

## **“Because” in literature: did Rose, Agnes, Dora, and Comfort cause celibacy?**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* This paper responds to a piece of dialogue from Flora Nwapa’s novel *Women are Different*, in which Comfort mockingly says, “They took up the job voluntarily. Now you will soon tell us that they are celibate because of us.” There are two different interpretations of the use of “because,” and the claim is obviously false on only one of these.

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*With the puzzle the celibate pose*

*Who knows more, Comfort or Rose?*

I was struck by a piece of dialogue from the second chapter of Flora Nwapa’s novel *Women are Different*. The question of whether they should beat up the white women teachers who have come to Nigeria has arisen. Rose, Agnes, and Dora plead against that course of action in unison:

Rose, Agnes, and Dora were so astonished that they began to cry. ‘Please don’t beat them up. Please whatever you do, don’t beat them up. They have been good to us. They are so delicate, they could die. They have left their relatives and friends, their beautiful homes to come to this bush to educate us. Please, *please*.’ (1992: 32)

Comfort, a township girl, replies:

‘What beautiful homes? Have you ever been to their homes? How beautiful are they? You have not been. They have a mission, they are missionaries. They

took up the job voluntarily. Now you will soon tell us that they are celibate because of us. That is nonsense.’ (1992: 32)

Rose is not convinced:

‘Comfort, please do be quiet,’ Rose said. ‘My father told me that Misses Hill and Backhouse and all the other white women the Anglican mission have in Nigeria are highly educated in the best universities in Great Britain. My father told me that no white woman will ever leave her home in Britain to live in this bush educating silly girls like us, with no good company, no electric light, no running water, and the bush infested with mosquitoes and tse-tse flies.’ (1992: 32)

I take Rose to be saying that the agreement was that these women would get nice conditions in Nigeria: electric light, running water, freedom from mosquitoes and tse-tse flies, etc. That includes “good company.” I wonder whether the suggestion in this dialogue is: they are not actually celibate and that was part of the agreement!

Anyway, let us assume that they are celibate. Are they celibate “because of us”? There are at least two interpretations of the because claim here, the first of which I take to be the natural one:

*(Decision interpretation)* The decision of the white women to be celibate was caused by Nigerian schoolgirls.

*(Location interpretation)* The fact that it is celibate white women who moved to Nigeria to work in the school was caused by Nigerian schoolgirls.

I shall assume, with Comfort, that the claim on the decision interpretation is false. Nevertheless, the claim on the location interpretation may not be (totally) false. A school might choose certain teachers from all their job applicants with an awareness of the

characters and abilities of the students they are taking in and beliefs about where those dispositions lead. “Look, these people are just like you. If you want to end up like them, then keep proceeding in the direction you are. Otherwise something has to change.”

The claim on the location interpretation is not obviously false. The presence of the celibate white women might have something to do with the schoolgirls, if not the initial decision to undertake a life of celibacy.

### **Reference**

Nwapa, F. 1992 (originally 1986). *Women are Different*. Trenton: Africa World Press.