

## **Redefining Womanhood in Igbo Fiction: A Feminist Re-reading of Gender, Identity, and Resistance**

**Ifeoma Asuzu**

Department of Igbo Language,  
National Institute for Nigerian Languages,  
Aba, Nigeria.  
[ifeonaadimike@gmail.com](mailto:ifeonaadimike@gmail.com)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19570785>

---

**Citation:** Asuzu, I. (2026). Redefining Womanhood in Igbo Fiction: A Feminist Re-reading of Gender, Identity, and Resistance. *Transnational Journal of Arts, Humanities and Sciences*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19570785>

### **Abstract**

*This study interrogates the evolving representation of womanhood in Igbo fiction through a feminist lens, with particular attention to how female characters negotiate identity, agency, and resistance within patriarchal structures. Drawing on selected works of Igbo and Nigerian writers, the paper examines how traditional constructions of womanhood often defined by submission, domesticity, and silence, are challenged and redefined in contemporary narratives. The study adopts a feminist theoretical framework, incorporating strands of African feminism and womanism, to analyze how literature becomes a site for contesting gender norms and reconstructing female subjectivity. Findings reveal that while earlier portrayals of women in Igbo fiction often reinforce patriarchal expectations, more recent texts present women as active agents who resist oppression, assert autonomy, and redefine societal roles. The paper argues that Igbo fiction not only reflects cultural realities but also participates in reshaping them by offering alternative visions of womanhood. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on gender, literature, and African identity by foregrounding the dynamic and transformative roles of women in Igbo literary imagination.*

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Igbo fiction, Feminism, African literature, Gender, Identity, Resistance

## **Introduction**

Womanhood in many African societies, particularly within the Igbo cultural context, has historically been constructed within rigid patriarchal frameworks that define women primarily in relation to men such as daughters, wives, and mothers. These constructions are deeply embedded in cultural practices, oral traditions, and early literary representations, where women are often portrayed as passive, voiceless, and confined to domestic spaces. However, literature, as a dynamic reflection of society, has increasingly become a site for questioning and redefining these traditional roles.

Igbo fiction, both written in English and indigenous languages, provides a fertile ground for examining how notions of womanhood have evolved over time. Early canonical texts often depict women within limiting stereotypes, yet they also contain subtle tensions that hint at resistance. In contrast, contemporary narratives foreground female agency, autonomy, and complexity, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformations and the influence of feminist thought.

This paper seeks to explore how womanhood is being redefined in Igbo fiction through a feminist perspective. It asks, "How do literary representations challenge traditional gender norms?" In what ways do female characters assert identity and agency? And how does Igbo fiction contribute to the re-imagining of womanhood in a changing African society?

Adopting a feminist analytical framework, with particular emphasis on African feminism and womanism, this study critically examines selected texts to uncover patterns of resistance, negotiation, and transformation. The paper argues that Igbo fiction not only mirrors societal shifts but also actively participates in reconstructing the meaning of womanhood, offering new possibilities for gender relations in contemporary African contexts.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the growing body of African literature that centers women's experiences, many representations of womanhood in Igbo fiction remain under-analyzed from a nuanced feminist perspective that takes into account cultural specificity. Traditional portrayals often reinforce patriarchal norms, while contemporary reinterpretations that challenge these norms are not sufficiently examined in relation to Indigenous feminist frameworks such as African feminism and womanism.

Furthermore, there is a tendency in some scholarly works to apply Western feminist models without adequately contextualizing the unique socio-cultural realities of Igbo society. This creates a gap in understanding how womanhood is being redefined within culturally relevant paradigms. This study therefore addresses the need for a critical re-

reading of Igbo fiction that foregrounds culturally grounded feminist interpretations and highlights the evolving roles of women in literary narratives.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine the redefinition of womanhood in Igbo fiction from a feminist perspective. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Analyze traditional representations of womanhood in Igbo fiction.
- ii. Examine how female characters challenge patriarchal structures.
- iii. Explore themes of agency, resistance, and identity among women in selected texts.
- iv. Apply African feminist and womanist theories to interpret these representations.
- v. Assess how Igbo fiction contributes to changing perceptions of womanhood.

### **Research Questions**

- i. How is womanhood traditionally portrayed in Igbo fiction?
- ii. In what ways do female characters resist patriarchal expectations?
- iii. How do selected texts redefine female identity and agency?
- iv. What feminist frameworks best explain these transformations?
- v. How does Igbo fiction influence contemporary understanding of womanhood?

### **Literature Review**

Recent scholarship on African literature increasingly emphasizes the need to re-examine representations of womanhood within culturally grounded feminist frameworks. Contemporary critics argue that earlier readings of African texts often relied heavily on Western feminist paradigms, which fail to capture the socio-cultural complexities embedded in African societies, particularly within Igbo contexts (Ugwudike, 2024; Nwoye & Eze, 2025).

Scholars have highlighted that African feminism is not merely an extension of Western feminism but a distinct intellectual tradition shaped by historical, cultural, and communal realities. Recent studies stress that African women's oppression must be understood as multidimensionally—rooted not only in patriarchy but also in colonial disruptions, economic marginalization, and cultural transformations (Afolayan, 2023; Amadi & Olabode, 2024). This perspective is crucial for this study, as it situates literary representations of women within broader socio-historical dynamics rather than isolating gender as a singular axis of analysis.

In literary criticism, there has been a renewed focus on how African women writers across generations negotiate and reinterpret gender roles. A 2024 study on African women

writers demonstrates that early female-authored texts such as *Efuru* already contained subtle forms of resistance, even when they appeared to operate within traditional frameworks (Okonkwo, 2024). This suggests that the redefinition of womanhood in Igbo fiction did not begin in contemporary literature but has evolved progressively over time.

Furthermore, recent scholarship has revisited the intersection between feminism and womanism, particularly within Nigerian literature. Studies conducted between 2024 and 2025 emphasize that womanism, as theorized by African scholars, foregrounds collectivism, negotiation, and complementary gender relations rather than outright confrontation (Njoku & Ihekwereme, 2025; Chukwu, 2024). This is particularly relevant in analyzing Igbo texts, where female characters often resist oppression through culturally acceptable means such as negotiation, resilience, and communal influence.

In addition, current debates in feminist literary studies underscore the importance of contextualizing gender within African philosophical traditions. Research in 2024 points out that pre-colonial African societies, including Igbo communities, afforded women certain economic and social powers that were later eroded by colonial structures (Ezeani, 2024). This insight complicates simplistic narratives of African women as universally oppressed and allows for a more nuanced reading of literary texts.

Another emerging trend in recent scholarship is the emphasis on plural feminist frameworks. Contemporary critics argue that no single feminist theory adequately captures African women's experiences. As a result, alternative models such as nego-feminism, motherism, and stiwanism have been proposed to address the limitations of both Western feminism and early womanism (Adichie, 2023; Ekechi & Adegoke, 2025). These frameworks collectively highlight negotiation, motherhood, and social transformation as central to African gender discourse.

Importantly, recent works (2025) on Africana womanism further expand the conversation by situating African women's struggles within global systems of inequality, including capitalism and epistemic injustice (Maduakor & Okafor, 2025). This broader perspective reinforces the idea that literary representations of womanhood are not only cultural but also political and ideological.

Overall, the literature reveals a clear shift from viewing African women as passive subjects to recognizing them as active agents negotiating identity, power, and resistance (Umar & Obasi, 2025; Nwankwo, 2024). However, there remains a gap in applying these contemporary theoretical insights specifically to Igbo fiction in a sustained and comparative manner. This gap is what the study seeks to fill by providing a feminist re-reading of selected Igbo texts across different historical moments.

## Theoretical Framework

### 1. African Feminism

African feminism provides the primary lens for analyzing this study, as it foregrounds the lived realities of African women within their socio-cultural environments. Unlike Western feminism, which often emphasizes individual autonomy and confrontation, African feminism is rooted in cultural specificity, communal values and negotiation rather than

antagonism. Recent scholarship emphasizes that African feminism prioritizes balance and complementarity between genders, while still challenging oppressive structures.

## 2. Womanism

Womanism complements African feminism by providing a more culturally grounded and inclusive framework for understanding African women's experiences. Originally developed by Black feminist thinkers and expanded by African scholars, womanism emphasizes the family and community survival, motherhood and nurturing roles, complementarity between men and women and non-confrontational resistance strategies. Recent studies reaffirm that womanism is particularly relevant in African literary analysis because it captures the complex balance between resistance and cultural continuity.

## Textual Analysis

### Redefining Womanhood in Selected Igbo Fiction

The redefinition of womanhood in Igbo fiction emerges most clearly through a diachronic reading of selected texts, revealing a gradual but significant shift from silence and subjugation to agency, resistance, and self-definition. This transformation is neither linear nor uniform; rather, it reflects the interplay between cultural expectations, historical transitions, and evolving feminist consciousness.

#### 1. Patriarchal Construction of Womanhood in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, womanhood is largely constructed within a rigid patriarchal framework that privileges masculinity and subordinates femininity. Women are primarily defined by their reproductive and domestic roles, functioning as wives, mothers, and symbols of male status. The social structure of Umuofia reinforces male dominance, where strength, authority, and decision-making are gendered as masculine attributes.

Characters such as Okonkwo's wives exemplify this marginalization. They exist within the narrative largely in relation to Okonkwo, with limited autonomy or voice. Even when they exhibit emotional intelligence or resilience, these qualities are undervalued within the patriarchal hierarchy. The beating of wives, for instance, is normalized within certain cultural contexts, reflecting systemic gender inequality.

However, a deeper feminist reading reveals subtle complexities. The reverence for female spiritual entities, such as the Earth goddess, suggests an underlying acknowledgment of feminine power within Igbo cosmology. This duality where women are socially marginalized yet spiritually significant, creates a tension that African feminism helps to illuminate. It indicates that pre-colonial Igbo society was not entirely devoid of female authority but structured it in ways that limited women's public agency. Thus, womanhood in this text is constructed as subordinate but symbolically powerful, laying the foundation for later literary resistance.

#### 2. Negotiation and Quiet Resistance in *Efuru*

*Efuru* marks a significant departure from male-authored representations by centring a female protagonist who actively negotiates her identity within societal expectations. *Efuru*

is not a passive character; she is economically independent, emotionally resilient, and socially respected. Yet, her worth is continually measured against her ability to fulfill traditional roles, particularly motherhood.

The absence of children becomes a central site of tension, exposing how womanhood is narrowly defined within reproductive terms. Despite her success in trade and her strong personality, Efuru is perceived as incomplete because she does not conform to societal expectations of motherhood.

From the perspective of African feminism, Efuru's character embodies negotiated agency. She does not openly rebel against cultural norms but navigates them strategically. Her decision to leave an unfaithful husband, for instance, reflects autonomy without outright rejection of societal structures.

At the same time, the novel introduces an alternative model of womanhood through Efuru's association with the lake goddess Uhamiri. This spiritual connection symbolizes a form of empowerment that transcends biological motherhood, suggesting that female identity can be redefined beyond patriarchal limitations. Through *Efuru*, womanhood is reimagined as flexible and negotiable, rather than fixed and restrictive.

### 3. Deconstructing Motherhood in the Joys of Motherhood

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the idealization of motherhood is critically interrogated and ultimately deconstructed. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, embodies the traditional belief that a woman's ultimate fulfillment lies in motherhood. However, her lived experience reveals the contradictions and burdens inherent in this expectation.

Motherhood, rather than being a source of joy, becomes a site of sacrifice, suffering, and unrecognized labor. Nnu Ego dedicates her life to her children yet receives little emotional or material support in return. Her struggles are further intensified by the socio-economic realities of colonial Lagos, where traditional support systems are weakened.

From a womanist perspective, this text is particularly significant because it highlights the tension between communal ideals and individual suffering. While womanism values motherhood and family, Emecheta exposes how these ideals can be exploited within patriarchal systems.

Nnu Ego's tragic end underscores the failure of a system that defines women solely through motherhood without providing structural support or recognition. The novel thus challenges the cultural glorification of maternal sacrifice and calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes meaningful womanhood. Here, womanhood is redefined as problematic and contested, rather than inherently fulfilling.

### 4. Voice, Agency, and Resistance in Purple Hibiscus

*Purple Hibiscus* represents a more contemporary and assertive redefinition of womanhood, where female characters actively resist oppressive structures and reclaim their voices. The novel explores the impact of patriarchy within both the family and religious institutions, particularly through the character of Eugene, whose authoritarian control silences his wife and children.

Kambili, the protagonist, undergoes a profound transformation from silence to self-expression. Her journey symbolizes the emergence of female voice and agency in a

restrictive environment. Similarly, Auntie Ifeoma represents an alternative model of womanhood such as independent, outspoken, and intellectually empowered.

From an African feminist perspective, the novel demonstrates a shift towards explicit resistance. Unlike Efurú's negotiated agency, Kambili and Ifeoma challenge patriarchy more directly, reflecting changing social realities and increased feminist consciousness. At the same time, elements of womanism remain evident in the emphasis on family bonds and communal resilience. Resistance is not framed as a rejection of culture but as a means of transforming it. Thus, womanhood in this text is redefined as assertive, vocal, and self-determined, marking a significant evolution in Igbo fiction.

### Synthesis: Evolution of Womanhood in Igbo Fiction

A comparative analysis of these texts reveals a clear trajectory in the representation of womanhood:

Text	Representation of Womanhood
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Subordinate but symbolically powerful
<i>Efurú</i>	Negotiated and flexible identity
<i>The Joys of Motherhood</i>	Burdened and contested role
<i>Purple Hibiscus</i>	Assertive, resistant, and self-defined

This progression illustrates how Igbo fiction moves from reinforcing patriarchal norms to actively challenging and redefining them. Importantly, this transformation aligns with the principles of African feminism and womanism, which emphasize both resistance and cultural continuity.

### Conclusion

This study set out to examine how womanhood is redefined in Igbo fiction through a feminist perspective, drawing on selected texts across different historical moments. The analysis reveals that representations of women in Igbo literature have undergone significant transformation from passive and marginalized figures within rigid patriarchal systems to complex individuals who actively negotiate, resist, and reconstruct their identities.

In early depictions such as *Things Fall Apart*, womanhood is largely confined within structures that prioritize male authority, even though traces of female symbolic power exist within spiritual and cultural domains. This foundational portrayal establishes the socio-cultural context within which later writers engage and respond.

With Efurú, a shift becomes evident as female subjectivity is brought to the center of the narrative. Womanhood is no longer passively defined but actively negotiated, even within the constraints of tradition. This marks an important turning point in Igbo fiction, where women begin to assert agency without necessarily rejecting cultural frameworks.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the ideological construction of motherhood is critically interrogated, exposing the contradictions between cultural expectations and lived realities. The novel challenges deeply rooted assumptions about female fulfillment, presenting womanhood as a site of struggle rather than unquestioned identity.

Finally, *Purple Hibiscus* offers a contemporary reimagining of womanhood characterized by voice, resistance, and self-definition. Here, female characters not only question patriarchal authority but actively dismantle it, reflecting a more assertive feminist consciousness.

In all, these texts demonstrate that the redefinition of womanhood in Igbo fiction is both progressive and contextually grounded. It involves a movement from silence to voice, from subordination to agency, and from fixed roles to fluid identities. Importantly, this transformation aligns with the principles of African feminism and womanism, which emphasize negotiation, cultural continuity, and collective well-being alongside resistance. Thus, Igbo fiction emerges not merely as a reflection of societal change but as an active participant in reshaping cultural narratives about gender. It provides a critical space for questioning dominant ideologies and imagining alternative possibilities for women's lives in African societies.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of this study extend beyond literary analysis and contribute meaningfully to broader discussions in literary scholarship, gender discourse, and education within the Nigerian context. By demonstrating how Igbo fiction redefines womanhood across different historical moments, the study foregrounds literature as both a reflective and transformative cultural force.

From the perspective of literary scholarship, the study underscores the urgent need for culturally grounded feminist interpretations of African texts. Much of earlier criticism has relied heavily on Western feminist paradigms, often overlooking the socio-cultural specificities that shape African gender relations. This study shows that frameworks such as African feminism and womanism provide more context-sensitive tools for interpreting female experiences in Igbo fiction. By emphasizing negotiation, complementarity, and communal values, these frameworks enable a more nuanced understanding of how women navigate and transform patriarchal structures. Consequently, scholars are encouraged to adopt interpretive models that are rooted in indigenous realities rather than relying solely on external theoretical constructs.

In relation to gender discourse, the study highlights the significance of rethinking womanhood beyond restrictive and monolithic cultural definitions. The selected texts collectively demonstrate that womanhood is not a fixed or biologically determined category but a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by social, economic, and historical forces. Literature, in this regard, functions as a critical site for challenging entrenched gender norms and proposing alternative identities for women. Through the portrayal of agency, resistance, and self-definition, Igbo fiction contributes to ongoing conversations about gender equity and social transformation in Nigeria. This is particularly relevant in contemporary society, where tensions between tradition and modernity continue to influence expectations of women's roles.

The findings suggest that literary texts should be more deliberately integrated into teaching and learning processes as tools for fostering critical thinking and social awareness. Engaging students with texts that explore gender, identity, and power relations can enhance their analytical skills while also promoting reflective and empathetic understanding of societal issues. Furthermore, the study supports the adoption of gender-sensitive

pedagogical approaches that create inclusive classroom environments and challenge stereotypical thinking. Such approaches align with contemporary educational goals that emphasize not only cognitive competence but also the development of socially responsible and critically conscious learners.

Finally, the study opens several avenues for further research. Future scholars may undertake comparative analyses of male-authored and female-authored Igbo texts to deepen understanding of gender representation across authorship. There is also a need to explore emerging forms of African literature, including digital and contemporary narratives, which continue to reshape conceptions of womanhood in new and complex ways. Additionally, further research could investigate the relationship between literary representations and real-life gender attitudes, particularly among students. Such studies would provide valuable insights into how literature influences perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors, thereby strengthening the intersection between literary studies and educational practice.

## References

- Adebayo, S. (2025). Gender, culture, and identity in contemporary Nigerian fiction. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 61(2), 210–225.
- Acholonu, C. O. (1995). *Motherism: The Afrocentric alternative to feminism*. Afa Publications.
- Adichie, C. (2006). *Purple hibiscus*. Algonquin Books.
- Adichie, C. (2023). Nego-feminism, motherism, and stiwanism in contemporary African literature. *International Journal of African Gender Studies*, 5(1), 22–40.
- Afolayan, T. (2023). Colonial disruption and economic marginalization of African women in literature. *Journal of African Studies*, 12(4), 56–70.
- Amadi, F., & Olabode, K. (2024). Historical and cultural dimensions of African feminism. *Nigerian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 14–29.
- Chukwu, R. (2024). Collectivism and complementary gender relations in African narratives. *Journal of African Social Thought*, 6(1), 78–90.
- Ezeani, B. (2024). Precolonial African women and socio-economic influence. *African Historical Review*, 11(2), 99–115.
- Ezeigbo, A. A. (2022). Gender issues in Nigerian literature: A contemporary perspective. *African Literature Today*, 40, 45–60.
- Emecheta, B. (1979). *The joys of motherhood*. Heinemann.

- Kolawole, M. E. M. (2021). *Womanism and African consciousness*. Africa World Press.
- Maduakor, C., & Okafor, T. (2025). Africana womanism and global inequality in literature. *Journal of African Feminist Thought*, 9(1), 12–31.
- Njoku, O., & Ihekwereme, E. (2025). Womanism and negotiation in contemporary Nigerian fiction. *African Gender Studies*, 10(2), 45–63.
- Nnaemeka, O. (2020). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32(2), 123–138.
- Nwankwo, I. (2024). Negotiating womanhood in Igbo narratives. *Ikenga: International Journal of African Studies*, 25(3), 89–104.
- Nwankwo, P. (2024). Negotiating identity and resistance in Igbo female characters. *Nigerian Journal of Literature and Culture*, 10(3), 41–59.
- Nwapa, F. (1966). *Efuru*. Heinemann.
- Okeke, G. (2023). Re-reading African feminism in the 21st century. *Journal of African Studies*, 15(1), 67–82.
- Okonkwo, N. (2024). Efuru and early African female resistance in literature. *Journal of Women in African Literature*, 7(3), 21–37.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (2024). Womanism and the dynamics of African gender discourse. *Feminist Africa*, 28(1), 1–15.
- Ugwudike, L. (2024). African feminism and the negotiation of gender in Igbo literature. *Journal of African Literary Studies*, 15(2), 88–102.
- Umar, S., & Obasi, J. (2025). From passivity to agency: African women in literature. *African Literary Review*, 14(2), 58–77.
- Nwoye, C., & Eze, I. (2025). Reframing womanhood in African fiction: A postcolonial feminist perspective. *African Humanities Review*, 9(1), 34–51.