

ON THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CEO IN IGBO LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of women in business within contemporary Igbo language literature, under the title “A Study of Women in Business as Portrayed in Contemporary Igbo Literature.” By analyzing selected texts written in the Igbo language, this study examines how female entrepreneurial characters are constructed, the social and cultural expectations that frame their experiences, their inspirations and the literary strategies used to portray their economic prowess. Drawing from feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, the paper situates its analysis within a broader understanding of gender roles in traditional and modern Igbo society. Through a thematic and textual approach, it explores recurring motifs such as industriousness, resilience, resistance to patriarchal structures, and communal economic participation. The research finds that while many texts still portray women entrepreneurs within the boundaries of traditional domesticity and motherhood, there is a significant and growing trend of authors of literary Igbo works who position women as central economic agents. These women are often portrayed as assertive, skilled, and adaptable, challenging gender norms and contributing meaningfully to household and community economies. The paper, therefore, argues for greater attention to these depictions, noting that literature not only reflects but can also shape evolving societal values about gender and enterprise. It recommends that Igbo literary criticism take seriously the intersection of language, gender, and economic empowerment in its engagement with indigenous texts.

Introduction

In many African societies, particularly among the Igbo people of the southeastern part of Nigeria, women have historically played essential roles in both domestic and economic spheres. Despite their often underrepresented status in political and formal leadership structures, Igbo women have long been visible in the markets, farmlands, and homes, engaging in vibrant entrepreneurial ventures that sustain families and communities (Okolie et al., 2021).

They are everywhere, fuelled by the zeal to cater for their loved ones. Driving this home, Okafor (2020) adds '... women do not just strive for themselves alone, but they also put the welfare of the people they care about first' P.34. However, the extent to which their economic roles are represented, celebrated, or critiqued in indigenous-language literature remains an area that needs academic attention. Literature, especially when written in native languages, carries the cultural DNA of a people, encoding values, ideologies, and shifts in social consciousness. To add to the implications of writers adding native nuances to native literature, Okafor (2022) says:

This can only be achieved when the author uses the right word at the right time. Majority of Igbo works make use of known facts like Igbo names, animals, places, and things to achieve this. This way, the author brings the work closer to its readers. This is to say that a literary work should be able to draw a certain target emotion from its target audience and this can only happen if the writer chooses the words to be used carefully (5).

This paper investigates how contemporary Igbo literature portrays women in business and explicit representations of female entrepreneurship. Thus, the intersection of language, literature, and gender in African societies is complex, as colonialism, missionary education, and imported patriarchal systems altered traditional gender dynamics in many indigenous cultures, including the Igbo culture, where women were once seen as both spiritual and economic custodians (Amadiume, 1987). Postcolonial African literature, particularly in English, has received considerable attention from feminist scholars who have sought to reclaim women's narratives (Nnaemeka, 2004). However, fewer studies have concentrated on literature written in indigenous African languages, where cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions allow for richer, sometimes contradictory depictions of women's roles. Igbo language texts offer a unique lens through which to examine the realities, constraints, and possibilities accorded to female characters, especially those operating within entrepreneurial spaces. As economic realities shift in Nigeria, with high unemployment rates and increasing informal sector engagement, literature has also begun to reflect these new pressures. Many contemporary Igbo literary works have started to depict women not merely as mothers or wives but as breadwinners, business owners, market leaders, innovators, scientists, creators, etc. Some texts portray these women as resilient forces navigating patriarchal resistance, cultural expectations, and economic hardship. Some Igbo literary writers have started portraying women as being able to break the glass ceiling even while standing on a glass cliff. Others critique their ambition or independence, revealing societal tensions about gendered economic roles (Onukawa, 2023). These portrayals contribute to ongoing cultural conversations about who a woman can be in Igbo society and what roles are acceptable for her. This paper therefore, explores these questions by analyzing two Igbo literary texts. It aims to uncover the dominant themes, metaphors, and characterizations associated with businesswomen and the extent to which these literary constructions affirm, resist, or reimagine the realities of women in contemporary Igbo economies. The analysis is guided by African feminist theories, particularly Motherism (Acholonu, 1995) and Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), which provide culturally grounded frameworks for interpreting gender in the African terrain. Ultimately, this study argues that Igbo literature holds immense potential for transforming cultural narratives around women and work. By centring women in business, these texts do more than reflect reality. They

actively participate in shaping how women's economic might is perceived, legitimized, or resisted in society.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis method grounded in African feminist thought. The aim is to examine how women in business are portrayed in contemporary Igbo language literature and to interpret the ideological, thematic, and cultural frameworks surrounding those portrayals. The research is neither empirical nor statistical; instead, it focuses on close reading and contextual analysis of selected texts using culturally appropriate feminist theories; specifically, Motherism and Nego-feminism. The methodology prioritizes textual interpretation informed by socio-cultural context, with the goal of uncovering recurring themes, character development, narrative strategies, and symbolic representations related to women's economic roles. Nwadike's *Adaeze* (1978) and Nsolibe's *Uwa bu nke Onye* (2019) are novels written in Igbo Language featuring women navigating economic and social struggles. Where available and necessary, scholarly articles analyzing these texts were also consulted to support and contrast the interpretations offered.

Analytical Framework

The analysis employs the following tools:

Thematic Analysis: Identification and interpretation of recurring themes such as resilience, motherhood, marginalization, economic resistance, and communal responsibility in depicting businesswomen.

Character Analysis: Evaluation of how female characters evolve in the texts and what their actions, language, and narrative arcs reveal about gendered expectations and economic behaviour.

Contextual Interpretation: Consideration of the socio-political and cultural realities of Igbo society, particularly with respect to gender roles, marriage, and economic structures.

Theoretical Application: Use of Motherism and Nego-feminism to interpret characters' strategies for negotiating power and survival in patriarchal and capitalist spaces.

The combination of these tools allows for a layered and culturally grounded understanding of how women's economic might is constructed in Igbo literary narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding how women in business are portrayed in Igbo literature requires a culturally situated feminist point of view, that is, one that recognizes the unique historical, social, and linguistic contexts of Igbo society. Western feminist theories, while foundational in global gender studies, often fail to capture the communal and interdependent gender dynamics of African societies. As such, this study adopts two African feminist models, Motherism and Nego-feminism, which are particularly well suited for interpreting Igbo cultural texts and indigenous narratives.

Motherism

Developed by Nigerian scholar Catherine Acholonu in 1995, Motherism is a theoretical response to Western feminism, which Acholonu critiqued for its emphasis on individualism and confrontation (Acholonu, 1995). As Okafor (2021) noted, "Motherism is closely knitted in motherhood. No one teaches any woman how to be a mother and this may be why most women who are not fortunate to have their own biological offspring are able to adopt kids and mother them well" (p.2)

Motherism presents motherhood not only as a biological function but as a nurturing philosophy rooted in community building, peace, and productivity. In this model, African women are seen as life givers, caretakers, and cultural stewards who contribute significantly to society through domestic and economic labour. As Okafor (2020) holds:

In raising kids, mothers are always at the fore. They do a better chunk of the job. This act goes back to time immemorial and often the reason some kids are heard saying 'I grew up with my grandmother'. It would be right to say that women have childrearing in their DNA...Parenting therefore involves every process and efforts put in place to make children responsible adults (p.170).

This shows the impact a mother has on her child, and this is the anchor base of motherism. If Applied to Igbo literature, Motherism helps reveal the ways in which women's business activities are framed within a communal ethic. For instance, a woman running a trade may be depicted not only as an entrepreneur but also as a mother figure who supports extended family members and upholds communal values. Even when female characters face resistance from patriarchal structures, their entrepreneurial labour is often justified by their role as providers, a theme that aligns with the maternal ethos celebrated in Motherism. As Okafor (2022) noted, "Women can hold their powers not only by means of public demonstrations, group strikes, suicides, ridicule and refusal to cook for their husbands, but also by their inherent vitality, courage, self-reliance and a common organizational ability by which they present and protect their interest" (58).

In the texts used (*Adaeze* and *Uwa bu nke Onye?*) for example, the protagonists' economic independence is intricately tied to their abilities to nurture, educate, and sustain their families. Their business decisions were framed not as acts of rebellion but as necessities for family survival, portraying them as compatible with traditional expectations of womanhood.

Nego-Feminism

Coined by Obioma Nnaemeka, Nego-feminism is rooted in the principles of negotiation and compromise. It also stands for 'no ego feminism'. According to Nnaemeka (2004), African women do not necessarily seek to dismantle patriarchy through direct confrontation but rather engage in strategic negotiations. Nego-feminism is both "the feminism of negotiation" and "the feminism of no ego," promoting collective well-being over individual advancement. This framework is particularly useful in analyzing Igbo language texts where female characters often achieve success not by rejecting tradition but by cleverly navigating it. In such narratives, women do not necessarily seek power for its own sake; instead, they leverage cultural expectations, familial roles, and relational dynamics to secure economic freedom. For example,

many Igbo texts feature women who appeal to male authority figures, manipulate kinship ties, or enlist communal support to start or protect their businesses. These characters embody the core of Nego-feminism; their success stems not from rebellion but from negotiation. Such representations suggest that economic empowerment for women is not at odds with cultural norms but can be achieved through culturally endorsed channels.

Literature Review

Literature reviews serve not only to synthesize past studies but also to expose gaps in scholarship and justify the current inquiry. In the context of Igbo literature, particularly the portrayal of women engaged in business, several intersecting themes emerge: cultural representations of women, gender ideologies in Igbo literature, feminist interpretations of indigenous texts, and evolving portrayals of women's economic might. While significant work has been done on African feminist literature written in English, far fewer studies have engaged with literary portrayals in indigenous languages, especially in the Igbo language. This literature review explores the thematic depiction of women in business in Igbo literary texts and scholarly interpretations of such works. Traditionally, the Igbo worldview acknowledges a complementary duality between male and female roles (Amadiume, 1987). Women in precolonial Igbo society were not passive beings but held significant economic and spiritual authority. Through their participation in farming, trading, craftwork, and social institutions like the *umuada* (daughters of the lineage), women actively shaped communal life. However, the introduction of the colonial systems imposed Western patriarchy that subordinated women to domestic spheres and emphasized male-centred narratives (Mba, 1982). These shifts affected not only social structures but also literary representations of women. Igbo proverbs and folktales, which previously offered women positive identities as industrious and wise, began to reflect patriarchal ideologies that emphasized silence, obedience, and subservience for women. Mmadike (2014) reveals that many Igbo proverbs and idioms portray entrepreneurial women negatively, warning against the assertive woman who “wants to be like a man”. Similarly, Emeka-Nwobia and Ndimele (2019) argue that Igbo oral traditions reflect a mix of respect for and suspicion toward female economic independence. African feminist theorists have long challenged the wholesome adoption of Western feminist paradigms in African contexts. Nnaemeka (2004) introduced Nego-feminism; a negotiation-based feminism that privileges dialogue and complementarity over confrontation. Similarly, Acholonu's Motherism theory argues for a model of African womanhood rooted in motherhood, nurturing, love and community (Acholonu, 1995). These theories are particularly relevant to literature written in indigenous languages, where cultural expression is more organic. When applied to Igbo texts, these feminist models help unpack the subtleties in how women balance tradition and ambition. For instance, Uzumma in Nwadike's work represents a “negotiator” of spaces between modern needs and traditional expectations. A study by Nnadi (2017) suggests that women in contemporary Igbo literature are increasingly written as agents of economic change, even when their efforts are couched in familial responsibility or moral undertones. Such portrayals align with the goals of Motherism: building sustainable families and communities through female labour and love.

Women in Igbo Literary Works

Igbo literature, comprising novels, drama, and poetry, has traditionally centred around themes of family, morality, and culture. Yet over the last three decades, female characters have increasingly emerged as complex individuals, especially in economic roles. A key example is *Adaeze* by Nwadike (1978), which has been widely studied as a feminist text written in the Igbo language and Urioma in *Uwa Bu Nke Onye* (2018) by Nsolie. In these novels, the protagonists navigate a difficult marriage, communal expectations, and personal ambition. The main female CEO in *Adaeze* is Uzumma, who could not sit idly and watch her children die of hunger. Her husband refused to sponsor their daughter's education because, according to him, it was a waste of resources. She was ready to sponsor their daughter through school but needed her husband's approval. So to achieve that, she invited her sisters-in-law to come and talk to her husband on the issue and thereafter, Uchechukwu, Uzumma's husband, declared that his wife could go ahead and train their daughter, but she should not expect any form of support from him. She put more effort into her business, knowing it was the only thing she had. She also engaged in multiple businesses just to create streams of wealth. While analysing her character, Okafor (2022) says:

A ga-ahụ na site n'agbam mbọ Uzumma, ụmụ ya nwetara ihe ndị ahụ nna ha enyeghị ha. Ihe ndị ahụ bụkwa ihe ndị ga-enyere ha aka na ndụ. ọ bụrụ na Uzumma legbara ọrụ ịzụ ụmụ ha anya n'ihia na di ya anaghị eweta ego e ji elekọta ezinaụlọ ha anya, ụmụ ha alaa n'iyi (p.106)

(It could be seen that from Uzumma's doggedness, her children got those things their father could not give them. Those things are also the things that will help them in life. If Uzumma had overlooked the task of raising their children because her husband did not bring in money for the upkeep of their family, their children would have turned out useless.)

The writer carefully brought out the doggedness of the Igbo people and presented the same in the character of Uzumma. No wonder Idemobi, Okafor and Dike (2024) said that the Igbo entrepreneurial abilities have been believed by many to be one of the pillars of Nigeria's economy, and it has contributed to the improved standard of living of people in the region. It could be seen that the female CEO in the text was greatly inspired by the great hunger to not see her children suffer, and the fact that the man in her life couldn't live up to her expectations. Some Igbo plays, such as *Nwata Rie Awọ*, often cast women as morally compromised when they engage in economic or political action. These representations reveal the cultural tension between economic empowerment and traditional femininity. The plays often use satire or tragedy to comment on the consequences of the female characters in public or economic spaces. However, this is not the case for contemporary Igbo literature. Now, authors can paint better pictures of women economically. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2007) notes that although many Igbo texts use women's domestic roles as a central theme, newer works increasingly depict them as traders, seamstresses, and teachers. These are roles that allow them some economic leverage. The presence of women in open market spaces is often portrayed as a site of both independence and strength. Many times, most female CEOs emerged because they were met with very difficult situations. Okafor (2022), while analysing this situation, writes:

O nwekwara otutu umu nwaanyi malitere ikpata ego ka di ha nwuchara... ebe ufodu bu naani na ha wara anya...Urioma elegharjala anya hu na o buzi oru ya izu umu ya iji mezu ochuchochi obi di ya. O matakwarana na o gaghi adiri ya mfe izu umu asato naani ya mana o tachitere obi buwe ibu ahụ. Iji nyere onwe ya aka n'oru chere ya n'ihu, o malitere ime otutu ihe ga na-enyere ya aka izu umu ya (p. 10).

(There are some women who started making money after they lost their husbands, while some were only because they were smart...Urioma has looked around, and it is now her duty to raise her children to fulfil her husband's wish. She also knew it was not going to be easy for her to raise 8 children alone, but she persevered and took up the challenge. To help herself with the task ahead, she began doing a lot of things that would help her to raise her children).

The Urioma character mentioned above was the protagonist in *Uwa Bu Nke Onye*. This woman had everything going for her while her husband was alive. Her husband, an understanding man, unlike Uchechukwu in *Adaeze*, understood the importance of fending for his family and giving all his children a good education. He worked towards that until untimely death claimed his life after a wrong diagnosis by a nurse. Urioma became fully aware of the challenges she would face in raising all her children alone, and she rose to the challenge. Fuelled by the need to continue providing for her children and fulfil her husband's wish, to give all his children quality education, she instantly became a CEO. She was steadily creating business ideas and venturing and succeeding in them. Unlike Uzumma in *Adaeze*, who had to negotiate her way around her husband to be able to give her child a good education, Urioma did not have to negotiate with anyone; instead, she was armed by the zeal not to fail her husband and children, and that was all she needed to succeed. She, like Uzumma, understood what training a child in the university would require, yet they embarked on it. For a clearer picture of the task ahead, Okafor (2021) said:

Nne na nna ufodu na-ere ala wee zuo nwa ha maobu umu ha na mahadum, ebe ufodu na-ebiri mmadu ego wee zuo nwa ha nihiha na nwere olile anya na nwata ahụ ga-enweta ezigbo oru mgbe o guchara akwukwo na mahadum (Most parents sell their lands to train their child or children in the university, while some borrow from people to train their child because they are hopeful that that child will get a meaningful job after university education).

This presents a better picture of what university education may take from parents, not to mention when it's one of the parents carrying the whole burden. These women knew what they were going to face, yet they did not back down; rather, they pushed on knowing that it was all for the benefit of their children. This shows that women are no longer afraid to take up challenges. They are no longer waiting around to be fed. Within them lies the innate strength to be whatever they choose to be. This may be why Okafor (2020) writes that the unfavourable society women have been swimming in helped to sharpen them. They have risen to become presidents, vice presidents, diplomats, lecturers, engineers, pilots, astronauts, and so much more. They are no longer afraid to be heard. This is to say that in contemporary literature and life, Igbo writers must present women as such, fearless and mindful people.

Igbo Women in Real-Life Enterprise and Their Literary Counterparts

Real-world studies support the view that Igbo women are prolific entrepreneurs. Okolie et al (2021) studied rural women who engage in basket weaving and farming in Nsukka, finding that despite minimal formal education, these women apply sophisticated economic strategies to sustain their businesses. Their stories echo literary representations of women who use skill, resilience, and intuition to thrive. Additionally, Eneh and Uzuegbunam (2019) emphasize that women's businesses in Igbo communities often rely on informal networks such as women's cooperatives, church groups, and apprenticeship systems. These economic cultures have begun to appear in literature, often romanticized or critiqued, depending on the author's stance. Such real-life examples offer a critical lens through which literary texts can be examined. So do the literary portrayals reflect these realities, or do they reinforce stereotypes? While some scholars have explored feminist themes in Igbo literature, very few have focused on businesswomen as central subjects of analysis, especially in Igbo texts. The majority of feminist critiques focus on English-language novels or anthologies. This gap suggests a need for more localized, language-sensitive literary analysis that examines how entrepreneurship intersects with gender, language, and culture. The major thing women in real life and in literature have in common is that they are both faced with a problem, a predicament that requires them to think of how to save themselves. Describing the causes of the predicament, Nsolibe and Okafor (2021) write:

What may be the cause of these predicaments may come from different dimensions and springs up in our everyday experiences- a phone call, an unwanted situation/condition, a visit, a ride, my child's problem in school etc. It might also be something that has been there but, has continued and still efforts are made to solve the problem or not. The predicament materializes as one comes face to face with any of the experiences mentioned above with an unexpected turn of events. So, what is this predicament that stands us at attention and differentiate this happening from other happenings in our day to day life? The answer is that they are those things that bring tension and a sense of perplexity and dilemma to lives (p. 267).

As carers, nurturers, givers of life, and mothers, women tend to worry over little things, especially when they concern their loved ones. However, it is not covered enough in Igbo literature. This paper addresses this gap by focusing specifically on the economic lives of women as portrayed in literature written in the Igbo language, thereby contributing to a richer understanding of African women's realities and imaginations within indigenous storytelling frameworks, and steered by Motherism and Nego-feminism. Nwadike's *Adaeze* presents a compelling narrative of a woman caught between societal expectations and personal ambition. Though the novel is primarily about marriage and survival, Uzumma's character reflects the entrepreneurial spirit commonly seen among Igbo women. Her engagement in trade and strategic decision-making aligns with traits of modern businesswomen. Uzumma's journey is also a reflection of Nego-feminism. This means that she did not confront her husband nor society head-on, but negotiated her survival through resilience, emotional intelligence, and economic strategy. Her entrepreneurship is framed not as rebellion but as a sacrifice for family continuity. This aligns with the core tenets of Motherism, too, where economic effort is justified as maternal duty (Acholonu, 1995). Moreover, her character highlights how literature in

indigenous languages portrays business not merely as profit-making but as an extension of *orụ nne* (maternal labour). Uzumma's involvement in economic activities symbolizes her capability to "provide," a central expectation of manhood in Igbo culture.

In contrast, Onyekaonwu's play, *Nwata Rie Awọ* (1980), offers darker, more cautionary portrayals of female economic prowess. In *Nwata Rie Awọ*, the central female figure defies social norms and is depicted as morally corrupt due to her pursuit of independence, which led her to give up/her daughter to live a life of servitude instead of engaging in meaningful ventures to fend for her daughter just like a typical Igbo woman would do. The play associates her entrepreneurial ventures with betrayal, disloyalty, and spiritual danger. Some Igbo scholars critique such portrayals, noting that Igbo drama often associates female ambition with social disintegration. Women who succeed economically are often cast as deviant, manipulative, or prideful. This literary pattern reflects a broader cultural tension; while Igbo society acknowledges the economic strength of women, it remains ambivalent about women who gain financial power without male mediation. The tragic endings of such characters serve as warnings against excessive independence. Unlike Uzumma, who works within traditional frameworks, these dramatic characters are punished for deviating too far from normative gender roles. This illustrates how some Igbo texts still function as cultural enforcement tools, reinforcing patriarchal boundaries.

The Market as a Site of Identity

The market is a recurring motif in Igbo literature and culture. It represents not only trade but also public performance, communal negotiation, and economic hierarchy. In some Igbo folktales and short narratives written in Igbo, the market is often the setting where women prove their strength and social relevance. In one folktale, for example, a poor widow outwits a wealthy chief at the market, winning wealth and respect. It is also important to mention how highly the Igbo people hold their folktale, although it is regarded as all fictitious, they value it. It is very important to emphasise how Igbo people regard their folktales. Okafor and Akpamgbo (2020) put it this way:

It is an oral form of Literature, fictitious and full of moral lessons. Folktale is the traditional beliefs, customs or stories of a particular people handed down from one generation to the other orally. In it lies everything that makes up the people (p. 2).

It is clearer how Igbo people revere their folktales; even though they are fictitious, they still use them. Though unnamed, the woman is portrayed as clever and industrious, attributes associated with successful market women across Igbo towns. The tale illustrates a cultural respect for market women's resourcefulness, despite traditional gender boundaries. Such depictions align with Motherist values, where women's economic roles are celebrated when tied to nurturing virtues and community upliftment. The character's anonymity may even serve to universalize her experience, casting her as an archetype of the Igbo woman whose work sustains the society.

Female Solidarity and Economic Networks

Another key theme is the presence of female networks, often shown as central to women's business success. In several texts, women rely on groups like *umuada*, or informal cooperatives, to access credit, mentorship, and protection. These networks are culturally grounded and often more reliable than formal systems. Analyzing the sources of funding for women or *umuada*, Okafor and Akpamgbo (2021) add:

Their major sources of fund are through levies and donations from good spirited members of the community. Some donations are also gotten from burial ceremonies especially from the burial ceremony of their deceased members. Some relatives, friends and other well-wishers of the deceased family also support the children by donating money to the group as the children and grandchildren dance at the ceremony. A particular percentage of the money realized at the end of the ceremony is usually given to the immediate members of the bereaved family while the balance is shared amongst the other members that participated. In the case of the burial of their deceased male relatives, the money realized during the Umuada dance is shared amongst themselves without giving any to his immediate family of the deceased (p.123).

This can be a major source of funding for women because most of them have full knowledge of their domestic financial needs, often target funds from their women's outings as a source of their capital. This system is also mirrored in Okolie et al.'s (2021) study of Nsukka women entrepreneurs who build communal apprenticeship systems. Such systems are rarely framed as confrontational or revolutionary. Instead, they embody Nego-feminist logic: economic partnerships arise from social negotiation and interdependence rather than individual rebellion. Moving further, Brogan and Dooley (2023) in their research say:

...women creating jobs for other women or becoming the breadwinners for their families. These instances challenge the norm, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is a more patriarchal society and having women creating jobs for other women is not typical. Women in these cooperatives feel as if their voice mattered now and how they can contribute to solving complex issues within their homes and communities, such as climate change, female genital mutilation, or other gender-based issues (p. 81).

Brogan and Dooley, in their research on how women pull their resources together to help each other, found that these women not only help themselves but also create job opportunities for others. This confirms the earlier submission that women extend their economic success to relatives. The above assertion heavily contradicts Madichie (2009), who asserts that business associations chaired by an African woman entrepreneur might not support fellow women entrepreneurs. This, however, depends on many variables, like the nature of the business, previous experiences, and so on.

Constraints and Cultural Policing

In real life, women do not have as much access to resources as men due to cultural factors and societal and personal beliefs. As Abasilim, Ogbobeta and Jesuleye (2024) hold:

While both women and men encounter similar challenges in starting their own businesses, women often face greater and more difficult obstacles. These challenges are compounded by factors such as inadequate supportive laws, a lack of gender-sensitive policies, and limited access to financial services for women entrepreneurs. The challenges women face in entrepreneurship may be due to institutional barriers that prevent them from actively taking part in entrepreneurship activities like their male counterpart. The dominant cultural values and beliefs in the society also play a huge role in determining the level of women participation in entrepreneurship (pp 224-225)

While some texts celebrate women's economic prowess, many simultaneously reinforce the boundaries of "acceptable" ambition. Characters who challenge male authority or exceed the economic power of their husbands are often depicted as having a negative influence on society. This narrative device, common in literary and oral forms, reveals a persistent cultural discomfort with unregulated female power. Even as women contribute significantly to the economy, they must remain within the limits set by male-dominated structures. Success is acceptable only when it upholds, rather than threatens, family and societal hierarchy. These portrayals reflect and critique real-world dynamics, where successful women may face accusations of pride, immorality, or spiritual corruption. These narratives are already playing out in the real African world, and most women are already defying it to achieve their dreams, and it's best for Igbo literary writers to begin to sensitise women, through their works, of the need to be financially stable.

Symbolism and Language Use

The Igbo language offers symbolic tools such as proverbs, idioms, and metaphors that shape how women in business are viewed. Mmadike (2014) identifies idioms like "nwanyi ka nwoke" as culturally double-edged, sometimes complimentary, sometimes derogatory. Authors who write in Igbo deploy these symbols with layered meanings. In *Adaeze*, the protagonist is described as "*omere nke di kara*," implying respect and social anxiety about her economic status and still 'does what her husband says.' However, this was just a tool the author used to present Uzumma as a woman who does not want stress but is actively pursuing her dreams. This type of linguistic coding adds richness to the literary portrayal and reveals how deeply language embeds ideology. Proverbs and metaphors are not just literary embellishments; they are instruments of cultural pedagogy, reinforcing values about gender, wealth, and power. Entrepreneurial women are often maternal, motivated by care and survival rather than ambition. In Igbo proverbs, women have often been depicted as lesser humans through derogatory words. To capture this, Emmanuel (2019) says that most Igbo proverbs are sexually derogatory and are used in Igbo patriarchal society by men to invigorate and sustain themselves as superiors over women. Consciously or unconsciously, these words have a way of demoralising women, most especially when they are said by their loved ones.

Conclusion

This study examines how women in business are portrayed in contemporary Igbo literature, using a culturally grounded feminist lens informed by Motherism and Nego-feminism. Through a close reading of selected texts, particularly Nwadike's *Adaeze* and Nsolibe's *Uwa bu nke Onye*,

it has been shown that Igbo literature is a powerful tool for narrating and negotiating women's economic identities. A dominant theme across the analyzed works is the interconnectedness of female entrepreneurship and motherhood. Female characters who engage in business are often framed as nurturers and sacrificial providers, reflecting the ideals of Motherism and Nego-feminism. In these portrayals, their economic efforts are morally justified as extensions of maternal duty and community welfare. In contrast, the society believes that women who act outside of traditional norms while pursuing ambition for its own sake or challenging patriarchal controls are often met with social resistance or even punished within the narrative. These portrayals reflect the ongoing ambivalence within Igbo society regarding the limits of acceptable female power, especially in economic spaces. However, a shift is visible in more recent texts and readings. Literary women are increasingly written not just as domestic caretakers but also as community leaders, strategists, and innovators. While these portrayals may still be framed within culturally acceptable boundaries, they suggest a growing openness to acknowledging female entrepreneurial autonomy. This analysis affirms that Igbo literature not only reflects but also shapes societal perceptions about women in business. By offering complex depictions of female economic status, these texts provide a valuable space for cultural introspection, critique, and possibility.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are offered for literary practitioners, educators, scholars, and cultural institutions:

Igbo authors should continue to develop female characters with economic depth, autonomy, and complexity. Businesswomen in literature can serve not only as reflections of real-life struggles but also as aspirational figures who inspire transformation.

There is a need for expanded feminist literary criticism in Indigenous languages. Most feminist discourse in African literature still centres on English-language works. Academic engagement with Igbo texts should use frameworks like Nego-feminism and Motherism because this can enrich global feminist theory with Indigenous perspectives.

Literature curricula at secondary and tertiary levels should include Igbo texts that portray economically active women. This will help normalize the image of female entrepreneurship and inspire younger generations to value both language and gender equity.

Institutions promoting Igbo language and culture, such as language academies, publishers, and community associations should support and fund the production of contemporary Igbo literature that features modern themes, including women in business, technology, and leadership.

Insights from literary texts should be integrated into gender policy development and cultural reorientation programs. Stories are powerful tools for changing mindsets, and literature can be a medium for promoting inclusive, gender-sensitive economic development. Generally, Igbo literature has begun to chart a path that reimagines the role of women in business, not simply as traders or caretakers, but as strategic thinkers and economic pillars. With continued attention and creative courage, literature can help reintroduce women in the cultural and economic consciousness of Igbo society.

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