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Silence and Speech: Exploring Language and Social Justice in Shema'u Abubakar Umar-Ari's *AMAL*

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Abstract
This paper examines how language operates both as an instrument of control and a medium of resistance in Shema'u Abubakar Umar-Ari's *Amal*. Drawing on feminist linguistic theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it explores how the female protagonist, Amal, negotiates systemic oppression through acts of speech and silence. Textual analysis demonstrates that when Amal remains silent in response to her father, Alhaji Bala's coercion, her silence resists his authority by exposing the emotional violence underlying patriarchal power. Similarly, her refusal to verbally consent to the forced marriage highlights how the absence of speech functions as symbolic resistance. Conversely, moments when Amal speaks, such as her plea to be allowed to pursue education instead of marriage, reveal how female voices, though emotionally charged, are frequently dismissed and delegitimised in a male-dominated cultural order. The findings suggest that silence, rather than mere submission, can signify resilience and dissent, while speech acts expose structural inequalities in the cultural hierarchy. The paper argues that linguistic practices are central to pursuing social justice and gender equality, contributing to feminist literary scholarship by underscoring the urgent need to amplify and validate the voices of marginalised girls. It concludes by recommending a more inclusive discourse that disrupts oppressive norms and empowers women's expression in literature and society.

Keywords: Silence, Speech, Language, Social Justice, *Amal*

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a socio-political instrument through which power is asserted or resisted. Questions around who is allowed to speak and who is silenced are central to debates among scholars, policy analysts, and social justice advocates. In patriarchal societies, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls are socialised into silence, taught that obedience and quietness define virtue and femininity. This enforced silence has tangible consequences for autonomy, legal rights, and human dignity (Hooks 37; Mohanty 18). Movements such as #MeToo and efforts by UN Women and Human Rights Watch have amplified marginalised voices, exposing silence as a mechanism of oppression. Spivak's enduring question, "Can the subaltern speak?" remains vital in confronting the systemic exclusions that bar many, particularly women in the Global South, from speaking to or within power (Spivak 287). Silence, she argues, is not mere absence but a form of violence and epistemic erasure. These global concerns take powerful local form in *Amal*. Amal's fate echoes the lived experiences of many Nigerian girls, especially in the north, where early marriage, religious conservatism, and limited education intersect. According to a 2023 UNICEF report, over 22 million Nigerian women were married before age 18, many without consent. In such settings, silence is a cultural obligation upheld by gender norms and institutional structures. Amal's character embodies this tension. She is silenced by her father, by customs, religion, and by a linguistic system that equates femininity with voicelessness. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in *We Should All Be Feminists*, notes that girls are raised to please, not assert, and are rewarded for compliance rather than courage (Adichie 19). Judith Butler's theory of performativity similarly suggests that gender is constructed through repeated speech acts and bodily performances (Butler 34). Amal's silence is thus a culturally scripted performance of idealised femininity, one that leads to her destruction. Despite Nigeria's legal protections, the gap between policy and practice is wide. The Child Rights Act of 2003 prohibits forced marriage and guarantees children's right to be heard, yet several northern states have refused to adopt it due to cultural and religious objections (Aina 88). The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015 criminalises child

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marriage and psychological abuse, but suffers from weak enforcement and low public awareness (Ogundipe-Leslie 62). These contradictions reveal silencing as not only cultural but also institutional.

This paper addresses the persistent silencing of women and girls in northern Nigeria despite progressive laws. While feminist scholarship has extensively examined physical and sexual violence, the linguistic dimensions of gender injustice, particularly silence and speech, remain underexplored. Literature offers a unique lens through which these dynamics can be examined. In *Amal*, the protagonist's silence functions as both a literary device and a political allegory, symbolising voices erased in the name of tradition. The paper aims to: examine the symbolic use of silence and speech; explore socio-cultural mechanisms of female silencing in northern Nigeria; evaluate the effectiveness of relevant legal frameworks; and contribute to feminist discourse on silence and speech. As Funke Aboyade argues, legal language often excludes those it aims to protect, especially women and children, who lack access to or understanding of legal systems (Aboyade 214). Thus, the law's abstraction views Amal's reality: legal recognition without empowerment. Ayo Bamgbose critiques postcolonial Africa's linguistic hierarchies, where elite discourse marginalises local expressions and enforces dominant ideologies (Bamgbose 101). *Amal* dramatises this through the contrast between the authoritative voices of elders and Amal's muted resistance. Her silence becomes both resistance and tragedy. The play not only reflects society but challenges it, questioning traditions that equate female silence with virtue. By positioning literature as a lens for social justice, this paper urges attention to the voices excluded from discourse. In *Amal*, silence is not just a theme; it is a call to action, demanding a more inclusive linguistic and social order.

Synopsis of *Amal*

Amal is a tragic, dramatic narrative that centres on a young girl named Amal, whose name ironically means "hope." Set in a conservative northern Nigerian village, the story exposes the harsh realities of forced marriage, gender-based oppression, and the silencing of female voices. Amal, a bright and expressive girl, becomes a victim of her father's authoritarian decision to marry her off under the guise of cultural obligation. Out of love for her father, respect and obedience to culture, tradition, and religion, she keeps quiet.

On her wedding day, Amal tragically dies. Her death becomes an ugly indictment of harmful traditions and a call for urgent societal introspection. The play presents silence and speech not only as themes but as existential conditions shaped by culture, tradition, religion, power, and justice.

Conceptual Clarifications

Silence

Silence is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that transcends the mere absence of sound. Michel Foucault describes silence as "an element that functions alongside the things said," suggesting that silence can structure discourse just as much as speech can (Foucault 27). Audre Lorde defines silence as a form of learned oppression, stating, "What is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (*Lorde* 40). This frames silence as a potential site of resistance or complicity. Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts that "silence is not a denial. It is a strategy that enables resistance to imposed definitions" (*Minh-ha* 92). Amal's forced silence in the face of patriarchal domination illustrates how silence is socially produced and regulated. In Nigerian sociocultural settings, silence is often associated with virtues such as obedience, modesty, and maturity, particularly for girls. As Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues, African women have been historically "trained in silence," socialised to interpret passivity as virtue (Ogundipe-Leslie 65).

Speech

Speech is a mechanism of action, identity, and resistance. Judith Butler emphasises that speech is performative and constitutive of identity, claiming, "The moment of speech is the moment when the subject is instituted" (*Butler* 33). J. L. Austin conceptualises speech as action in his theory of performatives, arguing that to speak is often to do something, not just say something (Austin 6). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie adds a narrative dimension to speech by asserting that "the ability to tell one's story is crucial to one's dignity" (*Adichie 17*).

In *Amal*, the hero's brief moments of assertive speech challenge patriarchal and cultural norms. However, the danger she faces when she attempts to speak underscores the instability of voice for marginalised individuals. Bell Hooks echoes this when she asserts that "to be heard is to be recognised as human" (*Hooks* 16). Speech in the play becomes a radical act that asserts the speaker's right to exist and to resist.

Language

Language is a deeply embedded sociocultural system that does more than facilitate communication; it encodes values, power relations, and ideologies. Language, according to Ayo Bamgbose, is "not only a means of communication but also an instrument of social control and identity" (Bamgbose 9). This aligns with the paper's focus on how language shapes and reflects power dynamics, particularly in gendered contexts. Edward Sapir states

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that "language is a guide to social reality," highlighting its role in shaping worldview (Sapir 162). Pierre Bourdieu conceptualises language as a form of symbolic capital, asserting that "language is not only an instrument of communication but also an instrument of power" (Bourdieu 37). Gayatri Spivak emphasises the limits of language for the oppressed, especially subaltern women, asking, "Can the subaltern speak?", a rhetorical question implying that dominant languages often ignore marginalised voices (Spivak 287).

In *Amal*, language becomes a vehicle of both domination and potential liberation. Patriarchal figures in the play use authoritative, commanding language to assert control, while Amal's emerging voice attempts to redefine her reality. The interplay of language and silence reveals the systemic barriers that obstruct meaningful self-expression for oppressed individuals.

Social Justice

Social justice refers to the impartial distribution of opportunities, resources, and privileges within a society. John Rawls defines social justice as "fairness" and introduces the idea of the "veil of ignorance" as a tool for assessing justice in social arrangements (*Rawls* 52). Amartya Sen links justice to individual capability, arguing that social justice should be judged by "the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen 74). Martha Nussbaum emphasises that social justice must guarantee every individual the conditions to live a life of dignity, arguing for the universal importance of "central human capabilities" (*Nussbaum* 35).

In *Amal*, social justice is fundamentally lacking. The hero's rights to freedom, dignity, and protection are denied by familial, cultural, religious, and legal institutions. Although Nigeria has enacted significant laws such as the *Child Rights Act* (2003) and the *Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act* (2015), enforcement remains delicate in many rural areas, allowing harmful practices like forced marriage to persist.

The denial of social justice in *Amal* reflects a broader global crisis where vulnerable populations, especially girls, remain subject to systemic neglect. The play thus becomes an artistic indictment of both cultural traditions and state failures that perpetuate injustice.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws its theoretical strength from two frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Theory, both of which provide powerful tools for interrogating the intricate relationship between language, silence, and social justice as portrayed in the play *Amal*. These theories help illuminate how power and ideology are embedded in speech acts and silences, and how these, in turn, reflect broader patterns of gender-based marginalisation in society.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, developed in the late 1980s by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, contends that language is never neutral but rather functions as a means of constructing and reinforcing power dynamics. Fairclough emphasises that discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures, asserting that "language is a form of social practice" (Fairclough 20). In other words, the way people speak or remain silent is deeply intertwined with ideological structures and institutional norms. Van Dijk adds that discourse controls access to knowledge, which subsequently shapes public opinion and enforces hegemonic structures (van Dijk 354). Within the world of *Amal*, the protagonist's voicelessness and the patriarchal dominance over her future are examples of institutional discourses that sustain injustice through culturally sanctioned silence. CDA thus provides a compelling lens to examine how Amal's silencing is not incidental but rather a product of systemic oppression manifest through language.

Feminist Theory

Complementing CDA, Feminist Theory further grounds the paper by interrogating the gendered nature of speech and silence. Emerging prominently during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and later expanded by theorists like Bell Hooks and Judith Butler, Feminist Theory critiques patriarchal structures that legitimise the subjugation of women. Butler's notion that gender is performative and constructed through repeated social practices is particularly pertinent to *Amal*, as the play showcases how cultural scripts dictate the roles and limitations placed on women (Butler 33). Amal's forced marriage and subsequent death exemplify how women's voices are structurally suppressed within deeply patriarchal environments. According to Hooks, feminism is fundamentally about the struggle to end sexist oppression and values the rights of women to speak and be heard in all spheres of life (Hooks 1). Thus, Feminist Theory helps us understand how silence operates not merely as the absence of speech but as an instrument of systemic disempowerment.

Both theories underscore the dependent variable of this paper: social justice. CDA reveals how unjust societal norms are reproduced and reinforced through discourse, while Feminist Theory advocates dismantling the gendered hierarchies that keep women like Amal voiceless. These perspectives are essential for examining how language can be a double-edged sword, either reinforcing oppression or challenging it. The advantages of CDA

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lie in its ability to connect language use with societal power structures, yet it is sometimes criticised for methodological inconsistency and reliance on subjective interpretation (Wodak and Meyer 6). Similarly, while Feminist Theory offers a robust framework for advocating equality, critics argue that it occasionally oversimplifies complex intersections of gender with race, class, and culture (Mohanty 338). CDA and FLT clarify that Amal's constrained voice is not incidental but structurally produced and maintained.

Crucially, the analysis links specific moments in the play to theory: Amal's unanswered plea to attend school ("I want to go to school, Baba…") exemplifies a performative assertion of agency (Austin; Butler), while its dismissal illustrates Spivak's epistemic erasure, the subaltern speaks but is not heard as a valid knower (Spivak 287). Alhaji Bala's rebuke "Enough, woman!" models Fairclough's textual-discursive-sociocultural circuit: a lexical command (text) enacts patriarchal authority (discursive practice) and reproduces gender hierarchy (sociocultural practice).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for a nuanced exploration of how silence and speech function in *Amal* not just as narrative devices, but as reflections of the lived experiences of many women subjected to structural inequality. By anchoring this analysis in CDA and Feminist Theory, the paper is equipped to uncover the ideological underpinnings of the linguistic choices in the text and to advocate for social transformation through critical engagement with literature.

Empirical Review

Abah and Okwori (2002) explored the transformative role of participatory theatre in confronting gender violence in Northern Nigeria. Conducting ethnographic performances between 1999 and 2002, they used a qualitative methodology grounded in community interaction to show that theatrical engagement enabled women to challenge societal silencing without confrontation. Their work, which relied on both primary data (interviews and live performances) and secondary policy texts, found that storytelling allowed for culturally resonant resistance, though they did not provide long-term impact measurements.

Nnaemeka (2005), in her widely cited study on African feminisms, developed the concept of "nego-feminism" to interpret silence not only as repression but as strategic negotiation. Through a conceptual analysis of African feminist literature spanning 1980 to 2004, Nnaemeka urged scholars to contextualise women's silence in indigenous cultures, cautioning against wholesale Western interpretations. However, her argument was largely theoretical, lacking empirical validation through field data.

Adebayo (2010) applied feminist literary criticism to analyse how Nigerian playwrights portrayed gender oppression in drama texts published between 1970 and 2008. Utilising secondary sources, including dramatic works by writers like Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme, he found that women characters were often voiceless or punished for speaking out. His textual analysis revealed that while some plays portrayed empowered female figures, these were often framed within patriarchal boundaries, limiting their transformative potential. The study's scope was comprehensive, but its limitation lay in its failure to disaggregate women's experiences along class and ethnic lines, thus generalising female subjugation.

However, Okeke and Nwakoby (2016), in their socio-legal study conducted from 2010 to 2015, investigated forced and early marriages in Northern Nigeria through both primary interviews and secondary legislative reviews. They found that despite the existence of the Child Rights Act (2003), cultural norms, legal pluralism, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to silence young girls through institutionalised marriage practices. Their recommendation emphasised the need for stronger legal domestication and community education programs.

Alawode and Usman (2020) conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Nollywood films released between 2015 and 2019. Drawing from film transcripts and reviews, their study exposed how female characters were linguistically subordinated, interrupted more often, given fewer lines, and made to speak in deferential tones. While their analysis was revealing, the study lacked triangulation with audience reception or policy discourse, limiting its broader applicability.

Sarah Deer (2015) investigated how silence is institutionally maintained through the legal system to marginalise Native American women. The study, spanning over three decades (1980s–2015), relied on both primary data, survivor interviews, legal testimonies, and secondary sources such as federal legislation and indigenous literature. Deer employed a feminist-legal ethnographic methodology, revealing that jurisdictional loopholes and colonial legal structures have historically silenced Native women, making them disproportionately vulnerable to sexual violence. The study showed that breaking the silence through storytelling and legal reform is critical for reclaiming justice. Deer recommended empowering tribal courts with full prosecutorial authority and establishing survivor-led advocacy platforms. While powerful in its cultural insights, the study focuses mainly on U.S. policy, which may limit its applicability across non-Western settings.

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Chakraborty and Karandikar (2016) explored silence and stigma among commercially sexually exploited women in India. Their study, conducted between 2012 and 2015 in Mumbai and Pune, used primary data from semi-structured interviews with 40 survivors. Using a grounded theory approach, the researchers analysed how silence operates both as a survival strategy and a tool of subjugation. Findings indicated that many women are silenced by traffickers and law enforcement, while others choose silence to avoid societal stigma or protect their children. Speech, when reclaimed, often invited institutional backlash unless supported by strong rehabilitation programs. They recommended improving trauma-informed care, legal support, and community-based rehabilitation services. The study, however, focused exclusively on urban populations, which may not reflect rural realities where cultural norms are often stricter and state protections are weaker.

Adomako Ampofo (2001) investigated gender socialisation and its linguistic implications among Ghanaian adolescents in Accra and Cape Coast from 1998 to 2000. The mixed-method study combined focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and quantitative surveys, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources, including school curricula and national gender education reports. The study found that boys were consistently encouraged to speak out and lead, while girls were instructed to be quiet, submissive, and respectful. These lessons were deeply embedded in educational and religious institutions. This early socialisation created long-term disparities in voice, agency, and participation. Recommendations included curriculum reform, teacher retraining, and promoting inclusive classroom interactions. While the methodology was robust, the study lacked direct policy follow-up or longitudinal impact assessment, limiting its prescriptive power.

Empirical studies from the United States (Deer), India (Chakraborty and Karandikar), and Ghana (Adomako Ampofo) offer critical insights into how gendered silence is socially constructed and culturally reinforced. However, few studies have explored these linguistic dynamics within the specific context of forced marriage and patriarchal authority in Northern Nigeria, as dramatised in literary works like *Amal*. This represents a significant gap in African-centred feminist and linguistic research, especially in the context of creative literature as a medium for critiquing systemic silencing and advocating social justice.

There is also a notable lack of intersectional analysis that considers how language use, particularly silence and speech, is shaped by culture, gender, power, and resistance within fictional yet socially grounded narratives like *Amal*. This paper, therefore, seeks to critically explore how silence and speech function as vehicles of control and resistance in *Amal*, situating the analysis within broader discourses on language and social justice in Nigeria, while engaging with CDA and the global feminist linguistic theory.

Methodology

The main data for this study is Shema'u Abubakar Umar-Ari's *Amal*. The play was intentionally chosen for its thematic relevance to the paper's focus on language, silence, speech, and social justice within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. The text is treated as a sociolinguistic artefact in which dialogues, characterisation, and narrative silences reflect broader power structures. The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory qualitative research design, which is suitable for analysing literary texts and uncovering the socio-cultural meanings embedded in language use. Close textual analysis was employed as the principal method of inquiry. Excerpts were purposively selected from moments in the play where silence, speech, or verbal suppression became critical to the development of the plot, for example, Amal's silence in the face of coercion, her pleas to pursue education, and her father's authoritarian decrees. These excerpts were systematically coded according to themes such as "silence as resistance," "delegitimised speech," and "patriarchal discourse." The analysis also relied on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1995), which considers (i) the textual level, where words, tone, and rhetorical devices were examined; (ii) the discursive practice, where patterns of who speaks, who is silenced, and how authority is constructed were analysed; and (iii) the socio-cultural practice, which situated these linguistic practices within broader patriarchal structures in Nigerian society. This multi-layered CDA framework enabled the study to move beyond surface interpretation of dialogue to an exploration of the power relations embedded in speech acts and silences. Furthermore, feminist linguistic theory provided a lens for coding and interpretation. The coding scheme was designed around feminist categories such as "voice suppression," "gendered silencing," and "subversive silence," which were mapped against Amal's interactions with male authority figures. This combined methodological approach allowed the study to capture both the textual features of language use and the broader ideological structures that sustain gender inequality.

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Analysis

Excerpt 1: (Page 39-40)

"Haba! Alhaji, Amal is too young to be married. Don Allah Alhaji, don't do this to me…"
"Enough, woman! Are you mad or stupid, which one? You even have the guts to speak to me like that…"

The dialogue between Amal's mother and Alhaji Bala captures the gendered power dynamics and linguistic oppression that underpin the social injustice portrayed in *Amal*. When the mother pleads, "Haba! Alhaji, Amal is too young to be married. Don Allah Alhaji, don't do this to me…", her speech reflects both emotional appeal and cultural reverence. The exclamatory interjection "Haba!" and the religious plea "Don Allah" reveal a respectful yet desperate attempt to intervene in a patriarchal decision. The mother's use of declarative and imperative forms attempts to assert moral reasoning within a communicative space often denied to women. However, her resistance is swiftly countered by Alhaji Bala's aggressive retort: "Enough woman! Are you mad or stupid, which one? You even have the guts to speak to me like that…". His response exemplifies *linguistic silencing*, where the authority figure invalidates the speaker's concern through rhetorical humiliation and gendered condescension. The phrase "Enough woman!" reduces her identity to her gender, stripping her of individual voice, while the confrontational questioning dismisses her appeal as irrational. CDA: imperatives and face-threatening acts index power asymmetry; the male speaker monopolises turn-taking, converting dialogue into decree. FLT: the mother's mitigated speech (politeness markers) exemplifies gendered self-protection; the subsequent humiliation polices feminine voice, reinforcing silence as the safer posture. This exchange underscores how speech from women in patriarchal societies is not only contested but often punished, thereby revealing the powerful role of language in sustaining or resisting social injustice.

Excerpt 2: (Page 41)

"I want to go to school, Baba..."

This simple yet emotional sentence is a profound act of speech as resistance. Spoken by Amal, it reflects a child's plea for autonomy and empowerment within a deeply patriarchal structure. The use of the personal pronoun "I" foregrounds self-identification and action, marking a significant departure from the silence and submission expected of girls in her sociocultural context. The verb phrase "want to go" emphasises personal desire and ambition, while "to school" links her aspiration directly to education, a symbol of liberation, growth, and future possibility.

Addressing her father as "Baba," a term that carries both affection and reverence in many African languages, Amal attempts to balance respect with resistance. This balancing act is where women and girls often soften assertive speech to avoid confrontation. However, beneath this polite framing lies a bold assertion of a girl's right to choose her future, which, in a patriarchal context, becomes a politically charged declaration. CDA: the non-uptake of a legitimate request reveals a discursive gatekeeping where girls' desires are excluded from decision-making.

From a feminist linguistic standpoint, this sentence exemplifies a statement that challenges not only familial authority but also the wider socio-cultural norms that prioritise marriage over education for girls. It highlights how language can serve as both a tool for expressing personal truth and a site of struggle against systemic injustice. In Amal's case, her desire to go to school is not merely educational; it is existential, it affirms her will to live, learn, and become.

Tragically, in the narrative, this appeal is ignored or overridden, reinforcing the thematic concern of the paper: that female speech, no matter how clear or morally justified, is often silenced by dominant patriarchal ideologies. Thus, this short sentence encapsulates the tragedy of lost potential and the urgent need for listening to and validating girls' voices in both family and society.

Excerpt 3: (Page 47)

"Salam gimbiya, how are you? [Amal didn't answer him; she only put her head down, avoiding his gaze.]"

This silence is performative, expressing fear, defeat, and societal conditioning. The speaker greets her warmly with "Salam gimbiya, how are you?", combining the Arabic-derived Hausa greeting "Salam" (peace) with the honorific "gimbiya" (princess), a term that superficially conveys respect and affection. However, these apparent courtesy masks an underlying power dynamic; the male speaker assumes the right to approach, address, and engage Amal in a situation where her autonomy is already severely constrained. In contrast, Amal's silence, "she only put her head down, avoiding his gaze," operates as a powerful non-verbal communicative act. FLT: ritualised silence operates as risk management and quiet dissent. CDA: withdrawal denies conversational ratification; by refusing uptake, Amal withholds legitimacy from the interaction.

From a feminist linguistic perspective, Amal's silence is not merely the absence of speech, but a speech act in itself, and a form of muted resistance. Amal's non-response, coupled with her avoidance of eye contact, signals

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discomfort, disapproval, and an unwillingness to participate in a conversation shaped by her social and emotional oppression. In a society where female voices are often devalued or punished, this silence embodies both protection and protest.

Amal's lowered head and averted gaze performatively reject the communicative frame imposed upon her. She refuses to legitimise the speaker's authority or intentions by withdrawing her consent to engage. Thus, Amal's silence is not passive; it is an intentional withholding of speech as a means of asserting action within a repressive social order.

The excerpt reinforces the theme that in patriarchal settings, silence can be a potent form of speech. Amal's refusal to speak back underscores both her vulnerability and her resistance. It is a linguistic strategy of survival, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric that the paper explores.

Excerpt 4: (Page 47)

"Ya Bello, I don't want to get married now, please. I want to finish my schooling first…"

This utterance by Amal is a rare moment of assertive speech, a direct, personal expression of her desires in a sociocultural context where young girls are often denied such intervention. The line begins with the respectful address "Ya Bello," a Hausa word meaning "Brother Bello," which establishes a polite but familiar tone. This is followed by an emotionally earnest plea: "I don't want to get married now, please." The addition of "please" reflects both desperation and regard, linguistic markers of a speaker who knows her request challenges rooted patriarchal norms. FLT: This is a calibrated assertion of autonomy shaped by gendered norms. CDA: the clause structure foregrounds desire ("I don't want… I want…") and contests the marriage script. The narrative's refusal to honour the request shows how institutional context overrides even a carefully framed female voice.

Amal's statement represents a performative act of resistance, using the first-person declarative "I don't want" to articulate self-determination. Her language breaks from the expected silence or compliance typical of female roles in conservative societies. The second part of her utterance, "I want to finish my schooling first," is particularly critical. It links her resistance not to rebellion for its own sake, but to a constructive, empowering goal-oriented education. This situates Amal's desire within the broader discourse of social justice and gender equity, echoing global feminist advocacy for girls' right to education. Her speech highlights the conflict between traditional obligations (early marriage) and personal aspirations (education), revealing the sociolinguistic tension between obedience and autonomy.

Amal's voice in this instance contrasts sharply with her silences elsewhere in the narrative. Here, her decision to speak marks a pivotal moment of intervention. However, within the context of the story, this assertion is tragically ignored, further reinforcing the paper's argument that speech alone, without structural support, may not be sufficient to overcome deep-rooted injustice. Nonetheless, Amal's plea stands as a linguistic embodiment of resistance and the yearning for justice.

Excerpt 5: (Page 75)

There is silence. Her body is numb and warm with her eyes opened and the eyeballs turned towards the sky. She is dead!

This represents the tragic culmination of Amal's struggle, a moment where silence becomes literal and absolute. The phrase "There is silence" marks a dramatic shift from earlier instances of verbal resistance, pleading, and muted protest to the final, irreversible silence of death. In feminist linguistic theory, silence is often seen as a rhetorical tool or a form of strategic resistance. However, in this instance, silence is no longer rhetorical; it is fatal. Amal's voice, once hesitant yet yearning for autonomy, is now permanently extinguished. This reinforces the paper's central argument that when speech is denied or dismissed in patriarchal structures, the result is not just oppression; it can be deadly.

The description "Her body is numb and warm with her eyes opened and the eyeballs turned towards the sky" evokes a haunting visual of unnatural stillness. The contradiction between "numb" and "warm" emphasises the reality between life and death, suggesting a recent and traumatic transition. Her open eyes, turned skyward, symbolise both resignation and possibly an unfulfilled longing, perhaps for divine justice or a life she was denied. From a narrative-linguistic perspective, this imagery captures the erasure of personhood: Amal is reduced to a body, her action annulled by societal violence masquerading as tradition.

The final sentence, "She is dead!", is abrupt, declarative, and devoid of emotional cushioning. It functions as both a narrative closure and a moral indictment. Linguistically, the bluntness forces readers to confront the consequences of silencing female voices, and it delivers social critique through grammatical finality. In terms of critical discourse analysis, this stark declaration shifts the tone from descriptive to accusatory, compelling the audience to reflect on the structures, familial, cultural, religious, and linguistic, that contributed to Amal's demise.

Summary of key instances of silence and speech in *Amal*. Across these scenes, we witness (1) a mother's respectful plea overridden by insult; (2) a girl's explicit educational desire denied recognition; (3) a ritualized

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non-response that refuses to ratify unwanted male access; (4) a mitigated, direct refusal of early marriage coupled with a constructive alternative (schooling) that is ignored; and (5) a final, terminal quiet that exposes the costs of silencing. Each instance links a micro-linguistic feature (address terms, imperatives, mitigation, non-response, declaratives) to macro-structures (patriarchal authority, legal non-domestication, communal norms), aligning with Fairclough's text/discourse/society triad and Spivak's epistemic erasure.

Findings

These excerpt forms the tragic irony that runs through the paper: when girls are denied the right to speak, to choose, and to live freely, the silence they are forced into sometimes becomes a silence of death. It powerfully illustrates how language, or the lack thereof, operates as both a site of oppression and a measure of social justice. The analysis shows that Amal's voice is differently authorised: respectful pleas are mocked; explicit claims to education are denied uptake; and protective silence is treated as consent.

Some existing studies frame silence as a voluntary survival tactic, but *Amal* presents silence as structurally enforced. Amal's lack of agency and inability to oppose her forced marriage contrast with the empowered speech of survivors in Deer's (2015) study, who reclaim their voices through activism and storytelling. This divergence reflects differing socio-political contexts: Deer examines indigenous communities within democratic systems that offer some legal recourse, while *Amal* depicts a fictional yet realistic northern Nigerian setting where traditional authority and cultural expectations severely limit such possibilities.

These findings affirm the relevance of Feminist Linguistic Theory, particularly the work of Deborah Cameron and Judith Butler, which argues that gendered communication is shaped by cultural ideologies and institutional structures. In *Amal*, language is politically charged. Female speech, often tentative and confined to private spaces, is overshadowed by dominant male voices that define social reality and enforce silence. This supports Cameron's (2005) argument that women's speech in patriarchal societies is frequently policed, misinterpreted, or devalued.

The play's symbolic silences and dialogue-driven power imbalances enabled a deeper examination of how language reflects and reinforces injustice through the effective purposive sampling and the qualitative textual analysis. This approach uncovered the underlying power structures embedded in the text, extending beyond surface-level narrative.

The analysis also resonates with Nigeria's legal landscape. While the Child Rights Act (2003) and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) aim to protect individuals like Amal, the play reveals a gap between legal provisions and lived realities. Tradition and familial authority often supersede statutory rights, reflecting the narrative's failure to give voice to the most vulnerable. This underscores the need to pair legal reform with cultural change and grassroots advocacy, an argument echoed in several empirical studies.

Ultimately, *Amal* illustrates that silence, when socially enforced, is a potent tool of oppression, while speech, though a potential form of resistance, entails significant risks. These findings call for gender-sensitive, culturally contextualised approaches to language and justice in literature and policy.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that in *Amal*, language is central to domination and resistance: who speaks, how they speak, and whether they are granted uptake determine life chances. By tying close reading to CDA and FLT, the paper traces how micro-features, imperatives, mitigation, and non-response map onto macro-structures of authority, revealing a pathway from everyday discursive control to catastrophic outcomes. Theoretically, the study advances feminist linguistic criticism of African drama by showing how epistemic erasure operates at the level of uptake and legitimacy (Spivak 287). Empirically, it underscores that statutory reform alone is insufficient without cultural change that re-centres girls' voices in family and community decision-making.

The implications extend beyond *Amal*. Nigerian feminist texts, from Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme to contemporary prose like Adichie's, recurrently stage the politics of voice, silence, and sanction. Applying the combined CDA and FLT lens to these works can deepen understanding of how literary discourse both reflects and challenges social norms. For advocacy, the findings support interventions that prioritise voice-enabling environments: school-based debate and storytelling programs; community dialogues that include mothers and religious leaders; and legal literacy campaigns crafted in accessible language. Evidence-informed messaging that normalises girls' right to speak about education and marriage could shift uptake patterns in households before formal legal processes are even invoked. Therefore, the paper concludes that reclaiming the right to speak is fundamental to achieving gender equity and social justice.

Recommendations

There is a need to foreground the voices of women and girls within both literary and socio-political discourse. Amal's silencing in the text mirrors the marginalisation of many women in real life; therefore, policymakers, educators, and writers should consciously create platforms where the speech of women and girls is not only heard

but validated. By doing so, literature and society can work together to dismantle structures that normalise silence as submission.

Second, the study recommends that cultural practices that perpetuate harmful gender roles, such as forced marriage and the trivialisation of women's resistance, be critically questioned and reformed. The narrative of *Amal* reveals how unquestioned traditions can lead to tragic outcomes. Engaging communities in dialogue about such practices, while respecting religious and cultural identity, can help reconcile tradition with human rights principles.

Third, writers and artists should continue to employ language strategically as a means of resistance and social justice advocacy. Just as Amal's moments of silence and speech expose the dynamics of power, contemporary writers can use literature to challenge entrenched patriarchal systems. This calls for more creative works that explore silence not merely as absence but as a form of symbolic action.

Finally, institutions of learning and literary scholarship must integrate feminist and critical discourse analysis perspectives into their curricula. This will equip students and researchers to better interrogate how language functions as a site of power, resistance, and social change. By grounding academic inquiry in real-life struggles of marginalised voices, the study of literature can make tangible contributions to social justice.

Ethical Considerations

Analysing early marriage and patriarchal control requires care. This paper avoids sensationalism, foregrounds structural critique over cultural stereotyping, and respectfully treats religious and communal values while assessing harm. Interpretations were reflexively checked against the risk of imposing external assumptions on northern Nigerian contexts. Because the data are textual, no human subjects were involved; nonetheless, the analysis adopts survivor-centred language and avoids romanticising harmful practices.

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