

Language as a Tool of Power and Control in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

*This study examines how gendered power relations and resistance are discursively constructed in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While existing feminist scholarship on these novels has extensively explored patriarchy, motherhood, and female agency at thematic and ideological levels, limited attention has been paid to the specific linguistic mechanisms through which power and resistance are produced, normalised, and contested. This study addresses this gap by treating language as analytical data rather than illustrative support. Anchored in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, the study analyses selected excerpts that represent recurring interactional contexts such as marriage, authority, and social expectation. At the textual level, the analysis focuses on micro-linguistic features including declarative and imperative structures, modality, evaluative lexis, metaphor, and pronoun use. At the level of discursive practice, it examines interactional patterns, silence, and narrative framing through which male authority is legitimised and female voice is constrained or enabled. These patterns are further interpreted at the level of social practice in relation to patriarchal ideologies within Nigerian socio-cultural contexts. The findings reveal that in ***The Joys of Motherhood***, patriarchal power is largely naturalised through unmodalised declaratives, possessive constructions, and metaphors that restrict female identity to relational and reproductive roles, while resistance is predominantly internalised and narratively contained. In contrast, ***The Stillborn*** increasingly foregrounds overt resistance through assertive declaratives, negation, and first-person pronouns that challenge male authority within dialogue. The study demonstrates that patriarchy and resistance in the novels are not merely thematic concerns but are discursively engineered through language, reinforcing the value of CDA for literary analysis.*

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis; gendered power; discursive resistance; Nigerian women's writing; literary discourse*

Introduction

Nigerian women's writing has consistently engaged with questions of patriarchy, gendered power, and female agency, particularly within the intersecting spaces of family, culture, and society.

Works such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* have

attracted sustained scholarly attention for their critique of women's marginalisation and the socio-cultural constraints shaping female experience. Much of this scholarship, however, has approached these texts primarily through thematic, ideological, or sociological lenses, often treating language as a transparent medium through which gender oppression is represented rather than as an active site where power is constructed, normalised, and resisted.

Language plays a central role in the organisation of social relations, particularly in patriarchal contexts where authority, obedience, and resistance are negotiated through everyday discourse. In literary texts, dialogue, narration, and figurative expression function not only to tell stories but also to encode ideological positions and power relations. As Fairclough (1995) argues, discourse is a form of social practice, shaped by and shaping social structures. From this perspective, the representation of patriarchy in literature cannot be fully understood without close attention to the linguistic choices through which dominance and resistance are enacted.

Although existing studies on *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn* have examined motherhood, marriage, tradition, and female resistance, they largely privilege thematic interpretation over systematic linguistic analysis. As a result, the specific discursive mechanisms through which male authority is legitimised, female subordination is internalised, and resistance is articulated remain underexplored. This gap is particularly significant given that power in these novels often operates subtly through routine speech acts, metaphors, evaluative expressions, and narrative framing rather than through overt coercion alone.

This study addresses this gap by adopting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its analytical framework. Drawing primarily on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the study examines how linguistic form, discursive practice, and social context interact to construct gendered power relations in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*. Unlike studies that focus mainly on what the texts say about patriarchy, this analysis focuses on how language itself produces and sustains patriarchal ideology, as well as how it enables moments of resistance. By treating language as data rather than illustration, the study foregrounds micro-linguistic features such as declarative structures, modality, metaphor, evaluative lexis, and patterns of address.

The comparative dimension of the study further highlights differences in how power and resistance are discursively configured in the two novels. While both texts depict patriarchal dominance, Emecheta's narrative often represents resistance as internalised and psychologically mediated, whereas Alkali's work increasingly foregrounds overt linguistic challenge and collective female

assertion. Examining these contrasts at the level of discourse allows for a more precise understanding of how gendered power operates across different narrative strategies.

By offering a linguistically grounded, CDA-informed analysis of two canonical Nigerian novels, this study contributes to feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating that patriarchy and resistance are not only thematic concerns but are discursively engineered within the texts. It also extends the application of CDA within literary studies, reinforcing its value for analysing the subtle workings of power in fictional discourse.

Research Questions

- 1) How are patriarchal power relations linguistically constructed in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*?
- 2) How are patriarchal power relations discursively normalised and presented as common sense in the selected novels?
- 3) What discursive strategies are employed to legitimise male authority and regulate female roles?
- 4) How is female resistance to patriarchal dominance linguistically realised in the novels?
- 5) In what ways do *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn* differ in their discursive representation of power and resistance?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine how language functions as a site for the construction, normalisation, and contestation of gendered power relations in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn* using a Critical Discourse Analysis framework.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. Analyse the linguistic features through which patriarchal power is constructed in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*.
- ii. Examine how discourse practices in the novels normalise patriarchal power and present it as socially legitimate.
- iii. Identify and analyse the discursive strategies that legitimise male authority and regulate female roles.
- iv. Examine how female resistance to patriarchy is realised through specific linguistic and discursive choices.

- v. Compare the two novels to determine similarities and differences in their discursive construction of power and resistance.

Literature Review

Feminist Readings of Nigerian Women's Writing

Scholarship on Nigerian women's writing has consistently foregrounded themes of patriarchy, motherhood, marriage, and female oppression. Studies on Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* frequently interpret the novel as a critique of the socio-cultural structures that confine women's identities to reproduction and domesticity (Kolawole, 1997; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Nnu Ego's suffering is often read as emblematic of the contradictions of traditional expectations and colonial modernity, where women bear social responsibility without corresponding power or recognition.

Similarly, critical engagement with Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* has focused on female agency, education, and resistance to patriarchal norms. Scholars highlight Alkali's portrayal of women who challenge restrictive gender roles through self-assertion and collective solidarity (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Azuike, 2009). These studies commonly position *The Stillborn* as offering a more optimistic vision of female empowerment compared to earlier feminist narratives.

While these feminist readings provide valuable ideological and socio-cultural insights, they largely privilege thematic interpretation over linguistic analysis. Language is often treated as a transparent vehicle for conveying oppression or resistance, rather than as a structured system through which power relations are produced and negotiated. As a result, the specific discursive mechanisms that normalise patriarchy or enable resistance remain insufficiently examined.

Language, Power, and Patriarchy in Literary Studies

The relationship between language and power has been extensively theorised within critical linguistics and discourse studies. Scholars such as Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008) argue that power operates not only through overt domination but also through routine discourse practices that shape social cognition and legitimise inequality. In literary contexts, discourse becomes a key site where ideological positions are encoded, reproduced, or challenged.

Some studies in African literary criticism acknowledge the role of dialogue, narration, and metaphor in reinforcing social hierarchies. For instance, analyses of Chinua Achebe's works demonstrate how proverbs, speech patterns, and narrative voice reflect hierarchical social

structures (Achebe, 1975). However, even within such studies, linguistic features are often discussed illustratively rather than systematically.

In the context of Nigerian women's writing, few studies move beyond broad observations about "language of domination" or "voices of resistance" to examine how specific linguistic choices, such as imperatives, modality, evaluative lexis, or metaphor, function discursively. This absence of micro-linguistic attention limits the explanatory depth of existing scholarship on gender and power in literary texts.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Literary Texts

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a robust framework for addressing this limitation by conceptualising discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). CDA emphasises the interaction between linguistic form, discursive processes, and social structures, making it particularly suitable for examining how ideology and power are embedded in language.

Although CDA has been widely applied to political speeches, media texts, and institutional discourse, its application to literary texts remains comparatively limited, especially within Nigerian literary studies. Where CDA has been used, it is often employed loosely, without sustained attention to linguistic detail or theoretical justification. This has contributed to scepticism about its value for literary analysis.

However, scholars such as Toolan (2012) and Simpson (2004) demonstrate that literary discourse is not exempt from ideological structuring and can benefit from systematic discourse analysis. By examining how characters speak, how authority is framed, and how resistance is linguistically realised, CDA enables a deeper understanding of how fiction participates in social meaning-making.

A critical review of existing literature reveals three major gaps. First, studies on *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn* overwhelmingly prioritise thematic and ideological interpretation, with limited engagement with language as an analytical object. Second, feminist readings often assume power relations as given, rather than examining how they are discursively constructed in specific interactional contexts. Third, comparative studies rarely analyse both novels using a shared linguistic framework, resulting in assertions of difference that are insufficiently demonstrated.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a CDA-informed, micro-linguistic approach to the comparative analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*. By focusing on how power and resistance are enacted through concrete linguistic choices, the study advances feminist literary scholarship beyond thematic critique and demonstrates the analytical value of CDA for Nigerian literary discourse.

Positioning of the Present Study

By situating language at the centre of analysis, this study repositions the discussion of patriarchy and resistance in Nigerian women's writing. It contributes to existing scholarship by showing that gendered power relations in the selected novels are not merely represented but are actively produced, normalised, and contested through discourse. In doing so, the study bridges feminist literary criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis, offering a more linguistically grounded account of power in Nigerian fiction.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with particular reliance on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse. CDA provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining how language functions as a social practice through which power relations are constructed, legitimised, and contested (Fairclough, 1995). Rather than treating language as a neutral medium, CDA conceptualises discourse as an active site of ideological production, making it especially suitable for analysing literary representations of patriarchy and resistance.

Fairclough's model operates at three interconnected levels: the textual level, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice. At the textual level, attention is paid to specific linguistic features such as vocabulary choice, grammatical structure, modality, evaluative lexis, and figurative language. These features are not analysed in isolation but as resources through which characters enact authority, obedience, or resistance. In this study, textual analysis focuses on how imperatives, declarative structures, metaphors, and evaluative expressions encode hierarchical gender relations within the selected novels.

The level of discursive practice concerns how texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within particular contexts. In literary discourse, this involves examining patterns of interaction between characters, narrative framing, and recurring modes of address that normalise or challenge

power relations. By analysing how certain forms of speech are repeatedly associated with male authority or female subordination, the study demonstrates how patriarchal discourse is reproduced as common sense within the fictional worlds of *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*.

At the level of social practice, discourse is situated within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. The study relates linguistic patterns in the novels to patriarchal structures prevalent in Nigerian society, where gender roles are institutionally and culturally regulated. This level of analysis allows the study to connect micro-linguistic choices to macro-social ideologies without reducing literary discourse to mere social reflection.

CDA is particularly valuable for this study because it enables a systematic examination of how gendered power operates through routine and seemingly ordinary language. Unlike thematic or character-based criticism, which often assumes the presence of patriarchy, CDA reveals how power is linguistically engineered and sustained through everyday discourse practices. It also provides analytical tools for identifying moments where dominant discourse is disrupted, negotiated, or resisted.

Although CDA has been more commonly applied to non-literary texts such as political speeches and media discourse, its application to literary texts is justified because fiction is also a form of discourse embedded in social relations. As Toolan (2012) and Simpson (2004) argue, literary language is ideologically patterned and therefore amenable to critical linguistic analysis. This study adopts CDA not as a rigid formula but as a flexible analytical framework that allows for close attention to language while remaining sensitive to narrative and cultural context.

By integrating Fairclough's model with feminist concerns about gender and power, this framework enables a linguistically grounded analysis of patriarchy and resistance in Nigerian women's writing. It thus aligns with the study's aim of moving beyond thematic interpretation to demonstrate how language itself functions as a site of domination and contestation in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language constructs and negotiates gendered power relations in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. CDA is employed not as a general interpretive stance but as a systematic analytical approach that treats language as data and foregrounds the relationship between linguistic form, discourse, and social context.

Research Design

The study is qualitative and interpretive, focusing on close textual analysis of selected excerpts from the two novels. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to uncover how patriarchal authority and resistance are discursively produced through language rather than to quantify patterns of usage. CDA provides the analytical tools required to examine the subtle and routine ways power is embedded in literary discourse.

Data Selection

The data consists of carefully selected excerpts from *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*. Excerpts were chosen based on explicit, predefined criteria rather than intuition. Selection focused on passages that:

- i. involve direct interaction between male and female characters;
- ii. depict moments of authority, command, judgement, or resistance; and
- iii. recur across the texts in comparable social contexts such as marriage, family obligation, and communal expectation.

This purposive selection ensures that the data are representative of recurring discursive patterns through which gendered power is enacted, while allowing for meaningful comparison between the two novels.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. At the textual level, the study examines specific linguistic features including sentence types (imperatives and declaratives), modality, evaluative lexis, metaphors, and pronoun use. These features are analysed to show how authority, subordination, and resistance are linguistically encoded.

At the level of discursive practice, the study investigates how these linguistic choices function within patterns of interaction and narration. Attention is paid to who speaks, who is silenced, how commands and evaluations circulate, and how repeated discourse patterns normalise patriarchal relations or open space for challenge.

At the level of social practice, the findings are interpreted in relation to broader patriarchal structures within Nigerian society. Linguistic patterns identified in the novels are connected to cultural norms governing gender roles, marriage, and authority, without reducing literary discourse to mere social reflection.

Comparative Strategy

A comparative approach is adopted to ensure analytical balance. Similar discursive situations in both novels are analysed using the same linguistic parameters. This allows differences in the representation of power and resistance to emerge from language use rather than from thematic assertion.

Analytical Rigor

To maintain analytical rigour, the study limits the number of excerpts analysed, prioritising depth over breadth. Each excerpt is subjected to detailed linguistic analysis, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in observable textual features. This approach responds directly to critiques of impressionistic or overly thematic literary analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a Critical Discourse Analysis of selected excerpts from *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Stillborn*. In line with Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis proceeds from textual features to discursive practice and finally to social practice. Textual examples are cited not as illustrations of pre-existing themes but as linguistic evidence through which power relations and resistance are discursively constructed.

Textual Level: Linguistic Encoding of Patriarchal Authority

At the textual level, patriarchal power in *The Joys of Motherhood* is frequently realised through unmodalised declarative clauses and imperatives that define women's roles as fixed and non-negotiable. For instance, when Nnaife addresses Nnu Ego with statements such as "*You are my wife. I married you to look after me and my children*", the declarative structure presents male authority as a statement of fact rather than opinion. The absence of epistemic modality (e.g. *may, might, I think*) forecloses negotiation and positions the speaker as the unquestioned source of legitimacy.

The possessive determiner "*my*" in "*my wife*" further encodes ownership, linguistically reducing Nnu Ego's identity to a relational function defined by male authority. This grammatical possession aligns with what Fairclough (1995) describes as the naturalisation of dominance, where power is embedded in routine linguistic forms that appear ordinary and unremarkable.

Similarly, evaluative metaphors reinforce patriarchal expectations. Expressions equating womanhood with fertility, such as references to childlessness as incompleteness, operate through

metaphorical reduction. By mapping a woman's value onto biological productivity, such metaphors discursively erase alternative female identities. Importantly, the ideological force of these metaphors lies not in their explicit hostility but in their presentation as cultural common sense.

In *The Stillborn*, comparable moments of authority occur, but the linguistic patterning differs. Male characters initially deploy imperatives and categorical statements: "*Your duty is to follow, not to ask questions*", which rely on role assignment through nominalisation (*duty*) and negation (*not to ask*). However, Alkali's female characters increasingly respond with counter-declaratives such as "*I am not a child*" or "*You do not decide my life*". The repeated use of first-person pronouns and negation marks a clear linguistic shift from compliance to resistance.

Discursive Practice: Interaction, Silence, and Voice

At the level of discursive practice, power is sustained not only by what is said but by who is permitted to speak and how. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, female speech is often restricted to internal monologue or silence. For example, moments of frustration are frequently narrated rather than spoken, as in descriptions where Nnu Ego "said nothing" while inwardly questioning her fate. Linguistically, this pattern creates an asymmetry between male externalised authority and female internalised resistance.

This containment of female voice functions discursively to normalise patriarchy. Because resistance rarely enters dialogic exchange, it lacks social consequence within the narrative. The repeated separation between thought and speech ensures that patriarchal discourse remains publicly unchallenged, reinforcing its ideological dominance.

In contrast, *The Stillborn* restructures discursive participation. Female characters increasingly articulate dissent aloud, directly addressing male authority figures. When Li states, "*I will not live my life according to your expectations*", the utterance performs resistance as a public act. The declarative structure, combined with future modality (*will not*), signals intention and resolve rather than emotional reaction. Discursively, such moments disrupt established interactional hierarchies by refusing silence.

Social Practice: Ideology, Culture, and Gender Norms

At the level of social practice, these linguistic and discursive patterns reflect broader patriarchal ideologies within Nigerian society, where marriage and motherhood are central markers of female

identity. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the linguistic normalisation of female sacrifice mirrors a cultural context in which women are socialised to endure rather than confront injustice. Power operates through what is linguistically routine, not exceptional.

In *The Stillborn*, the emergence of assertive female discourse corresponds to shifting social realities, particularly the influence of education and changing gender expectations. Language becomes a site where alternative social identities are imagined and articulated. Resistance, therefore, is not merely thematic but socially grounded and linguistically enacted.

Comparative Discussion: Discursive Configurations of Resistance

While both novels depict patriarchal domination, the difference lies in how resistance is discursively configured. *The Joys of Motherhood* encodes resistance primarily through internal cognition and narrative commentary, limiting its transformative potential. *The Stillborn*, by contrast, foregrounds resistance through direct speech, negation, and assertive modality. These differences are not abstract but linguistically traceable, demonstrating how discourse shapes the scope of female agency.

Conclusion

This study has examined how gendered power relations and resistance are discursively constructed in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* through the analytical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. By focusing on linguistic form rather than thematic assertion, the study demonstrates that patriarchy in the selected novels operates through routine and often unmarked language choices that present domination as natural, expected, and culturally legitimate.

The analysis shows that in *The Joys of Motherhood*, patriarchal authority is primarily encoded through unmodalised declarative structures, possessive constructions, and evaluative metaphors that restrict female identity to relational and reproductive roles. These linguistic features work together to normalise male dominance and limit women's access to discursive space. Resistance, where present, is largely confined to internal monologue and narrative mediation, which reduces its social impact within the fictional world. Linguistically, this internalisation of resistance reinforces the stability of patriarchal discourse by preventing confrontation.

In contrast, *The Stillborn* exhibits a gradual but significant shift in discursive patterning. Female characters increasingly deploy assertive declaratives, negation, and first-person pronouns to

articulate resistance publicly and explicitly. These linguistic strategies disrupt established interactional hierarchies by challenging male authority in dialogue rather than in silence. The analysis demonstrates that resistance in *The Stillborn* is not merely ideological but is linguistically realised through specific grammatical and interactional choices.

By grounding interpretation in micro-linguistic analysis, this study advances feminist literary scholarship beyond broad thematic critique. It shows that gendered power and resistance in Nigerian women's writing are not only represented but are discursively engineered through language. The application of Fairclough's three-dimensional model further illustrates how textual features, discursive practices, and social ideologies intersect in the construction of gender relations. The study thus contributes to the growing body of work that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis into literary studies, particularly within African contexts. It demonstrates that literary discourse, like institutional or political discourse, participates actively in the production and contestation of social power. Ultimately, the findings reaffirm the centrality of language in shaping gendered realities and highlight the importance of linguistically grounded analysis for understanding the dynamics of patriarchy and resistance in Nigerian fiction.

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