

The Feminine Image: Reconstructing Gender Stereotypes in African Male Literature

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Abstract : Feminist scholars constantly argue that women were seriously underrepresented in early African male literature, and where they appeared, rigid gender stereotypes largely shaped their images. Attempts by women to transcend these limitations were often questioned within the patriarchal structure of African society. Consequently, feminists encouraged contemporary female writers to reconstruct women's images in literary texts based on their lived experiences. In recent times, some male writers have also contributed to this reconstructive effort by challenging traditional female stereotypes in their works. The paper examines gender portrayal in *Adaeze* (1998), a novel by contemporary male writer, Uzoma Nwadike, with a focus on how stereotypical images are used to reconstruct the female gender. A purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the text, and the study adopts a content analysis approach anchored in feminist literary theory. The findings reveal that Nwadike portrays the female gender predominantly in positive terms. By contrast, the male gender receives a limited number of positive portrayals. Male characters are largely depicted negatively, while negative portrayals of female characters occur to a much lesser extent. Collectively, this pattern of representation suggests that contemporary male Igbo writers are increasingly engaging with women's lived realities, thereby addressing gaps neglected in earlier male-authored literature. The positive portrayal of women in *Adaeze* challenges patriarchal domination and promotes more balanced and harmonious gender relations. Consequently, literary representations should reflect the lived experiences of both genders as they are socially situated and treated in contemporary society, rather than perpetuating rigid or stereotypical constructions.

Key Words: female gender, African literature, male literature, gender stereotypes, reconstruction, feminism

Introduction

African literature refers to the body of literary works produced by authors from the African continent, spanning various genres, languages, and forms. It reflects the diverse cultural, historical, and social experiences of African peoples, often addressing themes such as identity, colonialism, independence, tradition, and modernity. It also refers to the body of oral and written works produced in African languages and reflecting African experiences. Blending various languages, such as Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Zulu, Arabic, English, French, and others, the African writers incorporated diverse linguistic elements in their literature, which makes African literature diversified in its nature and theme (Thakur & Roy, 2025, p. ix). The self-defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of the works, as its members have come to read them (or criticize them) (Meyer, 2019, p.2).

However, literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is shaped and conditioned by the social realities of the society that produced it (Raddannavar, 2014). Consequently, it is perceived as an imaginative portrayal of life as it reflects the "living situation of men and women in its rich viciousness (Akorede, 2011, p. 1 -2). According to Akorede, literature is deeply concerned with men and women in society, human interactions, human behaviour, and the relationships between people. These wide varieties of situations, settings, and experiences are deeply connected with the central institutions of family, marriage, kinship, politics, economy, law, education and gender relations (p. 2).

African literature has historically portrayed gender stereotypes that position feminine gender as passive, domestic, and dependent figures within patriarchal structures. Feminists criticized the negative stereotypes used to represent the feminine gender and urged contemporary literary writers, especially female writers, to reconstruct the feminine image in their texts through their lived experiences to present the reality of women in African literature. However, contemporary female literary texts increasingly interrogate these entrenched portrayals by deconstructing negative stereotypes of femininity. Some contemporary male writers who are sensitive to women's plight collaborate with female writers to reconstruct negative stereotypes of femininity in their literary texts. Hence, the present paper examines Nwadike's *Adaeze* to highlight the stereotypical images he employed to reconstruct a negative image of the feminine gender in his novel.

1. Overview of Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes represent a society's collective knowledge of customs, myths, ideas, religions, and sciences. The culture of an individual influences stereotypes through information that is received from indirect sources such as parents, peers, teachers, political and religious leaders, and the mass media (Dutta, 2013, p. 40). Gender stereotypes are prevailing attitudes and presumptions regarding the traits, roles, and conduct that are suitable for individuals according to their gender. They reflect our tendency to accept task performance more highly than social relationships when evaluating men and women, respectively (Omojemite, Cishe, & Zibongiwe, 2024, p. 78). They are socio-cultural patterning of appropriate behaviour for masculine and feminine genders (Adewoye et al., 2014; Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019; Priyashantha et al., 2021; Rakib, 2024). They are generalised, socially constructed beliefs about attributes, behaviours, and roles that are appropriate for men and women. These stereotypes fall into three main categories: role stereotypes, personality stereotypes, and occupational stereotypes. Role stereotypes define expected behaviours related to family and social responsibilities; personality stereotypes involve assumptions about emotional and behavioural traits (Quintero, Gonzalez, Patino-Jacinto, & Haynes, 2024). For example, males are more assertive, and females are more emotionally expressive. Occupational stereotypes associate certain occupations with one gender, such as that many nurses are female and engineers are generally male (Li, 2025, p. 2).

A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers, and/or make choices about their lives (Yakubu, 2020; Priyashantha, Chamaru De Alwis, & Welmilla, 2023; Rakib, 2024). Code (1987: 195), who identified the tyranny of stereotypes, reveals that, as women begin to move "beyond domination," it becomes increasingly apparent that, if they are to achieve a viable mode of being, then some fundamental assumptions, integral to most known social practice, will have to be radically rethought. Stereotypical conceptions of women's nature persistently count among the most intransigent obstacles against which women struggle in their efforts to bring an end to patriarchal oppression. He shows that stereotypes are a matter of both epistemological and ontological concern, because how people are known and know themselves through "received" doctrine, the findings of the acknowledged experts of a society, structures their very possibilities of being. Hence, the epistemological structures

created by and embodied in stereotypes have ethical and ontological consequences (Ali & Adshead, 2022).

The features of these stereotypes of women are well known. Some early and contemporary male literary writers describe women as, at once, seductive, irrational, and passive. They are subjective and emotional in their judgements, scatter-brained, politically immature, financially irresponsible, and constitutionally delicate. Incapable of sophisticated, abstract thought, their minds are forever occupied with trivia (Kiritu, Mwhia, and Mwangi, 2025; Lips, 2003, pp. 17-18). Because their conversation is largely gossip, women inevitably lower the tone of intellectual gatherings. They can neither be trusted to engage in serious professional occupations nor be expected to do hard physical tasks. They are ineluctably at the mercy of their biology. So, it is not reasonable, like things, that women should participate either in the "profession of learned men," the professions of hard-headed men, or the sports of athletic men. Rather, their proper role is to adorn and maintain the sanctuary called "home," man's haven in a tough world. Such stereotyped 'knowledge' about what women are enjoys prescriptive as well as descriptive hegemony. Despite the obvious inadequacy of these characteristics, they serve to define what it is to be a "good" woman, they contribute to keeping women in their proper place in society, and they provide reasons for condemning as aberrant those who do attempt to defy their prescription (Code, 1987, pp. 195–196; Ali & Adshead, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory

Feminist theory interrogates the social, cultural, and ideological structures that cause gender inequality. An important contribution to this discourse is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), in which she argues that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." This assertion highlights the social representation of womanhood and presents a critical lens for examining patriarchal portrayals of women in literature and society. Over the years, the concept of being equal to males has developed into different stages, and various feminist schools have come into being: radical Feminism, liberal Feminism, socialist Feminism, black/white Feminism, post-modern Feminism, and psychoanalytical Feminism (Guo, 2019, p. 453; Lawford-Smith, 2022), including womanism, an offshoot of Feminism. Haslanger and Tuana (2008: 21, cited in Okafor, 2019: 1) aver that from the inception of Feminism in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and America, women believed that they were oppressed and fought for equal rights based on the idea of equality of the sexes.

Some writers use the term 'Feminism' to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women. According to Tuttle (1986: 184, cited in Guo, 2019: 453), the main goal of feminist criticism is "to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing", "to analyse women writers and their writings from a female perspective", "to rediscover old texts", "to interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view", and "to resist sexism in literature and to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style" (p. 453). Feminism views gender stereotypes as socially constructed narratives that perpetuate power imbalances by prescribing rigid roles for men and women. These stereotypes often confine women to domestic, caregiving, and passive roles while positioning men as active, decision-making figures in public and economic spheres.

Feminist scholars argue that such stereotypes not only limit individual agency but also institutionalize gender inequality, shaping societal expectations and behaviours in ways that disadvantage women (Gurung, 2025, p. 149). However, feminists' utmost concern is to eradicate unfavourable stereotypical depictions of women in literature. Feminists seek social change in women's status by changing how society views them. There is a need to change societal ideas about patriarchy and to accept women as valuable members of society (Peter, 2010). They believe that the negative stereotypical image of women in literature contributes to the way women are visualized and treated in society. Negative stereotypes of women curtail their possibilities and effectively prevent them from achieving their potential. Consequently, feminists urge contemporary literary writers, especially female writers, to reconstruct negative, stereotypical perceptions of women in their texts.

Methodology

This study is literary in nature and focuses on the analysis of a contemporary African male-authored novel, Nwadike's *Adaeze*, to examine how gender stereotypes are employed to reconstruct the negative image of the female gender that was largely distorted in earlier African male literature. The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, enabling an in-depth examination of the meanings, themes, and ideological positions embedded in the text.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select *Adaeze* as the primary text for analysis. The novel was deliberately chosen because it is written in Igbo and offers a culturally grounded portrayal of gendered lives within contemporary Igbo society. The text vividly reflects social expectations, behavioural norms, and stereotypes used to describe both men and women in an African context. The selection of *Adaeze* is also motivated by the need to present a realistic picture of masculinity and femininity as they operate in contemporary Igbo society, particularly in relation to family life, education, religion, and sexuality.

In this study, the stereotypical portrayals of male and female characters by the male author, Nwadike, are comparatively analysed. Both positive and negative stereotypes associated with each gender are examined to determine the extent to which Nwadike reconstructs, redefines, or sustains the negative image of women that has been dominant in earlier African male-authored literary works.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of Uzoma Nwadike's *Adaeze* reveals a deliberate deployment of gender stereotypes aimed at reconstructing the image of women while simultaneously exposing the moral and social failings of men within a patriarchal Igbo society. The findings indicate that positive stereotypes are overwhelmingly associated with the female gender, whereas negative stereotypes are predominantly linked to male characters, with limited negative representations of women.

2.2 Positive Stereotypes Associated with Male and Female Genders

2.2.1 Female as Diligent

The female genders are portrayed as diligent, a quality attributed to the female character named Uzumma, the wife of Uchechukwu, a male character. She sustains her family through farming and trading despite her husband's neglect:

Dị ka nwaanyi gbasiri ike oru, dikwa uchu n'izu ahia, o nyeghi umu ya ohere ka ha chewe maka onodu ha na nna ha. Uwe, akwa, akpukpokwu na umu ihe ndi ozọ di ha mkpa, o nweghi nke o na-ekwe ka o kọọ ha. Ego nri di ya na-enye ya anaghi ezu, ma o dighi mgbe o na-ekwe ka aguu nara ya umu ya (p. 23).

(As a hard-working and industrious woman, she did not allow her children to be distressed about the strained relationship between them and their father. She never allowed them to lack clothes, shoes, and other essentials. Although the money provided by her husband was scarcely enough to sustain the family, she had never allowed her children to be hungry).

Uzamma is a very diligent and resilient woman. She decided to accept the responsibility of paying her daughter's, Adaeze's, school fees when her husband refused to do so. She continues to pay the school fees despite her husband's death to show how determined she is in maintaining the well-being of her family, with or without her husband. Ammann (2021) affirms that contemporary authors regularly critique patriarchal and colonial residues while depicting women as resilient agents navigating family, labour, and nation. From the feminist's point of view, Uzamma is a real feminist. Feminists support women's hard work, resilience, and independence, especially in finance, and their contributions to family welfare, ensuring the peace and well-being of their families. Ogundipe-Leslie (2007: 549), in her feminist theory of *Stiwanism*, posits that women's assumption of responsibility within the family structure is a critical pathway to their liberation from male-dominated social systems. Central to Ogundipe's conception of gender equality is the encouragement of women to accept responsibility, particularly financial responsibility, alongside men within the household. She argues that when women actively contribute to familial and economic responsibilities, African men are less likely to resist women's inclusion in the broader processes of social transformation across the continent.

The female gender, Adaeze, is similarly portrayed as diligent in her academic life, excelling consistently in schoolwork and manual labour: *N'ulokwukwo, a maara Adaeze nke oma maka irube isi. O ji ndi nkuzi n'onu ikwupu ihe o ga-eme, n'out ntabianya ahụ, ya e mee ya, juokwa ma o foro ozọ...* (p. 30). (In the school, Adaeze is known as an obedient girl. Teachers are the ones who delay telling her what to do; in a twinkle of an eye, she has done what they asked her to do and still expects more.) Nwadike's portrayal of the female gender goes beyond the societal expectations of the female gender represented in early African male literature as mothers, caregivers, homebuilders, dependents, and domestic workers (Gurung, 2025). He subverts the patriarchal belief that positions men as the primary owners of large businesses, sole family breadwinners, and the exclusive beneficiaries of formal education through his portrayal of female characters such as Uzamma and Adaeze as industrious, economically productive, and highly educated. Kiritu, Mwihia, and Mwangi (2025: 220) believe that masculinity can be regarded as a socialisation-related byproduct, since they are cultural construct; they are not just applicable to males but also women because women regularly exhibit behaviours that are seen as 'masculine' in certain historical and social situations.

2.2.2 Female as Respectful, Humble, and Protector of Family Dignity

The female gender is further portrayed as respectful, Humble, and protectors of family dignity. *Uzamma* demonstrates deep affection and respect for her husband, Uchechukwu. She is a humble and morally upright woman who seeks to preserve her family's dignity: She consistently shields her husband from public disgrace despite his womanising behaviour: "*Uzamma ... na-ejiri nwayo kpoo di ya n'isi ututu, mee ka o ghotu nke oma ihe ndi o na-eme na-ekwesighiri onye di ka ya*" (p. 17). (*Uzamma ... will politely speak to her husband early in the morning and make him fully understand the wrong things he does, which do not speak well of him*). In addition, even in the face of emotional pain, she defends him: *O bu eziokwu na di ya na-eme ya ihe mgba anyammiri, mana o naghị achọ isi n'aka onye o bula nata nkwuto n'ebe di ya no* (p. 22). (Her husband indeed broke her heart, but she never allowed anybody to criticise him). Her confrontation with a woman who publicly discusses her husband at the market further reveals her deep commitment to marital loyalty. Ezeigbo (2012) emphasizes in her theory of Snail-Sense Feminism that women's humility functions as a strategic tool for survival within Nigeria's rigid patriarchal social structure. According to Ezeigbo, women are encouraged to adopt accommodation and tolerance in their interactions with men, not as signs of weakness, but as deliberate strategies for negotiating power and ensuring peaceful coexistence within the family. Her theory emphasizes cooperation between men and women as a pragmatic approach to maintaining familial harmony while subtly challenging patriarchal dominance. Through *Uzamma's* action, Nwadike foregrounds the depth of her love, loyalty, and respect for her husband, using her conduct to underscore feminist ideals of family harmony, mutual respect, and relational stability.

2.2.3 Female as intelligent and academically outstanding

Nwadike presents the female gender as intelligent and academically outstanding, particularly through Adaeze: "*N'akwukwo, Adaeze bu azu eru ala. Uburu ya bu eso nke natugide umu nnunu. Mgbe o bula e lechara ule, o bughị na o ga-abu onye nke mbu, kama, ihe o ga-eji agafe onye na-eso ya n'azu ga-adj egwu*" (p. 30-31). (In academics, Adaeze was unbeatable. Her brain was very sharp and retentive. After every examination, she would not only take first position, but she would also give a very wide gap to the second person after her). Nwadike shows that even a male student, Ezetauwa, who speaks impeccable English, does not match Adaeze in their class. Adaeze's intelligence earns her leadership positions and admiration: "Obi oma kpara umuakwukwo ha niile... maka na onye o bula maara na ochichị ya ga-eweta udo, onu na agamnihu" (p. 59). (All the students were happy... because they all knew her leadership would bring peace, happiness, and progress). Nwadike subverts the prevailing social belief that men possess superior intellectual capacity and educational competence by portraying female characters who exhibit intellectual depth, educational attainment, and effective leadership. Through these representations, he challenges entrenched patriarchal assumptions that position men as the natural custodians of knowledge, authority, and leadership, thereby affirming women's capacity to excel in education and occupy leadership positions within society. Chukwukere (2000: 118) emphasises the importance of women's education. She asserts that education is a gateway to self-fulfillment, creativity, and autonomy, and it helps to guarantee women's liberation, self-assertion, and freedom from poverty.

2.2.4 Female as Thrifty and Chaste

The female gender, Adaeze, is further depicted as thrifty and chaste while in the university. Nwadike portrays women as those who live frugally. Adaeze is not an extravagant girl in her university; despite financial gifts from Nnanna (her fiancé), she remains disciplined: “*Ọ bụ eziokwu na ego si n’aka Nnanna abjara ya (Adaeze) yirim yirim, ma ọ bughị nwa mmefu akụ*” (p. 106). (It was true that Nnanna lavished money on her, but she was not extravagant). Adaeze does not waste money on frivolous things, which shows women as thrifty. She chooses to preserve her virginity instead of conforming to the libertine norms in society. Nwadike shows through Adaeze that women have good morals. Adaeze firmly rejects sexual advances: “*Ụmụnwọke na-awụ petem petem ka mmiri... ma ọ na-agba isiakwara*” (p. 97). (Many men were rushing like water ... but she stubbornly refused). Nwadike shows that: “*Agụụ butere a juchaa a nara. Obi Ada siri ike n’ikwapụ ihe ọnwụnwụ a mana ihe nramahụ aghaghị ichuputa ya ukwụ n’ama*” (p. 98). (Hunger makes one accept with s/he has rejected. Ada had made up her mind to resist temptation, but difficulties posed a big challenge to her). Adaeze resists all attempts made by her friends, Ọlachi and Titi, to get her to conform. Even when she meets Nnanna, their relationship is entirely platonic. Nwadike shows through Adaeze’s relationship with Nnanna that women can decide to preserve their chastity until marriage.

2.2.5 Female as Self-determined, Strong-willed, and Assertive

Nwadike portrays his female characters as self-determined, strong-willed, and assertive, thereby reconstructing the negative stereotypes historically associated with women in African male-authored literature as passive, irrational, and incapable of independent decision-making. Adaeze’s decision to become a Reverend Sister is a clear example of female agency challenging patriarchal expectations. Her choice is vehemently opposed by her family, particularly her mother, Ụzụmma, who expects Adaeze to marry and contribute economically to the family. Ụzụmma’s shock and emotional outburst: “*Adaeze, ị sị gịni? Ị sị ị na-eje ichi gịni? Kwuo ka m nụ... ọ bụ ihe ị gara mụọ ebe ọ bụ unu gụrụ akwụkwọ ukwu?... Bịa gaanụ. Ajo nwa siri owere baa nne ya afo. Tufiakwa!*” (p. 140-141). (Adaeze, what did you say? Did you say you want to be ordained as what? Talk, I am listening... Is it what you learnt from the University?... Start going. An evil child that entered the mother’s womb through the backyard. God forbid!). Ụzụmma’s response reflects a cultural ideology that interprets female ambition outside marriage as unreasonable, evil, and morally suspect. Despite her mother’s threats and communal pressure, Adaeze remains steadfast, asserting her autonomy by absconding to a convent in Amachara. Her resolute decision exemplifies African feminist principles, particularly Ogundipe-Leslie (2008: 549), in her feminist theory of *Stiwanism*, which emphasizes women’s responsibility to claim agency and participate actively in shaping their lives, and Ezeigbo’s (2012) *Snail-Sense Feminism*, which recognizes that women often navigate hostile patriarchal structures strategically while maintaining personal integrity. Adaeze’s assertiveness disrupts the stereotype of women as passive and compliant, demonstrating that female determination is a source of empowerment rather than defiance.

From a feminist perspective, Nwadike’s depiction challenges traditional male-centered narratives that often portray women as weak, dependent, or emotionally irrational. By presenting Adaeze as assertive, purposeful, and capable of achieving her goals while

retaining her emotional complexity, Nwadike reconstructs the female gender as autonomous, resilient, and multidimensional. He further critiques the societal and familial structures that hinder women's potential, urging a feminist reimagining of female empowerment in Igbo society. Emmanuval and Britto (2025:2766) argue that assertiveness is the skill to express oneself, thoughts, feelings, and needs only and honestly without infringing on others' rights. They further demonstrate that assertive behaviour is unlike passive and aggressive behaviour. Lips (2003: 10) terms assertive women, like Adaeze, as "the feminists, the intellectuals, and the career women", who cannot compromise their happiness. Adaeze rejects being subdued by tradition. Feminists support women's empowerment and assertiveness, advocating that women negotiate pathways to liberation without abandoning their families. Adaeze's actions reflect contemporary realities, where educated women exercise autonomy and embrace their chosen professions. Ezeigbo (1990: 48) urges literary writers to create "women who challenge patriarchy not just because they have been victims of such a system, but because they wish to assert themselves as constituting an important and indispensable half of humanity" (p. 148). Ezeigbo further affirms that only then can feminism give the male and female readership what Heilbrun and Stimson call "the vicarious experience of renunciation and awareness" (p. 148). The portrayal of active women who are full, complete, and assertive, according to Ezeigbo, "could play down on gendered conflicts and promote meaningful interrelationship between men and women" (p. 148) and ensure cultural androgyny.

2.3 Negative Stereotypes Associated with Male and Female Genders

2.3.1 Male and Female Genders as Promiscuous and Materialistic

Nwadike portrays both male and female characters as promiscuous and materially driven; however, male promiscuity is foregrounded as more aggressive and socially destructive, while female promiscuity is often presented as reactive and economically motivated. This balance aligns with Bachore's (2022: 182) argument that equitable gender representation shapes social perceptions and gender roles beyond literary spaces. Uchechukwu, Uzumma's husband, exemplifies male sexual irresponsibility. He squanders his salary on extramarital affairs, neglecting his wife and children: "... *ma ya hu umunwanyị nwoke ibe ya... akpirị etowe ya. Nke a tinyere ya n'ajọ omume: isogharị umunwanyị n'ike na inye ha ego aghara aghara...*" (p. 19) (...but if he saw other men's wives... he desired them. This led him into bad behaviour: befriending women and giving them money without reasoning...). His womanising yields no lasting value, only fleeting pleasure, thereby exposing the emptiness of male sexual excess. Through Uchechukwu, Nwadike critiques patriarchal masculinity that privileges sexual entitlement over family responsibility.

While male promiscuity is portrayed as predatory and irresponsible, female promiscuity is often framed as socially conditioned and materially induced. Olachi's moral decline is attributed not to innate waywardness but to exposure and temptation. Her acceptance of Ikechi, based on unrealistic promises and material display, illustrates how economic inducement compromises female agency: "*O kwere Olachi nkwa oko okpa na-ekwe nnekwu*" (p. 94). (He promised Olachi the type a cock promises a hen). The figurative language used to describe her submission reinforces a stereotypical portrayal of women as easily swayed; however, this portrayal is counterbalanced by Adaeze's chastity and moral restraint, which serve as a moral corrective within the narrative.

Overall, in the bid to reconstruct the female gender, Nwadike juxtaposes morally weak female characters with principled ones like Adaeze to challenge monolithic representations of women as promiscuous and materialistic. His narrative ultimately shifts blame from innate female moral failure to socio-economic pressures and patriarchal manipulation, thereby aligning with feminist critiques of gendered sexual politics.

2.3.2 Male and Female Genders as Extravagant and Irresponsible

Nwadike portrays both men and women as extravagant; however, he foregrounds male extravagance and irresponsibility as more pervasive and destructive to family stability. Uchechukwu, for instance, begins his civil service career at a time of economic prosperity but has nothing tangible to show for his earnings. Despite receiving a regular and substantial salary, he fails to save or plan for the future: "*Uchechukwu na-eri ezigbo ugwo onwa, ma o rara ya ahụ ichekwa ego maka ihe dīmkpa na maka ođinihu*" (p. 17). (Uchechukwu was receiving a good salary, but it was difficult for him to make some savings to safeguard the future). Uchechukwu is explicitly identified as the source of conflict in his household because of his drunkenness, womanising, and neglect of domestic duties (p. 17). His financial recklessness becomes a recurring source of conflict between him and his wife, who repeatedly cautions him against wasteful spending. Through this portrayal, Nwadike subverts the patriarchal assumption that men are naturally prudent providers and exposes male economic mismanagement as a catalyst for domestic instability.

Although male extravagance dominates the narrative, Nwadike also associates female extravagance with material desire through the character of Ołachi. Ołachi envies the wealth Nnanna lavishes on Adaeze and desires to replace her, not out of affection or ambition, but to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle: "*... ya adj ya ka ya buru Adaeze, wee were nwayoọ kpọọ Nnanna isi*" (p. 106). (... she felt like becoming Adaeze so that she could squander Nnanna's wealth). Ołachi's aspiration reflects economic dependency rather than productivity, reinforcing a critique of socially conditioned female materialism. In contrast, Adaeze's moderation and discipline suggest that extravagance is not inherent in women but shaped by circumstance and socialisation.

From a feminist perspective, male irresponsibility within the family is unacceptable. Klinken (2011: 104–118) argues that male headship in the family is not about male domination and oppression, but taking responsibility. While acknowledging women's increasing economic contributions in contemporary society, Klinken maintains that men should retain primary responsibility for family welfare. Consequently, Nwadike's portrayal of Uchechukwu exposes a distorted masculinity that contradicts both feminist ethics and redefined contemporary notions of responsible manhood. In reconstructing gender relations, Nwadike thus critiques male irresponsibility while implicitly advocating shared responsibility as the foundation for family harmony and gender justice.

2.3.3 Male Gender as Diabolical

Nwadike portrays diabolical practices exclusively through male characters. Although men are depicted as agents of diabolism, the narrative subtly shifts responsibility by suggesting that women's actions provoke men's resort to occult aggression. This narrative move implicitly constructs women as catalysts for male violence, thereby reinforcing a patriarchal

logic that rationalises male aggression as reactive rather than autonomous. Adaeze's suitor, Nnanna, exemplifies this portrayal. After financially supporting Adaeze during her university education and National Youth Service Corps, with the expectation of marriage, he becomes embittered when she chooses the religious life and becomes a Reverend Sister, hence Nnanna's resort to diabolical acts. The depth of this diabolical intent is evident in their instruction to the medicine-man: "... *ha achoghị ka nwaada a nwuọ anwuọ, kama, ka o dobe ya n'udị ọdị ndu, ọnwu ka mma*" (p. 133). (... they did not want the girl to die, but to be left in a condition worse than death). This request reveals a particularly cruel dimension of male aggression, where suffering is preferred over death. However, Nnanna is hesitant and morally conflicted. His refusal to procure ritual items and his fear during the ritual performance suggest an internal resistance to diabolical action. When instructed to summon Adaeze's spirit by repeatedly calling her name and recounting her alleged wrongs, Nnanna falters. His inability to proceed results in the medicine-man's anger and his attempt to summon Ibedinjọ, who has conveniently disappeared.

Nnanna's cowardice ultimately undermines the efficacy of the diabolical act. Through this failed ritual, Nwadike appears to suggest that men lack the emotional resolve to carry out extreme occult violence, portraying them instead as conflicted, fearful, and, to some extent, empathetic. Nevertheless, this portrayal is ideologically problematic from a feminist perspective. While men are shown as the perpetrators of diabolical intent, the narrative subtly absolves them by attributing their actions to emotional hurt caused by women's autonomy and life choices.

Thus, in the bid to reconstruct the female gender, Nwadike paradoxically reinforces patriarchal assumptions by depicting women's self-determination—particularly Adaeze's religious vocation—as the trigger for male aggression. Rather than interrogating male entitlement to women's emotional and marital loyalty, the narrative frames male violence as an understandable response to female non-compliance. This representation ultimately weakens the feminist potential of the text by shifting moral accountability away from men and reinscribing women as the indirect cause of their own victimisation.

2.3.4 Male and Female Genders as Gossipy/Flippant

Nwadike demonstrates that gossip is not exclusive to women, but he ultimately shows that men engage in gossip more extensively than women. He initially presents women as gossipy, particularly within the informal space of the hair salon. After Ọlachi leaves with her boyfriend, Ikechi, Adaeze goes out to plait her hair. Nwadike characterises the hair salon as a place of gossip: "*Ebe... ụmụnwanyị na-agba asịrị, na-akọ ụdị di ha ga-alụ*" (p. 96). (The place... where women gossip, discussing the type of husband they would like to marry). Through this depiction, Nwadike implies that women's discussions about their private lives and marital aspirations constitute gossip. However, such conversations may also be interpreted as social interaction and mutual sharing rather than idle or malicious talk. The women's salon functions as a space for interpersonal communication, not necessarily a centre for destructive gossip.

Nwadike further reveals that men are gossipy, particularly within communal and religious gatherings. This is illustrated through the reaction of men in Ụmụngwu after the news of Adaeze's entry into the convent becomes public. During a meeting held under a tree by members of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the men abandon the purpose of their meeting and engage in gossip about Reverend Fathers and Sisters. One of them remarks

sarcastically: “*! na-aña ha ntị! Ndj fada na ndj sista!... Sista, ọ bughị nwunye fada?*” (pp. 156–157). (Are you listening to them! Reverend Fathers and Sisters! ... Reverend Sister, is she not Reverend Father’s wife?). The men proceed to narrate alleged cases of sexual immorality involving church leaders, including a story of a Reverend Father who purportedly impregnated a girl whose child resembles him. Their prolonged discussion centres on the private lives of clergy, pastors, and married men and women, thereby revealing men as habitual gossipers who speculate and pass judgment on others.

Overall, while Nwadike initially associates gossip with women in private spaces, his narrative more strongly exposes men as gossipers within public and communal settings. This portrayal suggests that gossip is not gender-specific but becomes more socially disruptive when practised in authoritative and communal spaces, where it fosters moral judgment, distraction, and irresponsibility.

Conclusion

The author, Nwadike, displays concern for women’s plight by giving serious attention to reconstructing the image of women in his novels. He focuses on women’s domestic experiences, their education, work life, religion, and economic activities to recreate the image of women underrepresented in early male literature. The analysis reveals that through gender awareness, the contemporary male writer, Nwadike, collaborates with female writers to portray his female characters in positive terms. Nwadike, to a high degree, portrays his female gender positively as diligent, protectors of family dignity, intelligent, thrifty, chaste, self-determined, and strong-willed, as well as assertive. Nwadike, also, to a high degree, presents the masculine gender negatively as extravagant, promiscuous, gossipy/flippant, diabolical, and irresponsible. In contrast, the female gender is portrayed negatively, to a low degree, as extravagant, promiscuous, gossipy/flippant, and materialistic. Nwadike’s presentation of the male and female characters reflects how both genders are visualised in contemporary Igbo society. Unlike in the earlier novels, the male characters in the contemporary Igbo novel of Nwadike have both positive and negative attributes, like the female characters.

Apparently, the male gender is portrayed more negatively than the female gender in this novel. This indicates that contemporary male Igbo writers are beginning to change the lopsided depiction of gender in literature, which is evident especially in early Igbo novels. The recurrent stereotypes of women as wicked, jealous, and promiscuous should be discouraged because of their negative effects on women in the family and society in general. These vices are considered abhorrent in society, both in its traditional and contemporary manifestations, and unacceptable to feminists. This is because feminists, especially liberal feminists, are advocates of peace and unity in the family, which is essential for the coexistence of individuals in society. Literary works should be a tool to present the reality of women in the contemporary Igbo family and society at large. The use of negative stereotypes to depict women in literature leads to their denigration in society and thereby contributes to the disintegration of the family. Finally, it is essential for literary writers, especially contemporary male and female writers, to continue to positively reconstruct the real image of women in their novels so that women can be dignified and serve as role models to society, particularly to women who are struggling to achieve their potential in life, amidst patriarchal limitations.

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