

## FAMILY AND THE IGBO NOVEL

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the portrayal of the Igbo family in four novels: Ubesie's *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* (1973), Nzeako's *Nkọlì* (1973) and *Juochi* (1981), and Madụekwe's *Uru Nwa* (1978). Each of these novels explores problems that mar family relationships in Igbo traditional society. Ubesie's *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* portrays how a family can be destabilized by war, and a marriage can be ruined by a wife's unbridled waywardness and promiscuity. Nzeako's *Juochi* exposes how a wife's arrogance and negligence of her domestic responsibility, as well as a husband's moral laxity can destabilize a family. Nzeako's *Nkọlì* explores how co-wives' bitter rivalry and acrimony disrupt harmonious and cordial relationships in a polygamous family, and are sometimes occasioned by inimical external forces. Finally, Madụekwe's *Uru Nwa* depicts how a man's distrust and allegations of infidelity against his wife can lead to a broken home. *Uru Nwa* also shows how a female child doggedly playing a manly role can reunite her parents. These and other attributes of Igbo family life, highlighted by each of the novelists, show that Igbo novels depict a range of human social behavior.

**Key Words:** Indigenous Africa; Igbo family; Igbo novel; Igbo novelist; Traditional society.

### INTRODUCTION

The discussion presented in this paper requires the definition of some key terms, including those of the Igbo family, the Igbo novel, and the Igbo novelist.

#### I. The Igbo Family

'The Igbo' are one of three major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria; the two others are the Hausa and the Yoruba. The Igbo inhabit all of the South East, and parts of Delta and River states in the South South of Nigeria. People speak a common language, Igbo, which is divided into dialects that vary based on locality or community. In this discussion, 'Igbo' is used to refer to both the people and their language.

The structure and kinship ties in a conventional Igbo family differ little from those found in most other societies. According to Ejiofor (1981), the typical Igbo (immediate) family consists of father, mother and children. Ogbalu (1981) agreed with Ejiofor, but pointed out that the Igbo do not view the family to consist of only the man, his wife (or wives) and children; family also includes the man's servants, slaves, and those for whom he provides. The father is the accepted head of the family, and the traditional Igbo family normally lives in a walled compound, consisting of at least two houses: one for the father and the other for the mother (Ejiofor, 1981). Adult sons share the father's house, while daughters and juvenile sons live with their mother.

In modern Igbo society, this traditional residential structure has changed. Distinction is no longer made between the father's and mother's houses because a modern house, with a living room and a number of other rooms, can serve the entire family. More than any other unit of kinship or relationship within Igbo society, the family is the greatest source of intimacy and solidarity.

The Igbo view the family institution as the foundation of the Igbo society. Its importance lies not only in its being an agent of cultural conditioning for young members of society but also in that marriage and procreation, which take place at the family level, make family indispensable for the continuity of the Igbo. The family unit is therefore uniquely central, because of its vital role in Igbo society.

## II. The Igbo Novel

Igbo literary scholars (e.g., Emenanjo, 1982a<sup>(1)</sup>; Emenanjo, 1982b; Ugonna, 1982<sup>(2)</sup>; Uzochukwu, 1999<sup>(3)</sup>; Nwadike, 2002<sup>(4)</sup>) have demonstrated the existence of a creative literary tradition in Igbo society. Emenanjo (1986: 8) has noted:

There exists creative literature in Igbo and...in the repertoire now available, one can find works that are as mature and far reaching as classics in English, French, Afro-Saxon and Afro-French literatures.

The term Igbo literature refers to "all literary works written in Igbo language, and which address themselves to the issues of Igbo world" (Ogbulogo 1999: 126). This is essentially correct, but we need also to note that the issues that Igbo literary works address are not restricted to issues of the Igbo world. Igbo issues may predominate, but this literature also addresses broader issues that concern humankind more generally. In other words, there are human concerns and experiences that are universal, and Igbo literature, like literature in other languages, is concerned with these issues.

The Igbo scholars referred to above have insisted that, to be accepted as Igbo literature, a work must be written in Igbo, even if the author is not of Igbo extraction. We strongly support the view that African literature must be written in African languages. Otherwise, "They would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration" (Wali as cited in Emenyonu, 1978: 190). We also agree with Ugonna (1978: 3) who expressed the view that, "Each language is the best medium of expressing the worldview and the way of life of the people using the language...a people's thought expressed in alien tongue loses its genuineness." We do, however, accept the inclusion of works written in non-indigenous African languages as African literature insofar as such works are creative works that mirror African culture, African thought, and the African perception of the world, life and existence.

To this end, we have identified two broad categories of African literature: African literature written in non-African languages and African literature written in indigenous African languages. Within the first category we may more specifically talk of 'African literature in English', as it is used in some university English departments to differentiate between works that embody characteristic features of

African society from those of European society. It is under 'African literature in English' that Igbo writers such as Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and others, neatly fall. This specificity helps make 'Igbo literature' stand out as a category of African literature written in an indigenous African language, and removes the confusion and unnecessary argument that has been generated by the issue of language.

We wish to emphasize, however, that those scholars who would prefer their works written in English to be referred to as 'Igbo literature in English' would do well to have them translated into Igbo and ensure that the content of those works expresses the culture, ideas, philosophy, and worldview of the Igbo. An excellent example of this practice is Chukwuemeka Ike's translation of his novel *Porter's Wheel* into *Anu Ebu Nwa*. Apart from now being an Igbo-medium work, its content is, without contradiction, regarded as an authentic Igbo novel. The Igbo novel, as part of African literature, is an imaginative work of art conceived by a native or non-native Igbo speaker, and written in Igbo "or at least translated into the language" (Ugonna, 1982: 2). The "significant thing," according to Ugonna, is that "the text of an Igbo novel, poem or drama should be in Igbo." We have selected to examine four novels in this paper: Ubesie's *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* (1973), Madụekwe's *Uru Nwa* (1978), and Nzeakọ's *Nkọlị* (1973) and *Jụochi* (1981). All were written in Igbo and therefore meet a criterion, in terms of their medium of expression, of authentic Igbo novels.

## THE IGBO NOVELIST AND HIS ENVIRONMENT

The novelist is a creative writer who chooses the novel genre for his literary creation. His 'environment' refers to the general locale or the scene in which the actions in his work occur. For the Igbo novelists, whose works are examined in this essay, the environment refers to traditional Igbo society and the prevailing social and cultural circumstances that have shaped the novelist's views. The socio-cultural environment in which the literary artist lived, his religious beliefs, political situations, historical incidents, and other experiences of human life that have affected him, are often re-enacted or alluded to, in shaping his literature.

Emenyonu (1978: 188) was right when he stated, "Igbo written literature emanates from Igbo life and language. It embraces the social, political, economic and emotional forms through which Igbo life is revealed." The family, like any other subject in society, has been a focus of the Igbo novelist. The structure and attributes of the Igbo family can be seen in this genre. Family problems such as divorce, infidelity, co-wife rivalry and antagonism, different forms of domestic violence, and the effects of broken homes are also some of the themes noticeable in Igbo novels. We next examine, therefore, how the Igbo family has been portrayed in our selected novels.

### I. The Igbo Family in Ubesie's *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* (1973)

The Igbo family portrayed in *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* is a modern and successful one, living in the city Enugu. The family consists of Chike, the father, Ada, his wife, and their two children, Chukwuma and Obianuju. Chike is a successful industrialist and his wife is a civil servant. Their children are very young.

At the start of the novel, the family's relationships are portrayed as loving, peaceful and unified. As the following excerpt reveals, the man is wealthy, and loving and caring toward his wife:

Chike ji ego. O nwere moto. O bi n'ezigbo ụlọ dị mma. Oriakụ Chike Ada na-aza abụghị naanị n'ọnụ. Ọ na-eri akụ Chike kwetakwa na ọ na-eri ya n'eziokwu. Ọ bụ gịni ga-eme ka ya na Chike ghara ibi nke ọma, hụkwa onwe ha n'anya? N'uche Ada o nweghi. Ada nwere ihe niile nwaanyị na-atụ anya n'aka di ya... (Ubesie, 1973: 18)

(Chike is rich. He has a car. He lives in a good house. Addressing Ada as Chike's wife means something. She enjoys Chike's wealth and affirms it. What will prevent her and Chike from living well and loving each other? In Ada's opinion, nothing will cause that. Ada has everything a wife expects from her husband...)

We are also told that other people notice the peaceful atmosphere that defines Chike's family and wish to be like them:

Dịka ndị nọ n'akụkụ na-ele ha anya si hụ ha, ha na-ebi n'udo. Ha anaghị ese okwu... (Ubesie, 1973: 19)

(As perceived by other people, they live peacefully and do not quarrel...)

As some men do in Igbo families, Chike asks his wife to stop working since her salary is too meagre to afford anything, and he is wealthy enough to take care of her needs.

The outbreak of the civil war brings a reversal in fortunes for Chike, disrupting his business, and forcing him to leave the city with his family. Men must restrict their movements in order to avoid being conscripted into the war, and this situation impoverishes Chike. At first, Chike considers enlisting in the army but the thought of his obligations to his wife and children weigh on him. He feels inhibited by his family and drops the idea of joining the army.

Chike's attitude reveals a characteristic of the typical Igbo man, that of placing a high premium on his family. The Igbo man cherishes his family and considers it dangerous to abandon them no matter how precarious the situation may seem, or how urgent the need to leave. His reluctance reflects his deep commitment to his responsibilities. To the Igbo, the man is seen as "the bastion of security, who absorbs all shocks and feuds coming on the family from outside" (Ejiofor, 1981: 37). The typical Igbo man also places priority on his family over material pos-

sessions. This is illustrated by Chike's reaction to Ada when, as they are fleeing their residence in the city due to the uncertainty of impending war, Ada decides to use the only seat reserved in their car for their children to carry her dresses and cooking utensils. Chike sharply rebukes her: *Ada! Isi adikwa gi mma?* (Ada! Are you mad?)

In response Ada asks:

Nna Chukwuma, olee ka m ga-esi hapu igbe m? Olee ka m ga-esi hapu ite ofe m? Olee ka m ga-esi...? (Ubesie, 1973: 24)

(Chukwuma's father, how can I let go of my box? How can I let go of my soup pot? How can I...?)

Chike interrupts:

Gini bu ite ofe gi? Gini bu uwe gi? Ndu gi na umuaka a, na igbe gi na ite ofe gi, kedu nke ka mkpa? Ada, churu umuaka m chulara m ulo! Hapu ihe ndi a niile na o bu m zuru ha. Ejighi ego azuta mmadu. (Ubesie, 1973: 24)

(What is your soup pot? What is your dress? Saving your life, and those of these children, or your box and your soup pot, which are more important? Ada, take these children home for me. Leave all these things because I bought them. A human being cannot be bought with money.)

Here the novel provides eloquent testimony to the importance an Igbo man places on his family.

While men must be cautious in their movements for fear of conscription, women have no such fears. Because of the freedom of movement women enjoy, Ada, Chike's wife, engages in *ahia ataaki* 'ambush trading'<sup>(5)</sup> and starts making money. Her business transactions bring her close to the soldiers with whom she begins to flirt. Emboldened by her sudden economic power, she begins to show disrespect towards her husband, bringing male friends into her matrimonial home in the presence of her husband without concern. She ultimately abandons her family and goes away to enjoy life by living on her own.

Chike goes to Ada's house to beg for food and to remind her that he is still her husband. Ada retorts: *Di gbakwaa oku* (Ubesie, 1973: 115) (To hell with husband), but she is later evicted and returns to him. Chike and his brother, Okechukwu, strive to rehabilitate her but rather than embracing her family, she becomes more wayward and conspires to have Chike conscripted. Fortunately, Chike meets an old friend who helps him in this situation.

Chike is the embodiment of a mature and responsible Igbo man. As a husband, he is patient; he is ready to forgive and accommodate others. His patience is reflected in the way he endures his wife's waywardness. He remains calm and counsels her to refrain from her evil ways and accord him the respect due to a

husband. Chike states:

Nne, ị mara ugwu ruuru m ka di gi, kwanyere m ya, maka na di nwaanyi bu aka ogori na-ehi n'isi. Nwaanyi hapu di ya, isi eruo ya ala. Ndu nwaanyi enweghi isi ma o nweghi nwoke o ji etu onu. (Ubesie, 1973: 135)

(My dear, if you know the respect that is due to me as your husband, accord it to me, because a husband is the hand with which a woman supports her head. If a woman deserts her husband, she falls. A woman's life has no meaning if she does not have a man she can brag of.)

Chike's statement reflects the Igbo worldview of an ideal relationship between husband and wife. The Igbo believe that a wife is subordinate to her husband, and that she should be loyal and submissive to him. She stands to suffer if she deserts her husband. This view of traditional Igbo society is clearly endorsed by Ubesie. It is what the feminist critique would describe as the subjugation of womanhood—giving a woman a subordinate position in a male-dominated Igbo society.

Chike is no longer able to see socially and culturally accepted behavior in his wife. Ada's lifestyle becomes a source of embarrassment to him. As a man, he reacts to the embarrassment his wife causes him when she entertains her male friends in his presence. Her unrepentant posture makes Chike furious; interrogating Ada one day, he beats her mercilessly because no Igbo man, no matter how patient, will continue to tolerate this kind of insult and relegation from a wife.

Ada's attitude and actions shatter the peace and unity that once characterized the family. She mistreats her husband by flirting with other men. She starves her children when she becomes the breadwinner of the family, and ultimately abandons them. She relegates her husband to servitude, to the point of asking him to wash plates and do other household chores before she will give him money and food for the children. These instances demonstrate Ada's failure to keep her marriage vow, "for better, for worse," breaking her relationship with her husband and validating the prophetic statement made by a mad man immediately after they were joined together as man and wife by the priest, *ma o buru na ha abuo ejighi aka ha tosa onwe ha* (Ubesie, 1973: 17) (if two of them do not break the relationship themselves). Ubesie (1973: 85) also describes her refusal to have her meals with other members of the family:

Oge agaala mgbe ya na Chike na umu ha na-eriko ihe onu dika ndi si n'ezigbo ezinaulo. Otu ihe kpatara ya ugbo a bu na o bu Ada na-eweta ego nri.

(Gone are the days when she, her husband, and their children used to have their meals together as members of a good family. Now, the reason for this is that Ada has become the breadwinner.)

Ada's statement, *I wetara ego gari ka o bu ego akpu ka i wetara? ... Di gbakwaa oku* (Ubesie, 1973: 86) (Did you provide money for garri or for foofoo? ... To hell with husband) becomes her regular response whenever Chike demands respect from her. What Ada's behavior suggests about women becoming breadwinners in Igbo society is that they will become overbearing and may no longer submit to their husbands.

Ubesie portrays the marriage between Chike and Ada as lacking all the necessary ingredients that sustain a healthy marital relationship. There is no more caring, no commitment, and no more love. Their marriage vow has been abused and profaned:

Olulu di na nwunye Chike na Ada ugbu a dika o bu mgbere ka ha abuo na-atu. O dighi onye na-elenyere ibe ya udi anya kwesiri na di na nwunye ga na-elenyere onye nke ozu ... Akwukwo ha gbara n'ulo uka tupu ogu amalite di ka o bu eriri e ji chie ozu, nke e were gbanye nkita n'ukwu. (Ubesie, 1973: 85)

(Chike's marriage with Ada is now like a mere business transaction between the two of them. No one cares for the other in a manner deserving of a husband and a wife ... Their wedding in the church, before the war broke out, is like a rope for ozu title taking, which has been tied on a dog's legs.)

At last, after the civil war, things take a new turn for Chike. As the war ends, he goes to Lagos to see the white man who was managing his company before the outbreak of the civil war. He is surprised to see that his business has thrived during the war and that a large sum of money has been made and saved for him. He goes back to Enugu with enough money to start a new life. His family rebounds and they begin to live happily again, but without Ada. While Chike is hosting people at a survival party, Ada, who has learned of his restoration to wealth, reappears with an illegitimate baby, looking tattered and hungry. She begs Chike to take her back as his wife. Chike refuses, reminding her that he does not eat leftover food, and that the palm head that touches the ground has been soiled—*Isi akwu dara n'ala edetula aja* (Ubesie, 1973: 205).

With *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, Ubesie presents a picture of an Igbo family destabilized by civil war, and further shattered by a wife's infidelity and waywardness. Ada refuses to be tamed in spite of all her husband's entreaties. The story is a cautionary tale of a woman who, in her quest for materialism and comfort, becomes insensitive to the plight of her family, abandoning them when her husband and children need her most. Ada typifies the woman who identifies with her husband only when times are good:

Mgbe ihe di mma, ihe Ada na-akpo ya bu nna ya ukwu, ma o bu nna Chukwuma. Ma ugbu a, ihe o na-akpo ya bu nwoke a. (Ubesie, 1973: 87)

(When the going was good, what Ada called him was her 'boss or Chukwuma's father'. But now she calls him, 'this man'.)

The woman's attitude is critically evaluated in the following statements:

Ọ bụrụ na nwoke na nwaanyi abụghị di na nwunye mgbe ihe di na mkpa, olee mgbe ha ga-abukwa di na nwunye? ... Di na nwunye bụrụ naanị mgbe ihe di mma, ọ dighị mkpa na nwoke na nwaanyi ga-ekwekọta na ha ga-abu di na nwunye. (Ubesie, 1973: 204)

(If a man and a woman are not a couple in a difficult situation, when will they be husband and wife? ... If being husband and wife is only for when things are good, then it is not important that a man and a woman will consent to be husband and wife.)

Our illustrations above have shown that Ubesie's *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* truly portrays a family that is destabilized by war, and a marriage relationship that is ruined by a wife's intransigence, insensitivity to the plight of her family and her lack of moral rectitude.

## II. The Igbo Family in Nzeako's *Nkọlị* (1973)

In *Nkọlị*, Nzeako presents a polygamous Igbo family. The family consists of Ojeuga, his two wives, Ugoye and Ogechi, and their two daughters, Ekwutọsị and Nkọlị. The small size of this family is in contrast to the typical polygamous Igbo family, which tends to be large. *Nkọlị* is set in a rural Igbo community, and activities and behaviors typical of rural life are manifested in the work.

Nzeako presents problems typically associated with a polygamous Igbo family—the problems of co-wife rivalry. These are often described as rancour, mutual distrust, suspicion, acrimony, incessant fighting and quarrelling. The younger wife thinks their husband loves the older wife more; the older wife does not like to see her co-wife receive anything from their husband.

Ugoye, the first wife, left her husband and then returned when she heard he had married another wife. She is naturally quarrelsome. Her desire to have their husband love her alone leads her to consult a medicine man to prepare charms to help her seduce him. But the medicine man declines, warns her against harbouring such evil intentions, and advises her to go back and make peace with her co-wife, who does not contemplate any evil action against her. Ugoye is accused of witchcraft against Nkọlị, the daughter of her co-wife, but this allegation is later disproved when the real witch, who happens to be the first wife's namesake, is found. Unlike Ugoye, Ogechi is a peaceful woman. Recounting her traumatic experiences to her daughter, Nkọlị, she regrets being associated with polygamy. She blames her misfortune of not having another baby after Nkọlị, on her co-wife.

Ojeuga is a traditional Igbo man who believes strongly in the traditions of his people. His family problems sadden him and give him sleepless nights, but he is never biased in handling family issues, despite the incorrigible behavior of his first wife. He gives each of his wives fair hearing and verifies allegations before taking action. When, for instance, he is told that his first wife has consulted a



medicine man (*dibija*), Ojeuga decides to visit the house of his friend, Obiogbodu, who turns out to be the same medicine man his wife visited. Ojeuga is a patient husband and makes every effort to see that peace prevails in his family.

Ugoye's visit to a medicine man, as well as a fight between the wives that drew the attention of their entire neighbourhood, embarrass and frustrate Ojeuga, so he divorces Ugoye. But her departure brings no abatement to the family's troubles. Ojeuga and Ogechi thus decide to send Nkọlì to live with a female teacher in another town. Nkọlì is now safe, but Ogechi's troubles persist. Due to the persistent attacks on his family, Ojeuga, epitomizing the typical traditional Igbo man, goes to consult an oracle to unravel the cause of the trouble in his home.

While in her father's house, Ugoye, now divorced, gives birth to a baby boy. Ojeuga does not even ask about the child. Ugoye does not find life easy as a divorcee. While her father's family contemplate what to do about her condition, another woman, Ugoye Nduka, starts to publicly confess her atrocities against Ojeuga's family. In her confession, she reveals that all along she has been behind the woes that have befallen Ojeuga's family and that it is God that saved them from all her evil deeds. The confession makes Ojeuga feel compassion for his estranged wife and, along with others in the community, he begins to reconsider their relationship.

At last there is a reconciliation, and Ojeuga arranges to bring her back to his family. Ugoye and her children return amidst joy. The novelist thus presents a picture of a reunited family, which is happy, loving, and peaceful. The peaceful reconciliation and re-union ignite greater love and affection in the family. The co-wives, whose relationship was earlier marred by bitter rivalry, begin to regard each other as sisters.

Nzeako's views on the polygamous Igbo family are unclear. Early in the work, he highlights the problems associated with a polygamous family. While he seems not to have favoured it, as expressed through the feelings of the younger wife, his reference to another polygamous family and his resolution of the problem in Ojeuga's family suggests his endorsement of the polygamous marriage system.

In the text, we see Ogechi, Ojeuga's second wife, having a sleepless night and agonizing over the traumatic experiences in her marriage, especially the treatment she has received from her co-wife. As she narrates her ordeal to her daughter, Nkọlì, she regrets being associated with a polygamous marriage, and vows that none of her daughters will have a similar experience.

One problem that is often associated with polygamous families is that of rivalry between co-wives. Situations develop in which each is scheming to have the upper hand, or to be loved more by their husband. The craving to be loved can lead wives to take extreme steps, as Ugoye does in this story, even going so far as to consult the *dibija* (medicine man) for a love-inducing charm to win over her husband.

Yet, in another episode, Nzeako shows how Obiogbodu, a medicine man who has six wives, is able to manage his family and have all his wives live together peacefully. Obiogbodu emphasizes that such peace and cordiality only prevail when the women are humble. Finally, through the reconciliation of Ojeuga with his divorced wife, and her happy reunion with other members of the family,

Nzeako shows how peace, love, and unity can be restored even in a broken home. By taking this position, Nzeako promotes the view that polygamy can thrive in an atmosphere of understanding, mutual respect, love, and peace. He also presents, through Ugoye Nduka's confession, the idea that co-wives' rivalries can be caused by inimical external forces.

As in the other novels under study, *Nkọlị* captures some of the features of Igbo traditional society and family. In Igbo society, a man's kinsmen and his married sisters (*umụada*) get involved in settling family squabbles. The married daughter of a family (*nwaada*) considers herself a part of her father's family, and shows interest in that family's welfare. This is why when Ojeuga's first wife fights her co-wife, creating embarrassing pandemonium in the neighborhood, Ojeuga's married sister is equally disgusted with the woman's behaviour, and demands of her brother:

Gee m ntị n'olu nke oma. I hụrụ nkịta nọdurụ n'ezị bụ nne Ekwutosị, ọ ghaghi isi n'ụlọ a wee laa. Ọ bụ m kwuru ya. (Nzeako, 1973: 24)

(Listen to me very well. You see that dog, the mother of Ekwutosị, sitting outside, she must leave this house. I mean it.)

With this statement she vehemently advocates that Ojeuga divorce Ugoye. Ojeuga's kinsmen also gather to express concern over the unfortunate incident. Their communal feeling is conveyed by their spokesman Anako's comment:

Ọ bụru na ihere adighi eme ya na ndi ụlọ ya, ihere na-eme anyi bụ ndi umunna ya. (Nzeako, 1973: 28)

(If he and members of his family are not ashamed of themselves, we, his kinsmen are ashamed.)

The kinsmen make an attempt to find a solution to Ojeuga's family problems by inviting him and his wives to meet with them. Their concern demonstrates the spirit of being their "brother's keeper," a hallmark of social relations in Igbo culture. Ojeuga's in-laws, the kinsmen of Ogechi, decide to give Ojeuga some time to address the situation on his own before they take action.

Another attribute of Igbo traditional society, which Nzeako presents in his work, is the traditional process of divorce. After deciding to divorce his first wife, as a result of her cantankerous and quarrelsome nature, Ojeuga sends for the man who stood as his witness during the marriage (*onye dīrī ya n'isi ilu nwunye/onyebē*), as well as his kinsmen, to inform them of his intentions. Ugoye's parents are also invited and, at a formal gathering, Ojeuga returns Ugoye to her parents with the following statement:

Nwaanyi oma, ọ dighi nkojo ọ bula m na-akojọ gi, ma gi gaa ka nne na nna gi dọọ gi aka na ntị. Mgbe i natara ozi m, i loghachi. Ma i loghachila ma i nataghị ozi m. (Nzeako, 1973: 49–50)

(Fine woman, I do not castigate you, but go so that your parents can advise you. Come back when you receive my message. But don't come back if you do not receive my message.)

As we have shown here, Nzeako in *Nkọlị* explores how co-wives' bitter rivalry and acrimony are capable of disrupting harmonious and cordial relationships in a polygamous family. The novelist, however, expresses the view that it is possible for polygamy to thrive in an atmosphere of understanding, mutual respect, love, and peace. By blaming the cause of disharmony and rivalry in Ojeuga's family on some inimical external forces, and through Ojeuga's reconciliation with his wives, Nzeako demonstrates that peace, love, and unity can be restored even in a broken polygamous home.

### III. The Igbo Family in Madụekwe's *Uru Nwa* (1978)

Madụekwe's *Uru Nwa* is an exposition of a family where the man exercises overwhelming power over his household. In this work Madụekwe exposes what feminists refer to as the humiliation and oppression of womanhood. In this novel, Wogu sends his wife, Ahụdiya, away simply because he sees a male neighbor greeting his wife. The jealousy of seeing his wife exchange greetings with another man makes Wogu cast her out immediately, with no proof for his allegations of infidelity. In a furious commanding tone Wogu tells her:

Ahụdiya, laa ụlọ nna gị! Lawa ugbo a! Lawa! Ọ kaara m mma na ị noghikwa n'ebe a kariya na ị no ya na-emetu ya, na ị nọ ya na-emetọ ya! (Madụekwe, 1978: 44)

(Ahụdiya, go back to your father's house! Leave, now! It is better for me that you are not here than stay and desecrate it, than stay and make it filthy!)

This immediate divorce and ejection exposes Ahụdiya to the danger of traveling back to her father's home at night, through a dreadful forest, and forces her to abandon her two daughters, Adamma and the baby, Ngọzi.

Wogu marries a second wife, to whom he metes out almost the same humiliating treatment. The day Wogu catches her fighting with one of her daughters (who does not respect the woman as her stepmother), he chases her away with a machete without caring to scold or warn her about her behavior. He immediately demands that she return to her parents the next day.

Wogu's treatment of his wives shows how some men in Igbo traditional society send, or threaten to send, their wives packing at the slightest provocation or misunderstanding. Madụekwe also highlights another family in which a man, Otikpo, has two wives; he leaves his first wife and her daughter in the village, and takes his second wife to live in the town.

Madụekwe resolves the situation of Wogu's family, through the dogged efforts of Ngọzi, Wogu's youngest daughter. She, supported by her sister, Adamma, makes their father denounce his oath to never again have anything to do with his wife,

Ahūdiya. By taking reconciliatory steps and prevailing over her father, Ngozi brings her mother back to her matrimonial home, and the family begins to live happily again.

Though Maduekwe has, through Wogu's action against his wife, portrayed the high-handedness men sometimes exert in the Igbo family, his preoccupation appears to have been the enhancement of the status of women, as presented by Ngozi's achievements. In Igbo traditional society, the role of reconciling separated parents is normally seen as the exclusive duty of male children. Here, Maduekwe uses the reconciliatory mission undertaken by Ngozi to stress the importance of the female gender, and counter the assumptions of some people in Igbo traditional society that the female child is not as important as the male. Ngozi's success in reuniting her parents and restoring a harmonious relationship between them lends credence to the saying that what a man can do a woman can do better.

On the other hand, it may be said that the image of women as abused, which Ahūdiya's humiliation by Wogu epitomizes, is ameliorated by Ngozi's bold and dogged stance on the issue of recalling her estranged mother, in spite of her father's intractable nature. The prevailing affection in Wogu's home after the return of Ahūdiya, the expectations, and the recognition accorded the female child are evident in Ngozi's speech below:

Dịka ihe siri kwurū, ahūghị m n'omume nna m na ọ gaghị eleru anya, bururū nne m ezi di. Aririọ m na-arịọzi bụ ka ihe gaara nne m otu ọ tūrū anya o jiri kpebie wee lakwutewe nna m.

Onọdụ m n'etiti ndị mūrū m dizi elu. Ha jiri m kporọ mmadụ. Ọ dighị ihe ha zuru ime ha na-adighị agwa m. Ọ dighị nwa a na-eme mmadụ ha adighị eme m. Ọ dighị ihe m chorọ n'aka ha m na-adighị enweta. (Maduekwe, 1978: 133)

(From the look of things, I do not see my father displaying any attitude that suggests he will not be careful to make a good husband to my mother. My prayer is that my mother's desire in deciding to reunite with my father will be fulfilled.

My parents now hold me in high esteem. I am recognised by them. They do not plan to do anything without informing me. There is no kind of petting I do not receive from them. They do not refuse me anything I require from them.)

Family in Igbo society, as portrayed in this novel, is dynamic and fluid. Every member of the family is important and has a role to play in the scheme of things. Maduekwe, the novelist, has demonstrated that even a child, irrespective of the gender, can be instrumental in resolving a problem that mars their parents' harmonious relationship.

IV. The Igbo Family in Nzeako's *Juochi* (1981)

In *Juochi*, Nzeako elucidates two different types of families in Igbo society. One is the rural Igbo family that displays human tendencies that are typical of non-literate traditional societies: acrimony, hatred, antagonism, rivalry and oppression. It is a family ravaged by penury. The father, the only surviving man in his family, dies when his only daughter is just four years old. In his lifetime, he lived in the midst of kinsmen who wished him dead so that they could appropriate his land.

Ekwuigbo, lives a cautious life, avoiding any close association with people, and abstaining from drinking, taking kolanut, or snuff, to escape the schemes and intrigues of his enemies. Despite his caution and abstinence, Ekwuigbo suffers from many infirmities and ailments that he believes to be the handiwork of his enemies. His incessant visits to different medicine men for cures impoverish him further and, as a result, he cannot afford to take proper care of his only daughter. He also cannot afford the luxury of sponsoring his wife to take the *inyom* title like other women.

In his struggle for survival, he becomes isolated, and is abandoned by his relations. Even when he is in the throes of death, only his wife and daughter are by his side with no other person around to console them. His burial is a mere formality, with only a few people in attendance, who leave immediately after his interment.

As in his other work, *Nkọli*, Nzeako reinvents Igbo traditional society through his portrayal of the actions and experiences of this family. Less than two weeks after Ekwuigbo's death, his kinsmen enter his land and start to harvest his palm fruits and other farm products without regard for his widow and her daughter. In order to save her life, and that of her only daughter, from their enemies, Udumma, leaves her matrimonial home to seek refuge among her own people.

In Igbo traditional society, if her husband or late husband's kinsmen, either because of quarrels or for not having a male child, force a woman out from her matrimonial home, her paternal home can provide her succour and protection. Consistent with this spirit of Igbo kinship relations, Udumma's brothers warmly receive and resettle their widowed sister and her daughter. But they also remind her that Igbo culture does not permit sharing their father's property with her as a woman, and they ask her to fend for herself and her daughter.

In Igbo families, a widow assumes the responsibility for raising and providing for her children, just as Udumma does. In order to ensure their survival, she engages in menial work, supported by the efforts of her little daughter, who also goes to the bush to pick oil bean seeds, fallen palm fruits, and palm kernels, which she cracks. Once a reasonable quantity has been gathered they can be sold. In rural Igbo communities, people who embark on these activities are considered to be very poor.

Nzeako also identifies another feature of traditional Igbo family life: the act of parents sending their children out to work as servants when the family can no longer cope with domestic demands. Due to the increasing hardship the widow and her daughter face, Eloka, one of Udumma's brothers, suggests that *Juochi*,

her daughter, be sent to serve as a housemaid in order to lessen Udumma's burden, at least from the cost of feeding. Jụọchi is later given as a housemaid, but only with collective family approval. In Igbo culture, no member of the family is given either in marriage, or in servitude without the family's approval. Here, we see Udumma's brother playing the role of father, negotiating the conditions of giving Jụọchi as a maid.

In this portrayal of the typical Igbo family, Nzeakọ has depicted the experience of a man surrounded by enemies who desire him dead so that they can take over his inheritance. Ekwuigbo is particularly vulnerable because he has no male child to succeed him when he dies. In both traditional and modern Igbo society, when the head of the family dies, even when he leaves a will, family members are usually embroiled in arguments and controversies over inheritance. Some men appropriate their late brothers' property without regard for the families left behind. This is common when the deceased has no son. This is why most educated Igbo wives try to procure whatever property they can afford in their own names.

Despite representing these features of traditional Igbo society in his novel, Nzeakọ upholds the features of Igbo culture that he presents throughout his work. By showing how Ekwuigbo's widow and her only daughter are deprived of their land and its products, and are chased away by his kinsmen, Nzeakọ uncritically upholds Igbo tradition whereby widows and female children of a deceased man, who has no male child to succeed him, lose their inheritance to his closest male relations. The Igbo culture of denying a woman the right to share in her father's property is also reinforced by Udumma's experience at the hands of her brothers. Her father's first son (*ọkpapa*) says,

...ọ bughị omenala na ha ga-ewuru nwanne ha nwaanyi ụlọ n'ime ngwuru ha, n'ihị na a chọwa achọwa, o nweghị oke ga-erute ya... (Nzeakọ, 1981: 6)

(...it is not the culture that they build their sister a house in their father's compound because in the real sense of it, she has no share...)

While this Igbo family is rural, with all the trappings of a traditional family, the second type of family portrayed by Nzeakọ is typical of modern city-dwelling Igbo. The family consists of a couple, Ikegwuonu and Adamma, their two children, a boy and a girl, Adamma's sister, and their maid. They live in a house in the city of Enugu. Nzeakọ's description suggests that it is a well-furnished duplex, reflecting the family's social class. They are presented as a family living in a comfortable environment with all the amenities that modern homes provide.

Ikegwuonu is the father, and head of the family (*dibuulo*). Apart from going to arrange matters for their maid, Jụọchi, he remains passive in the story, even when he is supposed to scold his wife, or react to her ill-treatment of their maid. His illicit and amorous affair with his sister-in-law, who has come to spend her holidays with them, results in her pregnancy and his secret arrangement to marry her. These deeds betray him as a man who is morally bankrupt.

In an open quarrel with Ikegwuonu, his wife Adamma does not hide her suspicion of her sister Oriaku's pregnancy, as he has refused to take any action or

make any comment regarding her ceaseless complaints about the girl's misconduct. His wife tells him,

A na-enyozi gi enyo, n'ih na amakwaghị m otu i si eme omume n'oge a. O ruo n'ututu mgbe m bjara wee gwa gi na Oriaku arughị oru kwesiri ka o ruo, naani ihe i nwere ike igwa m bu na nke ahụ agbasaghị gi... Nke a gosiri na anyi bu nwunye di ugbo a. (Nzeako, 1981: 50)

(You are suspect because I do not understand how you are behaving. When I came to tell you this morning that Oriaku did not do the work she ought to have done, all that you could tell me was that it is not your business... This indicates that we are co-wives now.)

Ikegwuonu owns up to the plan of marriage with Oriaku, his sister-in-law, and this ignites a more aggressive reaction from his wife. The story ends with Oriaku leaving Ikegwuonu's home with her luggage, but the damage to his relationship with his wife has already been done. When a man, who is expected to take care of his wife's younger sister as a sister-in-law, impregnates her, it is condemned by Igbo society as an act of iniquity.

In this story, the man is the architect of his family's problems. The man's cordial relationship with his wife has been destroyed. They now face the prospect of a broken home. Caution and self-control on the part of the man would have saved his family.

In the end, Ikegwuonu leaves his damaged home and family, and finds solace in drinking. Nzeako notes:

... ma nwoke gbaṣuru n'ulo ya n'ih okwu na uka, hapuru ihe n'ime ulo ya, n'ih na o ghaghị ino wee na-eche ya. (Nzeako, 1981: 52)

(... but a man who runs away from his home because of quarrel, leaves something behind that must surely await him.)

The most visible member of this family is Adamma, Ikegwuonu's wife. She is made more visible by her assertiveness, arrogance, and harshness, especially towards her maid. She is noisy and always scolding, deriding or flogging her maid, Juochi, even for an offence committed by another person. When Juochi first comes to the home, Adamma discriminates against her, barring her from using certain amenities in the house, and denying her good food. The maltreatment and deprivation the little girl suffers at Adamma's hand further depicts the wife as a mean woman. Her assertiveness and arrogance are reinforced when Adamma scolds her younger sister for her failure to wake up early, prepare her husband's breakfast, and provide him with hot water for a bath. Adamma boasts:

Ulo a bu ulo di m, n'ih ya, o bu ihe m kwuru ga-eme. Ma o di onye nke ahụ na-adighi mma n'obi, ya laa... Ka m kwuo ya ekwuo n'ulo a. Onye o bu la no n'ulo a aghaghị ime ihe m kwuru, unu nuru ya? (Nzeako, 1981: 44)

(This is my husband's house and, as a result, what I say goes. If there is anyone who does not like that, let that person go... Let me say that in this house. Anyone who is in this house must do what I say. Did you hear that?)

When Oriaku attributes her inability to wake up early and perform her morning duties to a headache and upset stomach, Adamma is quick to notice, and suddenly changes her attitude toward her sister. Adamma interrogates Oriaku persistently to know her true state of health. Adamma becomes apprehensive and suspicious that the girl may be pregnant but she does not suspect that her husband is responsible for it.

Her suspicious reaction and persistent interrogation of her sister would not be unusual. In real life situations, there is no Igbo wife who would take lightly, or condone, such a pregnancy in her matrimonial home. In spite of her harshness and high-handedness toward Jụọchi, Adamma maintains a cordial relationship with her husband until the affair between her husband and her sister destabilizes their relationship and home.

Jụọchi is the major victim of Adamma's despicable behavior. The girl's suffering and hardship early in life are shown on three levels: the home where she is deprived as a result of her father's protracted sickness, her maternal home where she lives in abject poverty with her mother, and the home of her mistress, where she is grossly abused and dehumanized. Nzeakọ describes Adamma's inhuman treatment of Jụọchi by posing a series of critical questions:

Ọ buru nwa ọ mụtara ọ ga-eme ya ụdị ihe ahụ o mere Jụọchi? Ọ buru nwa ya ka mmadụ ozo mere ụdị ihe ahụ, ọ ga-adị ya mma n'obi? (Nzeakọ, 1981: 37)

(If she were her child, would she treat her in the same way as she treated Jụọchi? If another person treated her child in that same manner, would she be pleased?)

Nzeakọ is equally critical of the husband's failure to defend Jụọchi:

Ọ dị mma otu di ya siri gbachi nkịtị wee ghara ikwu okwu? Ka ọ pụtara na nwoke ahụ adighị ahụ ụdị mmegbu nwaanyi ahụ na-emegbu Jụọchi? Ka ọ bu e buru ozu onye ozo, ọ dị ka e bu ukwu nkụ? (Nzeakọ, 1981: 37)

(Is her husband's silence over the matter acceptable? Or is it that the man is blind to all the mistreatment being meted out to Jụọchi? Or is it that when he sees a corpse being carried, he sees a bundle of firewood?)

With these questions, Nzeakọ presents Ikegwụonu as a weakling who shirks his manly responsibilities and does not take action against what is going wrong within his family. It is Adamma who exerts the overriding authority in the home. The author acknowledges the fact that a man must not be passive and indifferent in



such matters. Nzeako also depicts Adamma as a wife who abdicates her domestic responsibilities to a maid, which is dangerous, especially when another adult female is involved. Adamma leaves her younger sister to attend to the needs of her husband. The closeness resulting from that interaction lays the foundation for the amorous relationship that later develops between Ikegwuonu and Oriaku, culminating in pregnancy, a secret arrangement to marry, and the eventual instability of the family.

Oriaku, the agent of destabilization, is like a demon assigned to wreak havoc in her sister's matrimonial home. Adamma's reaction to her sister's affair with her husband, described in the following excerpt, reveals not only the anger and condemnation that Adamma feels, but also the discord that results:

Ọ bụ ihe a ka ị bịara n'ebe a ime? Ị bịara ịnara m di m? Ọ dị mma, ugbu a ị wetala ihe ise okwu n'etiti anyị wee chọọ ịla. (Nzeako, 1981: 51)

(Is this what you have come here to do? You came to snatch my husband from me? Well, you have caused friction between us, and want to leave.)

It is through Oriaku, however, that Nzeako resolves Juochi's plight. Before leaving her sister's house, Oriaku, in her concern for Juochi, makes a secret arrangement to relocate her equally, as a way of alleviating her suffering.

The story of this second family in *Juochi*, like the story in *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala*, is a depiction of how the stability of a family, and the prevailing harmony in the home, can be shattered by infidelity. It reveals how a husband's extramarital affair with a girl, and his secret marriage to her without regard for his wife, can lead to disaster. The illicit sexual affair between the head of the family and his sister-in-law is an instance of the moral laxity plaguing some matrimonial homes, to which Igbo families are all vulnerable. In this case it is the father, the head of the family, who stoops so low as to impregnate a maid under his care. The story also portrays the level of dehumanization and oppression that some housemaids experience at the hands of their mistresses.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined portrayals of the Igbo family in the works of three Igbo novelists. Our analysis shows that these works explore human social behaviors that are observable in traditional Igbo family. In a number of instances, they do not project a positive image of Igbo family life, showing more interest in highlighting the problems that beset family life, than its strengths and successes. Though they attempt to resolve some of these problems, they more often create the impression that family relationships in Igbo society are often marred by strife. For instance, some characters in these novels are portrayed as mean, inconsiderate, irresponsible and cantankerous, or as the cause of family destabilization. Because three of the works examined were written and published in the 70s, and the fourth in the early 80s, one could hypothesize that perhaps these

novels portrayed observable problems that beset family relationships at that time.

Family is the bedrock of society and, therefore, the stability of any society depends on the strength and cohesiveness of families within that society. If families, generally, are stable and progressive, the society to which they belong will manifest these same attributes. The Igbo family, whether at home or in the diaspora, is an important element in the sustainability of Igbo culture and society. Through their works, Igbo literary artists should encourage this desired sustainability by focusing on positive images of Igbo family life.

#### NOTES

- (1) In Emenanjo (1982a; 1982b) he argued that any work that is to be taken as Igbo creative literature must be written in Igbo.
- (2) Ugonna also insisted that, for a piece of literature to be called an Igbo novel, poem, or play, it must be written in Igbo.
- (3) Uzochukwu, like others, argued in favor of Igbo as the language of expression for what should be regarded as Igbo novels.
- (4) Unpublished paper. Nwadike catalogued existing literary works written in Igbo.
- (5) *Ahja ataaki* translated here as ‘ambush trading’, was a term used by the Igbo during the Nigerian civil war to describe risky trade, for survival, embarked upon by courageous women across the enemy line.

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