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CHALLENGING GENDER-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES IN NOLLYWOOD: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF KUNLE AFOLAYAN'S *CITATION* AND *SWALLOW*

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Abstract: Existing scholarship on Nollywood extensively explores how female identities are constructed and contested. Though these studies have offered valuable data on gender portrayals, few studies have employed a detailed discourse-analytical lens to examine how female resistance is performed and narrated through language, especially in the context of institutional communication and economic power structures. This study examines how gendered power relations are constructed, challenged, and reimagined within academic and workplace environments in Kunle Afolayan's *Citation* (2020) and *Swallow* (2021). It explores how language operates as a site of ideological contestation, where female characters negotiate institutional and interpersonal authority, resist patriarchal silencing, assert economic autonomy, and subvert traditional gender norms. Adopting a qualitative design, the study purposively sampled 50 discourse excerpts from the two films, focusing on scenes where women articulate agency, resistance, and self-definition. These excerpts were analysed using key elements of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly the concept of lexicalisation, to identify how speech acts, lexical choices, and discursive positioning reflect and resist hegemonic gender ideologies. Five major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) power struggles and resistance to patriarchal authority; (2) challenging sexual violence and institutional silencing; (3) discursive construction and legitimisation of female professional authority; (4) economic autonomy and resistance to gendered dependency; and (5) subversion of gender norms and masculinities. The findings reveal that the female characters in both films are not passive recipients of patriarchal control but active agents who use language to assert their voice, reclaim space, and resist domination. Through strategic lexical choices and assertive discourse, these characters challenge the normative scripts of womanhood and reshape the ideological terrain of gender in contemporary Nigerian cinema. This study demonstrates how Nollywood, as a popular cultural medium, can function as a discursive space for gender critique and transformation.

Keywords: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, lexicalisation, Nollywood, speech acts, ideological framing, gender resistance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in media remains a critical area of inquiry, particularly within patriarchal societies where traditional power structures often marginalise women and restrict their access to agency. The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, functions not only as a source of entertainment but also as a cultural mirror that both reflects and shapes societal values, including gender norms. Historically, Nollywood has been critiqued for reinforcing stereotypical portrayals of women, frequently casting them in domestic, submissive roles, or defining them solely through their relationships with men (Okome, 2007; Haynes, 2016). As Adesokan (2011) observes, its narrative framework has often mirrored a society deeply entrenched in gender asymmetries, echoing broader African cultural texts in which male agency dominates both public and private spheres.

However, contemporary shifts in feminist and postcolonial scholarship have highlighted the emergence of filmmakers who challenge these hegemonic portrayals. Scholars such as Alola and Alola (2020), Osakpolor (2021), and Arinze-Umobi and Akpankwo (2026) have noted an increasing trend toward cinematic narratives that reimagine female subjectivity, autonomy, and resistance within contexts of systemic gender oppression. Among this new wave of filmmakers, Kunle Afolayan stands out for his commitment to exploring gendered power dynamics through nuanced storytelling. His films *Citation* (2020) and *Swallow* (2021) offer compelling case studies for examining how media discourse can serve as a tool for critiquing and resisting patriarchal ideologies. *Citation* (2020) tells the story of Moremi, a brilliant postgraduate university student who accuses a celebrated professor of sexual assault, navigating institutional cover-ups and social backlash. *Swallow* (2021), set in 1980s Lagos, follows Tolani, a working-class woman who confronts economic precarity, workplace harassment, and moral compromise. While distinct in setting and tone, both films spotlight women resisting patriarchal authority within institutional and economic structures. Their shared emphasis on female agency and discursive contestation provides fertile ground for a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), particularly in exploring how language is used to name violence, assert autonomy, and reshape gender norms.

Crucially, for the purposes of this analysis, the cinematic dialogues in *Citation* and *Swallow* are not viewed merely as dramatic entertainment, but as represented simulations of professional and institutional discourse, which reveal cultural ideologies about professional communication while remaining distinct from naturally occurring workplace talk. *Citation* provides a rich discursive site for examining academic institutional communication and hierarchical power negotiations between students and professors. *Swallow* highlights workplace communication and economic negotiations in male-dominated professional spaces. By examining these interactions, this study frames cinematic dialogue as a valid lens for exploring how gendered asymmetries are maintained and challenged in professional, academic, and socio-economic institutions.

This study examines how discourse in these films not only reflects gendered power dynamics but also participates in reshaping them within the Nigerian socio-cultural framework. This study

addresses the following research questions: (1) How do female characters in *Citation* and *Swallow* use language to resist patriarchal dominance? (2) In what ways does discursive strategy reflect shifting gender ideologies in Nigerian cinema? It hypothesises that female agency in these films is performed through deliberate lexical and rhetorical strategies that subvert gendered expectations. By analysing selected excerpts, the study seeks to demonstrate how cinematic discourse can expose, subvert, and potentially transform entrenched gender ideologies, contributing to wider feminist efforts to decolonise representation and amplify women's voices within African media narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nollywood, as one of the most prolific film industries in the world, has become a crucial site for constructing, interrogating, and reinforcing gender ideologies in African contexts. Scholars have examined how femininity is (re)constructed and regulated within its narratives, but more nuanced, discourse-analytical engagements remain limited. Kur and Aagudoso (2011) and Okwuowulu (2019), for example, critique how female characters are framed within binaries of virtue and vice, often culminating in social correction or symbolic punishment that reifies hegemonic gender norms. Adeniyi (2021) similarly explores the discursive foundations of “penis primacy” in Nigerian cinematic and societal representations, linking gender marginality to rape culture and patriarchal logic.

Expanding beyond film, Ayodele and Onanuga (2024) explore how female hip-hop artistes linguistically resist male dominance, employing performance and discourse to challenge systemic silencing. This emphasis on discursive resistance, though grounded in music, is instructive for understanding broader gender politics in Nigerian popular culture. Similarly, Amore, Aderogba, and Osijo (2023) use textlinguistic tools to demonstrate how African and American films incorporate feminist voice, showing how narrative structures themselves can be subversive. These approaches provide methodological cues for analysing media discourse but rarely integrate a full FCDA toolkit.

Within the scope of African cinema, Harrow (2016) notes a regime shift in women's cinematic roles – from passive to agentive – though this visibility often remains symbolic and restricted by cultural-nationalist imperatives. Gwam-Nzekwu's (2021) doctoral study echoes this, revealing that while portrayals of career women have emerged, they remain entangled in conservative tropes of domesticity and moral scrutiny. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), as articulated by Lazar (2005, 2007), offers a more nuanced framework for interrogating these representations by exposing how language naturalises gendered hierarchies and how women resist symbolic domination.

Regarding Kunle Afolayan's filmography, existing scholarship has primarily focused on his thematic depth and cinematic craftsmanship. Endong (2019) considers Afolayan's films as tools for nation-building, while Olayiwola and Folajimi (2017) analyse his demythologisation strategies. Emwinromwankhoe (2022) and Ifatimehin (2023) offer insightful readings of *Anikulapo*, highlighting both the empowerment and the ambivalence in its portrayal of female characters. Afolabi, Akintaro, and Adebayo (2026) further explore *Anikulapo: Rise of the Spectre*, examining the character of Awarun as a representation of female power and agency beyond patriarchal constraints within traditional sociocultural structures. Ekundayo and Akinwunmi (2025) provide a gendered reading of *Anikulapo* through the lens of the male gaze and female thingification, illustrating how visual framing and narrative structure objectify the female body while masking this objectification through cultural symbolism. However, there remains a noticeable gap in the

application of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to Afolayan's works – particularly *Citation* and *Swallow*, which directly engage with institutional and economic patriarchy.

Some studies have focused specifically on *Swallow*. Tairu (2024) reads *Citation* through the lens of karmic discredit, arguing that it ultimately reaffirms conservative morality through its narrative resolution. Scholars such as Okoye (2014) and Epochi-Olise (2017) investigate Afolayan's use of language and mythology but pay limited attention to their intersections with gendered power. Similarly, Ayodeji and Oluwatobiloba (2024), in their study of *Irapada*, foreground ritual and sacrifice in Yoruba cinema, presenting women primarily as vessels of tradition. Sam's (2023) contribution to "Narrative as a symbolic social act" addresses sexual bribery and pragmatic resolution but stops short of interrogating the systemic gender hierarchies that underpin Afolayan's storytelling. Moreover, Hermansyah (2022) interprets *Swallow* through the lens of Nigeria's 1980s economic crisis, viewing the film as an allegory of structural hardship. However, his analysis overlooks the gendered dimensions of economic vulnerability depicted in the film. Hogan and Eneyo (2023) examine *Swallow*'s aesthetics and technological motifs but offer little discussion of power, patriarchy, or resistance. These analyses, though informative, do not address gendered discursive strategies. Afolayan's broader filmography consistently blends cultural symbolism with sociopolitical critique, often framing female protagonists within moral or existential dilemmas. Yet, few studies have interrogated the gendered discourse of resistance in his work through the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), a gap this study aims to fill.

Studies in discourse and power, particularly van Dijk (1993), Fairclough (1989), and Wodak (2005), stress the ideological nature of language – how it serves to reproduce or challenge societal power structures. Yet, few works draw upon these insights to systematically examine Nigerian cinema. Even studies like Oladoja and Tomere (2022) and Omoera and Emwinromwankhoe (2024), which explore gendered voice in Nollywood, remain largely descriptive and do not critically analyse the linguistic mechanisms by which gender ideologies are sustained or resisted. This study addresses these gaps by applying a detailed FCDA approach to *Citation* and *Swallow*, focusing on speech acts, lexical strategies, and discursive constructions of female agency. It situates Nollywood not just as a space of gender representation but as a contested linguistic arena where patriarchal ideologies are challenged, negotiated, and potentially transformed through discourse.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), a subfield of Critical Discourse Analysis that interrogates the discursive reproduction of gendered power relations. FCDA, as articulated by Lazar (2005), focuses not only on how language reflects power asymmetries but also on how it can be mobilised as a tool of resistance and reconfiguration (Lazar, 2005). It is concerned with the ideological processes through which gender identities are constructed, sustained, and contested in discourse, particularly in contexts marked by systemic patriarchy and institutional hierarchies. As such, FCDA is methodologically suited to analysing the cinematic dialogue and narrative structure in *Citation* and *Swallow*, where female characters engage in discursive struggles against established power formations.

Discourse, in this study, is understood as both language-in-use and as a social practice that is ideologically saturated (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2006). Discourses do not merely describe social reality; they constitute it by framing what can be said, who can say it, and under what conditions. Within this framework, ideology refers to the tacit beliefs, assumptions, and values embedded in discourse that serve to legitimise social inequalities, particularly those rooted in

gender hierarchies (van Dijk, 1998). FCDA is thus attentive to both macro-level ideologies (e.g., patriarchy, institutional silencing) and micro-level linguistic strategies, including lexical choices, turn-taking, intertextual references, and pragmatic functions such as speech acts (Searle, 1976) and implicature.

A key linguistic tool deployed in this study is lexicalisation, which refers to the choice of specific words that carry ideological weight (Fairclough, 1989). The act of naming – for example, using rape instead of *assault* – is not neutral but deeply political. Such choices reflect the speaker's ideological positioning and serve to foreground or background certain social realities. Moreover, this study draws on van Dijk's (1998) notion of the Ideological Square, which explains how in-group and out-group representations are discursively managed – for example, by emphasising female resilience while de-emphasising male authority. These concepts enable a nuanced reading of how language is used in the selected films to either reproduce or subvert hegemonic gender ideologies. By integrating FCDA with broader linguistic insights, this study bridges gender representation in media with discourse analytical rigour. It thereby positions cinematic dialogue not merely as performance but as a form of professional and institutional communication where gendered power is both exercised and challenged.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), with an emphasis on uncovering how language both reflects and contests gendered power structures in cinematic contexts. The analysis draws from two Nollywood films, *Citation* (2020) and *Swallow* (2021), selected through purposive sampling based on their explicit engagement with themes of gender inequality, sexual harassment, and female resistance. Both films feature female protagonists navigating patriarchal systems and thus offer rich discursive data for feminist and linguistic inquiry.

The unit of analysis is the utterance – a speaker's complete verbal expression within a defined turn – examined within the broader narrative and interactional context. A total of 50 excerpts were purposively selected from both films, based on their concentration of gendered speech events where female characters negotiate power, resist authority, or challenge normative roles. Selection was guided by the presence of key discursive features relevant to FCDA, such as ideological naming, speech acts of defiance, lexicalised authority, and instances of institutional dialogue.

Each film was viewed repeatedly and transcribed manually to preserve sociolinguistic nuance, including code-switching, pragmatic markers, and non-standard dialects (e.g., Pidgin and Yoruba). The data were then thematically coded using an inductive approach, whereby codes emerged organically from repeated patterns across the transcripts. Initial coding of the excerpts focused on recurring discursive patterns related to resistance, agency, and gendered power. Using thematic analysis, 12 initial codes emerged (e.g., 'verbal resistance,' 'naming violence,' 'economic autonomy'), which were then grouped into five overarching themes. The final five themes were derived through iterative refinement and were cross-validated against theoretical constructs from FCDA.

Although a total of 50 excerpts were initially transcribed and inductively coded to reach thematic saturation, 22 highly representative excerpts were selected for detailed linguistic presentation in this article due to space constraints. Because the data corpus is multilingual (incorporating English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, and French), all non-English utterances were translated by the researcher. Translation prioritised pragmatic equivalence over strict literal translation to preserve the illocutionary force and lexicalisation strategies of the original utterances.

In alignment with the reflexive mandate of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2005), the researcher acknowledges her positionality as a Nigerian female academic. This linguistic and cultural insider-knowledge facilitated a deeper contextual reading of the complexities of power dynamics, particularly in interpreting the pragmatic weight of culturally specific vernacular and code-switching in professional spheres.

Linguistic analysis in the study focused on lexicalisation, speech act functions (Searle, 1976), modality, and discursive positioning, linking micro-linguistic choices to macro-level ideological structures. Analytical attention was given to how language performs identity, resists institutional norms, and constructs or deconstructs authority. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring that all films used were accessed through official, non-pirated streaming platforms, and all transcribed excerpts were used for academic analysis only. No identifiable personal data were involved, and the study operates within the bounds of fair use for educational research.

5. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this study, five dominant themes emerged from the analysis. Each theme captures a distinct yet interconnected dimension of how female characters in *Citation* and *Swallow* challenge hegemonic gender norms through discourse. The identified themes are:

1. Power struggles and resistance to patriarchal authority;
2. Challenging sexual violence and institutional silencing;
3. Discursive repositioning of female authority;
4. Economic autonomy and resistance to gendered dependency;
5. Subversion of gender norms and masculinities.

The analysis below explores each theme in detail, illustrating how language functions as a site of both oppression and resistance.

In analysing the themes, it is important to acknowledge the distinct historical contexts of the two films. *Swallow* operates within the linguistic and workplace norms of 1980s Lagos. *Citation* reflects contemporary, post-#MeToo academic discourse. The discursive strategies available to the characters differ. Furthermore, the analysis of speech acts in these excerpts (particularly directives, assertives, and commissives) is evaluated alongside their institutional felicity conditions. In these professional and academic communicative situations, a female character's speech act succeeds as resistance not merely through strong lexical choices, but by strategically subverting the expected institutional norms of who is allowed to speak, and how.

5.1. Power struggles and resistance to patriarchal authority

Power in patriarchal contexts is not simply enforced through laws or hierarchies; it is continuously reproduced through everyday discourse, institutional codes, and normative gendered interactions (Lazar, 2005). In African societies, particularly within the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape, male authority is naturalised across educational, familial, political, and relational domains, while women are discursively positioned as deferential subjects. As Lazar (2007) notes, power is not static but negotiated through discourse. In *Citation* and *Swallow*, power struggles unfold as female characters linguistically assert agency, refuse compliance, and redefine institutional and interpersonal boundaries through strategically crafted speech acts.

Excerpt 1

Koyejo: *You see this field trip, I don't want you to go... Yes, join another group. Do you understand?*

Moremi: *I'm not here to ask for your permission. I came to inform you. Dude, the last time I looked, it wasn't your signature on the cheque that pays my tuition fees!*

(Citation, 1:09:31)

Excerpt 2

Archibong: *Do you realise the implication of what you are doing?*

Tolani: *Yes. I don't owe any of you any explanation. I have filed my report.*

(Swallow, 20:11)

Excerpt 3

Moremi: *I hope my victory serves as a clarion call for change, and I hope my victory gives a voice to the silent girls and women in all walks of life facing sexual harassment just due to their gender.*

(Citation, 2:24:28)

Excerpt 4

Geeky Twins: *We know what you're going through and we salute you for taking a stance for all females on campus.*

(Citation, 46:04)

In excerpt 1, Moremi's interaction with Koyejo illustrates discursive resistance to informal male control through assertive speech acts. Koyejo employs a directive speech act ("*I don't want you to go*") embedded in paternalistic concern, typical of informal patriarchal dominance. His utterance contains modal control ("*do you understand?*"), positioning Moremi as a subordinate interlocutor. In response, Moremi performs an assertive counter-speech act, refusing to conform to his expected authority. Her use of the declarative structure "*I'm not here to ask for your permission*" reframes the exchange from request to notification, asserting autonomy. The lexical item *cheque* symbolically undermines the basis of economic control often associated with patriarchal patronage. Through strategic lexicalisation (Fairclough, 1989), she redefines herself as institutionally empowered, rather than relationally subordinate.

Excerpt 2 captures Tolani's linguistic defiance within a workplace hierarchy. Her use of the declarative structure "*I have filed my report*" indicates procedural literacy and institutional engagement. The phrase "*I don't owe any of you any explanation*" exemplifies a rejection of patriarchal accountability structures, where women are often compelled to justify their resistance to male authority. This utterance functions as a counter-hegemonic discursive move, reorienting the locus of power from informal, male-dominated workplace culture to formal institutional procedure. By invoking bureaucratic language, Tolani displaces male authority with administrative rationality – shifting the ideological battleground.

Excerpt 3 demonstrates how individual resistance can evolve into collective feminist discourse. Moremi's statement post-tribunal, "*a clarion call for change*", uses metaphoric discourse to elevate her personal vindication into political action. The repetition of *victory* alongside *voice* and *harassment* reflects discursive naming (Lazar, 2007), where injustices are explicitly labelled rather

than euphemised. This act of naming aligns with FCDA's emphasis on challenging ideological silencing by exposing how language can legitimise or resist oppression. Her discourse transcends personal narrative to embrace activist positionality – framing her speech as a representative, assertive act that mobilises collective awareness.

Excerpt 4 underscores the role of discursive solidarity in constructing feminist alliances. The Geeky Twins' use of collective reference ("*all females*") and the performative verb *salute* conveys public validation and moral elevation. The phrase functions as a commissive speech act – a pledge of allegiance to a broader cause. By evoking militaristic and nationalistic registers, the utterance recontextualizes campus feminism as heroic resistance, not mere personal grievance. This gesture of solidarity, especially in Nigeria's male-dominated academic space, reframes female resistance as worthy of admiration and replication.

Taken together, these excerpts illustrate how female characters in *Citation* and *Swallow* use language to reconstitute power relations. Through assertive, declarative, and strategic discursive acts, they challenge the ideological naturalisation of male dominance and reclaim agency within institutional and interpersonal domains. These instances exemplify FCDA's central tenet that language is a site of ideological struggle – one where women articulate resistance not only through what they say but how they say it.

5.2. Challenging sexual violence and institutional silencing

Sexual harassment and gendered violence are pervasive in patriarchal societies, often excused or obscured through institutional silencing, victim-blaming, and the discursive authority of men. In Nigerian academic and professional environments, women who report abuse frequently encounter disbelief, shame, and systemic reprisal. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) offers tools to uncover how such violence is both constructed and resisted in discourse. Language here becomes not only a mechanism of oppression but also a medium for contestation and agency. The excerpts below illustrate how female characters challenge silencing, explicitly name violence, and reclaim narrative authority through linguistic resistance.

Excerpt 5

Prof. Yahaya: *Miss Oluwa, are you implying that your supervisor, a senior lecturer of this university, a professor of international repute, attempted to assault you?*

Moremi: *No, I'm saying he attempted to rape me.*

(Citation, 1:43:03)

Excerpt 6

Tolani: *Did you slap him?*

Rose: *Tolani, because women like me and you never get justice in this country... If I ever see that man again, I will deal with him!*

(Swallow, 21:57)

Excerpt 7

Rose: *When I was growing up, all these stupid old men started touching me but I learned how to fight them!*

(Swallow, 1:32:17)

Excerpt 8**Dr. Nwosu:** *Why didn't you make an official complaint?***Moremi:** *Because I treated his f**k-up!**(Citation, 1:47:56)***Excerpt 9****Angela:** *There is a thin line between wooing and oppression, especially when one party has power over the other.**(Citation, 34:01)*

In excerpt 5, Moremi's response exemplifies a lexical escalation – from the ambiguous institutional term *assault* to the legally and culturally explicit term *rape*. Prof. Yahaya's attempt to soften the allegation using euphemistic language reflects the institutional impulse to depersonalise and minimise gendered violence. Moremi's correction is not only an assertive speech act but also a strategic act of discursive precision, one that names the violence and refuses the sanitization of her experience. According to Lazar (2005), such acts of naming dismantle ideological mechanisms that obscure systemic abuse. In the context of a university tribunal (i.e., a patriarchal space where authority is often gendered), Moremi's linguistic intervention disrupts both institutional and cultural norms that expect female silence.

Excerpt 6 demonstrates how Rose critiques the institutionalised impunity surrounding sexual harassment. Her phrase, "*women like me and you never get justice*," reflects an interdiscursive awareness of systemic failure. The statement blends personal testimony with social critique, positioning her experience within a larger pattern of state and institutional neglect. The utterance "*I will deal with him*" constitutes a threatening commissive act that rejects reliance on failed systems and implies a form of vigilante justice. From an FCDA standpoint, this discursive shift from legal to extralegal language reveals the desperation and resistance of women who have been failed by structural mechanisms.

In excerpt 7, Rose narrates her experience of childhood molestation using informal and evaluative language ("*stupid old men*"), disrupting the cultural norm of deference to male elders. By replacing neutral or protective titles like *uncle* with pejorative descriptors, Rose performs a discursive inversion – reframing abusers as morally and socially inferior. Her declarative, "*I learned how to fight them*," transforms her from a passive victim into an active agent. This aligns with FCDA's emphasis on how resistance is enacted through narrative positioning and counter-hegemonic language.

Excerpt 8 features Moremi's blunt, colloquial reply to a formal institutional inquiry. Her response, "*I treated his f**k-up*," employs vernacular empowerment – a deliberate refusal to use institutional language. The verb *treated* signals autonomous action, while *f**k-up* dismisses the institutional need for decorum or euphemism. This is an example of what Lazar (2007) terms discursive rebellion, where women reclaim power by rejecting sanitized bureaucratic discourse. Rather than participate in a process she distrusts, Moremi reclaims justice through informal but potent rhetorical defiance, resisting both institutional logic and linguistic norms.

Angela's observation in excerpt 9 highlights the discursive ambiguity that often surrounds gendered power in romantic and professional interactions. Her phrase, "*thin line between wooing and oppression*," deconstructs normalised gender scripts by emphasising the hidden coercion embedded in everyday interactions. The statement functions as a didactic declarative, urging both characters and viewers to critically reassess power asymmetries masked as affection. In FCDA

terms, Angela articulates the ideological function of romance discourse as a vehicle for patriarchal control, thereby challenging its normalisation.

Across these excerpts, women in *Citation* and *Swallow* engage in various forms of discursive resistance: through naming, challenging euphemisms, rejecting institutional decorum, and redefining their subject positions. These speech acts and lexical choices do not merely narrate experience; they reshape power relations, expose ideological silencing, and assert feminist agency. The analysis affirms FCDA's core assertion that language is a central site where gendered power is negotiated, contested, and potentially transformed.

5.3. Discursive repositioning of female authority

Within African patriarchal contexts, women's authority – especially in public, academic, or intellectual spaces – has historically been delegitimised or rendered invisible (Raymond & Canham, 2022). In *Citation*, however, Afolayan reconfigures this dynamic by presenting women as discursive agents who assert professional, cultural, and intellectual authority through strategic lexical choices, institutional alignment, and linguistic capital. The excerpts below demonstrate how female characters resist marginalisation by co-opting or subverting the discursive tactics traditionally used to reinforce male dominance.

Excerpt 10

Prof. Ibukun Awosika: *I would like to introduce every member of the panel starting from Uzoamaka Chukwu, who is representing the student body.... And Dr. Mrs. Nwosu. Thank you very much for being part of the panel ... and I have the privilege to chair this section...*
(*Citation*, 24:30–55)

Excerpt 11

Prof. Lucien N'Dyare: *Excuse me, young lady. I possess two master's degrees, a highly published PhD thesis and membership in 18 well-renowned academic fellowships, so now I understand you are one of the panel here, but I strongly suggest that you adjust your tone when addressing me.*

Prof. Ibukun Awosika:.....*And I am a Rhodes Scholar, I possess two PhDs, one Doctor of Letters, I belong to 23 academic fellowships across the world, and on top of that, I was previously nominated for the Nobel Prize in Economics, and as the chair of this panel, Professor N'Dyare, sit down!*
(*Citation*, 2:08:51–2:09:41)

Excerpt 12

Moremi: *(In French) Professor N'Dyare? Having issues with your car?*

Prof. Lucien N'Dyare: *(In French) You speak French?*

Moremi: *Yes, I have a French baccalaureate qualification.*
(*Citation*, 29:40)

In excerpt 10, Professor Awosika's introduction of the panel is more than procedural; it performs discursive authority. Her structured, measured tone and formal references (*Dr. Mrs.*, *chair*) function as lexicalisation (Fairclough, 1989), institutionalising female presence and professional hierarchy. Beyond mere procedural formality, her deliberate use of honorifics and structural titles functions as a discursive shield against patriarchal dismissal. By anchoring her speech in the strict

syntactic parameters of academic protocol, she preemptively neutralises any attempt to undermine her authority on gendered grounds. The act of naming, particularly the inclusion of a student representative (Uzoamaka), foregrounds female visibility and intergenerational representation. In a context where Nigerian student unions are predominantly male-led, this moment becomes a symbolic challenge to gendered institutional norms. By anchoring authority in formal institutional discourse, Awosika asserts a leadership style grounded in bureaucratic legitimacy rather than gendered hierarchy.

Excerpt 11 features a discursive confrontation between patriarchal credentialism and feminist authority. Professor N'Dyare deploys academic capital as discursive intimidation, listing qualifications to delegitimise a female interlocutor. His phrase “*adjust your tone*” is a directive speech act laced with gendered condescension – an attempt to enforce behavioural compliance. Awosika’s response mirrors his strategy but escalates the register: she outperforms his credentialism using the very tools like academic titles, fellowships, and global accolades that the patriarchal system respects and usually reserves for men, and caps her response with a decisive imperative, *sit down*. This utterance reverses traditional gendered power hierarchies. The imperative speech act, framed within an academic context, enacts linguistic dominance typically reserved for male authority figures. Awosika’s rhetorical strategy is thus a form of lexical counter-domination – leveraging the tools of patriarchal discourse to dismantle its monopoly on authority. Furthermore, this exchange perfectly operationalises van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square in institutional communication. Awosika strategically manipulates the discursive square by heavily emphasising her positive ‘in-group’ attributes (e.g., her superior global accolades, Nobel nomination, institutional rank as chair). Simultaneously, she effectively de-emphasises the positive attributes of the patriarchal ‘out-group’ (N'Dyare’s previously stated credentials). By capping her credentialist display with the blunt imperative *sit down*, she highlights his institutional subordination in this specific context. Through this application of the ideological square, Awosika does not merely defend her legitimacy. She completely neutralises his attempt at professional intimidation and redraws the boundaries of academic authority. From an FCDA lens, this exchange illustrates how women can repurpose dominant discursive codes to assert legitimacy. Awosika does not seek moral high ground or appeal to gendered sympathy. Instead, she reclaims space through credential-based self-legitimation, a mode of resistance deeply embedded in the norms of Nigerian academic culture, where hierarchy is textually and socially constructed.

The Ideological Square (van Dijk, 1998) is not limited to Excerpt 11. It is also operably present in Excerpt 1, where Moremi emphasises her positive in-group attributes (e.g., tuition-paying autonomy, institutional presence), de-emphasising Koyejo’s out-group authority (e.g., informal paternalistic control). Similarly, in Excerpt 2, Tolani’s assertion “*I don’t owe any of you any explanation*” strategically emphasises her procedural legitimacy (i.e., in-group: formal institutional engagement), de-emphasising the patriarchal out-group norm that women must justify resistance. Across these cases, female characters consistently manipulate the Ideological Square to centre their own legitimacy and dismantle patriarchal authority.

Excerpt 12 reveals a subtler but no less powerful discursive move. Moremi’s unexpected use of French surprises Professor N'Dyare, whose reaction, “*you speak French?*” suggests an internalised assumption of linguistic and perhaps intellectual superiority. Moremi’s reply, “*I have a French baccalaureate qualification*”, is a declarative act of epistemic parity, situating her within an elite, transnational academic class. Here, multilingualism becomes discursive capital. Instead of using French for deference or embellishment, Moremi uses it to interrupt linguistic hierarchy and assert global cultural fluency. In African postcolonial contexts, colonial languages often index

power, access, and prestige. Moremi's casual but confident bilingualism, therefore, subverts both gendered and neocolonial expectations, enacting multilingual agency.

Taken together, these excerpts demonstrate how *Citation* constructs women as agents of institutional discourse. Through discursive authority, credential-based counter-discourse, and linguistic versatility, female characters resist delegitimation and redefine their power. Awosika and Moremi do not simply participate in institutional spaces – they reshape the discursive terrain by speaking the dominant language more effectively than their male counterparts. This aligns with Ofori's (2024) notion of outspoken women in emerging Nigerian cinema who use formal discourse to challenge hegemonic norms. As FCDA emphasises, the ability to control language within dominant structures is a core mechanism of feminist resistance. In this context, Nigerian film becomes a site where discursive gender hierarchies are not only exposed but actively inverted through linguistic mastery.

5.4. Economic autonomy and resistance to gendered dependency

Within patriarchal societies, economic dependency functions as a persistent mechanism of gendered control, often casting women as financially subordinate in both private and public spheres. In the Nigerian context, gender roles are tightly structured around the male-as-provider/female-as-dependent binary, a schema reinforced by cultural practices, media portrayals, and everyday discourse (Ladele, 2010; Ofori, 2024). In *Swallow*, Afolayan subverts these ideological patterns by scripting female characters who reject financial dependency, assert the right to self-determination, and reconfigure economic relationships through linguistically empowered positions. These shifts are not just behavioural – they are discursive, marked by how the women speak about money, labour, and relational expectations.

Excerpt 13

Tolani: *I suggest I give you what little I have left of my savings, so you can add it to the money you have.*
(*Swallow*, 1:36:19)

Excerpt 14

Rose: *My work of seven years. Seven years! Show me one person wey try pass me for that bank. Show me one person wey him shorthand better pass my own.*
(*Swallow*, 21:35)

Excerpt 15

Tolani: *It's about my dowry.*

Sanwo: *What about it?*

Tolani: *But when exactly are you planning to meet my family so we can make this official? Let's do the proper thing so you can pay my dowry. I don't understand why it's taking so long.*
(*Swallow*, 16:44)

Excerpt 16

Mrs Durojaiye: *Baba yin oloriburuku, o ti fi owo ta poolu tan, emi nikan ni mo n sise (Your father that is unfortunate, he has used all his money to gamble, I am the only one working).*
(*Swallow*, 11:04)

Tolani's proposal in excerpt 13 to financially support her partner is a significant discursive deviation from patriarchal gender norms. The modal verb *suggest* frames her action as agentive, allowing her to occupy the subject position in financial negotiation. This is a strategic speech act that implies decision-making power, not dependency or deferential offering. In traditional Nigerian relationships, male pride and provider status are closely intertwined, making female economic support a potential threat to normative masculinity. Yet here, *Swallow* reframes financial contribution as a site of feminist agency. Through lexical control and pragmatic restraint, Tolani reclaims economic discourse as an expression of autonomy, not obligation. In FCDA terms, this act resists ideological constructions that equate femininity with financial passivity.

In excerpt 14, Rose's defense of her professional competence in Nigerian Pidgin constitutes a radical discursive act. Pidgin, typically marginalised in formal professional spaces, is deployed here to assert expertise and challenge institutional dismissal. Her repeated emphasis, "*Seven years! Seven years!*", operates as intensified lexical repetition, reinforcing her labour investment. The rhetorical challenge, "*Show me one person...*" functions as a performative declaration of merit, unmediated by elitist linguistic expectations. Linguistically, the syntax of her Pidgin and specifically the use of the comparative marker *pass* in *wey try pass me* and *wey him shorthand better pass my own* functions as an emphatic structural means to assert dominance in a competitive workspace. In the highly formalised, English-dominated Nigerian banking sector, standard English is typically the gatekeeping currency of professional competence. By choosing to articulate her unmatched stenographic skills (*shorthand*) using the syntax of Pidgin, Rose juxtaposes working-class linguistic identity with undeniable professional mastery. From a CDA perspective, this utterance destabilises the double marginalisation of working-class women: first by gender, then by language. Rose reframes her vernacular as valid, even superior, thereby constructing economic value in a discursive register often excluded from workplace validation. This is a case of classed linguistic resistance – an act of asserting professional legitimacy through subaltern language.

Similarly, in excerpt 15, Tolani's initiation of a conversation about dowry defies traditional cultural scripts that cast women as passive recipients of bride price arrangements. In many Nigerian traditions, dowry (or bride price) negotiations are male-led processes, with women often positioned as passive participants. Tolani's use of *let's* transforms the act into a collaborative speech act, reclaiming agency in a domain typically governed by patriarchal custom. The phrase *do the proper thing* is lexically ambivalent – It invokes tradition while simultaneously questioning the delay or inaction of her partner. This is a strategic discursive reappropriation: Tolani acknowledges the cultural norm yet repurposes it to critique her partner's failure and reassert her stake in the relationship's future. FCDA recognises this as ideological negotiation, where dominant gender scripts are not outright rejected but reconfigured from within to elevate female agency.

Mrs. Durojaiye's utterance in excerpt 16 performs economic authority through grievance. While emotionally charged, the declaration "*I am the only one working*" positions Mrs. Durojaiye as the de facto provider, flipping the patriarchal script of male financial dominance. Her frustration is not merely personal; it reveals the hidden labour of women within households, often discursively coded as male-led. The insertion of the Yoruba insult *oloriburuku* ('cursed or useless man') is more than expressive; it functions as a moral delegitimisation of patriarchal failure. In FCDA terms, this is a discursive inversion: the woman exposes and denounces the ideological assumption of male competence in economic leadership. Her language renders visible the typically unspoken economic contributions of women in domestic spaces, reframing them as both necessary and authoritative.

Collectively, these excerpts show how *Swallow* uses female dialogue to subvert entrenched gender ideologies surrounding economic dependency. Through modal assertiveness, vernacular legitimacy, cultural reappropriation, and linguistic confrontation, women like Tolani, Rose, and Mrs. Durojaiye dismantle the normative structures that position them as economically subordinate. Their speech acts redefine provider roles and challenge the ideological mechanisms that sustain gendered financial inequality. In doing so, the film contributes to a broader feminist discourse that values not just women's labour, but their discursive authorship of economic power.

5.5. Subversion of gender norms and masculinities

In Nigerian society, hegemonic masculinity is discursively constructed through ideals of dominance, rationality, sexual control, and provision, while femininity is framed around submission, nurturance, and moral propriety (Izugbara, 2004; Mensah, 2021). These expectations are normalised not only through institutions but also through language. *Citation* and *Swallow* deploy female characters who actively resist, invert, or ridicule these gender binaries through everyday discourse. Their speech acts reveal alternative constructions of power, expertise, and desirability that challenge patriarchal expectations and affirm feminist subjectivity.

Though the previous themes explicitly address institutional and economic communicative spheres, it is crucial to recognise that in patriarchal systems, the private and public domains are discursively intertwined. The subversion of social, domestic, and romantic norms directly informs female professional agency. A woman's linguistic refusal to submit to domestic subservience or romantic policing establishes the ideological groundwork for her defiance in the workplace. By rejecting patriarchal scripts in these private and social verbal interactions, these characters cultivate the assertive discursive identities they subsequently deploy in professional and institutional communicative situations.

Excerpt 17

Moremi: *Okay, Professor. I am going to teach you how to drive a manual gear shift automobile.*

(*Citation*, 28:52)

Excerpt 18

OC: *Let me get you some wine.*

Rose: *No o, na beer me I dey drink.*

(*Swallow*, 40:05)

Excerpt 19

Sanwo: *... o ni Mrs. Archibong query Salako, o tun wa fun ni suspension (She said Mrs. Archibong queried Salako and also gave him suspension).*

(*Swallow*, 2:01:08)

Excerpt 20

Rose: *If I am dating and in six months he hasn't proposed, I'm gonna date another person... You can take me out to a club every Friday and buy me beer. But you better not wake me up on Saturday morning and ask me for breakfast.*

(*Swallow*, 5:43)

Excerpt 21

Tolani: *My roommate Rose is someone I could ask for advice; she spoke manly whether or not I was ready to listen.*
(*Swallow*, 6:47)

Excerpt 22

Gloria: *Are you single?*

N'Dyare: No, I'm married.

Gloria: *Ouch!*

Mr Kwesi: *Your friend has no shame.*

(*Citation*, 12:01)

In excerpt 17, Moremi's utterance disrupts the patriarchal hierarchy of both academic and gendered authority. In Nigerian society, driving – particularly manual driving – is symbolically coded as masculine, connoting control, autonomy, and physical skill. The verb *teach* is a directive and pedagogic act, reversing the expected professor-student dynamic. From an FCDA perspective, this is a discursive inversion of hegemonic masculinity: Moremi occupies the instructional role, undermining both academic seniority and male privilege. Her confident declarative syntax reframes expertise as independent of gender, affirming the FCDA notion that language can contest institutionalised power.

Rose's response in excerpt 18 rejects the feminized elegance of wine and embraces beer, a beverage culturally coded as masculine and working-class. The lexical choice *na beer me I dey drink* is a linguistic act of self-definition that subverts expectations of feminine refinement. In Nigerian middle-class and patriarchal cultures, wine is gendered as sophisticated and feminine, while beer is coded as masculine, associated with strength, ruggedness, or working-class leisure. By declaring her preference for beer in Pidgin English, Rose both rejects elitist expectations of decorum and reclaims the right to pleasure on her own terms. Her casual, defiant tone affirms FCDA's argument that resistance is often embedded in everyday speech. The use of Pidgin, a socially marked and often male-dominated linguistic register, amplifies the defiance. It resists the standardised, "proper" language expected of women who wish to appear "decent." This scene disrupts gendered linguistic expectations and affirms alternative femininities that are assertive, earthy, and unapologetic.

In the reported speech of Excerpt 19, Mrs. Archibong assumes the role of institutional disciplinarian, an authority typically reserved for men in patriarchal workplace hierarchies. The verbs *queried* and *gave... suspension* are disciplinary lexicalisations, signaling control and retribution. FCDA identifies such terms as ideologically potent: they locate women as enforcers rather than nurturers, flipping conventional gender roles. The scene highlights institutional power enacted through discourse, where a female character asserts administrative control in a male-dominated structure.

In excerpt 20, Rose's declaration of her dating terms performs a discursive deconstruction of romantic expectations. Rose's rhetoric satirizes traditional female roles within romantic scripts – submissive, sacrificial, and patient. Her blunt speech acts "*If he hasn't proposed... But don't wake me up and ask for breakfast*" signal relational autonomy. This satirises the cultural expectations placed on women to endure, serve, and wait for male validation. Nigerian romantic culture valorises the "patient woman" who cooks, cleans, and supports while hoping for a proposal (Adedoja, 2019). Rose mocks this with blunt lexical choices, *gonna date another person* and *don't ask me for breakfast*, asserting that she owes nothing outside mutual commitment. Her refusal

to be domesticated disrupts the gendered equation of femininity with self-sacrifice, particularly in intimate relationships. Rose rejects the performative patience and dependence expected of Nigerian women in romantic relationships (Saguy, Reifen-Tagar & Joel, 2021). FCDA identifies this as a discursive rejection of patriarchal exchange, where attention or affection is expected to be reciprocated with service.

Tolani's reflection in excerpt 21 on Rose's speech style identifies it as "manly," a revealing moment of gendered linguistic perception; "*She spoke manly...*". Here, *manly* does not refer to pitch or tone, but to discursive style – directness, bluntness, assertiveness. In Nigerian sociolinguistic norms, such speech is typically associated with male authority, while women are socialised to be polite, soft-spoken, or indirect (Yul-Ifode, 2012). By acknowledging and admiring Rose's "manly" voice, Tolani acknowledges a form of feminine discursive agency that disrupts politeness norms often imposed on women. This can be interpreted as linguistic re-gendering, where traditionally masculine discursive traits are adopted by women, not as mimicry, but as resistance to the silencing effects of "feminine speech."

The interaction in excerpt 22 presents a layered commentary on romantic agency and gendered decorum. Gloria's flirtation breaks from passive female archetypes by initiating desire. Gloria's question "*Are you single?*" positions her as the initiator of a romantic inquiry, a role typically reserved for men within patriarchal settings. Her forwardness challenges the normative expectation that women should be passive, demure, or reactive in romantic engagements. In taking initiative, Gloria asserts control over her desire, disrupting the symbolic order in which male pursuit and female receptivity are naturalised. N'Dyare's simple response, while factually neutral, is followed by Gloria's humorous *Ouch!* indicating not embarrassment, but a confident acknowledgment of rejection. Mr. Kwesi's interjection, "*Your friend has no shame,*" is a moralistic speech act reinforcing patriarchal respectability politics. His language performs ideological surveillance, policing female behaviour within heteronormative norms. In contrast, Gloria's discourse challenges the premise that women should be ashamed of expressing desire, performing a subtle but effective act of discursive resistance.

Across these excerpts, *Citation* and *Swallow* subvert hegemonic gender norms by constructing alternative expressions of power, pleasure, and relational agency. Female characters dismantle traditional binaries through lexical inversion, assertive speech acts, register defiance, and re-gendering of discourse. FCDA allows us to see how these acts are not isolated – they are part of a broader ideological contest over language, gender, and legitimacy. Through discursive strategies, these films promote a feminist reimagination of what it means to speak – and be heard – as powerful, on one's own terms.

6. CONCLUSION

A comparison of the two films reveals distinct discursive registers shaped by their institutional contexts. *Citation* (2020) operates within the post-#MeToo academic discourse of a university tribunal, where speech acts tend toward formal assertives and declaratives (e.g., "*I have filed my report,*" "*sit down!*"), and lexicalisation draws on academic credentialism (e.g., PhD, Rhodes Scholar, French). *Swallow* (2021), set in 1980s Lagos, uses more colloquial and vernacular registers (e.g., Pidgin, Yoruba, and informal directives) reflecting the working-class professional sphere. Despite these register differences, both films share a common FCDA strategy: the subversion of expected institutional norms of who may speak, and how. In *Citation*, women speak the language of academia more effectively than their male counterparts (e.g., Awosika, Moremi); in *Swallow*,

they speak the language of the workplace on their own terms (e.g., Rose, Tolani). This convergence suggests that FCDA shows a shared discursive representation of female resistance in institutional communication, even as the surface-level linguistic realisations differ.

This study has demonstrated how *Citation* and *Swallow* function as salient discursive sites for contesting gendered power structures in Nigerian society. Using FCDA, the analysis revealed how language operates dually as a tool of patriarchal control and, crucially, as a medium of resistance. Across five thematic dimensions – power struggles, sexual violence, discursive repositioning, economic autonomy, and the subversion of gender norms – female characters assert agency not merely through symbolic or cinematic spectacle, but through deliberate, strategic speech acts. These films refuse to portray African women as voiceless victims or passive figures within male-dominated institutions. Instead, they foreground women as discursive agents who challenge, destabilise, and reframe the ideologies that seek to constrain them. Moremi's refusal to euphemise sexual violence, Tolani's linguistic assertion of financial agency, Rose's unapologetic vernacular, and Awosika's command of institutional discourse collectively illustrate how language becomes a terrain of ideological struggle and feminist reimagination. Significantly, the analysis demonstrates how female characters successfully manipulate van Dijk's ideological square in institutional communication. Rather than accepting marginalised out-group positioning, these women discursively centre their own professional, academic, and moral legitimacy (emphasising in-group positive traits), effectively de-emphasising or dismantling the patriarchal authority of their male interlocutors.

This study contributes to feminist media and discourse scholarship by affirming the role of language as a site of meaning-making, resistance, and identity negotiation. Afolayan's films, while positioned within Nollywood's popular tradition, transcend entertainment to function as cultural texts of postcolonial critique and feminist intervention. They interrogate hegemonic masculinity and model alternative structures of authority, solidarity, and discursive power rooted in African realities. In a context where gender-based violence, economic marginalisation, and institutional silencing remain pervasive, these films do more than reflect society – they intervene in it. They invite audiences to interrogate the perceived naturalness of patriarchal norms and to imagine new grammars of power, in which women's voices are framed as legitimate, authoritative, and socially consequential. Even though this study does not measure direct audience reception, it demonstrates that these films model highly transformative discursive scripts. In a context where gender-based violence and institutional silencing remain pervasive, Afolayan's films provide a vital representational blueprint. They invite audiences to interrogate the perceived naturalness of patriarchal norms and to imagine new grammars of institutional power, in which women's voices are framed as professionally legitimate and socially consequential. Ultimately, this analysis affirms that the media possesses significant critical potential, functioning as a simulated arena where alternative, equitable professional discourses can be rehearsed and normalised.

Although this study offers valuable data on the discursive construction of female agency in *Citation* and *Swallow*, it is not without limitations. First, the analysis is based on two films by a single director, Kunle Afolayan, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader trends in Nollywood or African cinema. Secondly, although Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) allows for deep exploration of language and ideology, the study focuses primarily on dialogue and speech acts, without extensive attention to visual or cinematic techniques that also contribute to meaning-making. Additionally, the analysis is interpretive in nature, relying on close reading and theoretical framing, which may invite alternative readings or critiques. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating a larger sample of films, comparative regional studies, or multimodal analysis that includes visual and narrative structure.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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