

GENDER BIAS IN SELECTED IGBO NOVELS

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Abstract: This study investigates gender bias in selected Igbo novels and examines novelists' commitments to advocate gender balance in their literary works of art. The selected Igbo novels are: Ubesie's *Isiakwu Dara N'ala* (1973), Nzeako's *Nkoli* (1973), and Meniru's *Nwaeze* (1978). Literature mirrors society, and it is through writers such as Igbo novelists that equitable gender relations are promoted within Igbo society. The objective of this study is to determine whether Igbo novelists portray both positive and negative images of male and female characters, which are essential for social cohesion and national development. The study also explored other factors that perpetuate gender imbalances in Igbo society. The study adopts a qualitative research design. Data were collected through close textual analysis of selected Igbo novels. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods. The theory of liberal feminism was adopted to analyze the data. The study's major findings reveal that most Igbo novelists are not gender-neutral. While some novelists advocate for the emancipation of women, others reinforce female marginalization. The findings of the study further reveal that gender bias has its roots in primary socialization, particularly within family structures that construct and perpetuate male dominance. Culture, media, religion, education, and peer groups reinforce existing gender imbalances and injustices that pervade many spheres of social life. Colonialism has also contributed to entrenching existing gender biases among the Igbo. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by highlighting how Igbo novelists negotiate gender balance in their works.

Keywords: culture, gender bias, gender stereotypes, Igbo novel, literary work of art

INTRODUCTION

This study examines gender bias in selected Igbo novels, focusing on how authors portray male and female characters and the implications for gender relations in Nigerian society. This study has become necessary in view of the fact that male chauvinism and oppressive portrayals in literature can act as barriers to healthy gender relations if not carefully and thoughtfully articulated. According to Gudhlanga et al. (2012, p. 137), gender bias is defined as “a social order in which women and men

portray each other negatively and face unequal opportunities in both economic and domestic spheres. This definition is in tandem with that of Musah (2022), who views gender as being portrayed negatively, disparity in status, power, and prestige between people who are identified as men and women.

Over the years, literary genres such as drama, poetry, and prose have been regarded as important sources for the transmission of a people's culture, tradition, values, societal beliefs, and gender role expectations. According to Chinyowa (1998), some novels advance patriarchal ideologies that impact gender perceptions as women are viewed as weak, inferior, and dependent. With regards to literature as a vehicle of social cohesion and development, Mutekwe (2007) asserts that literature's contribution to society's well-being is invaluable. Similarly, Wasosa (2010) emphasizes that literature stimulates debate and discussion on issues that threaten social cohesion as well as those that promote development. This implies that literature has immense power to address the profound psychological and sociological ramifications of society's unjust practices. Since literature can address society's challenges, this study seeks to identify gender bias in selected Igbo novels and examine how authors address it.

Since Nigeria assumed independence in 1960, Nigeria has participated in international conventions such as CEDAW and the Beijing Conference (1995), yet women continue to face marginalization in education and employment. In addition, Nigeria has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Even though they are part of many conventions on human rights and gender issues, it is regrettable that girls and women continue to endure marginalization in many spheres of life, such as education and the occupational sectors. School textbooks contribute to this problem through peddling stereotypes and traditional beliefs about women and men (Mutekwe, 2007).

Igbo novels also reflect power imbalances and gender stereotypes. While some Igbo novels have reasonably argued that women should not be disadvantaged based on their sexuality, as both genders have the same capabilities, others promote hostility between men and women. Wasosa (2010) avers that for any society to develop, healthy gender relations should exist.

Patriarchy is increasingly viewed as detrimental to future societal progress. A situation in which women are liberated and male-female roles in society are

renegotiated is fundamental not only to family cohesion but also to national development (Mazuruse, 2010). This emphasizes the need for equality between men and women if societal prosperity is to be realized and sustained. As long as authors continue to cast women negatively, gender biases will continue to be widened, and that may ultimately be catastrophic to national development.

According to Wasosa (2010), no society can realize economic and socio-political sustainability when women are shown to conflict with men. Describing the importance of male-female relationships, Aldridge (2007) emphasizes that male-female relationships are indispensable to the maintenance and development of human society. The bond is essential, serving to cement the unity of the family and the nation at large. The bonds indicate the quality of social life and preserve the group's cohesiveness as a fundamental unit of the nation. This implies that literature, owing to its fluidity and flexibility, determines the nation's capacity to define, defend, and develop its interests. This study, therefore, shows that the novelist's style of writing is essential if a society is to be taken to greater heights. In other words, cultivating positive gender relations is essential for societal well-being.

Previous studies have established that gender stereotypes and inequalities are recurrently represented in African and Igbo literary works. Ogbulogo (1999) found that women in Igbo novels of English expression are often portrayed as subservient, frivolous, or threatening, whereas women in Igbo-language novels are more likely to be represented as companions and associates. Similarly, Musah (2022) and Tshingilane (2024) demonstrate that literary representations of gender are shaped by cultural traditions and patriarchal practices, while Okafor and Ikwubuzo (2026) specifically identify derogatory representations of women in male-authored Igbo literature. Other studies have examined related aspects, including women's negative characterization and suffering in Ubesie's novels (Ezikeojiaku, 2001; Nwaozuzu, 2001), discriminatory gendered language in Igbo society (Chukwukere, 1995), stereotypical male and female roles in Igbo literature textbooks (Chijioke, 2006), and attempts to provide more balanced representations of female characters in *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* (Ikeokwu, 2009). Ikwubuzo (2012) further examined family relationships and gendered representations in male-authored Igbo novels, while Mogu (1999) highlighted the recurrent portrayal of women as passive and lacking agency. These studies collectively demonstrate the

persistence of gender stereotyping and unequal representation. However, they largely examine particular aspects of characterization, language, family relations, or gender roles rather than systematically investigating gender bias as a broader representational phenomenon across selected Igbo novels.

A further gap emerges from studies that examine gender inequality primarily in broader social, cultural, or educational contexts. Makama (2013) discusses women's marginalization in Nigeria's educational, political, and economic spheres, while Canagarajah et al. (2001) associate gender inequality with environmental factors. Mosley (2004) examines gendered divisions of roles in Ethiopian society, and Zondi (2013), together with Muhwati (2009) and Wasosa (2010), addresses gender-related issues in other African contexts but provides limited coverage of gender bias. Gaidzanwa (1995) advocates positive portrayals of women but approaches the issue from a sociological and relatively radical feminist perspective, which Goodman and Ritzer (2004) associate with replacing patriarchy with matriarchy. Nyoni (2004) and Mutekwe (2007) further show how gender-role socialization and educational materials contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes. Although these studies provide important insights into the social and cultural foundations of gender inequality, they do not adequately address how gender bias is specifically constructed through the representation of male and female characters in selected Igbo novels. Moreover, even studies directly concerned with Igbo literature, including Chukwukere (1995), Ogbulogo (1999), Chijioke (2006), and Okafor and Ikwubuzo (2026), leave room for a comparative examination of how both male and female characters are represented across the selected texts. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by examining gender bias in Nzeako's *Nkoli* (1973), Ubesie's *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, and Meniru's *Nwaeze*, with particular attention to the ways gendered representations are constructed in these Igbo novels.

Since Igbo novels are taught and examined in Nigerian schools, colleges of education, and universities, gender-neutral novels should be promoted in these institutions. According to Muhwati (2009), literature should promote and advance an ethical attitude in society rather than persistent patriarchal structures. This view is supported by Musah (2022), who asserts that literature promotes and fosters ethical and humanitarian attitudes by condemning vices and gender-based discrimination in Igbo

novels. Through the characters in Igbo novels, readers are bound to introspect. They may consequently appreciate the importance of Igbo literature in fostering unity, solidarity, harmony, and cohesion, as well as in removing social vices, adverse behavior, and immorality. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by analyzing how Igbo novelists negotiate gender bias and its implications for social cohesion and national development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study adopts liberal feminism, which advocates equal opportunities and legislative reforms to eliminate gender bias. It is relevant because it emphasizes balanced portrayals of male and female characters in Igbo novels. The liberal feminist, such as Millet (2000), maintains that society is unfair to females because it limits their access to and retention in certain fields of knowledge. They argue that the education of girls and women helps the country develop, particularly in production and health, where knowledge in various forms is needed (Appelbaum & Chambliss, 1995). They also argue that the education of girls should be considered as an investment with higher economic returns than that of males. According to Spender (1985), liberal feminism advocates for unrestricted participation of women in all spheres of life. They also advocate for legislative reforms to correct existing imbalances.

Within this theory, liberal feminists call for respect for women's rights and an end to gender imbalances and inequalities in many aspects of social life. They further question unfairness and marginalization of women in education and hold the belief that gender biases can be eradicated through a gender neutral education and legislation. Steps that the Nigerian government has taken since independence to eradicate gender disparities are in response to the demands of liberal feminists.

Liberal feminism is relevant to this study because it advocates for the inclusion of women in all spheres of social life. According to Wood (2007), liberal feminism argues that men and women are alike in important respects and should enjoy the same economic, political, professional, and civic opportunities and rights. The liberal feminist theory argues that, as human beings, women have a natural right to the same opportunities and freedom as men, which makes it outshine others. Thus, it is logical for the general principles of liberty and equality to apply to both men and women in the

best interests of eradicating gender imbalances and promoting gender parity in people's social lives. With regards to Igbo novels, the liberal feminists would advocate for the positive portrayal of both male and female characters if social cohesion is to be achieved.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring non-quantifiable issues such as attitudes, beliefs, and emotions related to gender bias. The qualitative design involved exploring non-quantifiable aspects such as beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. A qualitative research design is the most effective approach for analyzing gender bias in the literature. It focuses on meaning, nuance, and cultural context rather than numerical data. The study used primary and secondary data collection methods. The primary source of data collection is based on three selected Igbo novels that explicitly address gender bias: Tony Ubesie's *Isi akwu dara n'ala* (1973), Nzeako's *Nkoli* (1973), and Meniru's *Nwaeze* (1978).

These novels were selected for their thematic relevance to gender bias and their representation of diverse perspectives within Igbo literature. The secondary sources included academic theses, dissertations, peer-reviewed journals, and media reports, which provided contextual insights into gender bias in Igbo. They were used to provide supporting perspectives on gender bias in Igbo novels. This provided the study with a strong basis for argument and explored how authors treat male dominance over women. To ensure validity when analyzing gender bias in selected datasets, texts, or evaluation processes, researchers apply rigorous methodological controls. These steps eliminate confounding variables, verify classification accuracy, and test results against alternative explanations. A textual analysis of the selected Igbo novels was conducted to identify gender bias. These texts provided examples that were used to illustrate key arguments and substantiate the findings. Contextual analysis of gender bias in selected Igbo novels involves examining how authors use language, plot structures, and cultural worldviews to represent male and female characters within patriarchal frameworks. This approach evaluates how traditional societal norms shape literary power dynamics and character roles over time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents how male and female characters are depicted positively and negatively in the selected Igbo novels: *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* (1973), Nzeako's Nkoli (1973) and Meniru's *Nwaeze* (1978).

Positive portrayal of male and female characters in the selected Igbo novels

Male and female as hardworking and responsible

In *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, Ubesie presents Chike as hardworking and responsible, as excerpt 1 illustrates:

Excerpt 1

“Chike ji ego, O nwere moto. O bi n’ulo di mma” (P. 08).

(Chike has money, car and lives in a decent house).

The author portrays Chike as a man who has a chain of businesses in Enugu and Lagos. Ubesie depicts Chike as a successful businessman who is rich and has houses in Awka and Enugu. Ubesie describes Chike as a popular, rich man in excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2

“Nani Chike bu onye Igbo kpatara ego, kwe na ya kpatara ego. A bia n’Awka, ndi agha a anaghi ekwe ka mmanu eji akwo moto kponahu Chike, maka na o bu onye a mara amara nke oma” (P. 33).

(Chike is the only rich Igbo man I know who admits that he is rich, soldiers would not allow Chike's car to run out of fuel, because Chike is well-known).

Chike is so well-known that the soldiers at Awka supplied fuel for his car. Even during the war, Chike was seen working hard to sustain his family.

In the same vein, Nzeako in Nkoli portrays Ojenga as a hardworking man. Nzeako depicts Ojenga as a man who provides and cares for his children and wives. In a similar regard, Nzeako portrays Obiogbodu as an industrious and successful man in his profession as a medicine man, as excerpt 3 below illustrates:

Excerpt 3

“O wee kporo ya otu na ndi mmadu na-esi n’ulo ha abia ka ha hu ya bu igwuirube, ma ndi sitere “Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, Benin, Calabar na akuku Ugwu Nigeria di iche iche. Ihe ahu bu onye jiri anya hu, o laruo n’ulo ya, o kporo ibe ya” (p. 18).

(He told him how people troop to his (Obigbodis) house like locusts, including those from Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, Benin, Calabar, and different parts of Northern Nigeria. It is an experience that a person, upon getting back home, shares with others.)

Women are also presented as hardworking and responsible in some of the selected texts as the examples (excerpt 4) below illustrate:

Excerpt 4

“Ụbọchị ahụ bụ Orie... nne Ekwutosi bukoru ihe ole na ole, Ọ chọrọ ire n’ahia wee gaa ahia. Nne Nkoli gara ahia... Ọ rechaa.. zụkọta ihe. ọ chọrọ iji sie ofe, ya ndinyom ogbe ha wee laa. Mgbe nne Ekwutosi rechara... ọ zụtara ihe ole na ole”... (p.7).

(That day was orie... Ekwutosi’s mother carried things she wanted to sell and went to market. Nkoli’s mother went to the market... She finished selling... bought some things... She wants to use for cooking soup, and went home with other village women. When Ekwutosi’s mother finished selling... She bought some things...).

In excerpt 4, Nzeako portrays Nne Nkoli and Nne Ekwutosi as traders who go to market to sell their wares and, upon returning home, buy foodstuffs and condiments for the family’s upkeep. Nzeakor further portrays women as hardworking and resilient, particularly through Nne Ekwutosi, who continues trading even after childbirth, in excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5

“... ma nwanyi ahụ ezugbi ike, nke mere na mgbe ọ di mkpụrụ abali abụọ ọ mụrụ nwa, ka o buliri ukpa ya wee malite ịga ahia ‘nebe ọ na-azụta ukpa akpu wee buru ya gaa n’ahia obodo ọzọ, n’ebe ọ ga-enwe uru wee ree” (pp. 76 – 77)

(... but the women did not rest, for two days after child birth, she carried her basket to the market where she bought baskets of cassava and carried them to another town’s market, where she sold them for a profit).

Here, Nne Ekwutosi is portrayed as an industrious woman who is prepared to work hard in the face of difficulty to feed herself and her children. Nzeako, through the character Nne Ekwutosi, advises women to work hard to support themselves and their families, especially in difficult situations.

In Ubesie’s *Isi Akwu Dara N’ala*, Ada is portrayed as hardworking, though she is later presented as irresponsible. Ubesie presents Ada as a businesswoman who sells salt in the market, and she is coming back home from the market to buy foodstuffs to argue with whatever Chike provides.

Excerpt 6

“Chike bute ihe oriri, Nwunye ya (Ada) were ego o na-erita n’uru zuta ihe ha ga-iji si ya” (p. 69).

(If Chike bought foodstuff, his wife (Ada) used the profit from her trading to buy ingredient to cook it).

In this sense, Ada is portrayed as a hardworking woman who uses her trading profit to supplement whatever Chike provides in their family. Feminist theory supports such complementary roles between men and women as a basis for family harmony.

Meniru in *Nwaeze* portrays women as industrious through the characters, Ifeyinwa and Ebuzoajụ. As the excerpt 7 below illustrates:

Excerpt 7

“... *Ifeyinwa na-akūzi nkūzi n’obodo a na-akpọ Okulu*” (p.3)
(Ifeyinwa teaches in a town called Okulu).

Meniru presents Ebuzoajụ as a typist and secretary in the secretariat, as shown in excerpt 8:

Excerpt 8

“*Ebuzoajụ na-alụ n’otu nnukwu ụlọ oru a na-akpọ Secretariat. Ọ bụ taipist. Ọ maara oru ya nke ọma. Ọ bụ ya na-edere onye bụ onye isi ha akwukwọ. Onye isi ya bụ Nwoke a na-akpọ Mr. Blackhouse* (p. 28).
(Ebuzoajụ works in a big secretariat. She is a typist. She is knowledgeable in her job. She is her Director’s Secretary. Her director is a man called Mr. Blackhouse).

In excerpt 8, Meniru presents some of the work women are trained to do during the pre-colonial time. However, this contradicts what is observed in the modern era, where women are trained to be engineers, lecturers, lawyers, and doctors, among others. The current status of women is what feminist advocates work to change, to help women develop beyond their marginalization in society.

In Ubesie’s *Isi Akwu Dara N’ala*, the author presents women as caring mothers through the characters, Chike’s mother and an older woman who protects Chike from being conscripted into the army, as the excerpt 9 below shows:

Excerpt 9

“*Nne ya wee para oche dokwasi n’elu ite ya. Chike wee si ebe ahụ riba n’elu uko*” (p. 155).
(She trope a stove and put on top of another stool, Chike climbed to the roof of the house).

In another situation, she hides Chike in their food cupboard when an army van parks in front of their house, as the excerpt 10 below illustrates:

Excerpt 10

“*Ọ nūrụ ugboala kwusiri n’ezi, mara na ọ bụ ugbo ndị amị... Chike wee piola n’okpuru igbe nri ha nne ya were ji na ihe oriri ndi ọzọ kwachibido ya* (p.161).

(She heard a vehicle stopped outside, and knew that it was an army van... Chike sneaked into the food cupboard, and his mother covered him up with yams and other foodstuffs).

Similarly, an older woman who is Chike's neighbor hides Chike for three days in her house to avoid his being conscripted by Ada's army friends, as the excerpt 11 below testifies:

Excerpt 11

"Ebe ndu ya gbara gharii, otu agadi nwanyi bidobere ha nso si ya bia... Agadi Nwanyi ahụ kwere ya nkwa si na ya ga na-azọ ya ma ndi ami bia. Chike wee biri na be nwanyi ahụ" (p. 159).

(In his confusion, his neighbour, an old woman invited Chike to her home... The old woman promised to continue to hide him whenever the soldiers came).

Ubesie portrays Chike's mother and an old woman as the epitome of motherhood and committed caring mothers.

Nzeakor, in *Nkoli*, portrays Ogechi as a caring mother who does not want to endanger her daughter's life. She portrays her caring attitude to Nkoli in excerpt 12:

Excerpt 12

... na Nkoli gwa nne nwata ahụ, ka ya gaghachi hie ura... Ma obi nwa ekweghi nne Nkoli gaghachi n'ebe o na-ehi ura. O wee kwuo si, m ga-esoro Nkoli nwa-m hie ura n'ebe a. O buru onwu choro igbu ya, anyi abuo anwu o n'otu. O buru ndi mmuo m ga-ahu ya. Ma o buru mmadu, anya m abuo m ga-eji hu ya (p. 63).

(Nkoli's father told the child's mother that he wants to go back to sleep. But motherly feelings would not let Nkoli's mother go back to where she is sleeping. She then said, I will sleep here with my daughter, Nkoli, if it is death, let two of us die at the same time. Should they be ghosts, I will see them. But if it is a human being, I will see the person).

Here, Ogechi is presented as a loving mother who is determined to keep awake all through the night to save her daughter, Nkoli, from a witchcraft attack. Nzeakor uses Ogechi to portray the Igbo societal belief that a woman having a child of her own is her pride and source of security in the family.

In Ubesie's *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, men are presented as loving and caring husbands and fathers through Chike as the excerpt 13 below illustrates:

Excerpt 13

"Oriaku Ada na-aza abughi nani n'onu. O na-eri aku Chike, kwakwa na-ya na-eri ya n'ezikwu" (p.18).

(The eater of wealth which Ada bears is not for mere saying. She enjoys Chike's wealth and admits that she enjoys it).

Ada enjoys Chike's money to the extent that she is described as Oriaku meaning a woman who relishes wealth. In the same regard, Meniru through the character, Nwaeze, portrays men as loving and caring. This is evidenced in Ifeyinwa's comments about the reason she loves Nwaeze as shown in the excerpt 14 below:

Excerpt 14

“O cheta otu o siri wute ya (Nwaeze) mgbe o gwara ya na ahụ-adigi ya, na otu o siri kpọrọ ya baa n'ụlọ ya, wepụ akpati ya, chọọ ogwu isi ọwuwa nye ya... sikwa ya, “Ekwela ka gi rịa ọzọ, ị nụla? Ihu gi adighi mma igbaru abaru” (p.11).

(She remembered how he felt sorry when she told him that she was sick, and how he took her into the house, brought out his box and gave her paracetamol... also told her, “Don't allow yourself to be sick again, do you hear? It is not good for you to be unhappy.”)

Nwaeze, through this medium of loving words wins Ifeyinwa's affection.

Meniru further shows Nwaeze as a caring man through his attitude towards Celia. Nwaeze protects his girlfriend, Celia, whenever they visit the film house as demonstrated in excerpt 15:

Excerpt 15

“Nweze na-ahụ na ya dururu enyi ya ụlọ nke ya. Ọtụtụ mgbe ka ọ na-eji ụkwu aga maịlụ asaa site n'ụlọ Celia ruo n'ụlọ nke ya” (p. 22).

(Nweze ensures that he escorts his friend home, before he goes back. Many times he treks seven miles from Celia's house to his own).

Nwaeze's attitude reflects how men suffer in order to care for their girlfriends.

Portrayal of male and female as advocated in Igbo novels

Ubesie's *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* portrays men as educated through Okechukwu, his younger brother. Okechukwu attained the rank of captain in the army because of his advanced education. Okechukwu testifies to his level of education when he warns Ada against her ill treatment of his brother, Chike, in excerpt 16:

Excerpt 16

“Lee nwanne m nwoke bụ Chike, Ị maara nke ọma na ọ bụ ya zuru m n'ụlọ akwụkwọ. Ihe m bụ na soja bụ kaptin. Lee m anya n'ubu, ka Ị jiri mkpuru anya gi abụọ hụ” (p. 163).

(Look at my brother Chike, do you know that he was the one that trained me in school. I am captain in the army, look at my shoulder and see for yourself).

In *Nkoli*, Nzeako equally presents females as educated through a female teacher, Ndirika, who decides to enroll Nkoli in a nursery school, as the excerpt 17 below illustrates:

Excerpt 17

“Ndirika wee denye aha Nkoli n’ulo akwukwo, ka o soro ndi ozọ na-agu akwukwo ‘ota-akara’ (p. 66).

(Ndirika then registered Nkoli in a nursery school).

Nzeako uses the Ndirika action of enrolling Nkoli in a nursery school to enlighten the general public on the importance of women’s education to women in particular and society in general.

Negative portrayal of male and female characters in Igbo novels

Portrayal of male and female characters as prostitutes

In *Isi Akwu Dara N’ala*, Ubesie depicts men and women as prostitutes, through the characters, Ada and the army officer, as the excerpt 18 below shows:

Excerpt 18

“Ada puo n’utu, mgbe a na-ahụ ya anya bu oge ndi ihe abali sichara... Akuko si n’elu na-abiara Chike na nwunye ya no na di, ma o kaghi akwuna mma. ndi maara Chike na-akoro ya na ebe nwunye ya na-apukari oriri ugbua bu n’ogige ndi ami (p. 78-79).

(If Ada went out in the morning, when she would be seen was when people had finished cooking dinner... Chike heard different stories that, although his wife was married, she was no better than a prostitute, those who knew Chike were telling him that his wife normally went to the army camp).

Ubesie portrays Ada’s pursuit of financial independence as leading to immorality, reflecting gender-biased assumptions. Feminists frown at his type of behavior because a woman’s character should command respect in order to function as a role model to other women and her children. Ada’s children were aware of their mother’s waywardness and refused to follow her when she wanted them to follow her to Nanka where she wants to continue her prostitution.

Also, in *Isi Akwu Dara N’ala*, Ubesie depicts men as prostitutes through the character of an army officer as he (Ubesie) says in excerpt 19:

Excerpt 19

“Obi kporo nwoke ahụ nku ma nani otu ihe o jighi egwuri egwu bu mmaya na umu nwanyi. O nwere ike iji mmaya mee ebere, ma nwanyi mara mma anaghi esi ebe o no agafe (p. 104).

(This man is heartless, but one thing he does not play with is wine and women. He can give someone wine but he will not let go any beautiful woman that passes his way).

Ubesie uses the army officer to suggest that men are as weak as women, hence the army officer's life style is used to balance Ada's lifestyle. However, Ubesie portrays Ada's prostitution to extremity when he says in excerpt 20:

Excerpt 20

Ụmụ nwoke na-echu be Ada ka a na-echu mmiri, na-abia ka ha na-abiaara onye mmadu nwurụ mgbaru, si na be ya na-ala ka ndi jere ala nna ha. O dighi-mgbe mmadu jere ebe ahụ, o ghara ihu otu nwoke ma o bu mmadu abuo (p.139).

(Men were going to Ada's house like they were fetching water, trooping there as if they were going to sympathize with the mourner, going out from her house like those who had gone to share their father's land. There was no time a person got there, without meeting a man or two men).

The picture of Ada's male friends trooping to her house with impurity portrays her as a loose moral and as a widow. Chike, as a man, kept quiet about all that Ada was doing in his house because he was broke financially due to the devastating effects of the war. The author blames Ada's character for her promiscuity and for disturbing society's peace and stability. However, the author seems to exonerate men through the character of the soldier friend, even though they are equally responsible for the immoral behavior bedeviling the nation. It should be pointed out that, despite prostitution being a product of consensus between males and females, only females are unfairly depicted as murderers. Men are portrayed as victims of sexual relationships. The author's way of writing tends to influence readers to view women not only as prostitutes but also as murderers who are bent on disturbing the peace and stability in society. This gives women negative images and creates a gulf between men and women, as females are looked down upon. That does not create healthy gender relations.

Ubesie, to some extent tries to strike a balance by portraying the army officers as a prostitute. However, the instances in which men are portrayed negatively are not given much descriptive attention in novel. In fact, they are mentioned in passing. Foregrounding negative female symbolism reinforces patriarchal structures. Only Ubesie and Nzeakor portray women as irresponsible. They might be as a result of their being male writers. In Nzeakor's Nkoli's Nne Ekwutosi is portrayed as irresponsible and uncaring wife by denying her husband food as the excerpt 21 below illustrates:

Excerpt 21

"Mgbe ahụ ka nne Nkoli dotaara ya (Ojeuga) ihe oriri, O wee rie ya ka oke nkita, ma nne Ekwutosi ajughị ya ma o ga-eri ihe, ma o bu o gaghi eri (p. 45).

(It was that time that Nkoli's mother brought food for Ojeuga and he ate it like a male dog, but Ekwutosi's mother did not ask him whether he will eat or not.)

Nzeako portrays women as irresponsible through Nne Ekwutosi. This event is natural in a polygamous family in Igbo society. The feminists are against women's irresponsibility in the family, especially as it concerns their husbands. Women are supposed to offer their husbands food whenever they are hungry.

Ada, in *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, is presented as irresponsible. The author presented Ada as a successful salt businesswoman in Nanka. However, when Chike has no means of sustaining his children due to the devastating effects of the war, he decides to beg Ada for help, but Ada refuses, as shown in the excerpt 22 below:

Excerpt 22

*“Chike wee gbudo otu ikpere n’ala na-ariọ Ada... Ada dị mma, ọ bụrụ na I nwee ego a nile, ụmụ abụọ ị mụtara nwụọ n’agụụ, gini ka ị ga-akọrọ chi ị (p. 123).
(Chike then knelt on one leg and begged Ada... My dear Ada, if you have all this money and your two children die of hunger, what will you tell your God?)*

The above statements show women as irresponsible mothers and men as responsible. There is clear evidence of gender bias in the above statement, which has the propensity to devalue the respect and dignity of women in society. Such a statement tends to create sour gender relations that threaten social cohesion. This statement shows that males care for their children, but women are insensitive to the suffering of their children. Women are here portrayed as irresponsible. It is in this context that the author is often accused of portraying women as irresponsible. Ada might be nursing the feeling that her husband (Chike) may divert the money to his personal use rather than use it for the upkeep of their children. On this premise, Ada might be excused for her action. By presenting Ada as irresponsible, the author presents literature as a vehicle of social cohesion, as it creates friction between men and women. People in conflict can hardly unite to address developmental issues.

Portrayal of women as murderers

Nzeako portrays women as murderers through the character of the Medicine man named Obiobodu when, Nne Ekwutosi met him to make love portion for her in the following words (excerpt 23):

Excerpt 23

“Nwunye di gi bu ezi mmadu. O dighi ihe ojoo o na-eme gi... olee otu I siri chee na m ga-agworọ gi ogwu nke ga-eme ka di gi hu gi n’anya wee kpoo onye nke ozo asi. Ihe ahụ o bu ezi ihe n’anya gi? Biko.. Laa n’udo (p. 9).

(Your co-wife is a good person. She does not offend you in any way... How do you expect me to prepare you a charm that will make your husband love you and hate the other woman? Is that good to you? Please... Go in peace).

Ubesie portrays Ada as diabolical when she decides to poison Chike because she feels Chike is preventing her from visiting her male friends in excerpt 24:

Excerpt 24

“Otutu ihe malitere gbawa ya (Ada) n’uche. Nke mbu bu inyegbu Chike na nsi...”

(So many things started coming into her mind, the first was to poison Chike...)

Women go to such extremes when they are in a desperate situation. This contradicts the feminist ideal of complementarities between men and women. This unfair treatment of females shows that literature is not gender neutral, and not written by gender neutral authors. Such writing impacts negatively on gender relations through the absence of female role models. Therefore, existing social imbalances and injustices are entrenched in the literature.

The wholesale condemnation of women degrades them. Furthermore, the general yet misguided assumption that women’s actions are not informed by reason is detrimental to their dignity, self-esteem, and well-being. Consequently, society’s efforts to eradicate gender bias are curtailed. Such portrayals entrench negative stereotypes and undermine women’s dignity, contradicting feminist ideals of equality.

Discussion

Evidence from the selected Igbo novels indicates that Nzeako, Ubesie, and Meniru represent gender differently. Although Ubesie’s *Isi Akwu Dara N’ala* portrays both male and female characters positively and negatively, the distribution of negative characterization is disproportionately directed toward women. This finding is consistent with Ogbulogo (1999), who reported that women in Igbo novels were frequently portrayed as subservient, promiscuous, or dangerous to men, and with Chijioke (2006), who found that male characters were generally assigned more active roles while females were associated with passive and domestic roles. Similarly, Chukwukere (1995) observed that Igbo gendered language tends to employ praise-worthy expressions for men but derogatory sexual labels for women. The present study extends these

observations by demonstrating that such gender asymmetry is also manifested through literary characterization and the unequal attribution of responsibility to male and female characters.

The finding regarding Ubesie also corresponds with Ezikeojiaku (2001), who identified female infidelity as a dominant theme in *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, and Nwaozuzu (2001), who found that women's suffering and hardship contributed to their seemingly deviant behavior. However, the present study provides a broader interpretation by examining the representation of both genders. Although Ubesie contextualizes women's behavior within socioeconomic circumstances, particularly the effects of the Nigerian Civil War, women remain more frequently associated with irresponsibility and social problems. This observation is consistent with Ikeokwu (2009), who argued that Ada's involvement in business should be understood within the economic difficulties faced by her family rather than interpreted simply as evidence of female waywardness. Thus, the present study suggests that contextualizing women's behavior does not necessarily eliminate gender bias when comparable male behavior receives less condemnation.

Gender bias is also evident in the treatment of promiscuity. Ubesie's disproportionate association of sexual misconduct with women reinforces the pattern identified by Chukwukere (1995), who found that derogatory sexual expressions are more readily applied to women in Igbo society. The use of *mgboto*, although commonly associated with women, is not inherently gender-specific. Its predominantly female application in the literary context therefore illustrates how linguistic choices can contribute to gendered representations.

The findings further correspond with Ikwubuzo (2012), who observed that women in Igbo novels are frequently associated with family disruption through promiscuity, rivalry, arrogance, and neglect of domestic responsibilities. However, the present study argues that such recurrent attribution of family problems to women can itself constitute gender bias, particularly when male responsibility is comparatively underrepresented. In contrast, Meniru's novels demonstrate a more gender-neutral pattern, with male and female characters generally receiving more balanced treatment. This contrasts with the stereotypical patterns reported by Ogbulogo (1999), Chijioke (2006), and Chukwukere (1995), and suggests that gender representation varies according to authorial choices and narrative perspectives.

Overall, the findings confirm that Igbo novels can both reproduce and challenge gender stereotypes. Ubesie foregrounds female irresponsibility, Nzeako emphasizes gendered tensions within polygamous families, whereas Meniru offers comparatively balanced characterizations. While previous studies have documented negative female representations, gendered language, and stereotypical gender roles, this study extends the literature by examining these patterns comparatively in relation to both male and female characters. It demonstrates that gender bias operates not only through the negative portrayal of women but also through the unequal distribution of blame, responsibility, and moral judgment. Such representations have implications for gender relations and social cohesion and highlight the potential of Igbo literature either to reinforce or challenge existing gender inequalities.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

The study reveals that female writers tend to portray women more realistically, independently, and beyond traditional sexual and domestic roles, whereas male writers more often emphasize female sexuality and position women in relation to male protagonists. The selected texts also demonstrate that traditional cultural norms, particularly those surrounding marriage and polygamy, can reinforce women's subordinate status. Nevertheless, the novels show that women are capable of asserting their agency, freedom, and rightful place in society.

Overall, the study establishes that gender bias is rooted in primary socialization and reinforced by cultural, religious, and peer influences. While some novelists challenge women's marginalization, others reproduce gender stereotypes that restrict women's opportunities and contributions to society. Therefore, more balanced gender representation in literature is essential not only for promoting gender equality but also for strengthening social harmony and supporting national development.

Suggestions

This study suggests that Nigerian educational institutions should promote gender-neutral literature to foster equality and national development. Future researchers should examine contemporary Igbo novels and compare the portrayals of gender roles by male and female authors.

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