



“Who Says that Male Writers Misrepresent Women?” Gender Perspectives from Nzeako’s *Nkoli*

UJUBONU J. OKIDE, EBELE EUCHARIA OKAFOR
University of Lagos, Nigeria.

Abstract. It is rife among feminists that male writers portray women negatively in their works. Much research has been carried out in this direction in both Literature written in English and that written in Igbo. However, much attention has not been paid to male-authored works to unravel and critique the idea of bias against women. Consequently, the present study questions the idea that in the novel *Nkoli*, written by a male JUT Nzeako, that female characters were negatively portrayed. This is with a view to finding out how the female characters were presented and perceived in the text. It was found that Nzeako went to great heights to present his female characters positively. Precisely, both protagonist and antagonist had good and sterling qualities in spite of their differences and conflict. Additionally, the female characters were perceived as motivators, industrious, advisers, important, as well as highlighting the value of the girl-child. The study is of the view that, at a deeper level of introspection and criticism, male writers are more interested in reflecting societal realities and therefore not biased in portraying their female characters. It is maintained that changes in the socio-cultural systems also corresponds with changes in the direction of writers, male or female.

Keywords: Igbo novel, male writers, Nzeako, *Nkoli*, gender, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

For many years, gender has been a sensitive and important subject of interest to scholars, particularly feminists. Sieder and McNeish (2013) reveal that gender issues received more attention after the United Nations formed a new convention in 1979 that dealt with eradicating all forms of exploitation that existed in most countries. The social construction of gender is an outcome of the pervasive ideology termed social constructionism, which avers that everything people ‘know’ or see as ‘reality’ is partially, if not entirely, socially situated (Andrew 2012). On the premises of the construction of male and female genders in the

society, it is posited that gender differences are created and sustained by the society through its traditional systems such as its norms, conventions, institutions and laws (Ogunyemi, 1988). In this framework are traditional perspectives and beliefs that view women as passive, submissive, illogical, talkative, emotional, etc. In contrast, men are seen as competent, logical and independent (Behringer 227-228). These ideas were promoted by men, who established what is known as a patriarchal society, which is a society controlled and directed by men. Bergman, (1996) states that the proponents of this system believed that, physically and intellectually, women were not equal to men due to the fact that they lacked the ability to protect themselves from aggression and violence. They maintained that women were only prepared by their families to be wives and mothers. As a result, it was needless giving them education as they were viewed like objects not subjects. Incidentally, this traditional view of the genders is reflected in literature across the world by writers.

Portrayal of woman in literature has been a subject of interest to many research fields, particularly feminist criticism that yielded intriguing insights and theories about it (Mouaci & Kaced, 2024). Stratton (1990:98, cited in Peter, 2010: 1) is of the view that female characters have not been fairly treated in literature but marginalized based on certain questionable stereotypes and gender inequality. She stresses that a good number of male writers have encoded female characters as agents of corruption, moral decadence and contamination in their society. Incidentally, gender representation is not only about the author’s creation or perspective per se; rather, it is an obvious reflection of the society they belong to at a specific time. (Kimario, 2021). This assertion finds credence in the fact that literature is a tool that reveals society’s traditions and practices, including those that favor one gender over another (Lange, 2008). As a result, writers represent their views on gender through various characters, language, and themes in their works. However, feminists believe that male writers demean

women in their literature and portray them as a subordinate group and second sex (Kolmar and Bartkowiak, 2000). Koussouhon, Akogbeto, and Allagbe (2015: 314) reveal that, African literary canon was rife with male-authored texts such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973), etc., which profusely celebrated the male image or identity. In these works, the male character was given priority to the detriment of the female character. The authors further stress that "In the pioneering African [male] literary fiction, women's [image or] identity was painted against the backdrop of the various societal schisms that seek to perpetuate the status quo of the enslaved female versus [the] lionized male".

It is for this reason that Smith (2014) points out that there has been a misinterpretation of female characters, especially by male writers, and this discussion has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Aden, 2018; Fonchingong, 2006; Ngara, 1989). According to (Mouaci & Kaced, 2024), it is necessary to state that the literary canon has been dominated for years by male writers who dictated stereotypical visualizations and depictions of women in their texts, hence patriarchal webs made it impossible for women to be in power, or to write freely about their realities. As a result, male writers in African literature have been questioned about presenting their female characters as dependent individuals while portraying male characters as heroes (Jegade, 2014). In reaction, female writers in African literature have written in response to society's stigma about women previously presented by male writers (Jegade, 2014; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) argues that female writers emerged to reconstruct their identity, which was previously defined by men in literary works. Expectedly, Female writers portray female characters playing major roles and bringing about changes in society.

Notably, in the process of analyzing literary works, the gender of the author is of utmost importance, being the one that controls the narrative and characters. The way and manner characters are presented, against the prevailing context, shows the trajectory of bias. On the basis of the polar constructs above, the present study seeks to conduct a critique of an Igbo novel written by a male writer to ascertain the issue of bias against the female. The question posed in this study is, did Nzeako present his female writers in negative light?

2. Review of Portrayal of Women by Male Writers

Ngara (1989) contends that African literature tends to reflect the interests of male members of the African intelligentsia, and drew attention to the fact that in most novels of the early period, such as novels written before 1970, the hero is almost inevitably a male member of the African intelligentsia, such as Camara in *The African Child*, Waiyaki in *The River Between*, Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, Odili in *A Man of the People* and so on. According to Ngara, in all these and other novels of the time women played a secondary role in the affairs of society and the principal female characters were portrayed as foils and adjuncts to the major male characters. In typical fashion the hero sees himself as incomplete unless he possesses a girlfriend or wife. Thus female characters are not introduced as individuals in their own right, but are part of the array of devices used to portray and develop the male hero.

In his study on *Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature*, Fonchingong (2006) analyzed gender inequality in African literature from pre-colonial to post-colonial literary narratives. His study revealed the blame heaped on African male writers for practicing patriarchy and minimizing the presentation of women. After a critical review of the works of writers such as Ekwensi, Achebe, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ and Amadi, a systemic trend was found; the presentation of women by these writers demonstrated the dilemma of a patriarchal system where women played domestic roles only while men appeared to be leaders and heroes of society. Fonchingong further notes that, as a result of this negative portrayal of women by male writers, female writers such as Emecheta, Ba, and Nwapa saw the unfair treatment of women by male writers, and they revisited "the female question" to represent women fairly.

Zola's (2010) research focused on female character portrayal in various drama works written by male authors in isiXhosa, South Africa. The drama works used were Mkonto's *Inzonzobila*, Mtingane's *Inene Nasi IsiBhozo*, Siphambo's *Izinto Zimana Ukwenzeka*, Tamsanqa's *Buzani kuBawo*, Mtywaku's *UThembisa noMakhaya*, Ngani's *Umkhonto KaTshiwo* and Mmango's *uDike noCikizwa*. The research further aims to explore the ways in which some African male writers view gender inequalities and stereotypes in their female character depiction. It was found that while men were portrayed as busy outside the home, female characters were presented mainly as domestics, as they were expected to do the only chores at home, thus reflecting the subordinate position of females in their families and in society. Additionally, the female characters were presented as absent and silent in any decision-making of their families. The author sees this trend as the cumulative result of the power imbalances

between the sexes, where the man makes choices and takes decisions, leaving out the input of women. Furthermore, the women in these texts were portrayed as rebellious, gossips and witches among other negative tags, and in these ways suggesting that women are only destroying society rather than making contributions toward community development and progress.

Kadhim's (2018) study aims at demonstrating the negative treatment of women and the purpose behind this treatment in selected short stories by Katherine Mansfield and Ernest Hemingway. The author found that, in her stories ("Psychology", "Pictures", "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"), Mansfield depicted her female characters as paralysed, invisible women or victims. She concentrated on representing the systematic and determined victimisation of women in a society with an intellectual belief in the survival of the fittest. Similarly, in Hemingway's stories ("The Snows of Kilimanjaro", "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", "Cat in the Rain") women were presented as shallow-minded, heart-breakers or portents of destruction. They were represented as the source of moral, emotional and mental anguish for male characters. In addition, the females in Hemingway's selected stories were not active, but unnamed or named at the end of the story, which suggested their triviality. In other cases, women were reduced only to a sex object. He ignored females' subjectivity. Women were not appreciated, but on the contrary some of them were accused of their man's desolation. They were presented to justify the men's failure and weakness.

In Kimario's (2021) account, African male writers were depicted as demonstrating bias when discussing gender issues by presenting their female characters performing domestic roles, while their male characters perform major roles in their societies. The author describes male African writers as those that maintained and sustained patriarchal ideology that prioritizes the interests of the man over that of the woman in the society. Specifically, Kimario (2021) made reference to writers such as Achebe (1958) in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, which depicts Okonkwo's wife performing her role as a wife by cooking meals for her husband. On the other hand, Okonkwo, as a male character, occupies the position of a great wrestler of all times in his village. His role is to secure his village and work on the farm. Additionally, Okonkwo feels entitled to dominating his wife as seen in the story. Achebe (1958) presents his society's expectation for a wife to prepare meals for her husband on time. In the perception of Kimario, this negative presentation of female characters is injurious to

women as it has implications to the female experience such as low access to education, land, leadership, employment, and justice.

Ijem (2021) examines Negative Depiction of Women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This critique represents an overt revelation of language as a means of patriarchal exercise of power, discrimination, disregard for and subjugation of women. According to the author, it is against this premises that women are seen as inferior, impure, devilish, stupid, fearful, weak and irresponsible, as represented in a patriarchal society. The author claims that the attributes manifested by Achebe's women are dependence, cowardice, submission and vacillation, and that Achebe paints a picture of a society where men rule and dominate women. She claims that Achebe presents a society where there is an unequal power relation with the men as dominant figures and heads. For example, Okonkwo is shown as a wealthy man who has a large barn full of yams, owns women as property, and provides for the three wives who solely depend on him for their survival. According to the Ijem (2021), the patriarchal ideological system that prevailed in the Igbo society then subjected women to a lower position in the socio-political and economic order of Umuofia. For instance, Nwoye and Ikemefuna were construed as courageous and strong, as they carried their pots of water gallantly while Obiageli, a weakling, smashes hers and resorts to weeping, thus tactfully showing women as careless, emotional, weak in strength and character. Ijem (2021) relied on these points to conclude that, in pre-colonial times, women in Igbo society enjoyed few rights and are subdued by men; they humbly accepted their secondary position in a masculine world.

Mouaci and Kaced, (2024) examined images of woman in literature written by men and found that women were usually portrayed as subordinate, subservient and powerless with relatively limited roles and rights in life. On the basis of history, the authors observed that in patriarchal contexts, women did not have many opportunities in life except for marriage and motherhood. As a result, many male writers reflected this by depicting women as dominated, victims, submissive, and passive. These male writers contributed to propagating negative stereotypical images of women; for instance, the authors referenced some works where Victorian women were viewed as angels in the house and expected to obediently fulfill and satisfy the male's desires. Specifically, the authors referred to Patmore Coventry (1854) who first employed the expression 'angel in the house' as a title to his book of poetry that portrayed the archetype of the perfect Victorian woman. In many of the poems

written by Patmore Coventry (1854), he maintained that women should be submissive to men, satisfying her man's needs, and prioritizing his desires over hers, which ultimately reflects the domination and supremacy of men over women.

In the Igbo medium, Okafor (2019), the Igbo male writers are also guilty of negative description of women in their literary works; she names such writers as Tagbo Nzeako in the novel *Nkọlị* (1973); Tony Ubesie in the novel *Isi Akawụ Dara N'ala* (1973). In these novels Okafor () contends that the female characters were negatively portrayed as against the pervasive positive portrayal of male characters in these novels. Precisely, on the basis of ideological premises, the critic claims that in novels such as Nzeako's *Nkọlị* and Ubesie's *Isi Akawụ Dara N'ala*, the patriarchal and domestic ideologies were dominant; consequently, men were presented as lord and master due to their designations as head of the family; their status is reflected in the adulations by the wives and the structure of their living houses where the man occupy the main house *Obi* while the wives occupy the lesser or sub houses known as *Mkpuke*. With respect to the domestic ideology, Okafor (2019) shows that, in the two novels the female characters were portrayed as mainly cooks, home keepers, child-minders and nothing more, as if that is all that defines a woman. This is in addition to the claim that the female characters were portrayed in negative light, precisely seeing them as irresponsible and wicked, particularly when they fail to discharge their traditional duties such as cooking for their husbands and children and taking care of the home.

In sum, in the above previous works, the critics were concerned with the poor representation of women by male writers across the world. The present study would depart from the aforementioned by reappraising one of the works of an Igbo writer with the objective of arguing in favour of the writer's portrayal of women.

3. Research Methodology

The novel titled *Nkọlị* written in the Igbo language medium by J.U.T Nzeako was purposively selected for this study. There are three reasons for selecting this novel. First, the writer is a male writing about conditions in an Igbo family consisting of both sexes. Second, both the protagonist and antagonist in the novel are female, and as a matter of fact, the title of the novel is the name of one of the female characters in the novel. Third, and most importantly, the novel has earned criticism as being biased against women with respect to a negative portrayal of female characters

(Okafor). The analyses of the novel are textual, an outcome of a critical evaluation of the plot as narrated by the author. The data culled from the data were adequately translated by the author from Igbo to English before analysis. As a native speaker of Igbo and also a proficient speaker of English, the author has sufficient skills to undertake the task of translation, thus providing a semantic equivalent of the Igbo version for the purpose of seamless reading by a non-Igbo evaluator.

4. Analysis of Data

The data will be presented based on two different findings from the novel. The findings are : positive presentation of female characters and treatment/perception of the female in the novel under review. The discussion of the findings will follow after analysis.

4.1 Positive Portrayal of the Female

The author used quite a good number of women to tell his story. Incidentally, most of the female characters in the story were presented in positive light. They are as follows: Ogechi, Oduenyi, Obiogbolu's cordial wives, Ndirika, Ugoye and the Witch. These characters are hereby presented and analysed.

4.2 Ogechi, the Lamb

The protagonist of the novel Ogechi (Nkọlị's mother) is presented in positive terms by the writer throughout the narrative. In the beginning, the writer presents Ogechi as a godly woman who does not resort to seeking unorthodox means in times of trouble as other women do, and who is not vengeful in conduct, as shown in the excerpt below:

Ọ bụ Chineke bụ dibia nke m, ma bụrụ onye ọkaiwu m nwere. Ọ bụ n'ebe mgbaba nke m, ma bụrụ onye nche m. Akwụkwọ nso gwara anyị sị, 'N'ebe gị nwere Jesu, olee onye ị ga-atụ egwu ọzọ?' Otu ihe m matara nke ọma bụ na m ga-ejisie ike i mere mmadụ ibe m ihe ọma, na-agbanyeghi ma ọ ga-eji ihe ọjọọ kwughachi m ugwọ.

God is my Diviner, as well as my advocate. He is my place of refuge and my keeper. The Holy Scripture tells us, 'Since you have Jesus, whom else would you fear?' One thing I know for sure is that, I will endeavour to do good to my fellow human, irrespective of whether they will repay me with evil (Chapter 1, pg 5)

In this text, Ogechi is aptly referring to her relationship with her co-wife Ugoye, who is troublesome.

Ordinarily, in Igbo society, when people are severely challenged, they visit a diviner or witchdoctor to ascertain the cause and find a solution. Incidentally, with the advent of the Christian religion, resorting to such means is seen as idolatrous due to the predilection of witchdoctors into mysteries, fetish and evil practices. It is for this reason that Ogechi makes reference to the Christian Bible to justify her aloofness from such people. Evidently, Ogechi is portrayed as a practicing Christian who reposes confidence in God and Christ without allegiance to sorcery. A further proof of her godliness is her stance on doing good to people, even when they repay her with evil; by this she was referring to her co-wife, thus suggesting that she will do good to her co-wife (who is her 'enemy'), even if she fails to reciprocate her good gesture. This position is aligned with the Christian principle of not taking revenge but leaving matters in the hands of God, as specified in the holy Scriptures.

Aside Ogechi's personal attribution to herself, the novel shows that other people also saw her as a godly woman. When her co-wife Ugoye visited a witchdoctor with the intention of doing harm to Ogechi, the witchdoctor named Obiogbolu spared some time to counsel Ugoye, as seen in the following excerpt:

Ọ di ihe m chorọ ka i mata nke oma, ọ buru na i hataghị mmadu aja, ọ dighi ihe i nwere ike ime ya. Nwunye di gi bu ezigbo mmadu. Ọ dighi otu ihe ojoo ọ na-eme gi, ma ọ dighi eme ka di gi ghara ihu gi n'anya dika ọ huru ya

There is something I want you to know clearly, if you do not find fault with someone, there is nothing you can do to them. Your co-wife is a good person. There is no single evil that she does to you, and she does not prevent your husband from loving you the way he loves her. (Chapter 1, pg 9)

Obiogbolu's account of Ogechi indicates that she is completely innocent, especially with respect to her relationship with Ugoye, her co-wife. Obiogbolu used an Igbo maxim *o buru na i hataghị mmadu aja, ọ dighi ihe i nwere ike ime ya*, to indicate that, even he cannot succeed in using juju power to harm Ogechi because she is innocent. With that, the witchdoctor consents with the Igbo saying that *o ji ofo ga-ala* "The person with ofo/truth will go free". While declaring, without equivocation that Ogechi is a good woman, Obiogbolu reassured Ugoye that Ogechi have never done her a single wrong and had no intentions of making their husband love her more than Ugoye, the reverse of which, incidentally was exactly Ugoye's mission to the witchdoctor. Notably, the witchdoctor's endorsement of Ogechi's character is not based on any personal encounter or experience but possibly through

divination, since he had never met Ogechi and neither did he know that Ugoye was the wife of Ojeuga (their husband) as events later revealed. The art of seeing someone's nature and attribute from a spiritual angle is deemed more authentic, given the sacrosanct nature of the source.

Apparently, the incident that strengthened the portrayal of Ogechi as a godly person took place after their husband had divorced Ugoye, her co-wife. After the discovery that Ugoye was not the one responsible for bewitching Nkoli and Ogechi (which led to the eventual divorce) there was pressure mounted on Ojeuga by various parties to reconsider bringing back Ugoye. It was expected that, even if Ojeuga will reconsider, Ogechi would not, due to the past history of troubles and violence by Ugoye, and the fact that, since Ugoye left the house, she had enjoyed maximum peace in the house. However, Ogechi did the unthinkable, as shown in the excerpt below:

N'ezie, enweghi m obi ojoo n'ebe nne Ekwutosi no...Ihe bu uche m, bu na ọ bu nwanji ahụ sara asịsa rafuru nne Ekwutosi...Ọ bu ezie na anyi na-ako onu, ma na-ese okwu, ma ọ putaghị na m ahughị ya n'anya. Uche m na-agwa m na ọ buru na ọ ga-ewetu obi ya n'ala n'ulo anyi a, ọ dighi onye ya na ibe ya ga-ese okwu...

In truth, I am not bitter towards Ekwutosi's mother...My belief is that, it was that woman that confessed who deceived Ekwutosi's mother...It is true that we quarrel, but it does not mean that I do not love her. My mind is telling me that if she if she can humble herself in this our house, there is nobody who will quarrel with another person...(Chapter 13, Pg, 94)

The data shows that, despite the ways Ugoye disturbed Ogechi, Ogechi still loved her and supported the idea of bringing her back to continue to be her co-wife. It was Ojeuga the husband that actually approached her to know her opinion about bringing back her co-wife. This act by Ogechi showed glaringly that she is a godly woman; a majority of women would not support the idea of bringing back such a quarrelsome woman. She showed a good understanding that Ugoye was misled into such violent behaviour by the witch who later confessed, implying that her actions did not truly represent her personality. Being considerate is one of the attributes of godliness; it shows that Ogechi was broadminded enough to look at the matter from other angles, rather than being subjective. As a result, she did not condemn Ugoye but showed compassion towards her and gave her another chance to come back to her marriage. The depth of Ogechi's compassion towards her co-wife can be seen against the backdrop of her odium and negative attitude towards polygamy. In the beginning of the narrative, Ogechi had confided

in her daughter Nkọlị that her problem started when her co-wife Ugoye came back to the house after she had separated with Ojeuga. In other words, she was enjoying her relationship with her husband until the woman returned. In that narrative, she vowed that she will not be alive and her daughter will marry a man who already has a wife, neither would she consent for her daughter to marry a man who has intentions of marrying a second wife in the future. Based on Ogechi's attitude towards polygamy, it is expected that, now that her husband had divorced her co-wife that she will ensure that she did not come back so that she (Ogechi) would enjoy the pleasure of living with her husband alone, which had always been her desire. Instead, she sacrificed her own satisfaction and supported the idea of bringing her co-wife back to the house.

4.3 Oduenyi, the Interventionist

Aside Ogechi, Ojeuga's sister Oduenyi is presented in positive light. In her first appearance in the narrative, she confronted her brother Ojeuga on the matter of Ugoye's quarrelsome attitude and accordingly advised him to send her away from the house for the sake of peace and to save his own life. It is easy to interpret Oduenyi's action as fighting her fellow woman or an attempt to break the marriage of her fellow woman. But a critical perusal, based on the reasons she advanced, showed that her actions were not ill-motivated. At this point, it was obvious that Ugoye was irredeemable, having established a tendency towards trouble-making to the point that the entire community was aware, and having frustrated all efforts to make peace in the family. Oduenyi's intervention was aimed at restoring peace and equanimity in her paternal home. It is also instructive to note that Oduenyi was not against Ogechi because Ogechi was godly and peaceful; if she was a home-breaker, she would have advised her brother to send both women away, irrespective of their attributes. Rather than being labeled a home-breaker, she is actually a home-maker; her main concern was for peace to reign in her brother's family. A fact that strengthened the idea that Oduenyi was a good woman is her own marriage. In the process of advising her brother to send Ugoye away for his own good, she made reference to her own marriage, as seen in the next excerpt:

O lee ụdị ilu di o na-alu ugbu a, nke putara na mmadu adighi ndu wee nwee obi uto n'ulo a? Ilu di ahu, o bughị nke m na-alu n'ulo di m? O fodayuru ozo?

What kind of marriage is this that means that somebody will not be happy in this house? This marriage, is it not the one I do in my husband's house? Is there another one? (Chapter 3, Pg, 25)

The reference made by Oduenyi to her own marriage is to demonstrate that she is loyal to her own husband. To her, it was strange that Ugoye was making trouble in her own family hence the rhetorical questions *O lee ụdị ilu di o na-alu ugbu a ...* "What kind of marriage is this ...". *o bughị nke m na-alu n'ulo di m? O fodayuru ozo?* "is it not the one I do in my husband's house?" and *O fodayuru ozo?* "Is there another one?". The series of questions, three in all, shows glaringly that Ugoye's behaviour was simply an aberration. The second and third questions established the fact that Oduenyi did not exhibit same predilection in her own house, in relation to her husband. If she was pretending, it would have shown in, at least one way; if her brother failed to confront her with her own reality, Ugoye, herself would not fail to do so. In fact, the fearless Ugoye would have seized the opportunity to advise her to go and fix her own marriage first before doing same for her brother. Indeed, Oduenyi is presented as a woman who showed genuine concern for the welfare of her paternal home. Such intervention is approved and validated in Igbo custom where the *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* (Married daughters from the family) enjoyed right to intervene in matters in their paternal home for the purpose of restoring peace and harmony. As *nwaada*, Oduenyi played the interventionist role expected of her by the community and did it with the right motive.

4.4 Obiobolu's Cordial Wives

In the story, it was revealed that the Witchdoctor named Obiobolu had six wives. It was during the visit of Ojeuga to his house (to verify Ogechi's allegation that her co-wife visited Obiobolu) that he found out the number of wives Obiobolu had. Ojeuga was surprised at the number of wives Obiobolu had and said "*Eziokwu? Amaghị m na ha eruola isii. Ma echere m na ha agaghị a dī otutu kari a otu ahu*" "Really? I did not know that are up to six. But I thought they will not be up to that number." In response to Ojeuga's surprise, Obiobolu stated what gives the impression that he married good women thus "...kama isiokwu m bu na ji awayi di uto nke ukwu, onye na-esi ya abawanye ji." "...But my point is, when the yam pepper soup becomes very sweet, the cook will cut more yam into the pepper soup. The retort of Obiobolu is an Igbo proverb used to suggest that when a person begins to enjoy something they are eating, there is tendency to increase the quantity. In this proverb, the pepper soup stands for marriage, the yam in the pepper soup represents the wife, while the cook is the husband. When the pepper soup (marriage) becomes very sweet, the cook (husband) will cut in more yam (wives). In simple terms, Obiobolu's

stance is that, he married six wives because he was enjoying each of his wives. The fact is that Obiogbolu was enjoying peace in his home because he married good women; if any of the women was evil, the man would not have used that proverb to qualify them. Against the common view that polygamous homes are usually epicenters of quarrelling, Obiogbolu's case represents an exception. The fact that he was enjoying his women showed that the women were loyal to him and were also living in harmony with one another in the same household. There is no stronger way of projecting women positively than the notion of six different women living in peace under the roof of one man.

4.5 Ndirika, the Good Care-giver

In the story, as a result of the constant bewitchment of Nkọlị (in particular), Ojeuga and ogechi decided to take the little girl away from the village to know if the bad experience will stop or continue. They agreed to take Nkọlị to a relation of Ogechi who was a teacher living in Awka town named Ndirika, a woman. When they visited Ndirika and presented their request for her to accommodate Nkọlị, the woman warmly and heartily accepted the offer. Ndirika took very good care of Nkọlị in terms of feeding and general care. However, Nkọlị was always feeling lonely and missing her parents and so was always unhappy. Ndirika was worried about Nkọlị's mood and therefore took two major steps to ensure that she was happy. First, she introduced Nkọlị to other children in the teachers' quarters as narrated, *Nke a mere ka Ndirika na-adụ ya ọdụ kwa ubochi, ma mee ka ụmuaka ndi ọzọ bi n'ụlọ ndi nkuzi na-abia ikporo Nkọlị wee puo igwuri egwu* "As a result, Ndirika used to encourage her every day, and also arranged for other children who lived in the teachers' quarters to come and take Nkọlị out for play." This effort by Ndirika was aimed at changing Nkọlị's mood from sadness to happiness based on the knowledge and experience that children find joy when they come together to play. However, when Ndirika noticed that Nkọlị was still feeling moody despite the presence of her fellow children, Ndirika devised another plan. She registered Nkọlị in a kindergarten school in order to engage her with education and take her mind away from her family completely. The two steps taken by Ndirika represents sacrifices she made for the welfare of a child who was not her' biologically. The fact that she accepted to accommodate and nurture Nkọlị (even if temporarily) showed her large-heartedness. Particularly, feeding Nkọlị to her satisfaction and registering her in a school implied that she expended her own resources in the attempt to make Nkọlị happy. It is rare to find people who would take the child of another person as their own and spend their hard earned resources towards

taking care of them. The common trend is child abuse and maltreatment. Thus, it is a plus that a woman such as Ndirika was involved in the narrative and she played a role that helped to understand the source of the bewitchment in Ojeuga's family.

4.6 Ugoye, the Penitent

The antagonist in the story is Ugoye, the co-wife of Ogechi. In the beginning of the story, she is presented as greedy, troublesome, not submissive to her husband and evil. With respect to her greed, her co-wife confided in her daughter Nkọlị thus:

Ọtutu mgbe ka nna gi na-agaa ahia wee zukotara anyi ihe. O buru na nna gi enye ya ihe o nyere m, obi agaghị a di ya ọcha, nani ma o nyechara ya ihe nile, ma o bu na nna gi nyere m nke nta, ma nye ya nke ukwu. Nke kachasi ihe nile bu na nna gi nye ya nke ukwu, ma nye m nke nta, obi adighi a di ya ọcha.

Many times, your father will go to market and buy things for us. If your father gives her what he gave to me, she will not be happy, except she was given everything, or that your father gave me the small one and gave her the big one. The worst is that, even when your father gives me the small mone and gives her the big one, she is still not happy. (Chapter1, Pg, 4)

The excerpt shows that Ugoye is indeed a selfish and greedy woman; such a person who wants her own portion, in addition to the portion of her co-wife can only be seen as one who can never be satisfied with any condition. In addition to her greed, she is presented as troublesome and violent. After the fight with her co-wife which she initiated, her sister inlaw (Oduenyi) warned her brother to take her away from the family for his own good thus, *i huru nkita noduru n'ezi bu nne Ekwutosi, o ghaghị i si n'ụlọ a wee laa* "Do you see the dog outside who is Ekwutosi's mother, she must leave this house" (Chapter 4, Pg 24) Oduenyi described her as a dog to show that she is troublesome. In Igbo, troublesome people are referred to as dogs, in alignment with the propensity of the dog to bark at people. In terms of not being submissive to her husband, it was recorded that, during the meeting summoned by Ojeuga to address and resolve the dispute between both women, Ugoye behaved in such an irresponsible way that signaled her lack of submission to her husband. In the meeting, while Ogechi was trying to explain what happened, Ugoye not only interrupted her but attacked her physically thus, *Mgbe o na-akoro di ha ihe ndia, nne Ekwutosi bilie...gakwuru ya wee maa ya ura n'ihu di ha* "While she was telling their husband these things, Ekwutosi's mother arose...confronted her and slapped her in the presence of their husband" (Chapter 5, Pg 37). Ugoye's act of slapping Ogechi in the presence of

Ojeuga signaled disdain and insult to the husband; it showed that Ugoye did not have any respect for her husband. It would have been excusable if she did it when Ojeuga was not present, or even in the presence of another mediator, male or female; to do such an act in the presence of their husband is deemed sacrilegious. As a result, Ojeuga responded by beating her and took the decision to send her back to her father's house.

In addition to these, Ugoye is presented as an evil woman, particularly due to her resort to unorthodox means to make their husband love her more than her co-wife, as narrated by Obiogbolu, *Ma gi lee anya, nwunye gi bu ajo mmadu...nwanyi ahụ choro igwu ogwu nke i ga-eji hu ya n'anya wee kpoo nwunye gi nke ozọ asi. O bu ihe o choro ka m meere ya* "But listen, your wife is a bad woman...that woman wanted to make medicine that would make you love her and hate your other wife. That is what she wanted me to do for her" (Chapter 3, Pg, 20). The resort to divination underlines her desperation to take control in Ojeuga's family and implies that she was prepared to tamper with her husband's mind for the purpose of achieving her mission. It is due to these incidents that the Ojeuga's kinsman named Okoye described Ugoye as *...ube turu mmadu n'afọ, nke bu na ifopu ya, ma eleghi anya, onye ahụ anwuo, ma ahapu ya, onye ahụ aghaghị inwu* "arrow stuck in a person's stomach, such that if you pull it out, possibly the person will die, but if you leave it, the person will still die.". This is a way of indicating that Ugoye is trouble impersonated and there is no condition where she would not manifest violent behaviour. However, in the final analysis, it was shown that Ugoye was penitent. After the divorce and she was alone and suffering in her father's house, she had the presence of mind to reflect on her past in her ex-husband's house, as shown in the next excerpt: *Mgbe obula, Ugoye adighi echefu di ya bu Ojeuga na nwunye di ya bu nne Nkolji, n'ihi na obi ya malitere ima ya ikpe otu o siri meso ha omume...Nke a putara na mgbe echiche banyere ihe nile mere n'ulo di ha batara ya n'obi, o cheghariri n'omume nile o mere.*

Every time, Ugoye does not forget her husband Ojeuga and her co-wife Ogechi, because she began to feel guilty about her attitude towards them...As a result, when she remembers all the things that happened in their husband's house, she regretted all the things she did (Chapter 11, Pg 75 &76)

It should not be taken for granted that Ugoye regretted her evil behaviour, neither should it be her remorse be interpreted as the effect of her suffering in her father's house. In the story, the author linked her regret to reflection on her past actions, although she was going

through hard times at the time. It takes a godly heart to show penitence; if Ugoye was as evil as she was painted in the story, no degree of hardship would have made her regret her bad behaviour. And to demonstrate that she was not really that evil, it was later revealed that, it was not Ugoye that was bewitching Nkolji and Ogechi but a certain witch named Ugoye Nduka, as well as the fact that, it was the same witch who influenced and manipulated Ugoye into bad behaviour, as revealed in the next excerpt:

Akpoo m Ugoye wee gwa ya okwu, ghoo aghughu di iche iche nke ga-eme ka o nwee obi ojobo n'ahu di ya, na n'ahu nwunye di ya...Mgbe o chulara Ugoye, m chokwara ka m mee ka ulo ahụ dakpoo wee na-ata ha nile amusu

I called Ugoye and talked to her, and manipulated her in different ways to make her hate her husband and her co-wife...When he drove Ugoye away, I wanted to cause the desolation of that house and began to bewitch all of them (Chapter 12, Pg 88).

This confession by the witch shocked the entire community, including Ojeuga and Ogechi, who gathered to listen to her confession before her death. Prior to this time, it was believed that Ugoye was evil and a witch, as suggested by Ogechi's kinswoman and particularly as divined by the witch doctor, Obiogbolu. It was this confession by the witch that changed people's perspective in the nature and personality of Ugoye. Precisely, it was this confession that helped Ojeuga to consider bringing back Ugoye, and also helped Ogechi to support Ojeuga to give Ugoye a second chance in the marriage and family.

4.7 Ugoye Nduka, the Only Witch

In the narrative, the witch who eventually confessed to all her evil, including manipulating Ugoye the wife of Ojeuga and bewitching Ojeuga's family is shown as a woman. A casual evaluation would seem to suggest that the author deliberately upheld the stereotype of women as witches. However, a deeper and more cursory introspection would reveal that there is no intention to label only women as witches. In the story, while the witch was making her confession, Ojeuga was conversing with her friend and kinsman Okapue and said, *Echere m na nke a bu mbu m na-ahu nwanyi sara asisa* "I think that this is my first time of seeing a woman confessing". This statement by Ojeuga is ambiguous and has two connotations. First, it may mean that he was used to seeing men confessing and this is his first time of seeing a woman in the act. The second connotation is that, even if women have been confessing, this is his first time of seeing it, implying that it is not a common thing to see a female witch

making confessions in public. Whichever one is right, the statement negates the sentiment that women are witches. The response of Okapue seems to support the first connotation, thus *Nke a abughị mbụ m na-ahụ onye di otu a, kama o bughị n'obodo anyị. O bu n'obodo Agbenu...* "This is not my first time of seeing a person like this, but it is not in our village. It is in the village of Agbenu..." This response by Okapue, particularly referring to the woman as onye di otu a "someone like this" indicates that he is not used to seeing female witches in their domain but in other places such as Agbenu village. Thus, in this narrative, although the witch in question is a female, there are underlying insinuations that men are more into the diabolical and sinister act than women.

The next section will focus on the treatment of female characters in the story. It will be interesting to see how the female characters represented by the male author, either positive or negative.

5. Treatment and Perception of the Female

As has been pointed out already, both protagonist and antagonist in the story are female, including the name of the character used as the title of the novel, Nkọlị. Although Nkọlị herself is a minor character, her name was used to symbolize the events in the story which is full of unexpected outcomes and surprises. In the novel, it is evident that female characters were not oppressed or relegated in any way. Rather, they were treated with respect, shown to be strong and also included in decision making in the community and family.

Respect for the Female

The family of Ojeuga is one riddled with conflict and violence as a result of Ugoye's bad behaviour. The husband, Ojeuga took certain steps towards managing Ugoye's attitude; incidentally, his approach was not violent or intimidation or harassment, as could be expected in such situations. Ojeuga took the path of polity and diplomacy as shown in the excerpt below: *Ọtutu mgbe ka m kpọrọ naanị ya wee jiri olu di nro wee duọ ya odu, gwa ya ka o wetuo obi n'ala, n'ihu na o nweghi uru mmadu ga-enwe na o nwere ajo obi...Ma ihe m chọputara bu na mgbe o bula m gwachara ya okwu di otu a, ka o na-eme ihe ojojọ karịa...*

Many times I called her privately and with a polite tone advised her, telling her to calm down because nobody benefits from bitterness...But what I found out is that each time I advised her, she will do something worse... (Chapter 4, Pg, 25 & 26)

The private talk chosen by Ojeuga and the polite tone employed were signs of respect towards Ugoye. Ojeuga did not treat her as someone who is below him, neither was he bossy in his approach to her. This is despite the fact that Ugoye proved very stubborn, as she did not abide by any advice given by her husband. The private dialogue seems to suggest that both parties were on equal terms, or at least, that both parties shared some measure of power and authority in the family. It is hardly the case that unequal groups engaged in dialogue. A fact that strengthened the polite approach of Ojeuga is that, he did not engage Ugoye in such dialogue just once or few cases, but multiple times, as shown in the excerpt. This is a demonstration that Ojeuga was patient with Ugoye; he did not give up hope that with continuous engagement, she will change. The only time Ojeuga decided to lay hands on Ugoye was when she carried her violence to the extreme by slapping her co-wife in the presence of her husband who summoned the two women to resolve their conflict. That was a beating well deserved by the violent offender, as well as the only time Ojeuga took that approach.

Secondly, during the divorce proceedings, Ojeuga did not treat Ugoye with disdain but respect. He summoned a meeting of all parties, including his kinsmen and in-laws, where he formally handed over Ugoye to her parents. His hand-over comments showed respect for the woman, as shown in the excerpt below:

Nwanyị oma, o dighi nkojọ obula m na-akojọ gi, ma gi gaa ka nne na nna gi dọọ gi aka na ntị. Mgbe i natara ozi m, i laghachi. Ma i loghachila ma i nataghị ozi m

Beautiful woman, I am not condemning you, but go, so that your parents will caution you. When you receive my message, you will come back. But do not come back if you did not receive my message (Chapter 6, Pg, 49 & 50).

In this instance also, Ojeuga showed maximum respect to the wife despite that he was formally sending her away due to her troubles in his home. In the process, Ojeuga referred to her as Nwanyị oma "Beautiful woman" which seems paradoxical on account of her true nature and personality. Ojeuga deliberately and carefully used this uplifting tag to save his wife's face in public and possibly cushion the effect of the divorce on his wife. This is to show that the mental health of the woman was a thing of concern to him. If he did not care about her state of mind, he would have been casual in his approach. In addition, he also assured her that he was not interested in condemning her; even though she deserved condemnation, Ojeuga chose not to vilify her. This is a mark of respect borne out of care and consideration for the feelings of the party concerned.

5.1 Women as Partners in Progress

In the narrative, female characters were not presented as mere foils in the story, but as people who worked with men for the progress of the family and society. The characters that played these roles were Oduenyi, Ojeuga and the Community, as will be shown in this section.

5.2 Woman as Motivator

The narrative showed that it was Oduenyi that encouraged her brother to take the right and necessary steps to save his life, family and preserve the image and prestige of their lineage. After the fight that ensued between Ogechi and Ugoye, Oduenyi came to see her brother and used the opportunity of the incident to charge him to take action, as seen in the following excerpt:

O buru na i chorọ onwu, i hapu ya, ma o buru na i choghii, biko nwanne m, dokpuru ya gaa n'ulo ndi muru ya, ka i jide ya n'aka wee nye ha. I nuru ihe m kwuru?

If you want death, you can leave her, but if you don't want, please my brother, drag her to her parents' house, so that you will hold her by the hand and give to them. Did you hear what I said? (Chapter 4, Pg, 27) All these while, Ojeuga was giving Ugoye the benefit of the doubt, by constantly advising her without taking any concrete steps towards solving the matter. Oduenyi must have felt that her brother was not acting like a man, and therefore used those words to motivate him to take action. As a matter of fact, Ojeuga was portrayed as a weakling who could not handle the conflict that was destroying his house. He was merely listening to each party without taking necessary action. As far as Oduenyi was concerned, the conflict generated by Ugoye would ultimately lead to the death of her brother and the demise of her paternal home. Her goading was what encouraged Ojeuga to take the action he took later on by divorcing Ugoye. If Oduenyi did not give her the motivation, it is doubtful if he would have summoned the courage to divorce Ugoye. Oduenyi is thus represented as a female character that played a huge positive role in the affairs that proved beneficial for the family and community.

5.3 Woman as Adviser

The story revealed that Ojeuga carried his wife along in decisions he took over different matters in the house; he did not relegate his wife in taking major decisions. In the matter concerning the bewitchment of Nkolı, even after Ugoye had been sent away, Ojeuga was helpless and did not know what to do. As a result,

he sought for advice from his wife as shown in the next excerpt:

Biko nwunye m, o di ihe i cheputara, otu anyi ga-eme ka ihe ahụ kwusi, maobu ka anyi choputa onye na-eme ihe ahụ, i nwere ike gwam, aghaghị m igere ihe i kwuru...

Please my wife, do you have any idea, what we shall do to stop that thing, or for us to find out who is doing that thing, you can tell me, I would take your suggestion...(Chapter 8, Pg, 59)

Here Ojeuga did not decide the matter on his own; he involved Ogechi his wife and actually sought for her opinion and suggestion on how to handle the matter. He obliged his wife freedom to express her view in the matter. Ojeuga's use of the third person pronoun anyi "we/us" repeatedly in his plea showed inclusivity. He did not use m/mu "me/my" which could have shown that he was the one taking the action. The use of the inclusive pronoun showed that it was an action he wanted to take with his wife. The husband did not stop at pleading for his wife to suggest a way out of the imbroglio; after his wife suggested taking Nkolı away to another village, Ojeuga accepted her suggestion to relocate Nkolı. Again, thereafter, Ojeuga called his wife and asked her to suggest where to relocate Nkolı. Ogechi suggested taking Nkolı to the house of her friend who was a teacher in a school at Awka named Ndirika. Again, Ojeuga did not dismiss her suggestion but approved it and they eventually took Nkolı to the house of the teacher at Awka. It is evident that Ojeuga did not repress his wife but gave her ample chance to talk during matters in the family. This is not to say that he took every suggestion his wife made; for instance, Ogechi once suggested taking Nkolı to a prayer house for deliverance but Ojeuga rejected the idea because it was hasty and not well thought out. The fact is that Ogechi was involved in decisions made in Ojeuga's family which must have given her a sense of belonging. Furthermore, on the question of bringing back Ugoye to the family, after the revelation that it was the witch actually behind the evil deeds, Ojeuga did not take the decision alone; he sought for Ogechi's advice, as shown in the next excerpt:

O gwa ya ka o kwuo ihe o cheputara banyere ikpoghachi nwunye di ya, nwanyi ahụ gwa 220 ana o dighi ihe ozọ ya chere, n'ihi na ha ejirila ntị ha wee nuru ihe nile mere

He asked her to state her opinion about bringing back her co-wife, the woman told him that there is nothing else in her mind because they have used their ears to hear everything that happened (Chapter 13, Pg, 95)

The reason Ojeuga sought the opinion of his wife is the understanding that, aside being his wife, she is the one who has borne the burden of Ugoye's troubles all these whiles. Therefore, seeking her opinion is seen as

the rightful thing to do in the circumstance. Incidentally, Ogechi agreed to bring back her co-wife. If Ogechi had refused, going by Ojeuga's character, it is doubtful if he would have gone ahead to bring back Ugoye. The idea to consult Ogechi was not just a formality; Ojeuga knew that her opinion was pivotal towards taking any decision about nullifying the divorce of Ugoye.

5.4 Women as Observers

In the story, on account of Ojeuga's plan to divorce Ugoye, he summoned the entire Ụmuọkpara community through the go-between named Okoye. The meeting was not only attended by men in the community; women were also in attendance, as shown in the next excerpt:

Mgbe ha nile weere oji na oseoji taa, o bugara ndi nwanyi. Otutu n'ime ha were taa, ma ndi ozọ kwuru na ha agaghị a ta oji

When all of them had taken and eaten kolanut, he sent to the women. Many of them took and ate, but others said that they will not eat kolanut (Chapter 6, Pg, 46)

The inclusion of women of Ụmuọkpara in this meeting is crucial because, the meeting was summoned to determine the fate of their fellow woman. Their presence in the meeting implied that no one hindered them from participating. They were free to talk and express their views on the matter of their fellow woman. Although, in the narrative, no woman of Ụmuọkpara spoke during the meeting, there is nothing to indicate that they were barred from airing their views. The fact that none of them spoke implied that they were comfortable with the opinion of the men in the sensitive matter of divorce. Their inclusion goes a long way to show that the Ụmuọkpara community had a liberal leadership that accommodated the opinion of both gender in matters affecting the village.

5.5 Women as Industrious

In the narrative, women were perceived as hardworking and not laggards. In the beginning of the story, the author did not hide the fact that both Ogechi and her co-wife were hard working women, as shown in the excerpt below:

Ụbọchị ahụ bụ Orie, n'oge ehihie, nne Ekwutosi bukorọ ihe ole na ole ọ chorọ ire n'ahia wee gaa ahia. Nne Nkọlị gara ahia, ma ọ naghị n'ahia otutu oge, n'ihi na ihe ọ chorọ ire adighi otutu

That day was Orie, in the afternoon, Ekwutosi's mother carried the things she wanted to sell in the market and went to market. Nkoli's mother went to market, but she did not stay long in the market because what she wanted to sell were few (Chapter 2, Pg, 7)

This data showed that both protagonist and antagonist were traders in the community market. They were not just wives who depended on their husband for everything. They were both involved in the economic welfare of their home. It is very easy to gloss over or overlook this side of both characters due to their conflict. In spite of their differences, they were engaged in trade implying they were hard working. Although, the fact that they traded did not mean that they were financially independent; it shows that they were making input or playing supportive role in the family expenditure. Apparently, Ojeuga, their husband was not the sole carrier of the household financial burden. Furthermore, the story revealed that, when Ugoye was divorced, she went back to her parents and endured a lot of hardship, but she did not fold her hands as revealed in the next excerpt:

Ọ bụ ezie na mmadụ na-agwa nwanyi muru nwa ohuu, ka o zuru ike wee na-eri ihe nke oma, ma nwanyi ahụ ezughi ike, nke mere na mgbe ọ di mkpuru abali abuo ọ muru nwa, ka o buliri ukpa ya wee malite iga ahia n'ebe ọ na-azuta ukpa akpu wee buru ya gaa n'ahia obodo ozọ, n'ebe ọ ga-enwe uru wee ree

It is true that a nursing mother is told to rest and eat well, but that woman did not rest. As a result, after just two nights after child birth, she took her basket and began to go to a market where she bought a basket of cassava and carried it to a market in another village where she will make profit after sales (Chapter 11, Pg, 77)

This data shows that Ugoye was resilient and hard working; just after two days of childbirth, she started trading to feed herself, her daughter and the new born child. Having severed relations with her husband, and without any meaningful support from her poor and struggling parents, she had no option than to take her fate in her own hands and start trading. Although it was shown that her suffering continued despite her efforts, the fact is that she did something by way of making ends meet. She did not start begging or depend on handouts from sympathizers, thus underlining her resourcefulness.

5.6 The Girl Child as Important

The narrative underscored the perception of the girl-child in the family of Ojeuga. His wives had only girls and no male child. While Ogechi had Nkọlị, Ugoye her co-wife had Ekwutosi. It is obvious that, throughout the story, it was not shown that Ojeuga was concerned or desperate that none of the wives had given birth to a male child who would succeed him. Rather, he was more concerned about the health and welfare of Nkọlị

when she was bewitched and took steps toward saving her life. After relocating Nkọlị to the house of the teacher at Awka town, Ojeuga paid several visits to Awka to know how his daughter was fairing. In one of the visits, he bought several foodstuffs to support Ndirika who was taking good care of his daughter. The fact is that Ojeuga loved his daughter and made sacrifices to ensure that she was comfortable. This is not to say that Ojeuga was not interested in having a male child, since he longed to have more children aside Nkọlị and Ekwutosi. The fact is that, as important as the male child is in advancing the lineage, the man was not desperate to have one. Even when his divorced wife eventually gave birth to a male child, Ojeuga was not moved by the sex when he heard the news as shown in the next excerpt:

Ihe ọ gwara onye ahụ bịaara zie ya ozi ahụ bụ na ya enweghi ọjị ya ga-enye ya ka ọ taa, ma ya biko gaghachi n'ụlọ onye ziri ya ozi, gwa ya na ya kelere Ihe kere mmadụ. O gwula ihe o kwuru

What he told the person who brought that news is that he did not have kolanut to give him to eat, and that he should please go back to the person who sent him and tell him that he is grateful to the Person who created humans. That was all he said (Chapter 11, Pg, 76)

The reaction of Ojeuga to the news of Ugoye's birth of a male child (which was his own because Ugoye was divorced while she was pregnant) demonstrated that he was really not bothered about the sex of a baby, male or female, and therefore did not place any premium on the male child. It was expected that an Igbo man who, up till that moment, had only two girls from two different women, would be excited, and run to embrace his son and the mother, even despite the divorce. If Ojeuga was mindful of a male child, he would have dropped all charges against Ugoye and reunited with her, at whatever cost. Rather, he played down the news and did not pay any visit to his inlaws. Even after the reunion, there was hardly any mention of Ugoye's male child. Rather, when Ugoye came back to the family, Nkọlị was the one spotlighted, as shown in the following excerpt:

Mgbe mmadụ nile ahụ hụkọtara anya ọzọ, Ugoye jiri ọsọ gaa makuọ Nkọlị wee mabulie ya elu

When all the people saw one another again, Ugoye ran and hugged Nkoli and lifted her up (Chapter 14, Pg, 100)

The spotlighting of Nkọlị and the lifting up of Nkọlị by Ugoye is significant in the story; it is a symbolic demonstration of the sex more valued. Notably, Ugoye had returned with both her daughter Ekwutosi and her new born son, but Ojeuga did not go to hug his son and lift him up. Rather, it was Nkoli, a female that was lifted up, thus signifying the primacy of the girl child.

In sum, the male author, Nzeako painted a positive picture of the female in the novel. Aside the witches, all the major female characters in the story were positively and realistically portrayed. The other female characters with no name, such as Ogechi's friend that told her that Ugoye was the one bewitching Nkọlị could be excused because her conclusion was based on the submission of the diviner, coupled with the fact that Ugoye was making visits to witch doctors at the time.

There is no gainsaying the fact that female characters in the novel were portrayed in positive light, contrary to the opinion of authors (Fonchingong, 2006; Zola, 2010; Ijem, 2021; Mouaci and Kaced, 2024) all who cited patriarchy as the cause. Precisely, unlike the submission of Okafor (2019), It is true that Ojeuga lived in the obi (main house) while his wives lived in mkpuke (sub-house), it did not mean that the wives were relegated, as have been shown already in the analysis. The women had their say in the house, and even one of the wives was bold enough to slap her co-wife right in the presence of their husband, thus underscoring the freedom they enjoyed in Ojeuga's house. This study is aligned with the submission of Lange (2008) that it is unfair to criticize male authors for bias against their female characters. Lange (2008), who analyzed the presentation of women in four novels; two African novels in French and two U.S novels in English all written by men criticized the claim that male authors are unable to adequately present women from a female perspective due to the fact that they didn't experience what it means to be female. While admitting the fact that women indeed go through a different path as they grow up in societies that undermine them, while men go through a path that favors them, Lange argues that readers perceive literary works differently depending on the author's sexual orientation. In defence of male authors, Lange posits that the reason male authors are accused of not writing exclusively from a woman's point of view is due to skepticism that they cannot write from that angle. Lange stresses that male authors have, in the main, presented a realistic account of the female in society, for example by accurately portraying the distress and a sense of loss by female protagonists in the novels studied. Lange buttresses his point by stating that much research in the field of feminism has been done by women, which makes women experts and rightful writers about the issues of personal concerns. The point expressed by Lange is that if men were to venture into the field of feminism, it would help to correct the view that male writers misrepresent women in their works.

Since literature is used to mirror society, male authors reflect the society in a realistic manner; to do

otherwise is fantasy. Writers are observers who write what they see in the society. They create stories based on their observation. In addition, writers are not interested in correcting mores and ethics in society; their job begins and ends at showing reality. It is up to the society to react by protesting or advocating for change. Patriarchy is not a creation of male authors; rather it is the prevalent socio-cultural condition of a society with respect to gender. It is improper to accuse male writers of bias and sustaining patriarchy when they reflect such societal conditions in their works. The contrary is actually the case; if they do not, then they are biased in favour of the female. Writers who do not hold to the status quo mainly do so for the sake of political correctness. Although female writers have arisen to challenge the status quo, their responses are based on changing realities. As society evolves, so does socio-cultural systems, and so does writer's focus.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the portrayal of women in the work of an Igbo novelist. Against the backdrop of the accusation that female characters in the novel *Nkoli* were not positively projected, this study found exactly the opposite. It was revealed that, not only were the protagonist and antagonist female, both characters possessed positive attributes. While the protagonist was described as a lamb suggesting a peaceful mien, the antagonist was seen as penitent and her 'bad' side excusable on account of a certain manipulation by a witch, signifying that she was really not acting on her own dictates. In addition, female characters were also treated and perceived in different positive ways such as motivators, advisers, important, industrious, and generally as partners with men in the progress of the society. Furthermore, the female child was highlighted as very important in the family, thus questioning the age-old valorization of the male child in Igbo society. Finally, it could be judged that Nzeako's novel is a balanced account of gender as both male and female characters were realistically portrayed. If it is possible to accuse the author of bias, that bias is in favour of the female character.

References

- Aden A. L. P. (2018). A few good men: The politics of masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. *Post Scriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, 3(i), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1318882>
- Behringer, M. (2008). *Gender in Contemporary Literature*. New York: May and Baker
- Bergman, J. (1996). The History of Evolution's Teaching of Women's Inferiority. *The American Scientific Affiliation: Science in Christian Perspective.*, 164-179. Northwest State College
- Fonchingong, C. C. (2006). Unbending gender narratives in African literature. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 140-152.
- Ijem, B. U. (2021). Negative depiction of women in *Things Fall Apart*. *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies* 9(5), 55-64
- Jegede, O. (2014). Gender conflict in African literature. In C. E. Smith (Ed.), *Gender issues in African literature* (pp. 30-42). African Library of Critical Writing.
- Kadhim, R. J (2018). Negative treatment of women in selected short stories by Katherine Mansfield and Ernest Hemingway. *African Educational Research Journal* Vol. 6(4), 228-235
- Kimario, P. A. (2021). *Gender representation in African literature: A comparative study of selected works by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Buchi Emecheta*, The University of Georgia
- Kolmar, M. & Bartkowi, L. (2000). *Feminist Theory: A Reader, 2nd ed.* New York: McGraw Hill.
- Koussouhon, L. A., Akogbeto, P. A., & Allagbe, A. A. (2015). Portrayal of Male Characters by A Contemporary Female Writer: A Feminist Linguistic Perspective. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 3(12). 314 – 322. <http://www.journalijar.com>
- Mouac, N & Kaced, A. (2024). Images of woman: The question of women's representation in literature, *Afkar wa Affak*, 12(1) année
- Nfah-Abbenyi, J. M. (1997). *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Indiana University Press.
- Ngara, E. (1989). The Portrayal of Women in African Literature, *Kunapipi*, 11(3). Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss3/10>
- Nzeako, T. (1973). *Nkoli*. Ibadan: Macmillan Publishers.
- Ogunyemi, C.O. (1988). *Women and Nigerian Literature*. Lagos: Guardian Books
- Okafor, E. E. (2019). Gender and Decision Making In Igbo Literature. *Journal of Liberal Studies (CAJOLIS)*, 21(2), 208 – 219. University of Calabar.
- Peter, Z. W. (2010). *The Depiction of Female Characters by Male Writers in Selected Isixhosa Drama Works*. Dissertation. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

- Seider, R., & McNeish, J. A. (2013). *Gender justice and legal pluralities: Latin America and African perspective*. Routledge
- Smith, C., & Chin, C. (2014). *Gender issues in African literature*. African Library of Critical Writing.
- Stratton, F. (1990). *Critical Theory and African Literature*, Vol. 21. Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press.
- Zola, W.P. (2010). *The depiction of female characters by male writers in selected isixhosa drama works*. Doctoral Dissertation, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University