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Women as 'Other': Gender Bias in Male-Authored Igbo Literature

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Abstract- ***Igbo culture and worldviews are expressed through language. Igbo novelists utilise this medium to convey the significance of gender in their works. Consequently, gender domination in the Igbo cultural milieu is reflected in its literary texts. This paper examines the linguistic portrayal of male and female genders in an early post-war Igbo novel, Nzeakọ's Nkọlị (1973), and a later post-war Igbo novel, Ofomata's Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị (2000). The paper investigates how these novelists, writing at varied periods, portray the female gender and whether there is any change in the portrayal. The novels are deliberately selected and analysed using a content analysis technique grounded in feminist theory. The study finds that the language of the two novels is androcentric. Nzeakọ and Ofomata use derogatory names to depict women as second-class citizens, demons, and disruptors of family peace. While Nzeakọ depicts women as devilish, evil-doers, and grossly dependent, Ofomata shows women as those who are unfit for education. Even though Ofomata portrays women negatively, he depicts their dexterity and courage in their attempts to achieve their aims in contemporary society. He shows the importance of sisterhood in women's struggle for liberation in a patriarchal society. Contemporary male and female writers should create women whose character and personality are positive to depict the reality of women in society.***

Keywords: Women, Other, Gender, Bias, Male-Authored Igbo Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Interest in gender issues, like many other important human concerns, has continued to gain momentum in post-colonial Nigeria. Over the years, efforts have been and are still being made to recreate the perception of women in life and literature. Women, particularly those deeply concerned about what they describe as the denigration of womanhood in male-dominated society, have been more proactive in advancing gender equality. Across various sectors of national life, women have increasingly asserted their presence. In recent times, they have become more prominent, occupying key positions of responsibility and taking on demanding roles that were once considered the exclusive domain of men. Nevertheless, this heightened visibility in the public sphere has not fully resolved the tensions generated by their continued advocacy for greater gender balance.

Literature, which embodies the culture of the society that produces it, also projects the image of women through the portrayal of female characters. Since Nigeria's independence, particularly after the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War, more creative Igbo literature, especially novels, has emerged, reflecting various aspects of Igbo culture, life, and experiences. The characterisation of women in Igbo works of art has raised some pertinent questions: Is there any attempt to redefine women through the way female characters are presented in both early and later post-war Igbo novels? To what extent does the portrayal of women, through the novelists' use of language, reflect the place and time in which the works were written? How is the issue of under-representation of women in the traditional canon redressed in these novels? Or do the traditional inequalities in gender relations of pre-colonial Igbo society still subsist in the post-colonial era? These and other related questions will be discussed in this comparative analysis of an early post-war Igbo novel, Nzeakọ's *Nkọlị,* and a later post-war Igbo novel, Ofomata's *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị*. The *early post-war Igbo novel* refers to Igbo novels published between 1970 and 1985, whereas the *later post-war Igbo novel* denotes those produced from 1986 to the present. The primary aim of this paper is to examine how the two selected novels portray male and female characters and to analyse the language the authors employ in constructing these portrayals. The texts are purposively selected because they mirror postcolonial Igbo society and capture people's lived experiences and behavioural patterns, particularly in relation to gender relations.

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Gender: Concepts and Perspectives

Gender is clearly distinguished from sex. Sex refers specifically to biological characteristics such as anatomy and physiology that mark individuals as male or female. Gender encompasses non-biological differences, including roles, behaviours, and expectations shaped by society and culture (Chrisler and Lamer, 2016, p.1). “Gender” has become the accepted term for explaining the psychosocial and culturally shaped behaviours and attributes linked to women and men, often understood as gender performance. Gender-related terms include women, men, boys, girls, feminine, masculine, androgynous, gender roles, and transgender, whereas sex-related terms refer to female, male, and intersex. Newer identity labels (such as bio, feminine-of-centre, and gender-fluid) are grounded in the concept of gender rather than biological sex. (Chrisler and Lamer, 2016, p.1). The difference between sex and gender arose in the literature in the mid-20th century as scholars more clearly articulated the influence of biological and social factors on gender identity. Gender is shaped by patriarchy and can be defined as a social organisation of power in which males dominate various domains, such as social advantage, politics, property ownership, and morality (Kakavoula et al., 2026, p. 3).

Gender as a "social, symbolic creation" asserts its meaning "grows out of a society’s values, beliefs, and preferred ways of organising life." Thus, gender is a social behaviour and an identity marker within a structured society. Individuals are gendered in line with their society's cultural priorities (Wood, 1994, p. 21). Consequently, gender is not a fixed set of traits but a dynamic action that shifts between generations, racialised, ethnic, and religious groups, and social classes. (Wodak, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 515). Gender is a socially constructed set of rules, responsibilities, entitlements, and behaviours associated with being a man, woman, or gender-diverse person, and it shapes relationships based on these concepts (USAID, 2023; World Bank Group Gender Strategy, 2024-2030). These definitions and their impacts vary within and between cultures, shift over time, and intersect with other factors (e.g., age, class, disability, ethnicity, race, religion, citizenship, sexual orientation) (World Bank Group Gender Strategy, 2024-2030). While related, gender is not synonymous with women, sex, gender identity, or gender expression (USAID, 2023).

Since gender is performative and can change over time, it should not be seen as fixed. Instead, it is a flexible, dynamic construct. Historically, many literary writers depict gender roles as rigid and show one gender as subservient, passive, and docile. Behaviour outside these norms is often criticised. Such writers portray women negatively for not conforming to the 'rules' and present men's behaviour as the standard. As a result, portrayals of women are often disparaging, while those of men are prestigious. How women are linguistically portrayed is, therefore, central to gender discourse.

Overview of Gendered Language

Language is a major component of culture (Smith et al., 2010, p. 362). It is a medium for conveying emotions, thoughts, feelings, and information, with meanings interpreted by others (Osuji, 1995, p. 241). Notably, language both reflects and shapes identities. For example, it describes gender differences through specific words, phrases, and linguistic expressions referring to males or females. This distinction allows language to play a vital role in either reinforcing or constructing gender stereotypes within society (Salsabila et al., 2024, p. 261). Furthermore, writers use language to portray images of menfolk and womenfolk relevant to their era. This function affirms Cameron's (1998: 9) view that “language-using is a social practice, grounded in history and in the conditions of its user’s lives.”

The novel can be seen as a site for defining the position of the male and female genders through language. Richardson (1993) states that language portrays “males and masculine values, behaviours and goals as more important than females and feminine values, behaviours, and goals” (p. 44). As a result, “no matter how the female world in our society is conceptualized; it (society) uses a language that is hostile to it because language not only denigrates women but also a vehicle for asserting male superiority” (Bernard, 1981, p. 376). Language “reflects...women’s position of inferiority in the male world” (Lakoff, 1975, p. 26). For these writers, the ‘male world’ described by Lakoff is synonymous with literature, which often reflects male values.

The differing status accorded to the male and female genders in literature has prompted some Igbo scholars to examine how language is used to portray gender. For instance, Ogbulogo (1999: 123) analyses the image of women in Igbo novels by comparing the portrayal of women in some Nigerian novels in English and some selected Igbo novels. He exposes how women are portrayed as mistresses, good-time girls, common girlfriends, and fun-loving women, and as wives who are very content with their supportive roles in their husbands' lives. Umoren (2002: 354) also explains how womanhood is visualised in African literary tradition in Elechi Amadi's works. Although Elechi Amadi's works are in English, he focuses on the position of women in Igbo society. He shows how women are framed in Igbo society as mothers, cooks, home caretakers, and as men's servants. Chukwukere (2003: 122), who examines the language used to present the male and female genders in Igbo society, asserts that the language used to portray the male gender in Igbo society is praise-worthy, such as *oke* (male), *okemmadu* (influential person), while derogatory language is used to describe females as *ọkụelu*, *ashawo*, *akwụna* (promiscuous and slut). These sexual slangs used to paint women worse than men relate how language portrays women in our society, as well as in literature.

Given that analysis of the language used by writers reveals a persistent positive portrayal of men and negative biases against women, it is pertinent to constantly examine the language use in literary works to depict gender with more emphasis on females and to find a way to redefine it. This is because the way male and female genders are portrayed in literature reflects how they are seen and treated in society. Since language, which is "the aesthetic element of the narrative fiction" (Nwadike, 1995, p. 4), structures the position of men and women, it is very important to examine it because "without it (language) nothing can be said or written" (Nwadike, 1995, p. 4) about men and women. This is because specific words are needed to describe concepts that are important to people; without those words, it is very difficult to think about, and nearly impossible to talk about, objects, ideas, and situations (Smith et al., 2010, p. 361). Hundreds of studies in psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology show that language affects not only what people pay attention to but also how we think about what we notice, how we remember it, and how we approach problem-solving tasks (Smith et al., 2010, p. 361). Linguistic relativity (Rosch, 1974), derived from the Whorfian Hypothesis (Whorf, 1956) asserts that "languages are not simply a reflection of culture, or of the behaviours, cognition, or attitudes of their speakers, but instead actually help shape them by allowing or encouraging certain thoughts and discouraging others" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 361). In any culture, language is power. Struggles for the "power to name" are continually played out in politics and the media (Smith et al., 2010, p. 361), including the literature. Postmodern theorists today also emphasise the power of language to shape reality. They urge us all to be aware of the ways that language (or discourse) is used to frame (i.e., describe or limit) people's experiences, especially women, in literature (Chrisler and Lamer, 2016, .1).

Feminist Critical Approach

Feminist criticism, rooted in feminist politics, seeks to reinterpret women's literary experiences (Sotunsa, 2008, p. 3). Through discourse and metaphor analysis, feminist critics reveal how gender stereotypes are perpetuated by language that reflects a masculine worldview (Smith et al., 2010, p. 362; Cameron, 1998, p. 9). Feminism scrutinises women's representation in life and literature, arguing that language shaped by male values is intrinsically sexist and reinforces inequality. It maintains that such language upholds male superiority and belittles women. Forward and Torres (1987) support these views, observing:

> When men are enraged, they portray their wives as stupid, selfish, or thoughtless, and thereby batter the woman psychologically. Men also use their words as weapons and their moods to negate women. Their vituperative words batter women physically, mentally, and psychologically (p. 77).

Forward and Torres (1987) add that psychological battering, using words and moods instead of physical force, can be as devastating as physical abuse (p. 77), a dynamic reflected in male literary works.

Feminists contend that male writers often depict women as subordinate. Kolmar and Bartkowski (2000) demonstrate that, in The Second Sex (1949), Simone de Beauvoir, drawing on gender subjectivity in literature, criticizes the social construction of women as the quintessential "Other." Beauvoir maintains that woman, like man, is fully human and that both sexes are fundamentally equal. However, she observes that society frequently uses "man" to represent humanity in general, while "woman" is defined narrowly and negatively, without reciprocity. She therefore interprets the social positioning of men and women as analogous to a master–slave relationship (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 177; see also Okafor, 2015, pp. 55-56). Beauvoir further argues that men see themselves as naturally connected to the world, whereas women are perceived as obstacles or confinements burdened by their bodily specificity. She illustrates entrenched male bias by citing Aristotle's claim that a lack of certain qualities marks the female and should be regarded as naturally defective. Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas describes women as an "imperfect man" and as an incidental being. Religious symbolism reinforces this hierarchy, as in the Genesis narrative where Eve is created from what Bossuet calls Adam's "supernumerary bone" (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 177). For Beauvoir, humanity is coded as male because man defines woman not as an independent entity but only in relation to himself. A woman is denied autonomy since she cannot easily conceive of herself without a man, whereas a man can imagine himself without reference to a woman. In this framework, a woman becomes what man declares her to be—reduced to "the sex," meaning she is viewed primarily as a sexual being. Thus, she is positioned as the inessential and incidental, while man occupies the role of Subject and Absolute (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 177).

Beauvoir also argues that the notion of the "Other" is primordial in human thought. Early dualistic structures in many societies—such as self/other—were not originally gendered. However, male-authored traditions later mapped this binary onto the sexes. She concludes that women are treated as the Other largely because they remain economically and socially dependent on men, and because the sexes have never shared the world on equal terms (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 177). Although Beauvoir acknowledges emerging changes in women's status, she stresses that longstanding customs and legal limitations continue to restrict women's full self-realization. Even when women begin to participate in public life, the world remains largely male-dominated. She therefore insists that women can escape their condition as the Other only by refusing the implicit social bargain that ties them to male protection and privilege. As long as women rely on men for material security, they are likely to remain subordinate. Genuine transformation, in Beauvoir's view, requires women to relinquish these dependencies and assert their autonomy (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 177; see also Okafor, 2015, pp. 55-56). The visualisation of women as the 'other' contributes to their negative portrayal in literature. Leading thinkers from Aristotle to Darwin reiterated that "women were lesser beings," and this type of comment is expressed by writers, theologians, and other public figures who disparage and degrade women (Dobie, 2002, p. 94). The Greek ecclesiast John Chrysostom (cited in Dobie, 2002: 98) called women "a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil," and Ecclesiasticus (a book of the Apocrypha) states, "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman" (see also Okafor, 2015, p. 4). The African literary canon was dominated by numerous male-authored works, such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Season of Anomy* (1973), *The River Between* (1965), and *The Concubine* (1966), which extensively glorified and foregrounded the male image and identity (Okafor, 2015). The male sex/gender was, as revealed by prior scholarly linguistic and literary studies, given priority in these literary pieces to the detriment of the female one (Koussouhon et al., 2015, p. 314). In early African male-authored literary fiction, the portrayal of women was often shaped by prevailing social divisions that reinforced an unequal order, presenting the female as subjugated while elevating the male as heroic and celebrated (Koussouhon and Dossoumou, 2015, p. 129). The Igbo male writers, for example, Tagbo Nzeakọ's *Nkọlị* (1973); Tony Ubesie's *Isi Akawụ Dara N'ala* (1973); Chinedum Ofomata's *Achọwa Isi Ọchụ* (1997), *Ihe Ọjọọ Gbaa Afọ* (1999), and *Onye Chi ya Akwatughị* (1999); and Innocent Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* (1991), portrayals of women in their literary works are more detrimental to women than men. Consequently, feminists argue that contemporary male and female writers should

create women whose character and personality are positive to depict the reality of women in society.

Methodology

The novels Nkọlị, by J.U.T. Nzeakọ, and *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị,* by Ofomata (both written in Igbo), were purposively selected for this study. There are two reasons for selecting these two novels. First, the writers are male, writing about conditions within an Igbo family that includes both men and women. Second, most of the protagonists and antagonists in the two novels are female, and as a matter of fact, the title of the first novel, *Nkọlị,* is the name of one of the female characters in the novel, Ogechi's daughter, Nkọlị. The analysis of the novel is textual, an outcome of a critical evaluation of the plot as narrated by the authors. The data culled from the texts were adequately translated by the researcher, from Igbo to English, before analysis. As a native speaker of Igbo and a proficient English speaker, the researcher has the skills to undertake translation, providing a semantic equivalent of the Igbo version for seamless reading by a non-Igbo evaluator.

Data and analyses

The data will be presented according to the themes arising from both novels. For each theme, data from each novel will be presented and descriptively analysed to show how these novelists, at different points in their writing, use language to depict the female gender. The discussion of the findings will follow the analysis, and the conclusion will follow immediately.

Women as Second-class citizens

Nzeakọ's *Nkọlị* denigrates women as seen in the preface: *"Ụlọ chọrọ ichi echi, bụ naanị nwaanyị, ka a na-amụ n'ime ya"* [Home/Family that will get extinct begets only women] (p. v). This comment belittles women and makes them unimportant in the family and society. Ofomata's *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị* also reveals the importance of a male child in the family. His view is that any household without a male child has no hope of the continuity of its lineage unless a female child of that family is made to forgo marriage and remain in the house to bear children, especially male ones, for the family, or that the wife marries another woman if her husband is dead. This notion is seen in the words of Obiamaka to her daughter, Uju: *"Ọkpụrụkpụ ihe kpatara m jighi chọọ ka ị lụọ di ugbu a bụ ọ bụrụ na e mechazie n'ikpeazụ mụ amutaghị nwa ọzọ, ị nọdụzịa n'ụlọ nna gị tụbazịa ime mụtaba ndị ga-anọchi n'obi nna gị"* [The main reason I do not approve of your marriage now is in the event I do not have another child, you remain in your father's house and give birth to babies that will ensure the continuity of your father's family line] (p. 16). Uju's mother wants her to remain single to have children that will continue her paternal lineage because she (Uju's mother) has no son. Obiamaka's insistence on not allowing Uju to marry is to fulfill her husband's intention before he died and to maintain the traditional ideology of Igbo society. The two novels seem to have sustained the perception of women in pre-colonial Igbo society as less important than men.

Nzeakọ again shows that men are superior to women in the manner and language women use to address men. In his novel, *Nkọlị*, Ogechi addresses Ojeụga, her husband, as our father/lord: *"Biko nna anyị, agara m ahịa taata, wee lọghachi n'oge. O ruo n'oge mgbede, otu onye wee bịa…malite ịkọrọ m na nwunye di m gara n'ụlọ dibịa n'ehihie taata. …Di m, biko okwu ahụ nwanyị ahụ gwara m wee gbagwojuo m anya"* [Please, our father/lord, I went to the market today and came back early. In the evening, someone came and started telling me that my co-wife went to a medicine man's house this afternoon… Sorry, my husband, I was confused by what the woman told me (p. 13). The address term "*nna anyi*" (our father/lord) belittles the wife and makes her look like a child, even in her own eyes.

The superiority of men is also manifest in the words used to designate the areas of the house where both the man and the woman exercise their respective authority. Nzeakọ's novel reveals that in the traditional Igbo home, the 'obi,' the family's main hall, is primarily man's domain while the woman, that is, his wife, stays in another house called *'mkpuke,'* but all are within the same compound. This was the practice in pre-colonial Igbo society. The term *'obi'* in this sense symbolizes a higher status than *'mkpuke'*. The '*obi'* is structured to appear magnificent, while the '*mkpuke*' is structured to look very ordinary, thus marking the difference in the status of the two

occupants. Consequently, a woman goes to the man's *'obi'* whenever she desires to discuss any important issue with him, after which she goes to her *'mkpuke'* (see also Okafor, 2018, pp. 42-43). Ojeụga tells Ogechi: *"N'okwu ahụ I kwuru, akụkọ ahụ niile dị m ka ọ bụ nrọ. E-m, ihe bụ uche m n'ime ya bụ na ị ga-alaghachi n'ụlọ mkpuke gị"* [What you said seems like a dream to me. Well, what I think is that you go back to your room] (p. 13).

Women as Disruptors of Family Peace

Nzeakọ uses the character of his protagonist, Nne Ekwutọsị (Ugoye), to present women who engage in co-wife rivalry in a polygamous family. He uses denigrating language that portrays women as those who disrupt family harmony. Nzeakọ blames Ogechi's marital problem on the return of her estranged co-wife, Nne Ekwutosi (Ugoye), to their husband's house, and fails to point out that the problem was the outcome of polygamy intentionally perpetrated by the man. Nzeakọ therefore exonerates Ojeụga, the man, for the family problem, thereby showing women as the architects of family squabbles. Ogechi retorts: *"Ọ bụrụ na m matara na nwanyị ahụ ga-alọghachi azụ, a gaghị m ekwenye ka ọ lụrụ m…* [Had I known that Ugoye would come back, I would not have allowed him (Ojeụga) to marry me] (p. 2). This kind of remark portrays women as those who cannot co-exist harmoniously in a home. But Nzeakọ, the novelist, does not see anything wrong with Ojeuga's insincere behaviour because he sees the actions of men as natural and infallible. Any negative action they perform must have been prompted by women. This is shown in Ogechi's words to her daughter: *"... Ikpe amaghị nna gị, n'ihi na mgbe niile, ọ na-agba mbọ ka o mee ka ihe ise okwu ghara ịputa. Ọtụtụ mgbe, nna gị na-abanye n'ime ihe dị iche iche, nke na-adighị enye ya obi ume ala na obi ọcha"* […Your father is not to blame because he always tries to prevent a quarrel. Many times, your father gets involved in several things that do not give him peace of mind or happiness (p. 3).

Nzeakọ shows that women instigate men's discriminatory attitude towards them as wives in a polygamous setting. Ogechi's interaction with her daughter reveals how Ugoye puts pressure on their husband to share things unequally between them: "*Ọtụtụ mgbe ka nna gị na-aga ahịa wee zụkọtara anyị ihe. Ọ bụrụ na nna gị enye ya ihe o nyere m, obi agaghị adị ya ọcha….Nke a pụtara na ọ dighị ihe ọ na-eme wee mee ka udo dị n'etiti anyị bụ ndị nwunye ya."* [Many times, your father goes to the market and buys things for us. If your father gives her the same thing he gives me, she will never be happy… This means that nothing he does brings peace between us, his wives (p. 4). The above excerpt depicts men as kind, caring, responsible, and peaceful people, while, through Nne Ekwutọsị's character, women are portrayed as bad and envious, especially toward their co-wife. Nne Ekwutọsị is not only pictured as one who is bent on inflicting pain on her husband and co-wife, Ogechi, but also as one who brings disorder to their home.

Ofomata, whose later post-war Igbo novel portrays the position of women in the post-colonial Igbo milieu, also presents a picture of the cruel nature of women through Adamma, Osita's second wife. Adamma usually insults her co-wife, Uju, because of her inability to have a living child, as seen in the following excerpt: "*Mana ihe na-agbawa Uju obi kemgbe ahụ Adamma bịara, bụ na…. Mgbe ọ bụla, ọ na-akparị Uju, Uju agbachi ya nkịtị were anya mmiri na-akwọ aka"* [And what is agonising Uju's heart since Adamma comes in is that…. Each time she derides Uju, Uju ignores her but cries her heart out (p. 76).

Adamma's wicked behaviour towards Uju is occasioned by her envy that their husband loves Uju. She does everything within her power to see that Osita sends Uju out of the house. Uju, on her own part, blames Osita for her unpleasant experience in marriage. He married Adamma without her (Uju's) knowledge or consent: *"Osita achọghịkwa ka Uju mara n'ihi na ọ sị na ọ dighị uru Uju baara ya kemgbe ọ lụtara ya"* [Osita does not want Uju to know because he says that Uju has not been useful to him since he married her] (p. 74). Osita's remark depicts Uju (a woman) as worthless and useless without a child. Osita's behavior portrays this: *"Uju achọghị ịkọrọ Osita ihe ọ bụla banyere Adamma makana ọ bụ ọkụ ọ munyere na-enwu. Osita achọghịkwu ile ha anya kama ihe na-ewute Uju bụ na Osita kwooro maka Adamma were na-emezi ya ka ewu a kpụ akpụ"* [Uju does not want to relate Adamma's behaviour to Osita because he caused it. Osita does not even want to care about them, but what annoys Uju is that Osita treats her like a mere goat that is being pulled (p. 76). The phrase,

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"…*na-emeziya ka ewu a kpuakpu* " (… goat that is being pulled), in the above excerpt, is a derogatory and dehumanising expression. Ezeigbo (1992/1993) regards this type of attitude by some men as one of the ways "men introduce polygamy into the marriage institution to divide women, sow the seeds of rivalry and jealousy amongst them to control them effectively" (p. 7).

Women as Demons

Nzeakọ portrays women as diabolical personalities because, according to his portraiture, women can use any means, including unorthodox ones, to get what they want. Ogechi, in Nzeakọ's *Nkọlị,* blames her inability to have another child on Nne Ekwutọsị, her co-wife, who is portrayed as habitually consulting the witch doctors. Her words to her daughter reveal this: "*Lee malite mgbe m mụrụ gị, ọ dịghị nwa ọzọ m mụrụ…n'ihi na ọ bụghị n'efu ... Nke kachasị ihe nile, bụ na ọ (nne Ekwutọsị) na-aga n'ụlọ dibịa...*"[See, since I had you, I have not had any other child… because it is not without a cause…. The worst of all is that she (Ekwutọsị's mother) visits the medicine-man's house (p. 5).

Another picture of the heinous and devilish nature of women is painted by Nzeakọ when Ogechi tells her daughter, Nkọlị, how bad Nne Ekwutọsị is, as seen in the following excerpt: "*Nna gị matara nke ọma out nne Ekwutọsị dị, kama na ọ bụ ube tụrụ mmadụ n'afọ nke bụ efopụta ya, ọ dụpụta eriri afọ mmadụ, ma a hapụ ya, onye ahụ anwụọ*" [Your father knows Ekwutọsị's mother very well, that she is a spear thrust into someone's stomach, which if pulled out it draws out the intestines in the process and if left, the victim dies all the same] (p. 5). Ogechi's words portray women as a 'deadly spear' that kills instantly.

Through the words of Obiogbudu, the medicine-man, to Nne Ekwutọsị when she attempts to use diabolical means to hypnotise their husband to love her and hate Ogechi, Nzeakọ shows Nne Ekwutọsị's behaviour as a threat to Ojeụga's life: "*Nwunye di gị bụ ezi mmadụ. Ọ dịghị otu ihe ọjọọ ọ na-eme gị… Olee otu isiri chee na m ga-agwọrọ gị ọgwụ, nke ga-eme ka di gị hụ gị n'anya wee kpọọ onye nke ọzọ asị*" [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 person? (p. 9). Nzeakọ also ridicules Nne Ekwutọsị through her gaze when Obiogbudu, the witch doctor, was scolding her: *"Nne Ekwutọsị nọdụ ala n'oche wee na-eleya (Obiogbudu) 'muu' ka ehi"* [Ekwutọsị's mother sat down, gazing at him like a cow] (p. 9). Nne Ekwutọsị's movement after her visit to Obiogbudu is also derided: *"Nne Ekwutọsị alaghachila wee na-amịgharị ka Nkịta nyụrụ ahụ-isi*" [Ekwutọsị's mother came back and began to move about like a dog that produces a smelly fart] (p. 11). The phrases, "gazes at him like a goat" and "moves about like a dog that produces smelly fart" used in describing the woman's actions, are very degrading.

In the same way, Ofomata presents the female priestess, 'Eze Nwanyị', who claims to have a solution for Uju's childlessness but never does, as using her practice diabolically to extort money from her victims. Ofomata's view of women as fiendish is also reflected in Adamma's treacherous behaviour towards her husband, something he considers abominable. Adamma poisons her husband after receiving a thorough beating from him. She administers a concoction she receives from Bola, her man-friend, to her husband to kill him: "*O (Adamma) mechara garị…, tinye nke di ya n'efere were ọgwụ ghachanyere ya n'ofe bupụtara ya… O [Osita] rie garị ahụ…. O meghi mkpụrụ ụbọchị abụọ ọgwụ ahụ jide Osita*" [After preparing garri …puts her husband's own in the plate, sprinkles some poison in his soup, and serves him…. He eats that garri…. Barely two days after the poison gets him (p. 136-137). Ofomata describes Adamma's behaviour as diabolical, wicked, and heartless without showing any concern for the brutal beating she receives from her husband, Osita, or making any attempt to criticise the attitude of Adamma's lover (Bola), who aided and abetted the perpetration of the heinous crime. He does not condemn Bola, who knows that Adamma is married and goes ahead to entice her into a relationship; instead, the novelist sees Bola's behaviour as normal and a sign of man's prowess. Again, Ofomata makes Osita confront Adamma instead of Bola, as he subjects Adamma to physical assault and battery. Though Ofomata portrays women negatively, as in Nzeakọ's novel, he seeks to elevate their status through Uju's assertiveness.

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Women as Unfit for Education

Ofomata, through the actions of Osita, shows that some Igbo men, up till now, still believe that women do not deserve educational empowerment. Osita believes that educated women who are assertive are difficult to control and, therefore, women should be denied access to education. In his novel, Uju marries Osita because he promises to let her continue her education, but when she arrives, he changes his mind, fearing she will become bold and assertive after being educated. Osita says: "*Ọ bụrụ na Uju jechaa koleji pụta na ọ ga-eme ya ka ọ waa anya karịa ya, ọ na-ekwuzi n'elu, ọ (Uju) na-ekwu n'ala. Mgbe ahụ o were ya ka onye iberibe* [If Uju graduates from the college, she will be bolder than him [Osita]; he and Uju will no longer be compatible. She will regard him as a foolish man (p. 21).

After considering the humiliation he would face if he allowed his wife access to education, Osita decides to change his wife's mind. He convinces his wife that women's education is all about the money they will earn after their education. So, he claims that he has made the money she would spend till the end of the earth. Ironically, his intention to discourage her education is not because he has enough money to take care of her, but because he wants to control her for the rest of her life. Therefore, when he has carefully considered the implications of his wife's education, he makes his decision: "*Ọ na-aka mma ka e were ụtụtụ a kpụrụ ite bepụ ya ọnụ, maka e chebe oge ehihie mgbe ite ga-akpọ were nwaa anwa ibe pụ ya , ite awa*" [It is better to trim the pot's mouth when it is newly moulded, for if it is allowed to solidify, trimming it will break the pot] (p. 5). As a result of this decision, Osita lures Uju into a business venture. This shows that some men are not comfortable with women's education. Osita's action can be appreciated if we understand the mindset of men in a patriarchal society, which views educated women as usually wild, assertive, independent, uncontrollable, authoritative, and wiser if not checked in time. This patriarchal ideology is illogical because some women without education still exhibit the above tendencies. Ofomata shows, perhaps without being conscious of it, even without education, women can still be assertive and industrious, like Uju is in his novel.

Women as Evil-Doers

The stereotypical description of women as satanic, evil-minded, and bad-tempered is seen in both early and later post-war novels of Nzeakọ and Ofomata. Both writers use women's appearance and their relationships with others to characterise them as malevolent. Nzeakọ depicts Nne Ekwutọsị as quarrelsome and wicked, especially in her behaviour towards Ogechi. Ogechi's daughter, Nkọlị, confirms this after her mother, Ogechi, informs her of all the atrocities Nne Ekwutosi committed: *"... Olee ihe mere na nne Ekwutọsị jọrọ njọ dị otu a n'obi?* […Why is it that Ekwutọsị's mother is so wicked? (p. 5) The extent of her wickedness makes her appearance scraggy as described by Ogechi's friend, Adaora: "*Lee nne Ekwutọsị ahụ anya, ahụ a dịghị ya mma… ọ bụ ajọ obi o nwere mere ka mgbe nile, ọ dịka azụ okporoko*" [Look at Ekwutọsị's mother, she does not look healthy…her evil heart makes her always look desiccated] (p. 11).

The impression created above is that evil-doers are usually restless; therefore, they appear shabby and unkempt. This is the case of Nne Ekwutosi, whose odious behaviour makes her scraggy, skinny, and dry like stockfish as described by Adaora. Her wickedness is so apparent that even the medicine-man, her husband, and her sister-in-law emphasise it. In this novel, we find another character whose name coincidentally is Ugoye, as in Nne Ekwutọsị. Nzeakọ equally portrays her as a bad woman who destabilises families, maims, and kills both children and adults through poison and witchcraft. Her evil activities, as depicted by Nzeakọ, are evident in her confession, in which she claims responsibility for all the terrible ordeals Ojeụga's family and villagers have endured. This woman (Ugoye) dies shamefully after confessing to so many atrocities she committed. She even admits responsibility for Nne Ekwutọsị's misbehaviour within her family. This reveals that for this male novelist, Nzeako, a woman's misdemeanour in her family can be caused by another woman.

In the same vein, Ofomata's portrayal of women as malevolent is noticed in some incidents in his novel: When the priestess and the medicine-man, Ahụekwe, performed rituals to cleanse Uju of "*ọgbanje"* (child that is born to die), and the curse placed on her, Uju's

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misfortune, according to Ahụekwe, is shown to be caused by evil, unmarried women who are jealous of her beauty and her early marriage. Ahụkwe confirms this when Uju's mother, Obiamaka, goes to him for a sacrifice. He begins by invoking and making incantatory statements, addressing the wicked to leave Uju alone. He even names some unmarried women in the process. The portrayal of women as envious in character is more prominent in Nzeakọ's novel than in Ofomata's. Both novelists show that envy could lead women to commit hideous crimes ranging from fighting, quarrelling, gossiping, killing, and other abominable things. Nzeakọ characterises women as satanic through Nne Ekwutọsị's behaviour. Obiogbudu's words reveal this when he tells Ojeụga that, "the only thing a man should ask from his God is to give him a humble wife. A person who marries a humble wife will not understand how bad women are, but when the person marries a devil and puts him in the house, he will never come back home again" (p. 20).

Women are not only portrayed as satanic but also troublesome and quarrelsome. Ogechi's explanation to her husband about the fight she had with Nne Ekwutọsị depicts Nne Ekwutọsị as a devil, troublemaker, aggressor, cantankerous, and given to abusive language, fighting, insults, and mouthing profanities. Nne Ekwutọsị's frenzied behaviour prompted her sister-in-law, Ọdụenyi, to suggest some palliative measures for her brother, Ojeụga. After confronting Nne Ekwutosi, Ọdụenyi insists that Ojeụga must send her out of his house to save his life. Ọdụenyi's demeaning speech about Nne Ekwutọsị states: "That dog, Ekwutọsị's mother, seated outside, must leave this house. I said it…I want to let you know that if Nne Ekwutọsị does not leave my father's house, I will never step into this place again" (p. 20). She continues, "Except you send this emaciated bat away from my parents' house, but if not so, don't talk to me again when you meet me on the way because I will not talk to you" (p. 20). Linguistic characterisation of Nne Ekwutọsị as 'a dog' *(nkịta)* and 'emaciated bat' (*agịrịga ụsụ*) is indeed dehumanising, and the insistence of Ọdụenyi that Nne Ekwutọsị must leave her father's house reveals the level of insignificance, indignity, and humiliation women can suffer in a male-dominated society, which finds expression in the works of this male writer. Ọdụenyi further boasts while talking about Nne Ekwutọsị that "she will not be alive to see this 'mad dog' coming from the bush to destabilise her father's house. That will not happen while she is alive (p. 25). Nzeakọ uses Ọdụenyi to show that women are denigrated even by their fellow women. Ojeụga later sends Nne Ekwutọsị (in her pregnancy) back to her parents' house because of her nagging, purported witchcraft, and quarrelsomeness. Ọdụenyi is happy, and she expresses her joy to Ogechi, Nkọlị's mother: "*Nwunye anyị,otuto dịrị onye kere mmadụ n'ihi na Chineke ewepụla ekwensu jụrụ na mmadụ agaghị ekuru mmiri n'ụlọ a"* [Our wife, praise be to the Creator of humankind, because He has sent away the devil who said that nobody would have peace of mind in this house] (p. 25). Again, in this Ọdụenyi's statement, a woman is characterised as a devil (ekwensu). Though put in the mouth of a female character, Ọdụenyi, the demeaning utterances directed to Nne Ekwutọsị remain the words of a male writer, Nzeakọ, who is the omniscient narrator of his novel, *Nkọlị.*

Women as Dependent

Nzeakọ's portrayal of Nne Ekwutọsị in her parents' house shows women as incomplete without men. Nne Ekwutọsị's life in her parents' house becomes hopeless and unpleasant. She experiences hardship because of her parents' inability to take good care of her. She therefore lives in abject poverty: no food, clothes, or even the money to take care of herself. Above all, she is made to live in self-pity, regretting her actions towards her husband and co-wife. Nzeakọ's novel plays down the important role of women in society. He makes women depend on men for their well-being. Nne Ekwutọsị could not feed herself. Even the son she gave birth to while in her parents' house suffered from malnutrition. She is depicted as haggard and shabby, while her daughter, Ekwutosi, is also described as suffering from kwashiorkor.

But Ofomata's depiction of women is not entirely negative like Nzeakọ's. He projects women as capable of being independent and self-reliant without their husbands. Despite Uju's childlessness and status as a divorcee, Uju attains a prominent position in her community. She is portrayed as intelligent, hardworking, and wealthy, and, despite the

humiliations, she is determined to succeed in life. In her father's house, she performs tasks typically expected of a woman, such as repaying her bride price, building a house in her village and in the city, and taking care of her aged mother and her uncle's family. Osita is amazed when Uju pays back all the money he spent on her. He thinks that Uju will come back begging because of hardship, but Uju never does. Instead, she surprises Osita when she visits him in the hospital and helps him. Uju shows herself as a considerate woman with a forgiving spirit. At last, Osita regrets his cruel treatment towards Uju.

Discussion and conclusion

Nzeakọ and Ofomata's portrayal of gender appears to be informed by their experiences in the pre-colonial and post-colonial Igbo societies. Their writings exhibit characters that are stereotypes of men and women, especially women in the male-dominated Igbo society. Naturally, male domination is reflected in the Igbo language. The patriarchal character of Igbo culture is evident in the linguistic choices of Nzeakọ and Ofomata in their portrayals of women in their works. Their characterisation of the female gender underpins Arndt's view that "many African male authors describe women's figures that are not different from those of European writers, which marginalised and depicted women stereotypically" (Arndt, 2008, p. 18).

The Language of the two novels analysed in this paper is androcentric bias. This is done through the depiction of women's character in various negative ways that are consistent with society's perception of women. Their works seem to elicit the patriarchal ideology of their time. Nzeakọ, who appears to have shown how women are visualised in pre-colonial Igbo society, uses derogatory names directed to the protagonist (Nne Ekwutọsị) to dehumanise women, especially those tagged 'bad women' because of their assertiveness. To him, women should be mute, passive, docile, and dependent on men like Ogechi (Nne Nkọlị), whom Ojeụga and Ọdụenyi praised for her subservient behaviour. Any woman's behaviour not in line with the attributes enumerated above is a threat to men. Ofomata, even though he portrays women negatively, gives them their rightful place in the contemporary Igbo society. In his portrayal, he overlooks customs and traditions that disarm women from expressing their actions and opinions and that hinder their dexterity in handling any situation. Uju does not wallow in self-pity but acts as a courageous woman. She returns to Benin against her mother's wish. Flora Nwapa agrees that "this new radicalism has come after the women have been victimised and betrayed by their men" (Nwapa, 2008, p. 530).

Despite Uju's childlessness, she shows the powerful spirit of women's liberation through sisterhood. Women should embrace sisterhood in their struggle for liberation in a patriarchal society. Uju, with the help of her friends, starts a business in Benin, succeeds beyond expectations, and becomes a popular and influential woman in Benin. Above all, God blesses her with two boys and a girl. Ofomata, in his later post-war Igbo, which we have examined, therefore deconstructs stereotypes of women's docility and passivity and reconstructs their resourcefulness and doggedness. This is unlike Nzeako's earlier post-war Igbo novel, whose language portrays women, through the character of Nne Ekwutọsị, as lacking a full, autonomous, and independent existence without men. However, women are part of men. In his novel, Ofomata disputes this by showing, through Uju, that women are complete and whole without men. As can be seen from the examination of the two works, Nzeakọ does not attempt to redefine women through his female characters; rather, he revalidates the issue of under-representation of women found in the traditional canon. The traditional inequalities in pre-colonial gender relations are reinforced in his novel. The language of the two novelists, particularly that of Nzeakọ, is to a large extent from within male sensibility.

Contemporary writers, both men and women, should create women whose character and personality are positive, as Ofomata does in his novel, *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị*, whose full meaning is "One whose God does not abandon, nobody will." This proverb should be a word of strength to women, that no man holds one's destiny except God.' Osita denies Uju's education and ridicules her childlessness, and yet she feels fulfilled in life. Women writers have a crucial role to play in this regard. Since only women themselves have experienced social and cultural relegation and are portrayed as having demeaning personalities in literature, they should endeavour to

redefine the image of women, which male writers like Nzeakọ (and, to some extent, Ofomata) distort. Their portrayal of womanhood should reflect women's independent positions, their achievements as wives and mothers, and above all, their contributions to nation-building and the world at large. They should debunk men's idea of women being their property, incomplete and worthless without a child. Ofomata's portrayal of Uju reveals that, in the later post-war Igbo novel in post-colonial Nigeria, there is a significant shift in the perception of women, driven by societal awareness and rethinking of women's challenges and roles. Both men and women writers should embrace this change by celebrating women's positive qualities rather than focusing on their physical, immoral, or negative aspects in this period of female awakening and feminist consciousness. It is this new vision of women that Ofomata, to a large extent, in contradistinction to Nzeakọ, depicts in *Onye Chi Ya Akwatughị*.

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