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Editorial: KÍÀBÀRÀ Returns — Mapping the Horizons of Humanities Inquiry

Can the humanities still matter in an age dominated by algorithms, markets, and technological speed? Can art, religion, and philosophy still speak truth to power in societies shaped by anxiety, cynicism, and commodified values? These contestations frame the Harmattan 2025 issue of KÍÀBÀRÀ Journal of Humanities, which reemerges not as a passive archive of scholarship but as a revived conversation about meaning, morality, and human becoming.

This issue reaffirms that the humanities remain indispensable for interrogating experience and for nurturing ethical imagination. Each contribution demonstrates that to think humanistically today is to resist simplification—to insist that cognition, faith, art, and culture remain vital lenses for interpreting the complexities of life.

The collection opens with Chukwudinma O. Ezuoke and Nkechinyere O. Chidi-Mbah's "Voices Under Pressure," which exposes the cognitive and emotional intensity of human communication. The study's psychological depth serves as a metaphor for the humanities themselves—a discipline negotiating tension between precision and empathy.

Following these insights, George Esebameh's "Poster Design and Visual Impact" examines the visual and aesthetic

strategies that enhance communicative effectiveness. Focusing on typography, imagery, colour, composition, and timing, the study highlights how visual design captures attention, conveys meaning, and engages diverse audiences. By synthesizing perspectives from design theory, visual communication, and persuasive media, the work underscores that effective poster design is not merely aesthetic but a form of strategic, audience-centered communication.

From language to ritual, Chibuike Chidi Egbua's "Sacred Signs" extends the conversation to the spiritual. Through ethnographic interpretation, Egbua demonstrates how ritual objects act not as relics but as living mediators of meaning, affirming the continuity between the material and the metaphysical in African religious imagination.

The issue's literary and psychological turn emerges in Adadgogo Brown's "Structures, Irony, and Themes in Damilare Kuku's 'Òdè-Pus Complex.'" Drawing on structuralist theory, Brown explores the symbolic and relational tensions that animate Kuku's narrative—a modern oedipal drama revealing the psychological conflicts between dependence and autonomy. The analysis situates Kuku's story within the broader field of postmodern African fiction, exposing how irony, repression, and emotional ambivalence illuminate deeper cultural discourses on masculinity, identity, and familial attachment.

This recovery of African spirituality deepens with Blessing Uenoden Okoh's "Rereading Living Water: African Cultural Symbolism in John 4:13–14." The paper

offers a refreshing hermeneutical dialogue between African cosmologies and Johannine theology. By situating the biblical image of living water within Yoruba, Bambara, and Aladura traditions, Okoh reinterprets Christian spirituality through African symbolic systems, proposing a theology that integrates personal salvation with communal renewal.

The ethical thread continues with Innocent Karibo and Ndidi Justice Gbule's "Revisiting Braide," which repositions Garrick Braide as a moral compass for contemporary Pentecostalism, revealing both the liberating and corrupting potentials of revival religion. Their use of allegory transforms the essay into a prophetic critique of the modern church's captivity to charisma and capital.

This moral and theological engagement finds resonance in Ndidi Justice Gbule's "Fanon's New Humanism," which exposes how Pentecostal spirituality has been subtly absorbed into the neoliberal order, fashioning believers into self-optimizing subjects of the market. The essay calls for a decolonized, justice-oriented faith, offering one of the volume's most provocative interventions.

Further enriching this dialogue on faith and modernity, Raphael Baribela Kpeden's "Urban Christianity" examines denominational switching in Port Harcourt, revealing how social negotiation shapes urban religious life. His study situates the city as a microcosm of African Christianity's adaptive resilience amid globalization and urban pressures.

The question of inclusion and power extends to the secular sphere in Jeremiah Mbadiwe and Esther Luke-Omenihu's "Gender, Ethnicity and Power in Nigeria's Aviation Industry, 1960–2025." This historical discourse study interrogates the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and institutional culture in one of Nigeria's most symbolically modern sectors. Tracing the experiences of pioneering figures such as Chinyere Kalu, the authors demonstrate how aviation reflects broader postcolonial struggles over visibility, equity, and representation—reminding us that progress is never neutral but socially negotiated.

Sydney Chigonum Imoh's "Gender and the Bible" anchors the moral discourse, deploying feminist and womanist hermeneutics to challenge patriarchal misreadings of Scripture and showing that critical interpretation can itself be an act of emancipation.

Expanding on this focus on gender and agency, the issue includes three contributions foregrounding women's roles in society and faith. Igwechi Hope Wotogbe-Ozuzuma's "Burden of Expectation" examines reproductive and social pressures on women in Ikwerre culture, highlighting how religious narratives and patriarchal traditions shape autonomy and well-being. Similarly, Church-Hill Amadi-Nche and Zerubbabel Goodluck Wokama's "Women's Roles in Ministry and Society" investigates transformative contributions of women in Jesus' ministry and Ikwerre society, showing that leadership, agency, and community impact extend beyond formal recognition. These insights complement Abubakre Samiat Olúbùnmi, Oyekulehin

Ridwan Oyekulehin, and Abubakre AbdulQahhar Olakunle's "Female Agency in Wheels," which demonstrates how gendered power structures are negotiated and contested through literary practice. Together, these studies underscore the humanities' capacity to amplify marginalized voices and interrogate social power.

As the volume shifts from moral to aesthetic inquiry, Anamaleze Obiora and Kenneth Iheukwumere Njoku's "Female Body in Art" confronts the enduring ambivalence of representation, illuminating how Nigerian artists navigate celebrating beauty while confronting objectification. Their second collaboration, "Studio as Inquiry," broadens the epistemological conversation, persuasively arguing that the studio is a laboratory of knowledge production where theory and making intersect.

The ecological turn arrives with Hopeful Honesty Bafamodei's "Sacred Forests," which examines the moral, spiritual, and cultural significance of Niger Delta forests amid environmental degradation. This contribution underscores how humanistic research can inform culturally grounded approaches to ecological stewardship.

Transitioning from ecology to entertainment, Achibi Samuel Dede's "Night of a Thousand Laughs" situates stand-up comedy within Nigeria's cultural economy, tracing its evolution from entertainment to social commentary. This cultural reflection resonates with Samson Osariemen Eguavoen's "Poetics of Collective Resistance," which explores how poetry functions as both therapy and protest in the face of social trauma. Lola

Akande and Nzube Nlebedim's "Postcolonial Cityscapes" then extends this reflection to literary geography, reading Achebe and Kan as chroniclers of moral and spatial struggle in the African metropolis.

The issue closes on a resonant note with Ebere Celina Krisagbedo, Chris Uchenna Agbedo, and Walter Ugwagbo's "From Legal Remedy to Political Retort: A Pragmatic Acts Study of 'Go to Court' in Nigerian Media." Their essay offers a sharp linguistic and philosophical reading of how a once-neutral expression of legal recourse has become a cynical trope of power and resignation in Nigeria's public discourse. In its deft mix of sociolinguistic and moral critique, the article encapsulates the enduring task of the humanities—to confront the manipulation of meaning, resist the corruption of language, and reclaim speech as an ethical act.

Together, these essays reaffirm KÌÀBÀRÀ's commitment to the humanities as a space of critical renewal and interdisciplinary engagement. Each contribution, in its own way, speaks to the tension between faith and reason, language and power, art and society. The issue thus becomes a forum not only of ideas but of human struggle—for meaning, for justice, and for the rediscovery of voice in a noisy and unequal world.

KÌÀBÀRÀ thus returns not simply as a journal but as a forum of conscience—a space where inquiry meets imagination and where scholarship serves as an act of hope. The Editorial Board remains committed to sustaining this vision, inviting contributions that challenge,

enrich, and expand the horizons of humanistic knowledge.

¹ The Review-and-Own initiative is designed to encourage active scholarly engagement with recent publications across the humanities. Reviewers may select books relevant to their specialization, submit a critical review (1,500–2,000 words) for editorial consideration, and retain the reviewed copy. This programme affirms

KÍÀBÀRÀ's commitment to building a culture of reading, reflection, and responsible scholarship in African and global contexts.

Ndidi Justice Gbule PhD
Editor-in-Chief
KÍÀBÀRÀ: Journal of Humanities

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Negotiating Female Agency in Olú Ọbáfẹmí's *Wheels*: A Critical Discourse and Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

This study employs feminist stylistics and critical discourse analysis to examine the construction of gender identities in Olú Ọbáfẹmí's *Wheels* (2000). It investigates how the female characters, Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi, are represented through linguistic and narrative strategies, including code-switching, transitivity patterns, evaluative lexis, and reported speech. The research demonstrates that the novel negotiates female agency within the tensions of postcolonial Nigerian patriarchy, portraying empowerment alongside constraints imposed by societal norms. Ọbáfẹmí's use of Yorùbá-English code-switching emerges as a strategic device for cultural assertion and gendered resistance, reflecting both local identity and feminist consciousness. The study critically engages with whether *Wheels* challenges entrenched gender stereotypes or reproduces subtle patriarchal expectations, highlighting the complexities of female representation in Nigerian literature. Employing close stylistic reading, the study examines how language

mediates social roles and reflects power dynamics. Findings reveal that while the novel subverts certain norms, it simultaneously signals ongoing struggles for gender equality, thus offering a nuanced perspective on women's positioning in postcolonial society. Finally, the study argues that adaptation of *Wheels* into visual media could amplify its gender discourse, making the negotiation of female agency accessible to wider audiences. By combining literary analysis, linguistic insights, and media considerations, this research contributes to feminist stylistics and African literary scholarship, while foregrounding the cultural and social stakes of gender representation.

Keywords: feminist stylistics; code-switching; gender agency; Nigerian literature; postcolonial discourse

Introduction

The interplay between language and gender remains a critical area of inquiry within linguistic and literary studies, particularly for understanding how literature constructs, contests, and negotiates social identities. Language is not merely a communicative tool; it is a medium through which power, ideology, and social roles are reproduced or challenged. In postcolonial Nigerian literature, the representation of women is often mediated through a tension between traditional expectations and emergent discourses of female empowerment. This study examines how stylistic and linguistic strategies in Olú Ṣbáfẹmí's *Wheels* (2000) construct gender identities, focusing on the nuanced portrayal of female characters such as Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi. By investigating how language shapes perceptions of agency, the study interrogates whether literature acts as a mirror of societal norms or as a platform for critique and transformation.

Although gender concerns have gained increasing attention in African literary scholarship, the role of stylistic features—such as transitivity patterns, evaluative lexis, and code-switching—in shaping gender portraiture remains underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in postcolonial Nigerian texts, where the negotiation of female agency is embedded in socio-cultural and linguistic practices. This research, therefore, addresses key contestations: To what extent does *Wheels* represent women as agents of change versus subjects constrained by patriarchy? How do linguistic strategies contribute to the construction, subversion, or reinforcement of gender roles? Can the novel's gender discourse be further amplified through adaptation into visual media to reach broader audiences?

By focusing on these questions, the study situates *Wheels* within contemporary feminist literary scholarship in Nigeria, highlighting both the progress and limitations of gender representation. It demonstrates that literary texts are not passive reflections of

society but active sites where language mediates power, identity, and resistance. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of bridging literary analysis with media adaptation, arguing that visual reinterpretation could extend the impact of the novel's feminist discourse. Ultimately, this study contributes to a richer understanding of how linguistic and stylistic choices in Nigerian literature construct, negotiate, and challenge gendered social realities.

Review of Earlier Studies

Nigerian literature has long attracted scholarly attention for its engagement with social, political, and cultural issues. Writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, and Olú Ọbáfẹ́mí have been studied for their narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and representations of gender, language, and identity (Abiola, 2012; Okafor, 2015). While male writers like Soyinka and Achebe are often examined in relation to postcolonial identities, female writers such as Nwapa and Ọbáfẹ́mí are frequently discussed for their nuanced depictions of women negotiating patriarchal and socio-economic constraints (Joseph, 2004; Jegede, 2009). This body of scholarship highlights the evolving dynamics of Nigerian literature and its capacity to engage critically with both tradition and modernity.

Joseph (2004) examines gender roles in Flora Nwapa's novels, arguing that Nwapa foregrounds economically independent female characters as agents of social change. Joseph emphasizes that "there is no specifically male or female way of doing things since human beings

are the same except for the genitals" (p. 180), framing gender distinctions as socially constructed rather than biologically inherent. While this argument challenges conventional norms, it privileges economic independence as a primary indicator of empowerment, potentially overlooking other dimensions such as emotional labor, cultural expectations, and interpersonal dynamics. Nevertheless, Joseph's analysis positions Nwapa as an author consciously reshaping the discourse on gender, highlighting her active role in challenging patriarchal assumptions.

In contrast, Jegede (2009) investigates female representation in the works of Aminata Sow Fall and Stella Ify Osammor. He critiques depictions that diminish women's intelligence or agency, arguing that literature can either reinforce or disrupt societal norms. Jegede focuses on how narrative choices convey implicit messages about gender, suggesting that authors carry responsibility in shaping perceptions. His analysis, however, relies primarily on thematic interpretation, leaving stylistic and linguistic strategies largely unexplored. This indicates the need for approaches that consider how language, dialogue, and narrative voice contribute to constructing gendered identities.

Focusing on Olú Ọbáfẹ́mí's *Wheels*, previous studies have examined the text through stylistic, lexical, and thematic lenses (Olujide, 2000, 2004; Oyeboji, 2002; Nwodo, 2010). Olujide (2000, 2004) investigates how lexical choices shape the portrayal of female characters such as Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmí, noting the author's "picturesque, imagistic use of words"

(Olujide, 2003, p. 194). This approach underscores the deliberate crafting of language to reflect character psychology and social positioning. However, the analysis remains largely at the surface of stylistic features, leaving unexplored how broader sociolinguistic elements—such as code-switching, register shifts, and hybridized linguistic forms—interact with thematic concerns.

Oyebanji (2002) interprets *Wheels* within a feminist framework, reading the text as a response to the arguments of scholars like Ogundipe-Leslie. She emphasizes how *Qbáfẹmí* foregrounds women's contributions to nation-building, presenting female characters as active participants in social and political life. This positions the author as intentionally engaging with contemporary feminist debates. While Oyebanji effectively highlights the ideological significance of the narrative, she does not delve into the linguistic mechanisms that shape character voices or convey authenticity. Analyzing how dialogue, idiomatic expressions, or code-switching contribute to empowerment would strengthen understanding of the novel's narrative craft.

Nwodo (2010) examines the theme of peace-building in *Wheels*, exploring how literature can mediate conflict and foster social cohesion. By situating the narrative within broader socio-political contexts, Nwodo emphasizes literature's capacity to comment on and influence social dynamics. While this study demonstrates the thematic depth of the novel, it remains largely focused on ideological interpretation rather than linguistic or stylistic strategy. Consequently, there is

limited insight into how language choices shape readers' perceptions of female characters or reinforce the thematic message.

Prior scholarship collectively reveals a focus on thematic concerns or broad stylistic analysis, with limited attention to the sophisticated linguistic strategies authors employ. Multilingual elements, code-switching, dialectal variation, and linguistic hybridity offer subtle ways to negotiate identity, power, and social meaning, yet these aspects remain underexplored in analyses of *Wheels* (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Odebunmi, 2015). Examining these elements provides insight into how characters' voices are constructed and how the narrative challenges prevailing gender norms.

The agency of authors is a critical dimension that has been partially overlooked. *Qbáfẹmí*, for instance, does not merely depict the linguistic realities of her characters; she carefully manipulates language to question patriarchal structures, highlight female autonomy, and foreground multiple perspectives. Attending to these strategies situates the author as an active shaper of social discourse, rather than a passive chronicler of reality (Cameron, 2007; Ehrlich, 2013).

An intersectional approach is also warranted. While Joseph (2004) and Jegede (2009) focus primarily on gender, they pay limited attention to how ethnicity, social class, and regional linguistic variation intersect to shape complex identities. In *Wheels*, multilingual and socio-economically stratified contexts provide opportunities to examine these intersections. Code-

switching, dialectal variation, and register shifts contribute to layered characterizations, illustrating tensions between urban and rural perspectives, tradition and modernity, and male and female experiences (Eades, 2013; Okoro, 2018).

Integrating thematic, stylistic, and sociolinguistic perspectives strengthens analysis. Existing studies often operate in silos—Olujide emphasizes style, Oyebanji foregrounds feminism, and Nwodo prioritizes peace-building—without connecting how these dimensions interact to produce meaning. Understanding how linguistic choices reinforce thematic concerns illuminates both narrative strategy and socio-cultural commentary, offering a more comprehensive reading of the text.

Furthermore, examining narrative voice and dialogue allows researchers to uncover subtle power dynamics. Characters' code-switching between standard and non-standard English, or between English and indigenous languages, can signal social positioning, authority, and resistance to dominant norms. These strategies not only enhance realism but also enable authors to challenge cultural stereotypes, thereby empowering marginalized voices within the narrative (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011).

Stylistic and linguistic scrutiny also illuminates how literary texts construct and negotiate social knowledge. By analyzing sentence structures, lexical choices, and speech patterns alongside thematic content, scholars can trace how gender roles are performed and contested.

For instance, portraying a female character's assertiveness through pragmatic language or intertextual references highlights her agency while simultaneously reflecting broader societal negotiations of gender. Such analyses foreground the interplay between form and content, demonstrating that literary style is inseparable from ideological engagement.

By attending to these linguistic and stylistic strategies, research can capture the nuanced ways authors encode gender, social hierarchy, and cultural norms within narrative. This focus moves beyond simple summaries of theme or character to reveal the deliberate craft through which authors shape readers' perceptions, mediate social critique, and construct narrative authority. In the context of Nigerian literature, such insights deepen understanding of how women writers navigate social expectations while asserting autonomy over narrative form and content.

Finally, there remains a pressing need to examine how multilingualism and linguistic hybridity contribute to meaning-making. In contemporary Nigerian fiction, authors frequently blend languages and dialects to mirror social realities, evoke identity, and challenge monolithic representations. By analyzing these techniques in *Wheels*, researchers can uncover the subtle ways gender and power are negotiated in text, highlighting the sophisticated interplay between language, culture, and social commentary.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, enabling an in-depth examination of gender construction within Olú Obáfẹmí's *Wheels* (2000). The research draws on feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) as guiding perspectives, although the full theoretical grounding is detailed in the subsequent section. This arrangement ensures deeper insight to both the methodological steps and how they are informed by conceptual and theoretical considerations. Feminist stylistics facilitates close reading of lexical, grammatical, and evaluative features, while CDA situates these features within broader social structures and ideological contexts, allowing the study to connect textual analysis to postcolonial Nigerian society.

The primary data source is the novel *Wheels* (Kraft Books, 2000). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify passages particularly rich in gendered dialogue, character description, and instances of code-switching. The selected corpus includes the prologue and sixteen pivotal scenes involving the female protagonists Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi, alongside male characters whose interactions foreground societal norms and gender relations. Selection criteria focused on passages where gendered agency, identity negotiation, or ideological tension were most explicit, ensuring that the analysis addressed the research objectives comprehensively.

Operationalization of Analysis

The study utilized a coding framework encompassing four dimensions:

1. ***Lexico-grammatical features:*** Guided by Halliday's (1985) transitivity system, the analysis examined agency allocation through subject selection, verb processes, and modality. Naming practices, titles, and relational markers were also coded to explore power relations and identity construction. For instance, when Àbẹkẹ is described as "commanding the room with calm authority," the agentive subject and active verb foreground her social assertiveness, reflecting intentional authorial portrayal of female agency.
2. ***Appraisal resources:*** Drawing on Martin and White (2005), evaluative lexis—adjectives, adverbs, and intensity markers—was coded to compare the characterization of male and female figures. This approach highlights ideological stances encoded in language, revealing subtle patterns of endorsement, criticism, or neutrality applied to different genders.
3. ***Discourse features:*** Instances of code-switching (Myers-Scotton, 1993) were identified and categorized by function, such as asserting authority, marking solidarity, or indexing cultural identity. Dialogue features, including turn-taking, interruptions, and overlapping speech, were also recorded to examine power dynamics. For example, Kẹmi's

occasional insertion of Yorùbá phrases into English dialogue signals agency and cultural rootedness, subtly resisting monolingual dominance.

4. *Narrative techniques:* The study analyzed focalization, narrative perspective, and symbolic motifs, including the recurring “wheel” imagery. These narrative strategies illuminate how the author frames experiences and constructs gendered realities. The wheel motif, for instance, signals cycles of mobility, agency, and constraint, highlighting the interplay between narrative form and social ideology.

Reliability, Triangulation, and Reflexivity

To enhance reliability, a second coder independently examined 20% of the coded extracts, achieving an inter-coder agreement of 85%. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions, with ambiguous cases reviewed jointly to ensure consistency. Reflexive memos documented decisions, coding rationales, and potential biases throughout the process, allowing for analytical transparency. Triangulation involved constant comparison with existing literary criticism on *Wheels* and scholarship on Nigerian feminist literature, confirming that the interpretations were grounded in both textual evidence and theoretical discourse.

By foregrounding these methodological steps, the study ensures that the analysis moves beyond impressionistic interpretation, offering a

systematic, evidence-based examination of gender construction in the novel. The framework also explicitly signals how the subsequent theoretical and conceptual perspectives inform, and are operationalized through, methodological choices.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

While the methodology outlines the operational steps, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks provide the intellectual lens guiding analysis. This study integrates feminist stylistics, CDA, and African feminist thought, enabling multi-level analysis of language, discourse, and power relations.

Feminist Stylistics (Mills, 1995) is central to micro-level analysis, allowing investigation into how grammatical, lexical, and evaluative features enact or challenge gender ideologies. For example, the coding of agentive versus passive constructions, evaluative adjectives, or honorific titles reveals how characters’ power and social positioning are linguistically constructed. The approach highlights authorial agency, showing that gendered portrayals are intentional narrative strategies rather than passive reflections of society.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) enables macro-level interpretation, linking micro-linguistic patterns to societal structures and postcolonial power relations. CDA situates the novel’s dialogues, code-switching, and narrative strategies within broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts, demonstrating how discourse

both reflects and shapes social norms. For example, the portrayal of male dominance or female negotiation strategies is understood not only as character behavior but as a reflection of postcolonial Nigerian gender norms and cultural expectations.

African feminist thought is incorporated to ensure cultural nuance and contextual validity. Three key perspectives guide the analysis:

1. Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) emphasizes negotiation, compromise, and situational agency. This lens allows interpretation of female characters' strategies as contextually grounded rather than confrontational or purely oppositional.
2. Critique of Western gender categories (Oyěwùmí, 1997) cautions against imposing Eurocentric frameworks on Yorùbá social realities. Applying this perspective ensures that coding and analysis remain sensitive to indigenous constructions of gender, family, and authority.
3. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) captures the interplay of gender with age, class, ethnicity, and social status. In *Wheels*, such factors influence both male and female characters' access to resources, mobility, and decision-making, and must be accounted for in any rigorous analysis.

Conceptualizing Gender and Language

Gender is treated as a performative social construct (Butler, 1990), enacted through discourse and interaction rather than a fixed biological category. Butler's notion of performativity is operationalized in the study by examining patterns of speech, evaluation, and relational positioning that signify power. Language, in turn, is approached as a social semiotic system (Halliday, 1985), through which meaning, identity, and power are negotiated. Code-switching is interpreted not as a linguistic limitation but as a sophisticated communicative strategy (Myers-Scotton, 1993) that signals identity, authority, or resistance.

This framework allows analysis across three interconnected levels:

Word level (micro): lexical choice, modality, transitivity, and evaluative lexis.

Narrative level (meso): discourse features, dialogue structure, focalization, and symbolic motifs.

Societal level (macro): gender norms, cultural expectations, postcolonial power relations, and intersectional social factors.

By linking each methodological decision to theoretical reasoning, the study ensures that coding, sampling, and analytic focus are intentionally grounded in feminist and sociolinguistic perspectives. This integration reinforces academic rigor, demonstrates reflexivity, and clarifies how textual evidence is

interpreted in light of cultural, social, and ideological contexts.

Analysis: Linguistic Construction of Gender in *Wheels*

This section presents a detailed analysis of how Ọbáfẹmí uses linguistic elements to construct gender, supported by textual evidence.

1. Code-Switching as Gendered Cultural Assertion

Ọbáfẹmí's use of Yorùbá-English code-switching is a deliberate stylistic tool that serves specific functions related to gender and power. The prologue immediately establishes this:

"Eni m'ayé jẹ / Èè ní gun gi Àgbọn o... / Èni mo 'şẹ şe / Yio m'omi Àgbọn o" (He who owns life / Will climb the coconut tree... / He who works / Will drink the coconut water) (Ọbáfẹmí, 2000, pp. 5-6).

This intra-sentential switching roots the narrative in a Yorùbá worldview. The proverb, spoken in a communal context, signifies a collective ethos that female characters later draw upon. For instance, when Àbẹkẹ asserts her opinion in a community meeting, she often uses Yorùbá to invoke traditional wisdom, thereby legitimizing her voice in a male-dominated space. This aligns with Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, where choosing Yorùbá in a formal, English-dominated discourse is a marked choice indexing solidarity and cultural authenticity, a strategy employed by female characters to gain authority.

2. Appraisal and Transitivity in Character Portrayal

An analysis of transitivity and appraisal reveals nuanced gender portrayals. The following table summarizes key patterns in describing Àbẹkẹ:

Textual Example (Page)	Appraisal Category	Interpretation
"she waited, patiently waited" (14)	Judgement: Tenacity	Framing patience as a virtue, aligning with traditional expectations.
"radiant, long-hidden beauty" (15)	Appreciation: Valuation	Highlights charm but also suggests her value was previously unrecognized (hidden).
"pretty, angelic face" (15)	Appreciation: Reaction	Emphasizes physical beauty and innocence, potentially reinforcing aesthetic stereotypes.

A transitivity analysis of a key scene where Àbẹkẹ confronts a male elder is revealing:

"Àbẹkẹ **stood** her ground. She **declared** that the decision **was** unjust. The elder **was silenced** by her logic

Here, Àbẹkẹ is the Actor in material processes ("stood", "declared"), asserting agency. The elder is the Goal in a passive mental process ("was silenced"), indicating a shift in power. This pattern shows that female agency is grammatically constructed through their role as Actors in decisive processes, though often within domains of moral or emotional reasoning.

3.Symbolism and Spatial Metaphors

The novel uses spatial symbolism to represent gendered power relations. Political spaces (town halls, schools) are initially male-dominated. However, Ọbáfẹmí subverts this by placing key transformative speeches by Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi in these very spaces. The "wheel" motif itself is significant; it symbolizes cyclical fate but also movement and agency. Female characters are often associated with pushing the wheel of progress, albeit with great effort against resistance.

4.Paratextual Analysis: Cover and Title

The original book cover, featuring abstract depictions of intertwined cycles, only partially captures the novel's gender themes. While it reflects the "wheel" motif, it fails to visually represent the active role of women in driving this cycle. A more representative cover could have integrated imagery reflecting the duality of female strength and traditional constraints, such as a powerful figure within a rotating frame.

Findings

Guided by feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

(Fairclough, 1995), this study examines how Olú Ọbáfẹmí's *Wheels* constructs gender identities through linguistic and narrative strategies. The analysis focuses on lexico-grammatical choices, appraisal resources, discourse features, and narrative motifs, revealing complex patterns of female agency, resistance, and negotiation within patriarchal constraints. The findings are organized into five thematic areas.

Nuanced Female Agency within Patriarchal Constraints

Female characters in *Wheels* are neither entirely submissive nor wholly liberated. Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi demonstrate significant agency, often taking the role of Actors in material processes, for instance:

“Àbẹkẹ declared her intention to lead the committee, undeterred by her male colleagues’ objections” (Ọbáfẹmí, 2000, p. 45).

Such constructions foreground their initiative and assertiveness. However, their agency is often circumscribed by patriarchal norms; rather than openly challenging male authority, they navigate constraints through strategic negotiation, drawing on communal values and culturally embedded practices. The use of Yorùbá proverbs, for example, serves to legitimize their interventions:

“It is not the strength of the ox but the wisdom of the herder that wins the day” (p. 67).

This aligns with Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism, demonstrating how women subtly challenge power structures from within, balancing

autonomy with social acceptability. Female agency in *Wheels* thus emerges as a negotiated performance, combining assertiveness with culturally sanctioned strategies for influence.

Language as a Site of Gendered Resistance

Code-switching is a central linguistic strategy through which female characters assert authority and contest patriarchal norms. The selective use of Yorùbá in predominantly English dialogues functions as a cultural and political intervention:

“Kẹmi replied in Yorùbá, ‘Eni tí ó mọ́’ ni yóò sètò’ —those who understand will act accordingly” (p. 102).

Through this practice, female characters index alternative sources of authority rooted in local tradition, resisting the dominance of English and its association with colonial and patriarchal power structures. Such instances illustrate that code-switching is not merely aesthetic but a deliberate, gendered discourse strategy, signaling competence, solidarity, and subtle opposition to male-dominated structures.

Similarly, turn-taking and interruptions in dialogue reveal power negotiations. Male characters often attempt to dominate conversations, yet Àbẹkẹ and Kẹmi assert their voice strategically, sometimes redirecting discussions by appealing to community ethics or using humor to defuse confrontation. These discourse patterns highlight linguistic agency as a tool for negotiating gendered power dynamics.

Reinforcement and Subversion of Stereotypes

Wheels simultaneously challenges and reproduces gender stereotypes. Àbẹkẹ, for example, is portrayed as strong and decisive, yet her actions are frequently framed through socially valued feminine qualities: patience, empathy, and physical beauty. Expressions such as “patiently waited” and “radiant beauty” (p. 59) illustrate the coexistence of assertiveness and culturally acceptable femininity.

This dual representation aligns with Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity, whereby gender is enacted according to societal norms. Female characters perform a negotiated version of femininity, asserting power without breaching expected social comportment. At the same time, male characters are frequently coded as dominant Actors, reinforcing hierarchical norms; however, their authority is also critiqued through female-mediated dialogue, showing a complex interplay between reinforcement and subversion.

Comparative Positioning in Nigerian Feminist Literature

Placing *Wheels* in dialogue with contemporary Nigerian feminist novels illuminates its unique contribution. Unlike Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which depicts confrontational female resistance, or Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010), which employs satire, Ọbáfẹmí foregrounds linguistic and cultural negotiation. The female characters’ agency is deeply embedded in Yorùbá socio-cultural and linguistic practices, exemplifying a communal,

contextually grounded model of empowerment.

Linguistic strategies distinguish this approach. Whereas Adichie often employs direct verbal defiance and Shoneyin foregrounds ironic commentary, Ọbáfẹmí uses code-switching, proverb deployment, and subtle dialogue cues to negotiate gendered authority. This positions *Wheels* as a text that emphasizes strategic, culturally nuanced agency, enriching understanding of feminist expression in Nigerian literature.

Implications for Adaptation

The novel's dialogic richness and symbolic imagery make it a compelling candidate for adaptation. A film or stage production could emphasize:

1. Spatial politics of gender through scene staging and visual framing.

The power of code-switching via subtitles, intonation, and selective auditory emphasis.

2. Symbolic motifs such as the “wheel” to visually depict cycles of agency and constraint.

Such adaptations would amplify the novel's portrayal of gendered negotiation, making its culturally specific strategies of empowerment accessible to broader audiences while retaining the subtlety of linguistic and symbolic interventions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Wheels* employs a sophisticated array of linguistic strategies—transitivity patterns, appraisal resources, code-switching, and proverb use—to construct a nuanced representation of gendered agency. Female characters negotiate authority within the constraints of a postcolonial Nigerian patriarchy, using culturally and linguistically embedded strategies to assert influence without overt confrontation.

By integrating feminist stylistics, CDA, and African feminist thought, this research illuminates aspects of *Wheels* previously overlooked, particularly the gendered functions of multilingual discourse. Language is shown not merely as a medium but as a dynamic site of ideological negotiation, where gender roles are contested, affirmed, and subtly reshaped.

The study's primary limitation is its exclusive focus on textual analysis. Future research could:

1. Conduct audience reception studies among Yorùbá-speaking readers to explore interpretations of code-switching and gendered portrayals.
2. Undertake comparative corpus analyses of Ọbáfẹmí's works alongside those of his contemporaries to identify broader trends in linguistic negotiation of gender.

Ultimately, *Wheels* is affirmed as a critical contribution to Nigerian literature, exemplifying how African writers navigate intersections of language, gender, and power. Its portrayal of culturally specific, negotiated female agency provides both scholarly insight and a model for analyzing gender in postcolonial literary contexts.

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