first African woman writer, the experiences of women she portrayed in *Efuru* are reversed in Adichie's *The Visit*. Gender roles are reversed thus challenging the patriarchal roles of a woman placed as the head of the home, she works to earn for her husband and children, no housemaid and no sexual abuse is suspected at home. The literary techniques used include among others motif, tone, point of view, imagery, local colour, and songs. These techniques are used comparatively and it is discovered that they are apt in revealing women's experiences in the novels. The literary theory used in this research is eclectic.

**Keywords:** techniques, reversal of roles, motif, local colour

## 1. Introduction

In an earlier work by this scholar the following exposition on style or technique were submitted:

Technique or style is how a writer uses words to develop and tell the story in a literary work. Roberts and Jacob (1989) describe technique as "the way, in which writers assemble words to tell the story, develop the argument, dramatize the play or compose the poem" (p.262). According to them, technique is "highly individualistic. It is a matter of the way in which specific authors put words together under specific conditions in specific works" (p.262). Technique as defined here is the literary tool at the writer's disposal with or without embellishment (Dick 2009 p. 249; Dick, 2018 *English Linguistics Research* p.42)

The plethora of style is the distinctive way a writer or a speaker uses words and sentences that create the voice of the author which the audience hears. The density of local colour employed by a writer travels with the reader as he reads. Nevertheless, M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* typically describes style as: "The way in which language is used in prose or poetry encompassing elements such as rhetorical situation, diction, sentence structure, syntax, and figurative language" (p.303). What underpins the techniques employed by the women novelists Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* (1966) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *The Visit* (2021) include motif, tone, point of view, imagery, local language, and songs. It is important to present the resume of the two novels before going to the style used by the authors.

## 2. Synopsis of the Novels

*Efuru* by Flora Nwapa

*Efuru* by Flora Nwapa is a pioneering novel in African Women Literature. It is the first published novel of Flora Nwapa in 1966. Set in the Igbo village of Oguta in what is now Imo State of Nigeria, it tells the story of Efuru, a strong and independent woman, navigating the complexities of love, marriage, and societal expectations in a patriarchal society. Efuru, a beautiful and successful trader, is admired by many suitors but she remains unmarried until she meets Adizua, a handsome and caring farmer. They fall deeply in love and despite the fact that Adizua is poor, Efuru runs from her father's house to Adizua's on an Eke Market day. However, Efuru's father is highly respected. He sends delegates to bring Efuru home but they saw her happy and wealthy.

Efuru is eventually blessed with a baby girl after visiting a Dibia who tells her what to do in order to conceive. However, she losses the child to convulsion during her husband's absence but he never returns. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is a timeless classic that celebrates the strength and resilience of women, offering a powerful portrayal of female agency and

empowerment in African Literature. Her second marriage to Eneberi is plagued with distrust, she leaves and dedicates her life to the worship of Uhamiri, the local deity who gives wealth to women but she gives them no children. Ezeigbo sees Uhamiri as: “the epitome of female power, independence, beauty, and accomplishment” (Myth. p.54).

### *The Visit*

*The Visit* is a short story that views the world as a matriarchal society instead of a patriarchal one. In *The Visit*, gender roles are reversed. Women are leaders and career women while men took care of domestic work. Amara is the wife while Obinna is the husband.

Role reversal refers to upturning the cultural expectations tied to the sex of a woman like child bearing and child rearing. But the writers used words that empowered the female characters so that in *Efuru*, an illiterate but resilient business woman is crafted. She spends money on philanthropy, to farmers to buy yam seeds, paying hospital bills. In *The Visit* the woman walks briskly into the family as the head, her husband takes care of the children and the home while she works as a manager. Nevertheless, MacInnis C. C and Buliga E. (2020) warns: “Don’t get above yourself.

### 3. Styles Used in the Novels

#### Paradox

Abrams succinctly, admits that paradox is a statement that appears to be contradictory at the surface level but which on a closer scrutiny bears some truth. Worthy of mention is when Efuru’s father consults a *Dibia* over Efuru’s dreams and how the answers from that consultation come together to form a paradox. In the *Dibia*’s words: “You are a great woman. Nwashike Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a great honour. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you” (p.153). *Super Summary* brings out the paradox of the dibia:

Uhamiri symbolizes the paradox of womanhood, embodying fertility and intuition as a lake goddess. Women seek her for solace and empowerment, countering Igbo patriarchal norms. Despite her role in female fertility, Uhamiri herself is childless, challenging societal views on womanhood. However, by the end of the novel, Efuru begins to see this association as a potential source of comfort, hinted at in her final dream. This suggests that if the childless Uhamiri can be revered as a woman, Efuru can be too. (<https://www.supersummary.com/efuru/symbols-and-motifs/>)

In *The Visit*, the instance where paradox is used is in Eze’s declaration that he will never get married. Eze makes this statement after coming to a conclusion that men lose themselves in marriage because they stop their career and stop pursuing their interests after getting married. His own father loses himself in marriage. His father used to be a theater actor when he was in the University of Ibadan. When he gets married, his wife tells him he has to quit acting because married men who are actors are considered promiscuous. He radically becomes the family cook and gardener. He does not have a life of his own. Eze has come to visit Obinna in Nigeria and they decide to visit a club, on their way back, Obinna lies to two police women that Eze is married in order to escape arrest. He later confesses that the life Obinna invents for him before the police will be good to live.

You know, Eze said, as they got to the gate of Obinna’s home, “that life you invented for me for the police women, might be nice. Me married with a wife in Abuja. Abuja means she’s rich and successful, right? And I take weekend trips to Lagos to party with my boy. It might really be nice.” Eze was smiling wanly, and Obinna suddenly felt sorry for him. This statement by Eze contradicts his earlier disposition on marriage (p.20).

#### Motif

Motif is as a recurring conflict in a literary work. According to a research by Okocha Onueze and Chukwujinka Joe they argue that motif in Nwapa’s *Efuru* represents sacrifices made by individuals:

Sacrifice is a central theme in the novel *Efuru*, where characters must make sacrifices to solve their problems. For instance, Efuru sacrifices to have a baby and helps her former mother-in-law by performing a prescribed sacrifice. Additionally, Efuru sacrifices her possessions to save her marriages, ultimately sacrificing her life to serve the Uhamiri, the Goddess of the Great Lake. (<https://myliteraryachievement.blogspot.com/2017/05/analysis-and-summary-of-efuru.html?m=1>)

Abrams underpins that “a motif is a prominent recurring element in literature, such as incidents, devices, references, or formula” (p.169). In *The Visit*, Adichie’s recurring theme is the reversal of gender roles. For example: roles are reversed in politics, career progression, infidelity, birth control, economic expansion and family headship (pp.18-23). Obinna’s wife, Amara, earns money while Obinna her husband operates in the home arena.

## Tone

According to *Georgia State University Writing Studio*: “Tone is defined as how the reader interprets the voice of the work. Factors that influence tone include choice of words, the length sentence, transitions, paragraph structure, evident bias, and the responsible use of sources” (p.1).

In *Efuru*, the tactics she puts into remaining in her husband’s house include treating her father’s messengers to a feast (p.11). Towards the end of the story, the tone becomes sad with the death of Efuru’s father. Her second husband, Gilbert’s disappears and hence his inability to attend his father-in-law’s burial. Efuru’s sudden sickness also contributes to the harshness of the tone of the novel. At the end, the novel becomes tranquil because Efuru has become rich, without a husband that will subsume her personality.

On the other hand, *The Visit* crafts a setting in which the characters do not complain. They are happy with the life the author has given them. However, in his review of *The Visit*, Olukorede S. Yishau refers to the text as a literary work that portrays our world not as we know it: “It is a spectacular world in which matriarchy wrestles patriarchy and gives it a bloody nose” (p.1). Yishau refers to the mode of Adichie’s narration of the text as a blow embedded in subtle message. He writes: “Adichie tells this story in such a stylish manner that even the people she is making fun of will find the story entertaining before her message hits home and makes them wince” (Yishau p.1).

## Point of View

*The Visit* is told from the third person point of view. This is also known as the omniscient point of view, whereby the person narrating is outside the story. This type of narration allows the narrator to see everything happening in the story, including what goes through the characters’ mind and what they do in secret. A female American President approves a law prohibiting male masturbation. "Male masturbation was technically illegal in Nigeria, too, but men did it all the time." (4-5). This narration reveals to us what Obinna does in secret. This revelation is possible because the story teller resides outside the text.

Also, *Efuru* is narrated in the third person point of view. The unknown speaker is the one who speaks to readers from the beginning of the book to the end. The speaker tells both what is prevalent in the book and the feelings of the characters. The opening sentences of the novel strengthens the romance of Efuru and Adizua: “They saw each other fairly often and after a fortnight’s courting she agrees to marry him” (1). In the words of Roberts & Jacobs (2005), point of view is intertwined with the many interests and wishes of humanity at large (p.211).

## Imagery and Vivid Description

An imagery is a mental picture created by words, through the description of visible objects. In *The Visit*, Adichie uses imagery and vivid description to bring the characters to life. An example of imagery is seen on the cover page which reveals a picture of a lady standing in between two men who are both looking away from the camera. The lady is facing the camera boldly and her form of dressing was like that of a military personnel. This depicts the lady as bold, fearless and projects her as the leader of the two men she shares the picture with. The two men on the other hand are depicted pictorially to be timid and being led by the woman. This pictorial description accentuates gender roles reversal where women lead and men simply follow women’s leadership. Therein reside the nuances of subversion tactics inherent in deconstruction. According to Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is an activity rather than a theory (Toril Moi p. 139).

Also, Nwapa’s cover page is that of a woman who stands on a canoe, holding the paddle which she uses to navigate the water. This demonstrates a high level of strength and independence. Here is Efuru, resilient, standing on a canoe and paddling it herself. For example, we see many fishermen and farmers returning to town from their farms when Nwashike Ogene dies. “We must go, Nwabata. Bring the children to town by road. I am going with Igwe. Igwe, you go for your canoe. Both men carried their small portable canoes on their heads to the Great River. They got into them, balanced well and off they paddled to town” (p.199).

## Local Colour and Songs

According to Dick (2018), the use of local colour by a writer shows a people’s identity and cultural practices which gives cultural validity and cultural rootedness. Both Nwapa and Adichie are replete with Igbo names. These words create greater intimacy: Efuru, Adizua, and Ajanupu are used by Nwapa, while Adichie portrayed such names as Obinna, Eze and Amara, although they do not create glossary for these Igbo words in their works. Opara avers that: “singing is the genius appropriated by ancient goddesses and supernatural beings such as Cybele, Isis, Artemis and the Sirens” (p.51). The use of poems and songs according to Dick (2018) “not only portray the oral nature of African society but also artistically invest the feminist woman with voice and power” (48). In "Changing Times: Gender and Culture in Nigeria" (2023), Dick defines culture as: what a people do in marriage, child upbringing, socialization,

funeral obsequies (145 -157). The cultural song of the evil spirit that comes to claim his wife is used to portray disobedience. The *udara* fruit that fell on her feet is from the evil spirit. The girl disobeyed her mother by not staying at home when her mother went to the market and the evil spirit sings expansively to her mother:

Woman, give me my wife,

Shara.

Woman, give me my wife,

Shara (*Efuru* p.107).

*Udara* is a life giving local fruit, a symbol of love, but the spirit takes revenge on the girl by marrying her. These oral tales take place during moon light. In *The Visit* people do not swap the oral tales because the story is set in the city among the educated elite who use modern technologies like the android and television. The moon is sought during religious festivals but in *Efuru's* rural village, the moon is sought often.

#### 4. Conclusion

This discussion on literary styles bring out the voice of the author to the reader. Each author's style is distinct to her and also separates her from other writers. Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are Igbo women novelists from Nigeria who have used literary styles like motif, tone, point of view, imagery, local language and songs in the distinctive way a writer or a speaker uses words and sentences that create the voice of the author which the audience hears. From the style Nwapa makes *Efuru* an expanded woman that gives financial assistance to both men and women despite her childlessness and abandonment by her husbands. Through style Adichie fights patriarchy and reverses gender roles in the family.

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