

Marriage and Procreation: Continuities and Transformations in the Ankara Novellas *A Tailor-Made Romance* and *Love Me Unconditionally* Against the Backdrop of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

Enet Mundembe and F. Fiona Moolla

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Abstract: This article acknowledges that romantic love is slowly getting more recognition than before in the study of African literature and culture. The Nigerian publisher, Cassava Republic, has been part of this recognition. Their popular romance imprint, the Ankara romance series, presents stylish, sophisticated, urban heroines who negotiate complex social issues through their relationships with romance heroes. Although the Ankara novellas acknowledge and are inspired by the western romance tradition, they also consider questions which are specific to contemporary African cultures. One of the concerns which emerges in the novellas is the social pressure experienced by heroines to bear children. This pressure is exerted by their families, by men with whom they have relationships, by potential in-laws, and society at large. Two of the Ankara novellas published to date, hold a lens to the oppressive ways in which procreation is made an obligation for romance heroines. The titles which will be studied are *A Tailor-Made Romance* (2015) by Oyindamola Affinnih and *Love Me Unconditionally* (2017) by Ola Awonubi. These contemporary Ankara novellas will be read against the backdrop of Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru*, a first-generation African novel written by the first published African woman writer. We see that the dilemmas encountered by the Ankara heroines represent the concerns of *Efuru*, Nwapa's heroine, with some variation. Nwapa's novel has elements of the romance plot, but the ending is not the happily-ever-after romance ending. This article suggests that despite the difference in endings, both the popular Ankara novellas and the canonical novel, *Efuru*, draw attention to the discriminatory and disproportionate way in which heroines are made to bear the burden of procreation.

About the Author: Enet Mundembe holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of the Western Cape. Her MA thesis is titled *Figuring the heroine in the Ankara romance series against the archetype of Flora Nwapa's Efuru: Marriage, procreation, love, sex, and work*. Her research interests include popular romance, gender, sexuality, and human relationships in

general.

F. Fiona Moolla is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Western Cape. The socio-cultural history of love as it emerges through postcolonial and African literature is the focus of her research and writing. Her next project is a co-edited volume, provisionally titled *Love at Large: Worlding Eros*

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This article focuses on the significance of marriage and motherhood in two novellas from the Ankara Romance Series, published by the Nigeria- and London-based Cassava Republic Press. Oyindamola Affinnih's *A Tailor-Made Romance* (2015) and Ola Awonubi's *Love Me Unconditionally* (2017) are popular romances set in contemporary African cities that share many similarities with the other eight romances in the series, but are distinguished for the extent to which they foreground questions of marriage, motherhood and childbearing. These two novellas are contrasted with Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), set in traditional, rural mid-twentieth century west African society. Despite the wide disparity between the historical periods represented and the different settings, all three works display a deep concern with the problems encountered by women because of the premium culturally placed on childbearing in the African contexts represented.

A close analysis of *Efuru* as a love story and the Ankara romance series shows that marriage and childbearing remain critical topics in modern narratives. According to Pamela Regis's template, "society defined" establishes the status quo which the heroine and hero must confront (Regis 31). In the Ankara novellas, heroines get into romantic relationships and early marriages, which turn out flawed because of society's urgency or expectation that they should marry and procreate. Heroines endure hurt and disappointments like being jilted, infidelity, and deception in their romantic relationships. However, without exception, these heroines move on better informed to find new unconditional romantic relationships premised on love. In thinking about the heroine in romance fiction, it is not usual to think of the heroine in terms of motherhood. In the Anglo-American romance tradition, the classic convention is for the unmarried heroine to be childless, as we see in Jane Austen's heroines and in the romance novels which continue the Austen's tradition. But, in the Ankara series, we see some more unconventional heroines taking centre stage, for example, single mothers and divorced women looking for love. This follows a new popular international romance novel trend which the harlequinjunkie.com blog refers to as the "Single Parent Romance" (harlequinjunkie.com/trope-it-up-single-parent-romances/). Often, however, the Ankara heroine's happiness hinges upon the question of marriage leading to successful childbearing, as we shall see in the discussion which follows, which is different from the focus on single and divorced mothers in international romance fiction.

After presenting a brief survey of the significance of procreation in marriage, this article considers how the canonical background novel *Efuru* approaches the question of marriage and motherhood. It then explores what the Ankara romances are portraying, highlighting differences and similarities with the "classic" novel *Efuru* as far as the question of marriage and childbearing is treated. Although many novellas in the Ankara series address

similar questions, this article focuses on two texts: *A Tailor-Made Romance* (2015) by Oyindamola Affinnih and *Love Me Unconditionally* (2017) by Ola Awonubi. These novellas present questions of marriage and motherhood in detail. The comparison with *Efuru* reflects interesting continuities and transformations in understanding the figure of the heroine in the African context. These have developed over the roughly five decades, which separate Nwapa's novel from the Ankara novellas. As a continuity, we see mothers pressurizing their daughters to marry and bear children. These pressures result in a series of errors of judgment and disappointments in first relationships. Ankara heroines experience bitter relationships in pursuit of marriage and motherhood, like the heroine figure in *Efuru*. We see that the elements of "the barrier," as Regis calls it, are both external and internal, but mainly the barrier or obstacle is the failure to bear children (Regis 32).

Flora Nwapa

This section establishes the "canonical" background against which the article will consider the question of marriage and motherhood and the justification of yoking the foremost twentieth-century African women writer's work—Flora Nwapa's first novel *Efuru*—with the two chosen contemporary Ankara novellas: *A Tailor-Made Romance*, and *Love Me Unconditionally*.

Critics acknowledge that the canon of African women writers is significant since female writers have attempted to "redefine and focalize on the one-sided presentation of the African women in African Literature" (Fonchingong 142). Notable female writers of the first generation include Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ and Ama Ata Aidoo. As suggested by Jones et al., these writers give voice to women's experiences: "[I]t is in the pages of the African woman writer that we first find an objective treatment of womanhood and the problems of womanhood" (2). One of the main problems of womanhood in an African context revolves around the question of childbearing. Research shows that bearing children is central to the sociality of many African cultures (Ogùnyemi 9). This is evident in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) which directly alludes in its title to the closing lines of Nwapa's *Efuru*: "... the joy of motherhood" (Nwapa 281). Emecheta's classic novel of motherhood traces the tragic journey of the heroine, Nnu Ego, whose obsession with fulfilling the obligation for childbearing causes her significant pain and despair. Still, motherhood is at the core of many women's aspirations, as reflected in much of African literature. Emecheta has not been the only writer to explore further the connections between love, marriage, and procreation in personal relationships. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie acknowledges a debt to Chinua Achebe in her writing formation, but she has also recognized Nwapa. Her novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), represents in some ways a continuation of Nwapa's concerns about the question of childbearing introduced in *Efuru*, Adichie's central character Olanna, like *Efuru*, is an Igbo woman who yearns for children but cannot have them in a marriage.

Also, marital challenges like infidelity and inequality between the sexes in an African setting are a concern, as made apparent in Mariama Bâ's semi-autobiographical epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter* (1981). Other aspects of these themes like love, work, intimacy, and

betrayal are also addressed in other novels by African women writers, for example, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), and others.

However, the novelist I am giving focused attention is Flora Nwapa. Many scholars acknowledge Flora Nwapa as the mother of African literature, often even called the progenitor of it (Umeh 34), (Jell-Bahlsen 253). Her first novel, *Efuru*, was also the first novel published by an African woman writer, influencing the women writers who followed. Nwapa's full name is Florence Nwanzuruanu Nkira Nwapa (1931-1993). She was a Nigerian Oru-Igbo woman, born and raised in Oguta, in Imo State. She wrote African fiction, poetry, short stories, plays, and children's literature. Her notable works include *Efuru* (1966), *Never Again* (1975), *One Is Enough* (1981), and *Women Are Different* (1986), among others. Marie Umeh concedes that "[Nwapa's] books explore frustrations associated with love and sexuality; they emphasize the simultaneously individual and collective nature of personal relationships ... [t]hemes of female empowerment, male-female relationships, sexual abandonment, culture conflict, as well as expression of female desire and sexuality" (343).

The focus in this article is on the heroine in the Ankara series against the background of the archetype of Nwapa's *Efuru*, with a particular focus on questions of marriage and childbearing. It is interesting to read these two Ankara novellas—*A Tailor-Made Romance*, and *Love Me Unconditionally*—against *Efuru* on the identified themes because the differences in the setting and period reveal similarities and transformations. *Efuru* (1966) presents a traditional, rural setting in colonial times versus the 2015 and 2017 contemporary Ankara novellas' setting in cities in the independent postcolonial nation. There are also interesting generational differences between the twentieth-century canonical African women writers and the young, contemporary Ankara authors.

These Ankara Romance novellas interpret romance in particular ways relative to the contemporary African setting in which the narratives play out. The authors of the series are all women. This distinction has created a platform for the woman to shape their desires. The Ankara romance novellas are modern, urban, trendy, and sophisticated and do not gesture towards the "traditional" past. Ankara novellas could be considered part of the chick-lit subgenre of contemporary popular romance. The protagonist—the stereotypical "chick," according to Heike Mißler's description in her introductory notes in *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*, is "single, lives and works in an urban center, is surrounded by a network of friends, and is struggling to find a fulfilling job and a meaningful relationship" (1). These heroine-centered narratives focus on the social life and love relationships of young professional women. They follow a trajectory that starts from the heroine's frustration or humiliation, through a series of bad matches, to the heroine's realization of the need to self-reflect and find "the self" before finding a successful love match and, thereafter, a happy ever after ending.

This article analyses these narratives from an African feminist perspective. Susan Arndt observes that "African feminism aims at upsetting the existing matrix of domination and overcoming it" where transformation is the sought-out goal for the betterment of society, especially for African women's lives (32).

“Marriage must be fruitful”: The Importance of Marriage and Childbearing in African Societies

What does literary and anthropological scholarship say about marriage and procreation? Early and contemporary African texts by African women writers portray marriage and procreation as a topical concern (Sankar and Rajeshkannan 194). But like everywhere in the world, there have been massive transformations in ideas over the past century. Traditionally, in most parts of Africa, marriage is/was predominantly not for personal or mutual pleasure. It fulfilled social and economic roles, and, most importantly, it served as the kinship context for begetting children (Kofon 52). Marriage in many African cultures has been regarded primarily as an institution for the procreation of children. Marriage is fully “consummated” not by payment of the dowry or intercourse but by the birth of a child (Phillips 3). Infertility is regarded as a social failure in many African societies (Jones et al. 19). Although there are many contemporary permutations, an overview of the general position shows that reproduction is at the heart of a society that guarantees a lineage’s continuity through successful childbearing by married couples. Procreation is a kind of “medicine against death” (Mbiti 105). After death, one’s tribe and bloodline continue through their offspring. More children translate into more labour for the fields and “a possibility of wealth and defence against enemies” (Phillips 1).

What is the implication of this pressure to procreate for the woman? Culturally, marriage is regarded as a status symbol that elevates a woman (Ogude et al. 104). Her marriage must be productive through producing children; otherwise, failure to conceive is seen as a curse (Phiri 25). Marriage and procreation have a profound bearing on the heroine. Some women value “the identity and experience of being a married woman, a mother” (Smith, “Promiscuous Girls, Good Wives, and Cheating Husbands” 126) as a marker of femininity. Marriage is perceived as a fundamental rite serving to produce descendants. The pressure on the heroine does not end on successful procreation, but the sex of the child is also very important. Male children are most desired because they guarantee continuation of the lineage (Nhlapo 143).

It is for the above reasons that we find polygyny encouraged in Flora Nwapa’s early narratives, often by a wife herself in cases where a marriage proves infertile. Women are nurtured into believing that “[o]nly a bad woman would like to be married alone by her husband” (Nwapa 57). But contradictorily, polygyny is decried by the United Nations Human Rights Committee and women’s organizations as discriminatory to women since it is believed to negatively affect women emotionally and financially (Davis np). The paradox can only be explained by the ongoing transformations in gender attitudes and perceptions.

In some African settings, there are clearly defined roles for everyone; for instance, puberty rites focus on defining the sex and marital duties of both boys and girls before and after marriage. Young girls are prepared physically and socially for marital roles. In *Efuru*, we see some of these practices, including the “painful” clitoridectomy performed by the older women on young women (Nwapa 14). Paradoxically, “[w]omen are perpetrators of traditions that harm them” (Curry 55). This is explored in depth by Ginnete Curry in her book *Awakening African Women: The Dynamics of Change*. She acknowledges that women as upholders and guardians of traditional values reinforce traditions and customs sometimes through subjugating proverbs that they teach children. In *Efuru*, we learn of Igbo sayings that

make women inferior, like “*Di bu mmm ogori*,” which means, “a husband makes a woman beautiful” (Nwapa 97). These young heroines are nurtured to fulfil multiple roles, like daughters to parents, friends to peers, daughters-in-law to in-laws, most importantly, wives and mothers. Almost everything is defined for the heroine. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in *Africa Wo/Man Palava* observes that first-generation African woman writers like Nwapa portray heroines as victims in a larger sexist society (4-6). Women are nurtured to be submissive to men. Ironically, in *Efuru*, as we shall see in the Ankara series, women instill and enforce these practices onto their daughters. In *Efuru*, Efuru’s mother-in-law Amede screams at the young maid Ogea for failing to do the laundry and cautions that Ogea will not be able to please a husband in future (Nwapa 181). Also, failure to conceive is blamed on the heroine. These intrusions suggest that love relationships are not private affairs because society and family are involved and have expectations the heroine should fulfil—to get a suitor who marries them, please him, and to bear children.

Marriage and Procreation: The Pattern Set by the Literary “Foremother” in *Efuru*

Before exploring the two contemporary Ankara texts, it is crucial to look at how marriage and childbearing are presented in Nwapa’s first novel *Efuru*, for comparison and contrast. As already suggested, her classic novel *Efuru* is a crucial yardstick for what the Ankara novellas present on these essential questions. In *Efuru*, problems with childbearing are the main obstacles to the further growth of love in the romantic union represented by the marriage of the heroine, Efuru, and her husband, Adizua.

Nwapa’s first novel traces the fated life of the heroine Efuru, her courtship, elopement, marriage, and divorce. Though a distinguished person in her village for her good deeds and hard work, Efuru has difficulty bearing children and, for that reason, finds that both her marriages fail—the love-marriage to Adizua and the more “pragmatic” marriage to the second husband, Gilbert. Efuru falls in love and elopes with Adizua, a pauper, despite of her father’s elevated social status and wealth and her high social standing as his daughter. Following her marriage, Efuru is dearly loved by her in-laws and the community but has difficulties conceiving. She encourages Adizua to enter a second marriage when she does not conceive, even though she later bears a child.

Contrary to custom, Adizua secretly betrays her and abandons her for another woman outside the marriage. Efuru returns to her father’s home, where she meets and marries Gilbert, who, in turn, mistreats her when she fails to bear more children. Again, she leaves the marriage. Procreative failure is both an internal and external “barrier.” Efuru goes through many difficulties and much anguish, and she laments to herself, “surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood” (24). This is because she wants a child, apart from social pressure, conveyed in the narrative through neighbours’ talk about her infertility. Even her fully supportive mother-in-law becomes anxious because of the cultural belief that procreation is the foundation of marriage and the guarantee of the continuation of the family line.

We are presented with a setting where marriage is regarded as a crucial rite for every young woman. Nwapa is bringing to the fore women’s predicaments in settings defined by

tradition and culture that serve patriarchal interests. Heroines are nurtured from a very young age by older women tasked to ensure they are ready for the role. Elders like Ajanupu in *Efuru* make this clear. She rebukes Efuru for not fully training her young maid; her words are, “[r]emember she is a girl, and she will marry one day. If you do not bring her up well, nobody will marry her” (Nwapa 5). Pressure is exerted on the young girl that marriage and motherhood are essential rites to be fulfilled. Concerns about infertility are highlighted in Nwapa’s text because the purpose of marriage in this African setting is successful procreation. It is depicted as “a thorny, unbearable issue for a Nigerian woman” (Berrian 98). The heroine is only respected insofar as she successfully executes her maternal role. Even money is worthless compared with the value of a child, as emphasized by one of the women in *Efuru*: “Can a bag of money mourn you when you are dead? A child is more valuable than money. So, our fathers said” (Nwapa 37). Considering this setting, Efuru’s marriages to Adizua and Gilbert are bound to fail mainly because the obstruction of infertility prevents the ideal flourishing of the union of the lovers.

Efuru’s marriage to Adizua is a love marriage. Interestingly, Pamela Regis’s element of “the betrothal” in this case occurs in the “pre-story.” In the context of this culture, the complete union can only happen with the birth of a child. Intriguingly, Adizua never openly complains about Efuru’s failure to conceive. Instead, he is supportive, telling her, “[P]lease don’t think that it makes any difference to me whether you have a baby or not” (26). It is quite puzzling that their marital problems, and Adizua’s betrayal, starts only after the birth of Ogonim, their only daughter. So, unlike what we see in her second marriage to Gilbert, where infertility prevents a love relationship from developing after marriage, this first marriage fails because the hero falls out of love with the heroine. Efuru resolves that her husband’s indifference was not due to anything but a “lack of love” (53). Before their daughter’s death, the signs of a failed romance are evident. Efuru complains to Ajanupu: “For months, Ajanupu, my husband came home late every night. Some nights he did not come home at all. He did not eat my food and when I stopped cooking for him, he did not notice” (57). This development contrasts with the earlier times of their marriage where Adizua was so much in love that he would even abandon his farming to be close to Efuru, where “the least thing sent him home” (10). A close analysis shows that Adizua is not very excited by children and is more excited by money. We see him suggesting that his wife returns to trading, leaving the baby in a maid’s care (36). Moreover, even though they have a child, Adizua still abandons Efuru. He even refuses to come back for his daughter’s funeral, consequently inverting society value on the importance of children.

Nwapa has mismatched her heroine with weak men: Adizua and Gilbert are both foolish and irresponsible, yet Efuru is humble, respectful, and faithful but does not allow herself to be mistreated. Unlike her mother-in-law Ossai, who endures and waits for a deserting husband, Efuru is a strong, assertive, and decisive woman who cannot stand being in an “empty” marriage. Self-imposed suffering does not appeal to her; she says, “I know I am capable of suffering for greater things. But to suffer for a truant husband, an irresponsible husband like Adizua is to debase suffering. My suffering will be noble” (62). She surpasses the hero in every aspect. As we shall see, in addition to the focus on childbearing, the exceptional strength of the heroine is another element that the Ankara novellas share with *Efuru*. But unlike *Efuru*, the Ankara novellas also seek to portray heroes that embrace and complement successful, independent barren women. In this respect, they are true “romances” since they portray a wished-for ideal.

The Ankara Heroine: Marriage and Motherhood on “Her” Terms in *A Tailor-Made Romance* and *Love Me Unconditionally*

As established above, marriage and motherhood are among the many pressures that impact the heroine in *Efuru* and continue to reflect in contemporary texts like the Ankara romance series. Next, this article focuses on two Ankara novellas, namely, *A Tailor-Made Romance* and *Love Me Unconditionally*, which vividly present the question of marriage and motherhood.

Like Nwapa’s heroine, Efuru, these Ankara novellas present strong women whose lives are unfulfilled. As observed by Marie Umeh, the heroines of Nwapa’s novels generally, like Efuru in her first novel, “do not have it all; they may be gifted financially and intelligent but pay the price for these distinctions” (Umeh 350). Something is missing or unsatisfactory in their lives. In the “classic” novel, we have seen that Efuru cannot have children or keep a husband, an almost similar pattern to what we see in the Ankara series. The Ankara heroine is intelligent and has a thriving career but is unsatisfied. She is racing against the “biological clock,” needing a worthy hero who is the object of attraction to satisfy her passion, bear children, have a happy family and a fulfilled life. Ankara heroines want to define the kind of relationships they want, bear children on their terms, and not be dictated to or forced. Like Nwapa’s Efuru, their quest is for a love marriage, not arranged by families or forced unions, where marriage is not the culmination of romance and is entirely premised on childbearing. The heroine seeks independence in matters of marriage and love.

Despite disappointments, hurt from past relationships, and the pressures from their mothers, Ankara heroines themselves desire to be married and have children, but on their terms. It is about personal fulfillment, as depicted in *A Tailor-Made Romance*. Set in Lagos, Nigeria, the novella is about Tishe, a young woman set for success in an advertising agency. She meets a handsome, dashing, dressed Adnan who sweeps her off her feet. Like most of these heroines’ past relationships, Tishe’s has been disappointing too. Her former boyfriend, Fife, cheated on her with other women, and Leke her second boyfriend was not fully committed. Adnan is the man of her dreams till she learns that he is just a tailor from Mushin, a poor suburb in Lagos. What would society say and think of her dating a man of such a background? If we consider the plot of this novel through the eight plot elements Regis identifies as constituting the romance, we see social class as the main “barrier” threatening this relationship.

Nevertheless, Adnan, the hero, is unshakeable in his quest to win the heroine’s heart. He is attentive to the heroine’s needs. He takes her to romantic getaways and pampers her with love, which further arouses desire in Tishe. She continues to switch on and off until successful “betrothal.” She finally accepts him completely, realizing that her happiness lies in Adnan. They marry, and their union becomes a resolution that heals the rifts between rich and poor. Love bridges the class divide, but the hero’s accommodation of a less patriarchal attitude to childbearing is also crucially important in the final union of the couple.

In *A Tailor-Made Romance*, the question of childbearing remains central in the lives of the heroine and the secondary characters who surround her. Society, through mothers, continues to emphasize the importance of childbearing, nagging daughters like Tishe who wish to escape the pressure. We learn that,

[o]nce more she [Tishe] blessed her job for taking her away from home. She couldn't possibly cope with her mum's not so innocent ways of asking her for a son-in-law so that she could start having children. One would think her mum didn't have any grandchildren. Fikiwa her sister already had two children. What difference would hers make? (6)

As expected, Tishe's mother is always asking her for a son-in-law for the main reason that Tishe can start having children. This is because childbearing is the central concern, a marker of feminine fulfilment in this social context, as already observed in the discussion of *Efuru*, which appears not to have changed much despite the intervening decades.

Like we see in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, mothers continue playing an active and encouraging role in their daughters' romantic relationships. Tishe's mother also seeks for her daughter to marry, suggesting that it is still a form of achievement. These mothers are also portrayed in most African novels, such as in Elechi Amadi's village novel *The Concubine*, and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. They advise "dutiful daughters" on how to succeed in matters of intimate relations so that they can bear children in wedlock. In *The Concubine*, the heroine, Ihuoma, and a secondary character, Ahurole, are encouraged by their mothers to get married to have children to the extent of suggesting that they use love charms to secure attention of the partner or potions to fall pregnant. Maternal encouragement to marry is not dissimilar to what is seen in the early European romance novels like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Mothers like Mrs. Bennet also encourage their daughters to marry.

But it is also evident the heroine's wish for a family is personal despite being imposed by society while growing up. The heroine, Tishe, dreams of a future with a perfect family of her own. Here we see fantasy or the wish-fulfillment of the romance proper. She wants a husband and children, a well-off family like her Managing Director's, which is portrayed in the framed family photo on his office desk where "[h]e and his son in their well-cut suits and his wife and daughter are dressed beautifully. This [i]s her dream" (Affinnih 5). Besides rising in her career, Tishe desires a husband; she appreciates that she needs to "date" first to identify "the right man" (6). She wants children and is very specific—a son and a daughter. The two sexes are symbols of life and continuity, which align with traditional and, to a certain extent, modern society's reproduction expectations.

Like marriage, childbearing is not only a social obligation, but the heroine of the Ankara romances also desires it herself. This idea distracts the heroine even at work. Tishe is having an important business meeting with her Managing Director:

She sat there for ten minutes while he talked about the new account and how the M.D. of Celion was his childhood friend. All the while, her mind was on the framed family photo on his [the M.D] desk. He and his son in their well-cut suits and his wife and daughter dressed beautifully. This was her dream, to have a picture-perfect family: husband, son, and daughter. This was how she saw herself in future. Only she didn't even have a date right now, let alone a man. She was all set for the right man, but he was taking his sweet time showing up. (Affinnih 5-6)

The idea of “a picture-perfect family” like the Managing Director’s is fundamental to the heroine (5). It is quite significant that the author focuses on ideas of love and family during Tishe’s business meetings, suggesting the tension between two possibly contradictory desires. She deliberates on these thoughts of marriage and family in her Managing Director’s office in the middle of an important discussion of a new business account. Instead of following the meeting, her mind unconsciously wanders to thoughts about family and career, symbolically highlighting the importance of marriage and family as everything else ceases to matter. She admits that although she loves her job, the “lack of romance” makes her life dull (7). These thoughts about marriage and family are repeatedly emphasized in all the Ankara novellas, signifying their importance in a significant number of contemporary African romances more generally.

The Ankara novellas are more broadly noteworthy in the landscape of romance novels since the imperative to have a child also shapes how the hero is presented. It influences the characteristics heroines look for in prospective husbands. In *A Tailor-Made Romance*, a successful career woman like Tishe also values financial security in a future husband “so that they will be comfortably off” (7). Thus, wealth is a marker of desirable masculinity, unlike in *Efuru*, where heroines like Efuru do not mind marrying paupers like Adizua. Still, Tishe is looking primarily for a man who can be a father—she wants a fertile man to bear “beautiful” children and a man who can provide for the family (6, 7). The heroine thus needs security for herself and her offspring, which is what is sought for in the ideal hero.

In some ways, this is different from what we see in *Efuru*. As noted above, Efuru could marry Adizua for love even though he was somewhat feckless and unsuccessful. Efuru the heroine, and most women in that context do not choose between career and children. They managed farming and trade together with bearing and raising children since they had a support system in co-wives and mothers-in-law like Ajanupu, who actively supported the heroine/mother. In a sense, as represented in the Ankara novellas, the modern heroine has lost some independence since her desire for children is dependent on securing a hero who is willing to take on the supportive role previously played by other women.

Adnan fulfils the role of a perfect hero from the childbearing perspective—he is patient and loving. Despite his humble demeanor, he will be successful in his business and a good provider. He reveals his background:

“This is my life. I didn’t set out to be a tailor. I hold a degree.”

She [Tishe] widened her eyes in shock.

“I studied chemistry. But I lost my dad, and everything went crazy. I already had this passion, so when I didn’t get a job quickly, I needed to move on to do something. I had Mum and Adeelah [his sister] looking up to me. I had to pay the mortgage on the house in Abuja. And so, I started really small and very discouraging until I built this space for my business. So, in case you are wondering: this thing I do, I love it very much. I love the smiles on clients’ faces when I show them the finished work. I like the trust they put in me and my designs. But most importantly, I can’t get over the smiles on the faces of my students when I impart knowledge and help them hone their skills.” (159-160)

Adnan displays the characteristics of a good husband and father. He is confident, hardworking, and resilient in whatever he sets out to do. If he finds joy in teaching his students, then he has the patience to be a good father to his children. Although he wants children, his devotion and love to Tishe show that he does not mind if perhaps they cannot have them. He is the ideal hero capable of loving unconditionally (loc 1619).

That Ankara heroines want to be loved unconditionally is highlighted further in Ola Awonubi's *Love Me Unconditionally*. The title itself draws attention to the centrality of childbearing since it underlines the heroine's desire to be loved for herself apart from her ability to conceive and bear a child—she wants to be loved “unconditionally.” In *Love Me Unconditionally*, the heroine Deola's relationship and intention to marry are shattered because she fails to conceive within the five years of her relationship with Kunle. Consequently, the hero leaves her for a younger, fertile woman. Reference to Regis's plot elements shows “society defined” again foregrounded the most in this novel. It highlights the unfairness of the pressure on women to bear children. Deola moves on, and her family continues to arrange suitors, pressuring her into marriage. However, she is not interested in their matchmaking. Eventually, Deola finds happiness in “unconditional love” from a worthy hero, Femi Da Silva.

“Society defined” is expressed in the form of pressure to marry and bear children exerted on the heroine from society and mothers. Again, we see mothers' urgency to marry off their daughters. Heroines are groomed for marriage from an early age, instilling manners, and values to please future in-laws. For instance, at ten years old, Deola was taught dipping the knee—a sign of respect to elders and in-laws (Awonubi loc 376). Marriage safeguards status in society: “[I]f you had the usual status symbols—money, marriage, and children—you could get higher up the pecking order than a sibling who hadn't attained these emblems of success” (loc 421). Failure to get married is taken as a curse to the extent that Deola's mother suggests they consult their pastor for intervention in the form of prayers. Mothers boast among other women when their daughters marry well. The pressure to marry and conceive comes not only from mothers but mothers-in-law also who dictate who their sons should marry, determined importantly by whether the potential bride is fertile or not. *Love Me Unconditionally* suggests that “the Royal Mum's seal of approval” is needed before the hero and heroine marry (loc 187). “The betrothal” also cannot take place before proof of fertility. We are told, “[t]he lack of this child—the proverbial specter at the dining table—was the impediment to putting a ring on it [Deola's finger]. Kunle was never going to do that unless she got pregnant first” (loc 58). We see a situation where mothers-in-law go out of their way, insisting heroines conceive first before marriage proposals to satisfy societal expectations of procreation. The sons, in turn, put pressure on the heroines to please their mothers.

Heroines themselves also want children, and some are prepared to go to extremes by risking their health to bear a child. In *Love Me Unconditionally*, we are presented with two types of heroines. Both want children. There is Deola, who accepts her circumstances and limits of infertility, and then the shadow heroine Funmi, the protagonist's friend, whom she tries to dissuade from risking her life to save her womb. Funmi suffers from fibroids but goes to the extreme, choosing to sacrifice her life by refusing surgery because her womb might be removed, and she will not be able to get pregnant. Funmi's desperation recalls Buchi Emecheta's heroine Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who almost drowned herself after losing her only child, proof that she was not barren because society believes a childless

woman is a failed woman (Emecheta 62). But in the Ankara romances, Deola represents a “new kind” of heroine. She wants to bear children, but only to complement her love marriage, not at the expense of “her sense of identity” or personhood (Awonubi loc 123).

Deola becomes the epitome of the ideal heroine in twenty-first-century women writings. She probes and questions with ardor the nature of marriage and childbearing, referring to it as “some archaic ideal”:

Why were women victims of a way of thinking that told them that success in life was measured by marital status and whether you could procreate? And to think she had judged herself using this criteri[on] for years, trying to live up to some archaic ideal. That wasn't just a Nigerian thing- it was a belief of many other cultures. And then, if you could procreate, you had better make it a boy. It was as if a woman was some kind of drive-in where you placed your order, and nine months later, she handed you a boy with chips, burger, and a coke on the side. (loc 875)

Deola wants mutual respect. Although she would be happy to conceive, she does not believe her fulfillment will only be complete with a child. Her doctor even presents child adoption as an option in infertility cases, but mothers-in-law want their sons' blood heirs. A psychology study in Eastern Nigeria, West Africa, reveals that the adoption concept is still “a stigma” because of socio-cultural challenges (Agbo 86-7). Unlike Nwapa's heroines, Deola would not allow a second marriage to have a child in the family. She resolves that “society and culture would no longer dictate her life” (loc 882).

The novel title itself is a protest statement—the twenty-first-century heroine projected through Deola says, “love me, unconditionally,” capable or incapable of childbearing. Whilst having a child is important to her, she believes her fulfillment will still be complete without children. She wants a man who can continuously celebrate her and her accomplishments without conditions (loc 1619). She eventually finds this man in Femi. Deola's relationship with Femi represents the ideal relationship, the wish-fulfilment in respect of childbearing for the heroine. Femi becomes the ideal hero figure. His speech indicates a tolerant attitude towards childless marriages and his willingness to adopt rather than take a second wife for the purpose of having children. He says: “I realize now that for love to be the kind that endures, it [must] come without conditions. If it does, it is not loving. It is just a business arrangement where a woman gives a man her body when he wants it, food for the belly, and children because society expects it. In turn, he gives her his name and his credit card and lets her live in his big house, along with the rest of his material goods” (loc 1978). Femi's observation aligns with the heroine's quest—disqualifying marriages dependent solely on the woman's ability to conceive because it translates to commodification, reducing women to property while suggesting the husband is the only provider. The idea of the completely dependent woman conflicts with the independent, career-oriented, and proud Ankara heroine. The narrator comments: “It wasn't that Deola didn't believe in marriage—she did, with all her heart, but she wanted it based on mutual respect. On the understanding that she was not someone's chattel, but her own person” (Awonubi loc 898). Like Nwapa's Efuru who raises her own dowry, symbolically “marrying herself,” Deola refuses to be a man's personal possession. We learn from her office colleagues that “Naija” men, referring to Nigerian men, fear independent, intellectual women; for this

reason, the Ankara romance series presents an alternative hero figure like Femi to complement contemporary heroine figures in marital relationships—men who fit the heroines' desired model.

So, in comparison to canonical African texts, Femi's mother, Mrs. Da Silva, portrays an alternative view of childbearing involving the shifting of rigid mindsets: "[Mrs. Da Silva] was very unlike the typical Naija mother for whom having children was an absolute necessity. Instead, she was so understanding and supportive, pointing out that having children was not the only contributor to establishing strong marriages" (Awonubi loc 1848). This observation is confirmed in Efuru's first marriage where her husband still abandoned her despite her having a child. Mrs. Da Silva's empathy towards Deola is a result of having experienced the same trauma herself. She got married at twenty-two and only had her first child after ten years. She suffered accusations of witchcraft from her in-laws and society because she could not conceive. Like Deola, she believes ideal love is unconditional, and anything other than that is not loving but a transaction.

Conclusion

This article explored the heroine figure and the question of childbearing and marriage. It is clear childbearing is a topical societal issue and is expected to be fulfilled in marital contexts. Heroines themselves also want to marry and bear children, but in love marriages, which contrasts with the "Ur-text" *Efuru*, where the pressure to bear children trumps and destabilises the love marriage. While *A Tailor-Made Romance* and *Love Me Unconditionally* portray some women going to extremes, risking their health to bear children, they also present alternative perspectives of model heroes and mothers-in-laws supportive of childless heroines. These are not social possibilities in the context represented by *Efuru*. But the Ankara novellas suggest that the wished-for happy-ever-after status can still be realised in these romantic unions, even if the heroine cannot bear children.

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