



# New Voices of Women's Agency in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial and Other Stories*

Leah Iliya Jalo

School of Basic and Remedial Studies, Gombe State University

## ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 040620055

Type: Review

Accepted: 10/04/2020

Published: 28/06/2020

### \*Corresponding Author

Leah Iliya Jalo

E-mail: [leahjalo@gmail.com](mailto:leahjalo@gmail.com)

Phone: 08036346734

**Keywords:** Advocacy; Families; Inheritance; Marginalization; Patriarchal; Widows

## ABSTRACT

The paper articulates some of the problems faced by women in patriarchal societies with specific reference to the plight of widows as depicted in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial and Other Stories*. The stories provoke us to reconsider and think afresh about the various ways in which widows are marginalized. It also spurs us to ask how we can do something about their situation. The study seeks to find out how engendering awareness serves the empowerment process. It questions how the female characters respond to the cultural and social realities illustrated in the texts. The paper adopts the purposive sampling technique. Excerpts are purposively sampled from the selected text using the Negofeminist theory. Okoye presents female characters that are daring to face life on their own terms and this helps them to conquer the overwhelming problems they face as they emerge triumphant at the end. The study affirms that the advocacy carried out by women and writers is beginning to produce the much desired result. This is a hopeful move that will subsequently improve the inheritance rights of wives and daughters as well as the treatment of widows in most cultures. The response of these widows to their varied dilemma stimulates a change in some of the assumptions about them. This consequently pulls down the dominant structures that exploit women and takes advantage of them in the society. Our study reveals that maintaining equity and harmony in our families results in peaceful societies and nations. To address this, there is a need for conceptualization which digs deep into the ingrained and culturally normative prejudice. This will pave a path for peaceful co-existence, synchronization and integration of all members of the society.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

*The Trial and Other Stories* is a collection of poignant and painful narratives about widowhood in Nigeria. Ifeoma Okoye wrote the foregrounding work. It is through this work that she captures many different sides of women's lives. Although these women experience hardship, pain and suffering, they persevere to the end, highlighting women's capacity to struggle and triumph through adversity. The analysis of the stories is

necessitated by the need to draw our attention to the efforts of women to regain the pugnaciously ruptured status of women through an indefatigable search for a new female identity. The widows resolve questions why we should continue to debase womanhood in the name of culture. These women do not resign to self-pity, but reclaim agency by attaining freedom from the limits and constraints of their lives and their status as widows. This study affirms that the situation of widows should continue to feature on both national and international

forums until they become firmly integrated into the policy agenda, because if this is not done, there will be a perpetuation of this debilitating circle of exploitation and repression. These stories are purposively selected for analysis and are subjected to critical analysis.

Our choice of Okoye's *The Trial and Other Stories* is premised on the need to improve the condition of widows in societies as a means of achieving social engineering and change. This is because according to a report by the United Nations, there are about 258 million widows around the world and nearly one in ten live in abject poverty. Once widowed, women in many countries often confront a denial of inheritance and land rights, degrading and life threatening mourning and burial rites and other forms of widow abuse. Okoye calls for action towards achieving full rights and recognition for widows because it is long overdue. At the community level, it is important to review the plight of widows and ensure that their rights are enshrined in the law. Empowering women through access to full participation in decision-making and public life, and a life free from violence and abuse will give them a chance to build a secure life after bereavement. Importantly, creating opportunities for widows can help to protect their children and avoid the cycle of intergenerational poverty and deprivation (www.un.org).

Diana Meyers observes that some people grow up in social environments saturated with culturally normative prejudice and implicit biases or even in communities where overt forms of bigotry are strictly proscribed. Although official cultural norms uphold the values of equality and tolerance, cultures continue to transmit camouflaged messages of the inferiority of historically subordinated social groups through stereotypes and other imagery (1997). It is on account of this that the study of Okoye's short stories becomes important in the quest to reclaim women's agency. This is mainly because the wicked customs, which form the crux of the stories under consideration, suggests that they are not only oppressive but also repressive, not only physical but also psychological. This situation makes them inimical to women's agency. The study adopts purposive sampling technique. Excerpts were purposively sampled from the collection of short stories and analysed using the negofeminist theory.

The relevance of the choice of the topic treated in this paper lies in the fact that *The Trial and Other Stories* by Okoye brings to the fore, inherent gender bias and inequality in most traditional societies especially in Africa. According to Nneamaka Chikezie, "the common feature of all forms of gender-based violence is that they are violent acts that are socially tolerated because the victims are females" (20). The stories in this collection substantiate this statement. In his exploration of the use of short stories to portray the plight of women, Onuora Nweke declares that: "like writers from other regions, African women writers have utilized the short story genre both to prepare themselves for the task of writing major works of literature like the novel, and also to explore their vision in and about their societies" (212). Always

central to most works of literature written by African women is the negotiation of space by women for proper integration in the affairs of their societies instead of always being located at the periphery. Similarly, Regina Okafor posits that in her short stories, Okoye encapsulates the various traumatic experiences and tribulations of a widow: assaults, false accusations, exploitation and more. (78). Furthermore, Okafor examines widowhood as an institutionalized dead weight to personal identity and dignity. This study therefore goes further to expatiate on how these women achieve agency through negotiation and assertiveness. It advocates a re-ordering of mind set on gender polarization. The women therefore reject the patriarchal stand that women should remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened.

## 1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The feminist literary theory provides the springboard for the critical discourse on Okoye's selected text. Jonas Akung observes that feminist criticism identifies those areas of female oppression and exclusion and exposes them. This takes place in the explication of literary texts to see how these vices are imposed on women. We equally see the efforts made at rectifying inequalities in domestic and circular relations, particularly in defining women's rights within and outside marriage by creating characters that become the speaking voices of women. According to Chizoba Akpan, the focal thrust of feminism generally is centred on the advocacy for the liberation and dismantling of toxic patriarchal machinations (222).

The choice of the feminist theory is basically to bring to the fore some of the basic concerns of women as they aspire towards a non-gendered society. Zainab Abdulkarim posits that: "what female writers desire is an avenue to use their fictional writings to review the plight of the African woman through disarming tradition, cultural and social structures that oppose women's development as well as providing alternatives" (335). It is our purpose here to dwell on feminism as the most eclectic means of advancing for positive change in the lives of women. The feminist theory is a guiding set of beliefs and principles that become the basis for action. The feminists therefore seek to change the position of women or ideas about women through different concepts such as Negofeminism and the like.

### 1.2.1 Negofeminism

In addition to this, we equally consider Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism. Negofeminism is a subset of feminism. It is the feminism of negotiation. It aspires to change the world by regenerating humanity in an outstanding way; this can be achieved as it negotiates peace between warring parties. It usefully brings together analyses of key issues, events and arguments among the sexes that have been over heated and are

causing discord. Nnaemaka reveals negotiation as the best option in conflict resolution between the sexes. This has great potential for breeding meaningful development in politics. The strong can only listen to the weak when they stop feeling privileged. Nnaemeka argues that “all-knowing”, “all- talking”, and “never listening” feminist critics of African literature must try to understand that the negotiations of African feminists with their traditions are neither narrow-minded nor timorous. Nnaemeka opines that western feminism, womanism, stiwanism, motherism, and negofeminism are all committed to restoring women’s dignity and equality in their respective societies. This reiterates the need for international dialogue and an open exchange of perspectives, which recognizes both commonalities and differences.

Nego-feminism, therefore, connects with the oppressed groups throughout the world in order to open up avenues for greater development to take place. Its objective is to rethink familiar arguments and highlight textual moves, frame devices, while importantly drawing attention to factorial forgiveness between the sexes. Nego-feminism reflects on the challenges and possibilities inherent in any sexist tension. It also allows comfortable boundary crossing conversations that were available nowhere else to the same degree, which is why it negotiates between the sexes on any generated tension between them. The experiences of the female characters in this collection of short stories help in illuminating the attributes of the heroines on the basis of the feminist thought of Negofeminism. Accordingly, the stories in this collection point out the resolve of these widows to reclaim agency and change their social status through negotiation, modification and alterations in human interactions.

### 1.3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

#### 1.3.1 “Soul Healers”

In the first story, “Soul Healers”, Somandi shows her love and affection for her children when she dares her in-laws. She goes to check on her children despite their threats to disallow her. Her children looked sad and drained due to the absence of a mother’s love in their daily lives. According to Okafor, Somandi makes a mockery of the traditional regressive order that separates children from their mother by flouting the restriction order (79). She resolutely rebels against traditional restrictions on the woman when she realizes that the system is indifferent to her and her children.

Her story of widowhood is that of intimidation and suffering. Her husband’s family also insists that she must not secure a job and earn an income. However, she struggles because work in her opinion is not all about earning money: “it also meant freedom, empowerment, self-fulfilment and self-esteem. It meant meeting people, gathering experience, building character

and learning to live”(12). She believes that a woman without any income of her own would always remain someone’s slave. This character conforms to Adichie’s stand in *A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* where she states that women should “never apologize for working... you don’t even have to love your job, you can merely love what your job does for you- the confidence and self-fulfilment that come with doing and earning” (5-6). Therefore, she risks her life and goes to see them in school because “no one can love her children as she did. She referred to them as her soul healers” (14) as the title of the story points out. Her intelligence, resourcefulness and courage are commendable. Through her determined effort, Somandi is able to win back her children’s affection and get her emotional healing.

#### 1.3.2 “Between Women”

The story is about Ebuka who is an orphan from a very poor family and is already widowed at the age of twenty-two. She left her daughter to come to Enugu so that she can provide for the family, thereafter; she is hired as a domestic staff with the Edets. Mrs Edet denies Ebuka permission to travel home and see her daughter for about two years now. Her employer claims that she will not have time to cater for the children once Ebuka is away. Uzoamaka Madu observes that “Mrs. Edet, who is a woman and is unarguably endowed with all maternal instincts, denied another woman the opportunity of the companionship of her daughter of such a tender age is to say the least unfortunate” (150). The foregoing passage highlights a woman’s insensitivity to the needs of her other fellow women, thereby emphasizing the need for female solidarity. Apart from this, Mrs Edet has violently treated Ebuka, both verbally and physically, and this compels Ebuka’s aunt to comment thus: “Well I never really liked rich people. They treat others like dirt” (24). In the first part of the story, Ebuka is presented as docile, submissive and hard working. Subsequently, there is a turning point in her life. Okafor captures this aptly when she writes that: “the employee jettisons the cloak of docility and submissiveness and bravely puts on that of defiance, courage and determination and works out of Mrs Edet and her claustrophobic house to nurse her sick child” (82).

Ebuka has to take a decision: either to be ‘enslaved’ by a fellow woman because she desires a wage or pursue a better future by quitting the job. She chose the latter because “Amara gave meaning to her life. Amara was her life” (24). She has come to realize that: “It’s the fear of the unknown future that keeps us glued to a deplorable situation” (25). In this story, Okoye stigmatizes the abuse of the underprivileged and extols the importance of family. Okoye desires an improvement in women’s interrelationship and female bonding.

#### 1.3.3 “The Voiceless Victim”

The story is about a group of beggars struggling to survive and most of the beggars in this story are women. The narration focuses on Ebele who resorts to begging because she is saddled with huge responsibilities and is of very low financial status. Initially the narrator assumed that they are simply “lazy people who were reluctant to work for a living... despicable people” (35). The narrator’s attention is drawn to Ebele, who is about eighteen years old: “she was clutching a baby to her bosom and crying beside her was a toddler” (35). When this young widow pleads with her for some money, the narrator shouts at her. She tells her “Get out. You have no money and you are breeding like a guinea pig” (36). This outburst brought remorseful and disarming words from the beggar, a response that differs from what the narrator usually receives. Ebele is not overwhelmed by the enormity of her situation; she follows the narrator to the office and tells her about her plight and the unfortunate circumstance surrounding her life.

Upon hearing the young lady’s story, the narrator realizes that Ebele is a “victim of child marriage, of child widowhood and a world of imbalances” (42). At the end, the narrator appreciates the following virtues in Ebele: “her courage, initiative, high moral standards in spite of poverty, her well-chosen words, gently spoken” (40). The narrator admits that the beggar dared me to do something about her situation and indeed she rises up to the challenge as she resolves to help her find something meaningful to do. The story illustrates the plight of women in the society. This is because sometimes women are subjected to inhuman treatment on the basis of assumptions and misconceptions.

### 1.3.4 “A Strange Disease”

In this story, Enu refuses the advances of her brother in-law who wants her to be his third wife after the death of her husband. Enu knows that Onumba is possessive, covetous and selfish. She also understands the economic and social reasons that give rise to polygamy. Okoye points out the misery and deprivation polygamy can bring, far from being an economic panacea, it could lead to economic disaster. Jealousy is also exhibited; Akubia, his wife comes to fight her at home even though she has not given her consent to marry Onumba. Enu has become powerfully aware of its disadvantages, and through her, we are made to see the misery that polygamy can bring. Polygamy in this context is an instrument of oppression wielded by men to subjugate and dominate women. Enu knows that men who were polygamous in nature treat the newly acquired wives like idols until they got themselves another idol. The author is generally concerned about the fate of women, not only within the ambit of polygamy.

Enu is very cautious in the type of response she gives to her brother in-law because she observes that he is: “an insidious man, didn’t take kindly to any words or actions he felt were humiliating to him and he could harm her and her two teenage sons if she refused

his proposal in a way he found humiliating” (29). Beside all that, Enu did not like Onumba. She describes him as selfish, high handed and untrustworthy. He is also a wife beater, just like her late husband. She receives counsel from Ebube- a seventy-five year old widow who tells her: “Marry him if you want to be in hell fire for the rest of your life.... Marry him if you want to lose your sons’ share of the family land to him” (30).

His action suggests that when the kinsmen propose marriage as portrayed in this context, it is not out of love but for material gains and inheritance and also to establish continued male dominance. To overcome this hurdle, Enu applies a lot of wisdom and reason rather than emotion, she dreads having to go through “widowhood again with all its attendant deprivations and horrible mourning rites” (33). She comes up with a non-violent strategy, which successfully paves a way out of her dilemma without incurring the man’s wrath. This story buttresses the happenings in the traditional setting where women in polygamy do not enjoy the institution as much as earlier written African texts will have us believe. The bitterness, strife, rivalry and rancour associated with polygamy are well typified in the relationship between Akubia and Enu. Her decision not to get married is important because it shows the development of female protagonists who now question ‘that form of happiness that is derived from matrimony’. Her refusal also suggests she is now more informed.

Writing on the subject of polygamy, Andrea Powell submits that polygyny which makes specific reference to a man having more than one wife as opposed to polygamy which is more encompassing is still being practiced in Africa. In addition to this, he notes that polygyny dehumanizes women in many ways. This means that despite its benefits, polygyny is intrinsically destructive to women’s anatomy (166). To conquer this challenge, Enu pretends to be suffering from a deadly disease, which is infectious. Onumba gives up his quest of having her as a third wife and she achieves her desired freedom without confrontation, she negotiates her way out of this dilemma and secures the future of her sons in the process.

### 1.3.5 “The Trial”

In the title story, Anayo is accused of murder and summoned for questioning by a group of clan women. In a review by African Books Collective, we learn that “The Trial” tells the tale of Anayo, a grief stricken and pregnant widow, who stands accused by her jealous brother in-law, Ezeji of poisoning her husband. This notwithstanding, she is determined to prove to the women group that she is innocent. Here, Okoye explores intra-women relationships by highlighting the manner in which the women group handles other women in disadvantaged positions. She notes that the women’s group was notorious for applying rigidly the clan’s traditional laws and sanctions. In like manner, Adichie

equally opines that: “women are quick to criticize other women in an attempt to silence them” (27).

The group’s duty is to find out the truth and to certify this; Anayo has to go through the traditional trial to prove her innocence because if she refuses, she will be ostracized. Anayo revolts against the decision; she reminds the other women of female solidarity and wonders why the educated members of the group will not speak against this injustice. In this regard, we see the woman not only as the oppressed but also as the oppressor. Anayo faces a dehumanizing and humiliating trial under the clan’s traditional laws.

Anayo then reminds women about their situation when she says: “we shouldn’t let men use us to police ourselves... this dehumanizing and humiliating tradition” (48). Yet, none of the women stands up for her cause and they insist she goes through the trial. She is apparently shaken by Toje’s response; this is a woman who often spoke of feminism, injustices meted out on women by men. Yet here “*she is watching a fellow woman being humiliated and subjected not by men but by her fellow women and remained tongue-tied*”(49) (my emphasis). When Anayo’s mother arrives, Anayo is initially relieved that finally someone will stand up for her, but much to her chagrin, her mother advised her to go through the trial to prove her innocence.

Anayo rejects the assumed self-silencing of womanhood; she airs her view over her trial and clamours for change. The silence in the trial room is described as ‘deafening’ (53). Her keen scrutiny enables her to observe that her brother-in-law dips his finger into the water before passing it over to her. This makes her suspicious of his motives because she knows he is desperate to get her out of the way, therefore, Anayo raises an alarm. Her assertiveness, insistence and strong will come into play. When she refuses to take the water until it is certified safe by her in-law; the Ozo who is present at the scene supports her and this singular act earns her, the much desired freedom. He declares: “You’re free to go, our wife. The accusation against you is dropped. Go and get ready for the burial of your husband” (54).

Ezeji is visibly shaken and distraught, he expresses his disappointment thus: “You are not going to inherit the property of a man you’ve murdered” (55). This reveals the motivation behind his actions. Through this story, Okoye rewrites a scene of what sometimes occurs at funerals in some African cultures but with a twist. Rather than allowing the woman to be destroyed and reduced to nothing on account of her husband’s demise, we encounter a female character that asserts her eccentricity which at the end leads to her individual freedom and the freedom of all women who choose not to be limited by the circumstances surrounding their lives. Instead, they serve as agents of change and liberation for the woman who rises above these limitations to advocate for change and re-orientation. She is presented as an educated woman, who stands

firm and achieves some concession. She is intelligent and audacious, smart enough to manipulate her circumstances and to save her life. Anayo refuses to give in to the option of remaining silent as a result of a mortal fear of the domineering male figures around her.

### 1.3.6 “The New Business Woman”

Mercy’s late husband Egolum used to run an automobile spare parts shop before his demise three months ago. She resolves to continue running the shop instead of starting a new line of business with all the risks involved. As at the time of his death, she was unemployed with three children to cater for. To get a good grasp of the business, she decides to go to the shop and assess it so as to map out her plans. This is because she is concerned with salvaging and securing her late husband’s business.

Mercy is not unaware of the problems and challenges she is likely to encounter in her attempt to delve into a male dominated field. She desires to break the norm and challenge stereotypes about women in this line of business. Although she cannot identify the spare parts, their functions or their names and she did she know the retail price of each item, she remains committed to overcoming all these obstacles and maintaining the shop. Her husband’s business rival offers to buy off the business and categorically tells her that it was a man’s business. He adds: “I do not know of any woman in the business”; but she quickly tells him: “I am happy to be the first” (60). Okoye implores women to take up the challenge and break negative assumptions about women by daring into fields hitherto assumed to be the exclusive prerogative of the male gender. It is necessary for women to take a leap into fields historically filled with men.

When she closely scrutinizes the records, Mercy realizes that the sales boy who has been running the shop since her husband’s death was not bringing in much. It dawned on her that he may be embezzling the profit. He suddenly announces his decision to quit the job because he says: “I don’t want to work under a woman. This is not a woman’s business” (62). Mercy hated the way Adim and Odo “belittle her because of her sex” (63). Rather than give up, Mercy decides to go and see Ezeleu, another spare parts dealer to seek for his guidance and support. Unlike the other men who look down on her, Ezeleu noticed her determination to succeed and offers to help her. He releases one of his trust-worthy boys named Innocent to join her in the shop and guide her accordingly. Ezeleu opines that he would be happy if his daughters would grow up to be as self-confident and as enterprising as Mercy. He admits that he has seen in her the qualities of a strong, steady and determined woman. He also offers to come over to her shop occasionally to see how the shop is been run. In this story, we learn that a woman can pick up the pieces

of her life after the death of her husband and make a success out of it.

### 1.3.7 “From Wife to Concubine”

After the death of Ini’s husband, she has issues with her brother in-law who she describes as “wicked and powerful” (66). He has become known for acquiring other people’s farmlands by deceit, intimidation or litigation. In like manner, he plans to dispossess her of a block of four flats in Onitsha. Rather than fold her hands, Ini decides to fight for her right so that her children will not starve to death. She is also careful to ensure that the case does not get to the court because he can easily get the judgment passed in his favour. The court of law, which should serve as a place of refuge for the poor and disadvantaged in the society and the last hope of the common man is shown to have failed in its duty such that favours are granted at the expense of upholding justice and equity. In this case, justice is passed in favour of the highest bidder.

Going down memory lane, Ini re-calls all the dehumanizing widowhood rites she had to go through after Fred’s death and how she was not allowed to take part in the burial although she is asked to provide the money needed for the burial expenses. After all these experiences, she realizes that: “once you give in to other people’s attempt to subjugate you, they would most likely continue to subjugate you” (68).

To show his desperation, Paul spreads word in the village that Ini is not legally married to Fred but was merely his concubine. He also steals her marriage certificate and all efforts to get another copy from the Registry proved abortive. Ini originally owns the block of flats in contention but she changes the papers to bear her husband’s name because tradition stipulates that it is embarrassing for a man to live in a house owned by his wife. Ini blames herself for this huge mistake but she does not allow it to deter her from finding a solution to the problem. Ini is not scared into giving up her rights; instead, it pushed her to negotiate her way out of this dilemma into liberty as imprinted in the feminist theory of Negofeminism. Her next action after Paul gives her a quit notice is a sly solution, which nevertheless gets Paul to stop harassing and intimidating her. She threatens her brother in-law with information about his past, which her late husband once divulged to her. Though she did not know the details, Paul’s reaction when she mentions it suggests he has something to hide. From that day, Paul did not mention anything about the acquisition of the flats to her again. On the contrary, he returns her marriage certificate to her a few weeks later and she continued to live in her flat without further threats. The story deconstructs all the myths derived from the supposed passivity of the female mind.

### 1.3.8 “Second Chance”

Ogoli sets out to secure the custody of her children after her husband’s death because she chose to remarry

outside the extended family as is expected of her. Three years after the death of her husband, she has been working tirelessly to cater for her two children. Life has not been easy for her financially and otherwise. To get over her lonely moments, she decides to marry a widower who also has children of his own. She hopes that her children will find a father figure in him while she serves as a mother to his own children.

Her late husband’s uncle reminds her that although she is free to remarry, she could not take the children along because they belong to the extended family of Anachuna. Ogoli on the contrary fears that her children are too young to be left without a mother. She exhibits a mother’s love and sacrifice when she laments that: “I’d rather die than let them be taken away from me” (75). She ponders on this culture that “discriminates against widows and the children of widows. The children had already been traumatized by the death of their father. The custom could cause them to lose their mother as well” (75). The story illustrates that there are no easy solutions to life’s surprising ironies, yet the end is a hopeful one.

Although Ogoli loves Gerry, she fears that marrying him would mean losing her children to her in-laws. That is not a path she wishes to take because “it would mean committing them to a life of unhappiness, a life without a father and mother” (81). Her commitment to Gerry is only renewed when he promised to protect her children, see them through school and ensure that they are not taken away from her. In this story, we are presented with a battle of will and strength, victory and defeat, yet Ogoli is determined to make something positive happen and she succeeds. The story gives room for women to make informed choices and break down gender stereotypes.

### 1.3.9 “Daughters for Sale”

Meta’s brother in-law has practically pushed her to the extreme. Her reaction to his misogynist attitude makes people to call her mad... He refers to her as a mad woman for daring to challenge him, she says: “because I won’t let him continue to treat me like a goat being dragged to the market for sale” (83). She comments that she was not ‘mad when she was obeying him like a dog’.

Her story has been a long tale of a disadvantaged female serving the wimps and caprices of the dominant male figure in her life. Her own father had sold out four of his daughters; one after the other to the men who could pay the highest bride price. The money he acquired from this, along with his life earnings, he spends on drinking. He sells Meta off to a grains dealer in the north and she concludes that “that was just the beginning of my suffering” (85). Years into her marriage, she losses her sons, Chidi and Johnson and finally her husband, who died in a motor accident. After the demise of the men in the family, she is at the mercy of her brother in-law who sells out her daughters to the highest bidder thereby repeating the circle of pain in her life. In

this story, women are reduced to commodities exchanged between men.

Her brother in-law denies her access to the money he collects from her daughters' suitors because the tradition says that, "A woman must not touch the bride price. A woman must not know how much her daughter is sold for. Tradition says so" (86). The reference to being 'sold' as indicated in the quotation above highlights the commodification of the female body and compares the woman to an article of trade; it reduces her to an acquired material under the rule and subjection of the man. After the wedding of her older daughter, Awele and her husband easily abandon her and move on with their lives; Meta's main worry is that when her brother in-law collects huge sums of money as bride price, he leaves her with a disgruntled son in-law. Meta learns that her brother in-law, Uko intends to use Ikechi's bride price to settle a huge debt, to show her displeasure, she threatens to disrupt the bargaining that evening unless her brother in-law agrees to accept a token as bride price.

Uko seeks for help from the elders of the clan to plead with her not to carry out her threat; he comes into the compound with some elders 'like a rain drenched cock' (87), he must have realized that: "a token bride price is better than no bride price" (88). His response shows that male gender animosity and antagonism is threatened by female awareness and revolt. Uko is thus caught in a trap because of his greed and is now ready to listen to her for once. By being assertive and insistent on pursuing her rights, Meta achieves a commendable feat, which earns her the respect of her prospective in-laws and reminds Uko that the woman should be given her rightful place in matters that affect the children she has borne and nurtured. In this instance, power is transmitted from the hands of the oppressor to the subject, which leads to agency and self-identification.

In this story, we are presented with a scenario of double exploitation of women: as wives and as daughters. Okoye insists that this multiple oppression must stop if we wish to achieve gender justice. This can be achieved through self-affirmation and proclamation. The story points out that the strength of the oppressor comes from the silence of the oppressed, this accounts for the voice given to Meta, which reduces the patriarchal dominance of her brother in-law, Uko.

## 2.0 CONCLUSION

All the widows in the collection of short stories contrive positive means of overcoming their limitations. We see the dogged determination of the characters to escape varied forms of oppression and victimization. These women are able to define their reality apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination. They provide new points of recognition, embodying Stuart Hall's vision of a critical practice that

acknowledges that identity is constituted "not outside but within representation", and this helps us to discover who we are (qtd. in Parker 281). By challenging the figures of authority in their lives, these characters learn to draw vigour from their feminine strength. Therefore, their presentation depicts the various approaches used by these female characters to redefine previously understood notions of widowhood.

These women could have easily become victims of complicity, but they rose above it. To achieve agency, Helen Cixous urges women to "urgently learn to speak" (246). In line with the previous excerpts, Okoye gives women a voice, which removes them from the shadows and brings them to the forefront. The ultimate concern of our selected writer is a vibrant call for an end to the oppression against women in whatever manner.

Feminist concerns galvanize women and men, writers and civil society to work for the abrogation of the old-fashioned customs and traditions against widows. Okoye engages the sympathy of the reader for her heroines' efforts to achieve their escape from a seemingly hopeless destiny through re-orientation. She assiduously seeks to extricate women from all forms of mundane limitations. One of these is degrading widowhood practices as well as inheritance practices that discriminate against women. This suggests that the African woman needs to get rid of all the complex structures that militate against her success. The study thus advocates for a stable society realized through the corporate endeavour of the sexes.

Having evolved through this process, the characters are enabled to seize social, economic, political and psychological agency for themselves, and liberate the personal into the political sphere to bring about social peace and harmony. To address this, there is a need for conceptualization, which digs deep into the ingrained and culturally normative prejudice. It would pave a path for peaceful co-existence, synchronization and integration of all members of the society. In this context, Literature as a depiction of social dynamics in art form has no doubt played a role in shaping people's consciousness. It is hoped that this will in turn translate to collective responsibility for social transformation.

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#### BIODATA

Leah Iliya Jalo is a Tutor with the School of Basic and Remedial Studies, Gombe State University and also a Doctoral Student of English Department, University of Jos. Her area of Research Interest include: Gender Studies, Social Change, and Female Empowerment. This paper is a reworking of a chapter in an on-going PhD Thesis being supervised by Prof. Amaka Maureen Azuike and Prof. Jeff Godwin Doki in the Department of English, University of Jos. I am indebted to them for their generosity, reading and re-reading as well as their academic guidance which enabled me to produce this work.

**Cite this Article:** Jalo, LI (2020). New Voices of Women's Agency in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial and Other Stories*. *Greener Journal of Language and Literature Research*, 6(1): 11-18.