ALMA MATER
Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies

Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
Research Article, 2025, 2: 389–400
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2025.1349.9

Beyond the Whiskers: Cat Metaphors in Select Igbo Literary Texts

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Abstract

Literature, through metaphor, mirrors the thought systems of a people. One such metaphor, the animal metaphor, is significant in framing human relationships with the environment. This paper examines cat metaphors in three Igbo literary texts. Using Jonathan Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis, this qualitative study identifies instances of cat metaphors; explores and interprets their mappings onto human behaviours using the characters and contexts in the study texts. The findings reveal four cases of cat metaphors. It notes that the cat is primarily used alongside the rat to illustrate power dynamics. The dominant is portrayed as the cat, while the subordinate is depicted as the rat. The cat's stealthiness and relationship with the rat are domains for mapping human behaviours. Although the cat metaphor is not extensively used in the studied texts, its usage reflects the Igbo people's perception of the cat as a domestic animal in their geographical enclave. This study contributes to understanding Igbo literature and culture, highlighting the significance of metaphor in shaping societal values and power dynamics.

Keywords: *Cat, Metaphor, Igbo, Nigeria, Power*

Introduction

The universality of metaphor in languages of the world can never be underestimated. Human experiences, perception, and understanding are mirrored through the use of metaphor (Muhammad & Rashid, 2014). It enables humans to comprehend one kind of entity in terms of another. Humans use metaphors to communicate their thoughts as the human mind is, in itself, metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). They use metaphors to explore their relationship with nature. In the view of Kövecses (2010), metaphor is the understanding of one conceptual domain [target domain] in terms of another domain [source domain]. It is a "linguistic representation that results from the shift in the use of a word or phrase from the context or domain in which it is expected to occur to another context or domain where it is not expected to occur, thereby causing semantic tension" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p.15). Metaphors are relative as their awareness depends partly on the users of the language, especially as it relates to their experience of the language, and metaphorical meanings can vary in different contexts (Susilowati, Wijana & Cholsy, 2023).

A source domain that provides rich metaphorical expressions is that of the animal/fauna (Muhammad & Rashid, 2014; Sommer & Sommer, 2011; Kellert, 1997; Shepard, 1996; Lawrence, 1993). This can be alluded to the relationship shared by humans and animals.

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How to cite this article: Ezebube, C. (2025). Beyond the Whiskers: Cat Metaphors in Select Igbo Literary Texts. In: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies 2:2*, 389–400.
Submitted: 20.05.2025
Accepted: 29.05.2025

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In the words of Lawrence (1993, p. 301), "No other realm affords such vivid expression of symbolic concepts; symbolising through the use of animals is preeminent, widespread, and enduring." Aside from the fact that humans are regarded as higher animals, they rear and keep other animals either for commercial or subsistence purposes. This study centres on a common domesticated animal, the cat, to metaphorically analyse its use in Igbo literature. The domestic cat (Felis Catus or Felis Silvestris Catus) is a small, hairy, carnivorous mammal (Kingdom: Animalia; Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Carnivora; Family: Felidae; Genus: Felis; Species: Felis Catus) (Wozencraft, 2005, pp. 534–535).

The cat is a significant figure in the Igbo environment, making an early appearance in the opening chapter of Chinua Achebe's (1958) classic *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, Okonkwo is praised for defeating Amalinze the cat at the age of eighteen. Achebe (1958) explains that Amalinze earned the nickname "the cat" because his back would never touch the earth. The Igbo people predominantly reside in the southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo in Nigeria, with communities also found in Delta and Rivers states in the South-South region (Onuora, Alu, Echem *et al.*, 2020). They speak the Igbo language, which belongs to the Kwa group of languages spoken in West and Central Africa (Metuonu, 2014). Among the Igbo, the cats are domesticated for various reasons. They provide companionship to homeowners and are effective hunters used to control rodent infestations in homes and warehouses. As a little boy who spent part of his early life in the village, I remember vividly that some homes in my community had cats. These homes belonged to elderly people who lived alone. They kept the cats as companions. In this state, the cats had better treatments than the dogs, goats, turkeys, sheep, and fowls. They can sleep in the same room with their owners, a privilege other domestic animals lack. They are given human names and accepted into families as members. Also, many courier outlets and storehouses use cats to keep off rats.

Since people in the Igbo rural areas have domestic cats as pets, the animal is met with negative connotations among religiously conscious folks (Enemchukwu, 2024). The cat, as a spiritual and symbolic entity, is presented as an agent of witchcraft and misfortunes, as they are believed to have supernatural powers. This conceptualisation is a result of Nigerians being notoriously religious as a people, leading to the prevalent cruel treatment and victimisation of cats in Nigeria (Enemchukwu, 2024).

As an animal that exists in their environment, the Igbo use the cat as a metaphor in their folklore and modern-day literature. Igbo literature refers to literature written in the Igbo language (Emenyonu, 2020). The first generation of creative writing in the Igbo language came into being with the publication of Pita Nwana's *Omenụkọ* in 1933 (Felix-Emeribe, 2018). This was followed by D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo* in 1937 and Leopold Bellgam's *Ije Odumodu Jere* in 1963. Creative writing in Igbo literature came to a halt with the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war. However, following the war, it experienced a resurgence with the publication of Tony Ubesie's novels (Mbah, 2015; Emenyonu, 2003; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1997), and since then, Igbo creative writing has been propelled by numerous talented writers. This study focuses on three Igbo literary texts: one by Tony Ubesie and two by Chinedum Ofomata. These literary texts are Igbo novels written by acclaimed Igbo literary writers and used in schools and institutions of higher learning.

This study is motivated by the concept of linguistic relativism, which states that each language possesses unique idiosyncrasies and conceptual frameworks that distinguish it from others. Therefore, examining cat metaphors, through the annals of Igbo literary texts, provides an understanding and interpretation of these metaphors within the framework of

Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to identify instances of cat metaphors, explore and interpret their mappings onto human behaviours.

Conceptualising the Cat among the Igbo

The cat is a common domestic animal among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. Studies that examine the cat among the Igbo are reviewed in this sub-section. Orji**,** Onwukwe, and Onukawa (2023) in their study of animal-based metaphors in Igbo state that the domesticated cat has dual metaphorical senses in the Igbo culture – derogatory/negative and commendatory/positive. In the derogatory sense, they note that it is associated with a person who is poisonous or deadly, while the positive connotation stems from the cat's predatory nature of preying on rats and other rodents (protector in the course of guarding a house).

In his study of Igbo therianthropy, Kanu (2022) points out that the cat is one of the common animals associated with shape-shifting. He notes that it is used to attack the animal farm of an enemy. Kanu (2022) explains that an enemy could turn into a cat to attack the poultry farm of a prosperous farmer. The examination further notes the relationship between therianthropy and witchcraft as two sides of a coin. In a similar view, Okpalike (2024) observes that it is common knowledge for witches to turn into cats to harm their victims by direct or remote contact. He gives an example of a TV News report where a witch turned into an old woman from a cat after being hit with a stone by a boy.

Ezuruike (2017) states that the Igbo conceptualise the cat as a good wrestler whose back does not touch the earth. This is believed to have stemmed from the cat's agility and resilience. She also notes that it can be used to connote a quiet and dangerous person. The reviews in this sub-section show that the cat has positive and negative connotations among the Igbo. While its positive connotation draws from its ability to prey on rodents, its negative connotation hinges on spiritual attachments that the Igbo people have concerning it. The *meow* sound, the colour of the eyes, and the belief that it can be used for shape-shifting might be reasons for such negative connotations. However, this necessitates this study as it will ascertain whether such conceptualisations align with the cat metaphors in the selected Igbo literary texts.

Studies on Cat Metaphors

Many scholars have examined cat metaphors in different parlances and from various perspectives. Such studies are reviewed in this subsection to chart a path for the present study and to bring to light how the cat is construed in other cultures and languages. Lawrence (2003) believes that the startling polarity in the human-cat relationship stems from the cat's possession of an unusual set of natural and culturally imposed traits. In addition, the persistent image of the cat as half-wild and half-tame as a domestic animal makes it endearing or demonised, depending on the predisposition of the individual or society with which the cat interacts. She notes that the cat is a prime example of the extreme variability in human perceptions of a species, with its image ranging from god to demon.

A study by Liu (2013) investigates cat metaphors in Chinese and English. He explains that cats are Chinese people's favourite pets. The proverb – 'When the cat is away, the mice will play' portrays the cat in a good light, and the mice as the bad ones. This further makes

the cats powerful with leadership abilities. In English, Liu (2013) observes that cats are often referred to as bad women who usually speak ill of others, presenting them as evil. Liu (2013) finds that the cat is a hero in Chinese and evil in English. Therefore, the metaphorical meanings of cats in Chinese are often positive, but negative in English.

Ezuruike (2017) analyses the cultural connotations of animal names in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo using the theoretical framework of Linguistic Relativity. She observes that while the three Nigerian languages share some similarities, they also have distinct connotations. Regarding the cat, she notes that the Hausa view it as a symbol of laziness, selectiveness, or slipperiness. The Yoruba associate the cat with witchcraft. In contrast, the Igbo conceptualise the cat as a skilled wrestler whose back does not touch the ground; a quiet and dangerous person. Of the three languages, the cat carries a negative connotation in Hausa and Yoruba, with no positive associations. For Igbo, it has both positive and negative connotations.

In their study of cats in Russian and Chinese omens, Ya and Korovina (2020) note that in Russia, the cat is seen as worldly wisdom and cunning, while in China, they are appraised for their ability to expel mice from homes. They note that in Chinese proverbs, the cat can be represented with positive and negative connotations – someone who is smart and a traitor, respectively. Irrespective of the fact that the cat symbolises fertility and longevity among the Chinese, it is also associated with the afterworld; a being that has supernatural abilities to take guises and communicate with spirits. In Russian traditional culture, it is regarded as a source of benefits. They regard three and seven coloured cats as harbingers of well-being, while the black cat is considered a constant companion to a witch.

To ascertain Lakoff and Turner's (1989) proposition of a cat as being fickle and independent, Muhammad and Rashid (2014) examine the similarities and differences in the meanings associated with the cat metaphors in Malay and English proverbs. They note that the proposition is not true. They opine that Malay and English share common metaphorical mappings of cat, although differences occur owing to the social and cultural environments in which the language users live. The study observes that both languages frame cats as authoritative, fierce, and untrustworthy. However, while English frames the cat as useless and lazy, Malay sees them as insignificant and shameless. In a similar analysis addressing the same languages, Adilah and Jamal (2021) investigate feline characteristics using conceptual metaphor theory. Their study finds that the English language has fewer feline proverbs when compared to Malay. Focusing on the cat, the study notes that there are more representations of the cat in Malay than in English. In English proverbs, an adult domesticated cat represents burden, secrecy and inferiority. In Malay, it is viewed as a dreaded and bad person. It can also mean something impossible, being authoritative and a lady who speaks harshly. As it relates to cat gesture/action, in English proverbs, representations such as willingness to take risks and endure annoyance are noted, while in Malay, representations such as hastiness, fright, anxiety, and happiness are realised.

Focusing on Greek and Spanish children's literature, Xouplidis (2020) opines that cats are linguistically, literally, and socially defined literary constructs that can take up human-like features. They serve as narrative motifs for the transmission of social values about non-human animals. The researcher notes that pet cats are positively presented in the literature as privileged, while stray cats are portrayed as underprivileged. Furthermore, cats with seven lives and magical powers are common perceptions of cats in children's literature, dominating in both cultural contexts, stereotypes, and superstitions. Xouplidis (2020, p. 319) states, "literary cats play an important role in the interpretation of nature, exclusively

through human culture, as ultimately, young readers interpret their biological status in ontological terms based on anthropological standards."

Smith (2021) investigates the existence of the feline metaphor – 'Fat Cat' – as a storied signifier of capitalist greed. He examines the visual representations of the metaphor and observes that the predominant images were those of masculine-gendered cats. The 'Fat Cat' metaphor, as a form of business storytelling, uses disembodied textual narratives and parodies the socio-economic elite in the United Kingdom to pass a message that capitalism is not always of the socially responsible type. This seems to be in line with the view of Deignan (2005) that cats in English are negatively used to connote greed and selfishness. Ardianto (2022) conducts a contrastive semantic analysis of animal metaphors in Indonesian and English. He uses the expressions – cat in a sack and pig in a poke – to explain what both animals mean to both languages. English speakers are more likely to be familiar with pigs than cats. He observes that cats are always close to the life activities of Indonesian speakers, implying that they relate more to cats than pigs.

Hwang and Sin (2023) explore the role of cats as symbolic mediators. They note that cats are interpreted diversely, which relates to cultures. In Islamic culture, they are sacred beings; in Buddhist culture, they represent bad omen, while in medieval European Catholic culture, they are the devil's alter ego. Hwang and Sin (2023) highlight the roles cats play as symbolic objects in literary, artistic, geographical, cultural, religious, and psychological spheres. They note that in ancient Egypt, cats were considered objects of worship, symbolising mercy, harvest, love, fertility and healing. They were revered as representatives of God, as evident in the half-human, half-animal goddess with a cat's face – Bastet. They are further constructed as femininity, regeneration, patience and unconsciousness. This shows the cat to be a polysemantic symbol in different cultures and languages, as people can give it various interpretations from various perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The current study adopts the theoretical tenet of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). The theory addresses metaphor from four perspectives – linguistics, semantics, cognitive, and pragmatics. This is reflected in Charteris-Black's (2004) integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter, CDA), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter, CMT), and corpus linguistics. CMA is an approach to metaphor analysis that "aims to reveal the covert intentions of language users" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 34). This implies that it examines metaphorical expressions and descriptions to identify ideologies underlying language (Charteris-Black, 2005). It is also concerned with the analysis of the way metaphors are used to construct meanings in discourses (Charteris-Black, 2019). Charteris-Black (2004) divides his domains into abstract and basic. The basic domain represents human experiences that act as the source output for a more abstract target domain. This means that basic domains are used "to reflect in language how we experience more abstract domains" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 15).

The two main pillars of CMA are CDA and CMT. CDA employs linguistic expressions to discuss social and historical contexts to reveal hidden ideologies that examine the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Li, 2016). CDA has many models and proponents such as Norman Fairclough (1989), Teun van Dijk (1988, 1996), and Ruth Wodak (1996, 2001). CMT presents metaphor as a cross-domain mapping that is pervasive in human thought. As a theory, it moves metaphor away from the traditional view of an ornamental tool of language use to the terrain of cognition (Li, 2016). CDA and CMT

complement each other in CMA. CMT offers a stronger cognitive dimension to CDA while CDA contributes to CMT through its socio-discursive and linguistic approach (Imperiale & Phipps, 2022).

Charteris-Black (2004, p. 34) lists three stages for the analysis of metaphor. These stages are:

1. Metaphor identification
2. Metaphor interpretation
3. Metaphor explanation

Metaphor identification deals with the tension that may exist between a literal source domain and a metaphoric target domain. Metaphor interpretation is concerned with examining social relations that are constructed in the metaphorical mappings. Metaphor explanation refers to the way a metaphor relates to the situation/context in which it occurs. In CMA, metaphors are not solely interpreted as conceptualisations of the source domain to the target domain. Though the use of metaphors cannot be separated from the intentions of their manufacturers (Susilowati, Wijana & Cholsy, 2023). CMA is therefore suitable for this study as it not only identifies metaphors but also reveals more deeply the intent of such usage.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design and operates within an interpretivist paradigm, grounded in the understanding that reality is socially constructed (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). The research employs the three stages of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) to analyse the selected literary texts. In the identification stage, the texts were carefully read to pinpoint instances of cat metaphors, focusing on semantic tension – the identification of metaphors in unexpected contexts or domains. For the interpretation stage, the study explores the relationship between the cat metaphors and the cognitive and pragmatic factors that influence their use, emphasising the sociocultural framings that shape these metaphors. In the explanation stage, the study highlights the social roles that cat metaphors play in the texts, revealing how they function within the narrative to represent power dynamics and gender relations. The selected texts are –

i. Tony Uchenna Ubesie – *Isi Akwụ Dara n'Ala* (1973)
ii. Chinedum Ofomata – *Anụ Gbaa Ajọ Ọsọ* (2001)
iii. Chinedum Ofomata – *Ihe Ọjọọ Gbaa Afọ* (2005)

Synopses of the Study Texts

Isi Akwụ Dara n'Ala (hereafter, *IADA*) is a novel set before, during, and after the Nigeria-Biafra War (July 6, 1967 – January 15, 1970). It follows Ada, a young woman desperate for marriage, who initially falls for Obiọra, a married man, but ends the affair upon discovering the truth. She later marries Chike, and they have two children, Ọbịanuju and Chukwuma. Their peaceful life is disrupted when war breaks out, forcing them to flee Enugu for Awka and later Agụata, where they endure severe hardship. To support the family, Chike sets up a small business for Ada, as women have more economic freedom during the war. However, success changes Ada. She engages in affairs with army officers, neglects her family, and even orchestrates Chike's conscription into the Biafran army. Chike is later saved by a captain linked to his brother, Okechukwu. After the war, Chike rebuilds his life,

while Ada, now with a child from an affair, begs for reconciliation. Chike refuses, as she has desecrated their marriage, as symbolised by the novel's title: *Isi Akwụ Dara n'Ala* — "the palm fruit bunch that has touched the ground."

Anụ Gbaa Ajọ Ọsọ (hereafter, *AGAỌ*) is an Igbo novel that talks about Ikpendụ, a notorious miscreant who brings shame to his family. Though his parents had troubled pasts, they never imagined having a son who would surpass them in crime. In contrast, his elder brother, Ọzọemena, is his complete opposite. Feared by the villagers, Ikpendụ terrorises the community and preys on women at will. Hoping to reform him, Ọzọemena sends him to Sapele as an apprentice, but Ikpendụ remains incorrigible, squandering his brother's wealth and nearly bankrupting him. Relocating to Onitsha, Ikpendụ establishes a notorious robbery gang. His luck eventually runs out, and he is killed during a heist. His surviving gang members secretly bury him in a distant forest, but his restless spirit returns to torment them, his relatives, and the entire village. A powerful ritual is later performed to end his hauntings once and for all.

Ihe Ọjọọ Gbaa Afọ (hereafter, *IỌGA*) follows Ikenna, a young bachelor who dates two women, namely Ego and Nkemdịrịm, at once. When they discover his deception, he chooses Nkemdịrịm, believing her to be the most beautiful. However, their marriage brings chaos and misery to his life and family. Nkemdịrịm isolates Ikenna, cutting him off from friends, some of whom had encouraged the marriage and showing hostility toward his relatives whenever they visit. Neither Ikenna's warnings nor physical reprimands deter her from her cruel behaviour, leaving him full of regret. Her downfall comes at Ikenna's father's burial, where the *Ụmụọkpụ* (a group of village women) punished her for her excesses. Without warning, she flees the village and abandons the marriage. At the end, Ikenna finds happiness with Ogenna, his well-trained and virtuous housemaid.

Instances of Cat Metaphors in the Study Texts

Four instances of cat metaphors are identified in the study texts. Tony Ubesie and Chinedum Ọfọmata use the cat *nwamba* in these instances to depict their characters and characterisations. The table below presents the metaphoric expressions identified in the texts, their glosses, and the target characters on which the conceptualisations of a cat are mapped.

Instances of Cat Metaphors in the Study Texts

s/n	Metaphoric Expression	Gloss	Target Character	Text & Page
1.	Otu a ka ọ dị na be Chike. Agụ ekoola uzu ebe ahụ, ndị ọchị agha na-abịa achụ nwunye ya zewe ebe ahụ ezewe, maka na oke na-achọghị ọgụ hụ ọnụ nkakwụ bi n'ime ala, o zewe ya ezewe. Ma n'ime ọnụ nke a, ihe bi ya bụ ***nwamba***.	That is how it is in Chike's house. The leopard resides there, and the army commanders who came to flirt with his wife now avoid the place because whenever the rat that does not seek a fight sees the hole of a shrew, it fears it. But in this hole, what lives there is a cat.	Okechukwu	*IADA:* 172
2.	… wee malite gosibe 395mpha anụ ọbụla gbara ọsọ ka oke, ***nwamba*** arịa ya elu.	… and began to show her that any animal that runs like a rat, the cat will climb over it.	Ikenna	*IỌGA:* 211

3.	Ha nọchaa nzukọ I ha ga-esi kpaa Ikpendụ eze, ọ dị ka ụdị nzukọ ahụ ụmụ oke nọrọ wee tụpụta aro I ha ga-esi na-ama mgbe ***nwamba*** na-abịa ka ha were gbaa ọsọ ndụ ha.	After having a meeting on how to deal with Ikpendụ, it would be like the meeting held by the rats, planning how to detect when the cat is coming so they can run for their lives.	Ikpendụ	*AGAỌ:* 43
4.	Ha abụọ na-arụ I ụdị ọrụ maka nkịta na ***nwamba***, ọ dịghị nke hụrụ azụ hapụ.	The two of them do the same work because the dog and cat neither see the fish nor leave it.	Adaobi	*AGAỌ:* 53

In the selected novels of Tony Ubesie and Chinedum Ofomata, four characters are depicted using cat metaphors, each embodying distinct traits associated with the animal, as evident in Table 1. Among them, three are male, while one is female. The following section examines how these characters are conceptualised as cats within the literary texts, highlighting the nuances of their roles and interactions.

Conceptualising the Cat in the Study Texts

The study texts present three distinct conceptualisations of the cat, each reflecting different aspects of its symbolic meaning, which are explored in the following section.

The Cat as Dominant

In *Isi Akwụ Dara N'ala* (*IADA*) by Tony Ubesie and *Ihe Ọjọọ Gbaa Afọ* (*IỌGA*) by Chinedum Ofomata, the cat is portrayed as a symbol of dominance, representing superiority and control over others (entries 1 and 2 in Table 1). Both authors use the cat-rat relationship to illustrate power dynamics, with the cat symbolising dominance and the rat representing subordination. In the natural world, the cat exercises control over the rat, and this relationship is mirrored in the texts to depict authority and hierarchy.

Ubesie (1973) employs this metaphor to describe the power struggle in Chike's household (entry 1 in the Table). During the war in *IADA*, Ada, Chike's wife, engages in amorous relationships with several army officers, who visit her home freely, even in the presence of her husband (*IADA*, p. 163). Chike, afraid to enlist in the Biafran army, is unable to challenge Ada's actions. She exploits this fear, using the threat of conscription to dominate him, warning that her army lovers could forcefully enlist him if he dares to question her behaviour (*IADA*, p. 150). The wartime context grants women like Ada a unique advantage, as they are not subject to forced conscription like their male counterparts. Consequently, Ada's army boyfriends feel emboldened to visit her home without restraint, despite her marital status.

The power dynamics shift with the return of Chike's younger brother, Okechukwu, who has become a captain in the army. Ubesie (1973) extends the cat-rat metaphor to illustrate the transformation in Chike's household. When Okechukwu visited Chike and Ada, he encountered two of Ada's army boyfriends. Initially, they assume he is an ordinary civilian they can intimidate, but upon realising his high military rank, they abandon their car and flee (*IADA*, p. 170). In this moment, Okechukwu assumes the role of the cat, instilling fear in Ada's lovers and asserting his dominance.

Ubesie (1973) further reinforces this hierarchy by introducing the shrew as an intermediary figure in the power scale. He explains that rats naturally fear the shrew, yet in this scenario, Ada's boyfriends do not merely face a shrew (a lesser power); instead, they encounter a cat

(a higher power), Okechukwu (*IADA*, p. 172). Okechukwu's authority stems from his status as a captain, granting him leverage that Chike, his disempowered brother, lacks. Had Okechukwu not held a high military rank, he too would have been powerless, just as Chike was rendered vulnerable by the war. Through this analogy, Ubesie underscores how social and military status determine dominance, shaping interpersonal power struggles during wartime.

Likewise, Ofomata (2005) conceptualises Ikenna as a cat in *IỌGA*, portraying him as a figure of authority and discipline within his household (entry 2 in the Table). In the traditional Igbo society, the man is the head of the household. He wields power and authority over his household. The Igbo marriage system upholds the authority of the man as he is expected to pay the bride price and fulfil all marital obligations; practices that often present the woman as a commodity within the marriage (Oboko & Ifeanyichukwu, 2021). Within this framework, Ikenna asserts control over his wife, Nkemdịrịm, particularly when she disobeys or insults him (*IỌGA*, p. 201). Ikenna initially married Nkemdịrịm for her beauty, unaware of her ill-mannered behaviour (*IỌGA*, p. 110). Her disrespectful attitude creates tension within the family to the extent that her husband's visiting relatives leave abruptly because of her conduct (*IỌGA*, p. 166). As a result of the persistent maltreatment that Ikenna suffers from his wife, he sometimes chooses to overlook her impolite actions and allow her to have her way. However, on some occasions, he responds with physical discipline (*IỌGA*, p. 191). Ikenna, as a cat, exerts authority over Nkemdịrịm. This authority is physically and culturally based. Physically, Ikenna is stronger than Nkemdịrịm. An Igbo proverb, *Ike nwoke dị ya n'ọkpụkpụ aka mana ike nwaanyị dị ya n'ire* ("The strength of a man is in his muscles, while that of a woman is in her tongue") supports this notion that men possess physical dominance. However, this does not negate the fact that there may be some women who are physically stronger than some men. From a cultural viewpoint, Ikenna's authority over Nkemdịrịm is reinforced by his status as her husband, a role that gives him a superior position within the marriage.

The Cat as Predatory

The cat is used in explicating the predator-prey relationship in Ofomata's *Anụ Gbaa Ajọ Ọsọ* (*AGAỌ*) (entry 3 in Table further above). It is used in the text to symbolise Ikpendụ as a calculated predator who stalks his victims and strikes unexpectedly. He terrorises the villagers, thereby making life unbearable for them. As a miscreant, he not only steals from the villagers but also asserts dominance over them. For instance, he steals and kills a goat belonging to a villager named Uwakwe. As if that were not enough, he also cuts Uwakwe's yam tendrils (*AGAỌ*, p. 22). His predatory attitude extends to the point that even some masquerades fear him (*AGAỌ*, p. 46). This is particularly significant because the masquerade cult is highly revered and respected in the Igbo society, as masquerades are believed to embody the spirits of ancestors. Just as the rats instinctively fear cats, the villagers live in constant fear of Ikpendụ. Ofomata (2001) employs the image of the cat to depict how Ikpendụ undermines the village elders' plans to contain him. Each time they conclude a meeting on how to deal with him, he finds a way to thwart their attempts (*AGAỌ*, p. 43). Unable to control his excesses, Ofomata (2001) presents the elders as rats scurrying for safety at the sight of a menacing cat. After their meetings on how to deal with Ikpendụ, fear prevents them from carrying out the resolution because each of them is concerned with their safety (*AGAỌ*, p. 43). Ikpendụ is portrayed as a master criminal, exuding authority over those he dominates.

The Cat as Dangerous

Ofomata (2001) conceptualises Adaobi in *Anụ Gbaa Ajọ Ọsọ* (*AGAỌ*) as a cat (entry 4 in the Table above). Adaobi is Ikpendụ's girlfriend at Bida. She has the same character mould as Ikpendụ, and this is what bonds their relationship. She shares in Ikpendụ's ruthless and predatory nature. Together, they make life unbearable for the people of Bida. In this metaphorical expression, Ofomata (2001) presents Ikpendụ as a dog and Adaobi as a cat, highlighting their shared affinity because both are predators that feast on fish. As a dangerous predator known for its cunning and lethal hunting techniques, Adaobi terrorises the men at Bida. To illustrate how efficient a killer she is, Ofomata (2001) recounts with the statement: *ị kpọọ Ikpendụ abalịdịegwu, mara na ihe ị ga-akpọ Adaobi bụ ehihiedịegwu. Ihe nwagbọghọ a ji ehihie mee ụmụ okorobịa bụ naanị Chukwu ga-akọ ya* (*AGAỌ*, pp. 53–54) (If you call Ikpendụ 'one who makes the night dreaded', then you must call Adaobi 'one who makes the day dreaded'. What this lady does to young men in the daytime can only be explained by God). This statement underscores Adaobi's fearsome reputation, solidifying her as a truly dangerous person.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study reveals that cat metaphors are employed for both male and female characters in Igbo literature, although they are mainly used for the males. It is worth noting that cat metaphors in Igbo literary parlance do not enjoy the same number of usages with fauna such as dog, fowl and rat; hence, the limited number of cat metaphors analysed in this study. The cat, naturally a predator, dominates and terrorises rats, which is a theme seen in the works of Tony Ubesie and Chinedum Ofomata. These seasoned Igbo novelists incorporate this predator-prey relationship into their writings, highlighting the cat's dominance, especially over rats. In *IADA*, Okechukwu is conceptualised as a cat to illustrate how he dominates and overpowers Ada's army boyfriends. Ada's army boyfriends are depicted as rats, reluctant to fight back and instead fleeing for safety, aware that Ada's married status makes it shameful for them to be killed while on an adulterous mission. In *IỌGA*, Ikenna is also depicted as a cat, showing how he overpowers his wife, Nkemdịrịm, whenever she provokes him. This resonates with the Igbo belief that cats are strong and resilient. In *AGAỌ*, Ikpendụ is portrayed as a cat to express how he dominates his village elders, showing his predatory nature. The elders, depicted as rats, cannot execute any of their plans on him due to fear. Ofomata further draws a parallel between Ikpendụ and his accomplice, Adaobi, using metaphors of the dog and the cat, respectively. Adaobi, as a cat, is shown to dominate the men in Bida, emphasising the cat's stealth and thieving nature.

This study underscores that cat metaphors in Igbo literature can have multiple conceptualisations, reinforcing the dual metaphorical senses of the cat as both negative/derogatory (poisonous/deadly) and positive/commendatory (predatory/protector) in Igbo ideology by Orji, Onwukwe, and Onukawa (2023). Okechukwu's action in *IADA* can be regarded as commendatory as he tries to stop his brother's wife from her adulterous lifestyle. For that of Ikenna in *IỌGA*, some might consider it right as he tries to reprimand his unmannered wife while others might consider it as wife battering. However, this study challenges the view that the cat's predatory role is entirely positive, particularly in cases like Ikpendụ in *AGAỌ*, where his predatory actions are harmful to the village elders. Additionally, this study points out that while generally, the Igbo associates the cat with protection against rodents in their everyday discourse, the dominant and predatory aspects of the cat are more present in the literary texts studied.

Furthermore, the cat-rat relationship consistently portrays the cat as dominant and the rat as subordinate, reflecting the power dynamics between genders in Igbo society, where the males are perceived to be dominant and the females, subservient.

In conclusion, the current study has shown that cat metaphors in Igbo literature are powerful tools for illustrating complex relationships, particularly power dynamics between characters. Through the use of cat metaphors, male and female characters in the studied texts are depicted as dominant forces. The cat's dominant, predatory, and dangerous nature is used to portray characters in the texts. This study emphasises that although the predatory nature of the cat can be positive, it can also carry negative connotations. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how animal metaphors, such as that of the cat, can be used to mirror societal structures and reinforce themes of power and control in Igbo literary traditions.

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