

A panoramic view of motherhood by juxtaposing the select trilogies of Flora Nwapa and Perumal Murugan

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to compare the transformation process of women exploring two different spaces. This study primarily analyses the representation of women in post-apartheid and postcolonial South Africa and India. Flora Nwapa's novels, such as *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), and *One Is Enough* (1986), provide critical analysis of the condition of women from different walks of life in these contexts. This research article also examines Perumal Murugan's novels, including *One Part Woman* (2013), *A Lonely Harvest* (2018a) and *Trial by Silence* (2018b). These selected novels direct the study of this research to talk about certain women characters' living conditions in the suburbs, the countryside, and the university campus, like colleges and educational institutions. For this study, the social context and class structure of the post-independence Indian and South African cultures have been taken into account. The research paper also unfolds the sets of social, cultural, political, and ethical conditions of the postcolonial world. The following facets, like cultural violation, power dynamics, use of physical force to marginalise, and lack of self-respect and self-esteem, also draw attention. This article delves into women's relationships with men to represent their lifestyle, feelings and emotions. Here, the observation of women's endurance of specific traumatic experiences at the hands of men and how their struggles help them express themselves to the outside world. It also throws light upon the persistence of women and their voices to be heard in postcolonial South Africa and India during their lives. Therefore, this study culls out the life experiences of women in South Africa and India.

Keywords: Flora Nwapa, motherhood, Perumal Murugan, postcolonial studies

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Introduction

The modern era is the age of collaboration, correlation, and coordination. Nothing can exist in a vacuum. Every branch of literature is correlated and interdependent and has a developmental and growth genesis. This is especially true in the case of gender studies, which deal with women's issues. It is becoming clear that the political and ethical natures of humans, society, and culture are issues. The globalisation system has made the world more interconnected over the last half-century. Women's issues must be understood globally in a globalised world. The problems women face in one developed country are frequently strikingly similar to those in other countries. Reflections on identity construction reveal psychological and social similarities in the lives of women. Over time, society has become discriminatory and devolved into heinous exploitation forms. The chosen novels address women's issues such as education, marriage, political and social rights, gender discrimination, harassment, childlessness, and identity. In general, Nwapa and Murugan attempt to write about the real experiences of women from different walks of life.

Flora Nwapa and Perumal Murugan are two writers with much in common regarding literary and societal sensitivities. However, there are substantial formal differences between the two authors because Murugan's writings represent a creative response to Flora Nwapa. Thus, it calls for the readers to pay attention to both the parallels and the contrasts. Both authors are interested in the critical topics of women's poverty, disease, infertility, and the tension between tradition and innovation. Nwapa and Murugan not only provide a complete study that delves deeper into the psychological implications of childlessness but also challenges the foundation of their predecessor's subject image. Murugan makes an essential contribution to contemporary Indian fiction by exposing the horrifying conditions of (Ponna). Women must endure facilitating men's prolific sexual self-gratification outside marriage. Even after many decades, Flora Nwapa's words serve as a model for society. Efurū, Idu, Ojiugo, and Amaka, Nwapa's particular female characters, are openly concerned with love, marriage, and money. The women of Nwapa are unpretentious. Overall, the problem of the selected works is discursive, revolving primarily around marriage, money, gender relations, and disputes.

In India's south, Tamil Nadu and Africa's south, Nigeria is rich in cultural practices, and its citizens, especially in rural areas, adhere to

society's standards without question. In wealthy economies, women's position and treatment are based on social stigma and prejudices, but the situation is considerably worse in rural areas of impoverished countries like India and Africa. In some areas, society's limitations on women are immutable. Like many other Indian states, Tamil Nadu worships women as Goddesses while tying them up in inescapable knots in the name of patriarchal society's rules and conventions. In the book *The Man-Made World*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman states, "Women accept conventions, repeat them, enforce them upon their daughters; but they originate with men" (Gilman 2020, 165).

Traditional and cultural practices mirror the values and beliefs of the progress of the country. Women are more affected than men by infertility, which is viewed negatively. According to research, one in every five infertile women has experienced discrimination or prejudice due to infertility. When one segment of society sees infertility as a disease or a hereditary problem, the other sees it as a tragedy. Rural civilisations, which are deeply linked with myths and belief structures devoid of scientific explanations, fiercely criticise barrenness and, as a result, usually blame and isolate women who cannot conceive. Rural people are pushed by stigmas reinforcing this view, and they have no choice but to comply with the expectations forced on them. On the one hand, a woman's infertility in a marriage is criticised, yet female libido and sexual urges are taken for granted and manipulated on the other.

Ritual practices, women, and marriage

Indian marriages, like other marriages, are based on social conceptions. Marriage is a centuries-old social institution with gendered expectations and traditions. In addition, the concept of marriage has been around for thousands of years and has been influenced by various historical events. Without a doubt, marriage is one of society's most resilient institutions. This arrangement laid the foundation for men and women to have a heterosexual relationship. In ancient times, marriage was always about transferring property, money, and women, not about transmitting love. Women were viewed as exchangeable commodities; this mindset and practice persist today.

Men, not women, were permitted to remarry if their wives could not bear children. Ponna, with teary eyes, said, "Marry another woman. At least let her be blessed with a child" (Murugan 2013, 54). According to popular belief, a child completes a family; without a child, a couple remains paired and can never become a family. The fundamental desire

of the partners within a few years of marriage is to have a child. The external desires of others in their lives shape the couple's passion. Because sterility is stigmatised, it affects women more than men. According to polls, one in every five infertile women has faced prejudice or discrimination as a result of their infertility. When one group considers infertility an illness or a hereditary problem, the other feels it is a tragedy.

In Africa, the oral tradition of narrative has always included women significantly. Because women are more vulnerable to victimisation when physical force and violence are in control, South African women suffered greatly more under Apartheid than their male counterparts. When a man's family looks at a future wife, her capacity to provide income is considered. Women in Africa generally operate within the pre-defined social and biological role of motherhood and family life. They are expected to produce crops like yams and cassava to feed the family and cultivate the land. In their towns and markets, women are well-known for being traders. In addition to the accomplishments women can experience through their job in Igbo society, their status as mothers impacts the limitations the culture places on them. In Nigeria, motherhood is highly regarded, and the culture supports mothers, particularly sons.

Couples without children often believe that God alone can support and nurture their lives and facilitate conception. Women without children tie a tiny cradle in the Amman temple to represent their desire for a child. To conceive quickly, they tie the cradle from a tree on the temple grounds. Religion and God offer moral support for those who want children owing to ritual practice. For things to swell in the womb, women fast for a day and keep a lit lamp on their tummies. They cooked food and provided it free of charge to married couples without children as a kind of prayer, with those who ate asking God to grant the couple a child.

Devatha received Pongal from Ponna and Kali and new attire for Amman. They reasoned that by doing this, the tribal girl's curse and Amman's fury would decrease. God is pleased by offering Pongal to God and the people, which prompts Him to take mercy on them and send them happiness as a child. They spent half their money on prayers and offerings for Ponna and Kali. Kali and Ponna's income was spent on ceremonies, food and temple priests.

The main deity in Nwapa's works and the lives of the characters she fictionalises, Uhamiri, is a female deity revered equally by male and

female worshippers who all exhibit the same enthusiasm and innocence. Another essential aspect of Igbo culture is the predominance of female goddesses linked to water or underwater environments, such as the goddess Idemili of the Anambra region. These female goddesses are typically pictured as generous to followers and even good people who unintentionally come into contact with them or one of their manifestations. The fundamental nature of social relationships in traditional Igbo society allowed women to feel at ease in their social roles and positions as separate sex from men. This provided context for their dilemmas as women. Appropriate rituals and ceremonies maintain the respect of maternity comparable to that of the Earth.

Childless marriage is a Failure

Both states' Views of motherhood depict the mother as the symbol of love, security and reverence. Ponna glances at the portia tree and lets out a wistful sigh as she goes around the home doing errands and helps her mother with household duties, occasionally pausing to tend to Kali. On seeing the cow, which produced eight calves, Ponna lamented, "She'd tear up just looking at that cow. She had once cried loud, 'I don't have boon that even this mute creature has been blessed with.'" (Murugan 2013, 8) Despite Ponna's lack of fertility, the tree Kali planted thrived after their marriage. "Every absurd thing reminded her of that lack" (Ibid.). Every infertile woman's anguish due to her perceived deficiency is a struggle in and of itself. However, her society becomes even more willing to add to it, and the community understands where and how to strike to cause the most suffering. The work vividly illustrates people's cunning and how they never miss an opportunity to attack someone lacking in anything, thus deemed unworthy to continue in society.

Ponna shares the besetting defect of contemporary Indian womanhood: being denied the freedom afforded by their men. If Kali is avaricious, concupiscent, and shy, Ponna is none of these things. Her weakness is simple-mindedness or naivety. Ponna emerges as the prominent figure and is frequently depicted as a reform target. Four women—Efuru, Idu, Ojiugo, and Amaka—attempt to appease their families, society, and themselves, but they find the task challenging or impossible. This is further demonstrated by looking at the words these women employed. "God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood," Efuru frequently tells herself (Nwapa 1966, 24). Nwapa's concern for

the rhythms and rituals of daily life, particularly in women's compounds, may be seen in the novels *Efuru* (1966), *Idu* (1970), and *One Is Enough* (1986). Women are prominent in her stories as decision-makers, speakers, market price setters, and unofficial jurors in their local communities.

Women continued to be acutely conscious of the effects of particular rites of passage, mainly those concerning children. F. U. Okafor makes the following statement in *Igbo Philosophy of Law* that any Igbo, past or present, would agree with wholeheartedly: "Children are regarded as direct blessings from God. In Igbo land, the end of the marriage is procreation. Childless marriage is, therefore, a tragic failure" (Okafor 1992, 3). Amadiume further states in her research that "self-sufficiency came only with marriage. With marriage too, independence, aggressiveness and thrift were encouraged in the protection of children" (Amadiume 1987, 97).

Ojiugo decides to leave Amarajeme to have a child with another guy and raise it together. Traditional social expectations lead to Amarajeme being publically disgraced by Ojiugo for choosing motherhood above everything else and Idu deciding to commit suicide rather than live and marry Ishiodu. Thus, the special characters in select novels explore how women must have a voice and determination turn for themselves to discover self-identity and happiness in their traditional cultural customs.

Childlessness and the unhappiness it brings

Childlessness frequently takes a psychological toll on both couples due to Ponna and Kali's inability to bear a child. On the other hand, women's negative consequences are more severe than men's since they are considered procreative. In indigenous societies, women and girls are sexualised and confined to the home for reproduction. It was widely believed that giving birth was a woman's primary function for a long time. Though everyone's involvement in shaping lives is essential, the role of a woman in bringing a child into the world is significant. As a result, society's gaze is irresistibly directed to the woman when determining guilt.

Perumal Murugan's handpicked novels deal with the ostensibly never-ending humiliation of a childless couple named Kali and Ponna. It goes one step further by attempting to alleviate their suffering, which is motivated by societal expectations. On the other hand, the irony takes a seat and settles in only because the community's preferred

answer is even worse. Perumal Murugan depicts the terrible reality of a loving marriage shattered by a sequence of viciously direct and stinging scattered occurrences.

Flora Nwapa considered the first significant woman writer in Africa, creates dignified and responsible women who have problems but try to solve them in traditional African society. Efuru abandons an unhappy marriage and worships Uhamiri, the river goddess demonstrating her freedom to choose. She revolts against the unacceptable conditions within her culture and rejects the status quo — similarly, Idu flouts social conventions that enthrone parenthood and decides to die for her departed husband.

Efuru and Adizua initially share a happy marriage, enjoy each other's company, and even inspire jealousy in some females. Adizua, however, grows lonely because they both work at different places and find any reason to return home to be with her. Adizua simply leaves his marriage and Ogonim, the daughter and wife, without explaining the reason for his actions. He does not attend the funeral even after his daughter falls ill and passes away. The marriage is undoubtedly over. Efuru and Gilbert have a wonderful wedding; they spend time together, visit the beach, and enjoy themselves, perhaps a little too much for some. The pair seems to be living a great life until the motherhood problem starts. Efuru encounters contradictory ideas in her first marriage to Adizua and runs into the same issues with her second marriage to Gilbert Eneberi. So both marriages have the motherhood concept, which causes problems for Efuru.

Myth acts as a plot device

Kali and Ponna felt only God could help them have a child. The couple prayed for a child at every temple in the area. Since they were in dire need of a child, they worshipped whatever God they could find. They visited the Dandesswarar temple, a hilltop shrine, and Devatha Amma, a minor deity in the jungle. They contribute half of their wages to the temple. They wanted a child more than anything else since it is more important than money. As a prayer, Ponna even placed her life on the line to traverse the razor-sharp ledge on the mountaintop. She was putting her life on the line to obtain a child and silence the people. Because of Kali's ancestors, they felt they could not have children. They have been unable to have children due to the curse of a triable girl. Ponna and Kali offered Pongal to the deity to atone for their faults in exchange for a pardon from the couple. Every month, Kali and

Ponna waited for her menstrual cycle to begin in the hopes of becoming pregnant, but it was in vain. Someone looked to have died in residence.

Women can have intercourse with any random guy at the temple celebration to create a kid. A stranger transforms into God and gives the woman a kid that day. Seerayi, Kali's mother, plans to send Ponna to the festival with the hope of having a child through God. Her mother and brother Muthu helped Ponna. They do not want the couple to have a child because it will bring them happiness. Kali's evolution becomes a study of the very character of the human being altered by the terrible forces of modernity after Ponna is caught up in a search for meaning in her existence in a time of fast societal change. Even when her persistent attitudes are blatantly exposed in all their grotesqueness, Ponna, the admitted and shameless lady, makes no bones about valorising her improper behaviour.

Idu advances the plot. For instance, in *Idu*, Adiewere and Idu consider their rebellious new wife and propose sending her away at one point; a few pages later, it is revealed that she has departed for another man's home. (Nwapa 1966, 49–50, 56) The husband of Efuru shows a desire to take a new bride. The author exposes that his mother has a new daughter-in-law during a conversation between her and her friends (Ibid., 195). Nwapa develops the text of the Igbo experience by allowing a women's discourse to appear to articulate itself in her writing. She also reveals motherhood's practical, lived realities, which is probably even more significant than this. Without diminishing the significance of motherhood as an institution in West African society, she probes the dark, sandy underside of chauvinism's privileged emblem. Nwapa shows that the mothers of Africa also have opinions, like anger, rival dreams, and their own lives.

Infertility as a lonely struggle

The exceptional characters of Ponna, Efuru, Idu, Ojiugo, and Amaka are now experiencing fights from both the outside and within themselves. The terrible side of unaccomplishing one's deepest desires haunts one's thoughts and prevents us from living our life in general. Because they were preoccupied with being a mother, they could connect anything to the subject of children. Without societal tension, they are continually prevented from questioning themselves. Anxiety and misery have imprisoned them. When people discover the couple's plight, they feel satisfied that they are not going through the same

difficulties before empathising with their situation. Both writers recommend constructive strategies for women to free themselves from the oppressive tentacles of the past that prohibit them from executing new ideas for themselves in more practical and human existence, in addition to dispelling misconceptions that programme and stereotype women. Although the protagonists of each novel come from societies that are very different from one another, their unique predicaments illustrate how politics, economy, and tradition affect interactions between mothers and children and between men and women.

Dissatisfaction with the present

The following characters, Efuru, Idu, Ojiugo, Amaka and Ponna's relationships with Kali, Gilbert, Adiwere, and Amarajeme play vital roles in comprehending the plot better. These men, driven out by a harsh environment, bear a strong resemblance to their artists, and their images read like sensitive persons protesting a terrible existence. On the other hand, these men are the ones who give their wives wind in their sails. Nwapa and Murugan aim to write about the real experiences of women from many walks of life by dispelling outdated beliefs about women as mothers and motherhood. Efuru, Adizua, and Adizua's mother are pretty concerned about the idea of motherhood. This quality emphasises the injustices and constraints in traditional civilisations, contributing to the conflict that Efuru and her mother-in-law portray through their speaking performances. They understand that God decides whether or not a woman has children. However, society still shuns women who cannot conceive and even holds them responsible when males experience physical problems. One must wonder why someone has to bear the blame or serve as the fall guy in an inhuman circumstance.

Defeating the Silence of Traditional Power

The comprehensive comparison study uncovers insights into female characters' psychological and cultural conflicts, revealing social issues that demand more attention than the patriarchal system currently provides. Silence is frequently interpreted as evidence of women's oppression in society. Tillie Olsen outlines how the continual demands of daily life have driven women's creative skills into unnatural silences, allowing them no other existence but that of mothers, wives, daughters, and nurturers in her book *Silences* (1978). In *Boundaries of*

the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction (1987), as Roberta Rubenstein points out, most women have often been doubly silenced.

Furthermore, women have been silenced on several topics. It is not easy to express one's feelings as a mother in a patriarchal family structure, as Adrienne Rich points out in *Of Woman Born* (1976). Rich claims that motherhood, "as defined and constrained under patriarchy," is firmly ingrained in our culture and internalised by many women. It inhibits women from expressing their feelings as mothers, mainly when those sentiments are negative. Women are encouraged to show their children only self-effacing affection. As Rich explains, "Mother love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist." (Rich 1976, 46)

The majority of women have trouble expressing their feelings and views. Because of women's impotence in society, several female characters are ambivalent toward society. Feminism's worldwide efforts have aided in unsettling the long-standing social and economic abuse of women throughout history. It has helped modern women break free from past, present, and future restraints. Modern women are no longer the timid, domesticated women of the past who sacrificed their hopes and ambitions for the sake of their families and society.

Fullness and Autonomy of Women's Lives

Undeniably, the women characters' acceptance of patriarchal beliefs and norms undermines Nwapa's portrayal of the wholeness and autonomy of women's lives. In addition to sharing their problems and strengthening female bonds, the village women also translate their lives into a medium they control when they talk. Additionally, by focusing on their desire to please their husbands and their issues with infertility, their dialogue reflects on, objectifies, and so in a sense, specifications the social limitations they encounter. The self-generating orality is made possible by Nwapa's choice of social setting for her novels. Each story features women living in stable, self-contained household environments where everyone knows the customs and surroundings, and only a few characters are foreign. Reference to outside objects or routine action is omitted or condensed where it is possible to gesture at them or assume that they are understood physically.

Similarities of the Theme

Murugan and Nwapa's characters face inner struggles and triumphs. Traditional notions of motherhood and barrenness are examined thoroughly for the women's and society's welfare that contribute to specific economic, political, and social conditions of the cultural context. Novelists criticise the male instrumentalisation of traditional ideas and gender roles through the characters they create. In the end, both writers are incredibly successful in their use of language, achieving a masterful fusion of language and setting.

Early morning, Kali was discovered hanging from a tree branch in the family courtyard. His lack of children was the main factor contributing to his suicide. After 12 years of marriage, Kali and Ponna were content with their union, just like any other husband and wife. They were similar but unique; their union was a form of love that jealous people envied. As a result, when Kali committed suicide, many comments were made about it. His family also had a different justification. In Perumal Murugan's trilogy, women are the ones who suffer the most. In one instance, women are singled out for not having children. Ponna experiences loneliness as a widow during a lonesome harvest, but she gives birth to a son, yet her happiness depends on Kali. "They pushed me away because I was childless. Even though I have a child on the way, they will shun me because I am a widow. Look what my life has become, Venga. I cannot take the lead and take part in anything anymore. He has left me in this state" (Murugan 2018a, 160).

In 2014 Murugan published sequels that offer two distinct possibilities *A Lonely Harvest* (2018a) and *Trial by Silence* (2018b) in Tamil. In the sequels, Kali faces the ramifications of traditional practices that smell contemporarily drenched in gender inequity and injustice. *A Lonely Harvest* has Kali commit himself because he cannot handle the anguish of Ponna's infidelity by choosing to engage another man. In the trilogy, the author's characters represent a significant voice that challenges the conventions that assign males to domestic leadership roles.

Nwapa asks the narrator to consider motherhood and parenthood via the experiences of Amarajeme and Ojiugo, a married couple. After some years of marriage, they are still without children, and Ojiugo discovers that her husband is infertile. The wife of Amarajeme takes extreme methods to become a mother out of a need to uphold her customary position as a mother. The death of a prominent character in *Idu* is particularly noteworthy because it was a suicide. Amarajeme

realises he is powerless after learning that the child his wife gave birth to is not his. He is highly embarrassed by this realisation because it has made everyone in the community aware of his impotence and the fact that, by conventional standards, he is not a man. He starts to doubt his contribution to society. His only love has abandoned him in favour of her best friend to start a family. His reputation has now been damaged, and he is humiliated.

Amarajeme kills himself because he believes he has no other reason for existing and his life is meaningless. Ojiugo's activities conform to what society expects of her and are moved by cultural beliefs, but she also neglects the feelings of her husband, Amarajeme, in the process. Through Ojiugo, society is responsible for Amarajeme's suicide. Ojiugi reveals to the readers what she feels about motherhood. It is time to acknowledge that both men and women may have health issues that prevent them from becoming parents.

Additionally, everyone is aware that not all children live. Therefore, it is not the mother's responsibility if God decides to take the children. The community must avoid blaming the women solely for the problems. Both authors challenge the notion of the powerful masculine and the vulnerable woman, advise readers against the acceptance of mystical counter images, and emphasise the value of the entire society. Thus, the heroines gradually realise that motherhood has not brought fulfilment after years of sacrificing everything.

Contrasts between both the novels

The protagonists' experiences contrast to show the balance between tradition and modernity. The writers draw attention to the disparities between women in different countries and the situation of women in underdeveloped areas with limited prospects. The rituals and practices depicted show how superstitions and unquestioning beliefs lead to many issues and intolerance; all harmful to society's growth and which the characters despise and want to alter.

Most key decisions are made by or with the input of family members. All the characters feel that marriage and love are necessary for happiness and contentment, in contrast to elders' and disadvantaged women's traditional ideas, which perceive marriage as necessary and associate it with security and social position. All of the mother figures are against the effect of Westernisation in the shape of clothing, music, and other forms of expression. They cannot fathom

the consumer culture of style and beauty, which the young ladies enjoy without guilt.

The selected novels use a first-person narrative style that gives the idea that the characters speak directly to the audience and engage readers who identify with the protagonists. The writers' language is interwoven with their native dialect, making it more authentic and relevant to female readers. The novelists have also developed their own feminist patterns, model, and philosophy. They have set characters that expose society's persecution of women since the novels focus on the misery of ordinary women in remote rural areas who are oppressed, discriminated against, and denied opportunity. When the novel's protagonists interact with other women, we notice that they are sensitive to their fellow women's discrimination and try to improve their social position.

Conclusion

The research study has provided several insights into the formation of modern women's identities as portrayed by writers. It deduces various traits from this investigation, which aimed to uncover differences in book protagonists based on locale and genre. In addition, despite the diverse backgrounds and genres, the study identified some common elements among selected works.

According to the findings, the protagonists in the select novels set in rural villages uphold virtues such as honour and loyalty to elders. On the other hand, the male characters are more independent and rebellious, ultimately choosing their own path, even if it angers their elders and parents. The selected works portray the characters as intense and persistent women and the expected quality is discovered.

The compelling story throws light on reality by comparing novels from different national traditions, noticing the specificities of individual texts. It also zooms out to see the more prominent genre. The researcher wants to engage two national and literary conventions in discourse while maintaining their distinct identities.

Ultimately, both novelists achieve remarkable success in their use of language. They masterfully combine language and setting. Flora Nwapa uses proverbs, metaphors, and imagery from traditional Igbo society to effectively communicate the need for change in Nigerian communities concerning the conventional values that African women still let guide their lives. In contrast, Perumal Murugan utilises very few proverbs. Still, it achieves a similar level of authenticity through

dialogue, glittering symbolism, and stunning visuals drawn from the lives of the Kongu Vellalar community that give depth to his characters. Above all, the chosen works are complete with the perceptions and sincerity essential to creating genuine characters. The liberation of historical and contemporary enslavement thanks to this humanisation of the characters.

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