

Laughter and ethnic identity: Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different*

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Abstract. This brief paper raises a puzzle, or half-puzzle, about Flora Nwapa's ethnic identity in light of sentences in her novel *Women are Different* and presents two solutions.

Draft version: Version 1 (October 4th 2022).

"Faint was the fire under mother's frying pan

And that was how I became a white man!"

In a book entitled *In Their Own Voices, African Women Writers Talk*, Flora Nwapa presents herself as having the identity of a black woman writer – it is not just a category she is placed under, but also a category which she uses to understand who she is. Well, that is my understanding anyway. She tells the interviewer:

I am concerned with the fate of the black woman whether she is in Africa, North America or the Caribbean. (Nwapa, in James 1990: 112)

When asked whether she reads much of other writers, she replies:

Yes, I do quite a lot. I read Buchi Emecheta, and I read African-American and Caribbean writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall – there are great similarities. (Nwapa, in James 1990: 116)

But when I read her novel *Women are Different*, I was confronted by a puzzle, or half-puzzle at least.

One of her characters, Rose, says:

Many people have forgotten how to laugh, because few people can make them laugh. The white man in his wisdom goes to great lengths to make films which make people laugh. Laughter they say is a great medicine. (1992: 106)

The sentence beginning with “The white man in his wisdom...” makes one laugh (or at least make me laugh). But then we are left with this puzzle:

- (a) We are told: there are many people in relation to whom only few people can make them laugh and that it is the white man who in his wisdom goes great lengths to make films which make people laugh.
- (b) The novel makes us laugh with this information.
- (c) It is a novel by a black woman writer.

How can we reconcile (a), (b), and (c)? Someone might say, “Easy: this is a novel, not a film and proposition (a) is about films.” But it looks suitable for being made as a film, or there is some filmic quality about it, and I think the writer knew what she was doing when producing that quality. (Also there should be a good dose of humour in the film.)

A solution is that Nwapa is expressing some complicated identity: “It is unlikely that any white man would say this but it will make you laugh and I am rather like a white man.” I don’t wish to encourage stereotypes, however (and should probably warn against taking the lines at the beginning as an inspiration for racist poetry). Another solution is that it is Rose who says this and Nwapa sounds as if she wishes to distance herself from Rose (1992: 138), so one should not take this humorous observation as evidence of Nwapa’s identity.

References. James, A. 1990. *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*. London: James Currey; Nwapa, F. 1992 (originally 1986). *Women are Different*. Trenton: Africa World Press.