



Linguistic Strategies in Nigerian Films as a Medium for Addressing Injustice against Widows in South-East, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The portrayal of women's language in Nigerian films plays a crucial role in addressing societal issues, particularly injustices faced by widows. Examining how women's language in Nigerian films serves as a medium for combating these injustices could help in providing a voice to the marginalized and fostering societal change.

Objective: The study investigated the ways in which female characters use language to challenge oppressive traditions, promote social awareness, and empower both on-screen and real life women. By analysing selected Nigerian films that focus on widowhood and women's rights, the study highlights the intersection of gender, language, and power in addressing cultural practices that subjugate widows.

Method: The study employed a qualitative content analysis method to examine dialogues, character interactions, and linguistic strategies used by women in the selected films. It also draws on feminist film theory and sociolinguistic frameworks to assess how language reflects resistance, agency, and advocacy.

Results: The results indicate that Nigerian films significantly use women's language as a tool for challenging widowhood oppression, fostering public discourse, and advocating for women's rights.

Conclusion: The conclusion of this study is that by giving voice to the struggles of widows, films act as a powerful medium for fighting injustice, amplifying marginalized voices, and inspiring social change in Nigerian society.

Unique contribution: This study provides fresh insights into how language choices shape narratives around widowhood and address societal injustices against widows in South-East Nigeria. (This study not only contributes to linguistic and sociolinguistic scholarship by exploring the use of language in film but also offers insights into cultural discourse on widowhood, gender, and social justice within Nigerian society.)

Key Recommendation: Filmmakers and content creators should intentionally use linguistic strategies that bring attention to the plight of widows and other marginalized groups in Nigeria. The article suggests collaboration between filmmakers, linguists, and social advocates to ensure that films not only reflect these injustices but also inspire empathy, dialogue, and action among audiences, thereby fostering social justice and cultural sensitivity.

Key words: widowhood, social stigma, language, discrimination



INTRODUCTION

In the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape, films, as a colonial heritage (Okpadah & Afolabi, 2019), have evolved as a powerful tool for social commentary and advocacy. Film is a medium of communication that breaks all cultural barrier because its visual appeal-its language is universal (p.18). Among the many issues addressed by Nigerian filmmakers, the plight of widows has gained considerable attention. According to Aromona & Waters (2017), the issue of gender portrayal in media has been a growing concern for researchers (Ross-Smith & Walker, 1992) and the focus has primarily been on sex stereotyping in media and the media encouraging the disparity and traditional sex role attitudes and behaviours (para.1). Several studies have investigated how women are portrayed in the media (Jekayinfa, 1999; Peters, 2001), and specifically in films (Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro, Janstova, & Snyder-Suhy, 2010; Okunna, 2002; Abah, 2008) with the media often criticized as presenting women as objects for commodification. Widows in many Nigerian communities are often subjected to oppressive cultural practices, ranging from loss of property to exclusion from their husband's families, social stigmatization, and harmful mourning rituals. Particularly in Southwestern part, the travail of a widow begins as soon as the death of her husband is announced. The in-laws immediately demands for the list of the man's property and bank accounts, after which she is subjected to series of rites and ritual practices to mourn the death of her husband (Adeyemo & Wuraola, 2016).

Living as a woman in Nigeria intersects with other socioeconomic realities, exposing them to multiple disadvantages and suffering social, economic, and health constraints. These are exacerbated by low literacy levels, cultural beliefs and rituals. Widowhood comes with a lot of burdens and disadvantages. These include: maltreatment, discrimination and stigmatization. Tradition, modernity and neo-patriarchy all present challenges to Nigerian women. Some traditions ban women from inheriting land and property. Upon the death of a husband, the woman loses all she had acquired by herself and from her husband. She is traditionally dehumanized through compulsory mourning rituals like forced seclusion (p.381, 2016).

It is also essential to acknowledge the role of female filmmakers in shaping the narrative around widowhood in Nigerian films. Many female directors and producers have been at the forefront of using films as advocacy tools for women's rights. Their unique understanding of women's issues enables them to use language effectively in their storytelling, ensuring that the voices of widows are heard loud and clear. According to many feminist scholars, the mass media have the power to influence people's thinking and for that reason, certain stereotype representation of women have the tendencies of encouraging some of the stereotype representations of women to thrive in the society (Ali ibbi, 2017). Through carefully crafted dialogues and emotionally charged scenes, female filmmakers present widows not merely as victims, but as strong, resilient women who resist injustice. They use language to evoke a sense of solidarity among women and to build bridges across social divides. These films do more than just entertain; they educate and inspire change.

Beyond merely presenting the plight of widows, Nigerian films also showcase how the expression with language is used as a form of advocacy. Films such as *Dry* (2014) and *Widows in Distress* (2006) demonstrate how women's stories and experiences are narrated in ways that evoke empathy and provoke social change. In these films, the voices of widows are amplified, urging audiences



to rethink societal norms and calling for reforms in widowhood practices. Additionally, Nigerian films use language to empower widows by portraying characters who assert their rights and demand better treatment. These portrayals often inspire real-life actions, as audiences—both male and female—begin to challenge outdated cultural practices. Through their words, these women reclaim their identities, defy oppression, and set an example for others to follow. In this context, women's language in Nigerian films has emerged as a significant medium for fighting the injustices faced by widows.

The problem of the study focuses on the persistent cultural and societal injustices faced by widows in Nigeria, which are often reinforced by patriarchal structures and discriminatory traditions. Despite existing legal frameworks that protect widows' rights, many continue to suffer from economic deprivation, social exclusion, and emotional trauma. Widows are frequently stripped of their inheritance, subjected to oppressive mourning rituals, and marginalized in their communities. Nigerian films, as a prominent form of popular culture, have increasingly taken on the role of social commentary, addressing these issues. However, the way women's language is used in these films to represent and challenge widowhood injustices remains under explored. The study identifies a gap in understanding how the language of female characters in Nigerian films serves as a powerful medium for resisting and combating these oppressive practices. Women's voices in these films not only highlight the injustices faced by widows but also offer a means of advocating for change, raising awareness, and empowering both on-screen characters and real-life widows. The problem lies in the need to critically analyze how language, as a tool of resistance and empowerment, is employed in Nigerian films to address widowhood injustices and promote social justice.

The significance of the study on the linguistic strategies in Nigeria's films as a medium of fighting injustice against widows lies in its potential to contribute to several important areas. The study offers a deeper understanding of how language reflects and challenges gender dynamics, particularly in patriarchal societies like Nigeria. By focusing on the linguistic strategies women use in films, the study adds to feminist discourse on how women resist oppression and advocate for justice. Nigerian films are a powerful cultural medium with wide-reaching influence. This research seeks to investigate how women's language in Nigerian films can be leveraged to challenge harmful cultural norms, advocate for legal reforms, and ultimately foster societal change that uplifts widows and ensures their rights are respected.

The research questions of the study on the role of linguistic strategies in Nigeria's films as a medium of fighting injustice against widows especially in sampling southeast Nollywood movies are as follows:

- A. how is women's language used in Nigerian films to portray the experiences of widows facing societal injustices?;
- B. In what ways do female characters in Nigerian films use language to resist or challenge oppressive widowhood practices and cultural norms?;
- C. How does the portrayal of women's language in Nigerian films raise awareness about the rights and struggles of widows in Nigerian society?
- D. What linguistic strategies are employed by women in Nigerian films to advocate for social justice and legal reform concerning widowhood?



Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was Qualitative Content Analysis

This method was ideal for examining the linguistic elements within Nigerian films and understanding how they convey themes of injustice against widows. It allowed an in-depth exploration of language use, cultural context, and social themes as presented in films.

Population

Specifically, films that depict themes of widowhood, social justice, or gender-related issues, particularly those set in or relevant to Southeast Nigeria. These films served as the primary sources of linguistic data. Female characters, especially widows, and other key characters whose dialogues contribute to the portrayal of injustices against widows. These characters' linguistic choices were analyzed for strategies that highlight or critique societal attitudes.

Sample and selection of Films

Films were selected based on the subject matters. They were movies from Nollywood. The article examined four selected films which were divided into seasons (interval) for coding purpose excluding advertisements.

Films Synopses

The Cry of a Widow. The plot was creatively written and thrillingly executed in the most unique style. The movie captures the story of a young girl, Chidimma (Mercy Johnson) who finds her thrown into the most miserable and unfortunate life by fate. Her encounter with rich Madam Gold (Patience Ozokwor) changes her life and brings back her happiness and a sense of belonging but incidentally propel her new and horrific directions, she was totally unprepared for. One day things suddenly go awry, bringing her to an undesirable end of journey. Producers: Eriobu Chibuzor Sunday Director: Ikechukwu Onyeka. The film is a Nigerian movie that highlights the emotional and societal challenges faced by widows. It follows the story of a woman whose life takes a devastating turn after the death of her husband. As she navigates through grief, the widow faces cultural practices that strip her of dignity, inheritance rights, and support.

The Agony of Widows (2018). Produced by and directed by Godstime Ikenga. The film is a Nigerian movie that portrays the harsh realities faced by widows in society. After the death of her husband- Amadi, Nkechi passed through hell. The film delves into cultural practices, societal expectations, and the emotional and financial struggles widows endure after the death of their husbands. It highlights how traditional norms often marginalize and victimize women, leading to isolation, exploitation, and abuse. The movie also explores themes of resilience, survival, and the fight for justice, as some widows challenge these oppressive systems, seeking empowerment and change. Through its storytelling, the film raises awareness about widowhood's painful experiences in Nigeria.

Crazy Widow (2021). Produced by Onyeka Okepeze and directed by Vincent D Anointed. The film is a Nigerian comedy-drama that follows the lives of a group of widows who, despite their shared grief, tackle their challenges with humor, wit, and determination. Hearing both sides of the story before concluding helps cos been biased has cost people their lives and fortunes..... She (Mercy Johnson) assumed the mantle of the CWO leader and changed everything in the community about women... She was a renowned trouble maker who regardless of who you are



humbles you with her troubles... Henry (Smith Nnebe) valued his wife (Chizoba Nwokoye) and believed everything she told him which nearly caused extended family war..... She never liked Henry. The movie portrays the unconventional and often humorous ways these women navigate societal expectations and financial struggles after the death of their husbands. Rather than conforming to traditional widowhood norms, they take bold steps to reclaim their independence and happiness, sometimes leading to wild and unpredictable situations especially Monica. The film blends comedy with serious undertones, highlighting themes of empowerment, friendship, and the fight against societal pressures placed on widows in Nigeria.

The Silent Widow (2014). Produced by Obi Cajetan and directed by Ekene Ukadike. This movie centers on the plight of a widow Anyanwu (Chinyere Wilfred) who was accused of killing her husband and labelled a witch by her own children and the entire community. This story is very powerful, intensely emotional, it will touch every one's heart. The film is a Nigerian movie that delves into the emotional journey of a widow (Leachi) dealing with societal pressures and personal grief. The plot follows the life of the widow after her husband's death (Anyanwu), as she faces challenges from in-laws, friends, and society. The movie touches on themes of loneliness, survival, and the struggles widows often encounter in traditional settings. It showcases the cultural expectations placed on widows, their rights, and how they navigate the difficult period of mourning and starting over. The film highlights resilience and the strength needed to overcome such adversities.

Intersections of Feminist Film Theory and Sociolinguistics Framework

Feminist film theory and sociolinguistics intersect in intriguing ways, as both explore how power dynamics, gender, and societal structures are represented, communicated, and negotiated in different contexts. These theories complement each other in this study. Feminist film theory analyzes the ways in which cinema represents gender, with particular attention to women, gender roles, and patriarchal structures. It explores how films often reflect and reinforce societal attitudes toward gender, including objectification, the male gaze, and stereotypical portrayals of women. Mulvey in her seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) introduced the concept of the "male gaze," explaining how cinema often places the audience in a masculine, voyeuristic perspective. Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society, particularly how language reflects, reinforces, or challenges social structures, including gender. It examines how language usage varies across different social groups, and how it helps to construct identity and power relations. Films not only portray gender through visual imagery but also through the characters' language use. Sociolinguistics can be used to study how male and female characters speak differently, how power dynamics are negotiated in dialogue, and how stereotypes are reinforced or challenged. Film scripts and dialogue can be analyzed as a form of discourse that reflects broader societal values, including the gender norms of a particular time or place. Feminist film theory would critique these portrayals, while sociolinguistics offers insights into the language patterns and social implications.

Both frameworks are concerned with how power operates in society. Feminist film theory looks at how films reinforce or challenge patriarchal power, while sociolinguistics examines how language do the same in real-world interactions. Together, feminist film theory and sociolinguistics provide a comprehensive approach to understanding how gender, language, and power are intertwined in cinematic representations and in the society at large.



RQ1: How is women's language used in Nigerian films to portray the experiences of widows facing societal injustices?

Language is one of the most potent vehicles of expression. In film, it goes beyond mere communication; it reflects societal values, experiences, and struggles. For Nigerian women, especially widows, language becomes a medium to voice their resistance against oppression and to challenge patriarchal structures. Women's expression of their state or feelings with language in films is often a mix of direct and indirect forms of communication, including dialogue, non-verbal cues, and symbols that convey powerful emotions and social commentary. In Nigerian films, women use language not only to express their grief but also to advocate for justice. Through conversations between characters, filmmakers portray the emotional and psychological trauma that widows endure. Their words become weapons against the silence that traditionally shrouds widowhood practices in many communities.

Example: Mama, I am tired. I am sick and tired. There is nothing I do in that house that pleases her. (Mother-in-law). There is nothing. She is driving me knot "Mama". I am going knot....

RQ2: In what ways do female characters in Nigerian films use language to resist or challenge oppressive widowhood practices and cultural norms?

In many Nigerian cultures, traditional practices subjugate widows, often relegating them to roles of silence and invisibility. Films serve as a platform where women's voices can rise against these systems. Through the use of language, characters articulate their defiance of unjust practices, questioning the foundations of patriarchy and its continued dominance over women's lives. Female characters in Nigerian films often express their anger, frustration, and disillusionment with societal norms through language. The dialogues often depict confrontations between widows and family members, the wider community, or traditional authorities. These confrontations show how women, often marginalized, fight for their dignity and rights. In essence, the language of these women in films reflects a broader fight for gender equality and justice.

Examples: Nkechi: "Do not worry I will deal with him"

Orjiako: what do you want?

Nkechi: "Has your wickedness gotten to the level that you want to kill my children in a broad day light... you try to intimidate us and take over the land." ... a title man that want to kill my children then you don't deserve any respect."

Cheta: my mother is a witch. She must confess.

Anyanwu: ...Now listen to me. "Akamu di ocha". I am finished everybody is against me...

Results indicate that Nigerian films significantly use women's language as a tool for challenging widowhood oppression, fostering public discourse, and advocating for women's rights.



3. How does the portrayal of women's language in Nigerian films raise awareness about the rights and struggles of widows in Nigerian society?

The portrayal of women's language in these Nigerian films play a significant role in raising awareness about the rights and struggles of widows in Nigerian society. This portrayal often reflects the societal expectations, cultural norms, and gender dynamics that widows encounter. Women's expression with language in Nigerian films, particularly widows, often reveals the unequal power relations between men and women. Through their dialogue, widows may express feelings of marginalization, loss of agency, or exclusion from decision-making processes, which reflects their real-life experiences. This portrayal draws attention to the patriarchy that limits their rights and freedoms, especially in matters such as inheritance, property ownership, and remarriage.

Examples: Village girl: Imagine these two witches fetching water in the same place we fetch. I feel like reporting them to the Elders to stop them from fetching water from this stream...after killing her four children and husband...

Cheta: Mama is a witch and a murderer. She is responsible for the death of her children. She doesn't deserve to live.

Monica: Settle me for killing my husband. He will settle me with #5M, a car and #50,000 monthly allowance.

Henry: I can't do every single thing she has said.

The language used by widows in these Nigerian films often reveals their emotional and psychological pain. Through intimate conversations, soliloquies, and expressions of grief, these women communicate the intense loneliness and societal pressure they endure after the loss of their husbands. This allows the audience to empathize with their struggles, encouraging a deeper understanding of their plight.

Examples: I am living in pains and agony.

Anyanwu: All I see death.. (agony laughter..)

Leachi: I am now a widow. Stanley ! ! !!!

Widows in Nigerian films often have to navigate the complex societal expectations imposed upon them. The language they use can reflect the cultural stigma associated with widowhood, such as being blamed for their husband's death, being subjected to harmful widowhood rites, or being pressured to remarry within the family. These dialogues expose the traditional norms that constrain widows and raise awareness about the need for change in societal attitudes.

Examples: Ugonna: Elders "Nna anyi" That woman is a witch, she is responsible

for the death of our brother, her husband. She can't stay under the same root with us, so, she has to go.

Leachi: Elders, I am innocent. I don't know anything about this. Please, I'm an orphan. I don't have anywhere to go to.



Ugonna: She has decided to associated herself with that witch, let her go stay with that witch (Anyanwu).

Anyanwu: Nna anyi, I am innocent. If this is the price, I have to pay.

I am innocent.

Olisa (God) what is this? Don't let anybody...

Leachi: I am now a widow! Stanley ! ! ! !

In some these films, widows used assertive or defiant language to fight for their rights, challenge oppressive practices, or demand justice. These films act as advocacy tools, showing widows resisting cultural pressures and calling for legal reforms that protect their rights. By portraying women speaking out, these films create awareness about issues such as widow inheritance rights, economic independence, and the need for better legal protections.

Examples: I am finished, everybody is against me.

This misery is unbearable.

My husband, please come and take me away from this wicked world.

The language used by widows in these films sometimes highlights the importance of female solidarity and support networks. Through conversations with other women, widows express shared experiences of struggle, thereby creating a sense of collective empowerment. This portrayal emphasizes the value of community support in alleviating the suffering of widows and raises awareness about the potential for grassroots movements to advocate for widows' rights.

4. What linguistic strategies are employed by women in Nigerian films to advocate for social justice and legal reform concerning widowhood?

In Nigerian films, women—particularly widows—employ various linguistic strategies to advocate for social justice and legal reform concerning widowhood. These strategies help them articulate their struggles, challenge patriarchal norms, and demand change. Here are some key linguistic strategies used:

Widows often use assertive language to confront oppressive figures, such as family members or community leaders. Through bold statements and refusal to comply with harmful widowhood practices, they assert their agency and demand respect.

Examples: in *Agony of Widow/Crazy Widow*

Monica: "... because you killed him (Anayo). why are you alive? Why didn't you die?

You will not sell it (leftover drinks), "na onwu dim" (my husband's berial).

Uncle: She is a widow, you have to dance to her tune.

Monica: I will show you madness. Allow me to show him the power of a widow.

Allow me to go naked for him...



Widows may explicitly challenge cultural norms and traditions that disenfranchise them. This defiance is often reflected in their refusal to undergo dehumanizing widowhood rites or accept societal restrictions on their rights.

Example: “I am not responsible for my husband's death, and I will not be treated like a criminal!”
“See this witch, by the time we are through with her, she will see. Don’t come into this house again- murderer”.

Elders, I am going nowhere. I’ll remain here to prove my innocent.

Widows use emotive language to narrate their personal experiences of loss, suffering, and injustice. This appeals to the audience's emotions, creating empathy and highlighting the human cost of discriminatory practices.

Example: “You cannot imagine the pain of losing a husband and then being told I no longer have a place in my own home.”

Nne gi kam bu. “I’m your mother”.

Just leave me alone, leave me let me die...

Death why have you decided to go for my family. My daughter Christy is death and I have to be accused of killing her. Come and take my life away

When will this be over, when? Come! Come!!! And take me. I am tired. “Ike agwulam”

Emotional appeals are also used to expose the harsh realities of widowhood, such as property dispossession or ostracization. By emphasizing their vulnerability, widows invite the audience to reflect on the need for social reform.

Elders, your daughter and our mother here is a witch. Take her home for questioning and redemption.

“You are my son, I carried you for 9 months (holding the stomach) and I fed you with this breast (lift her breast with her two hands). I will go nowhere. I will stand on this ground to prove my innocence...”

Widows in Nigerian films often code-switch between local languages and English to emphasize particular points or convey different social identities. English, being the language of power and authority, is used to articulate demands for legal reform, while indigenous languages are used to connect with cultural identity or to invoke emotional depth. A widow may switch to English when speaking to legal authorities or government officials to express her rights and switch back to her indigenous language when sharing her personal pain with the community.

Example: “Eluwa nka lee” x2

“Alaeze eluigwe amaghim ebem ga ebido ebido

Emelu odighi nma... emeala odhighi nma

Obu gini kam ga eme?

Olisa bi n’igwe Chei, Akwa imanu n’akam di ocha

Nna kperem onum.”



The indigenous language used above were to invoke emotional depth.

Widows in these Nigerian films often use proverbs and metaphors that carry cultural weight to question societal values and traditions. By drawing on well-known wisdom, they subtly critique oppressive practices and call for reform.

Example: “A tree does not fall without a reason; but must the branches break too?” This metaphor was used to highlight that, although the widow’s husband has died, she should not also lose her dignity or property.

Some widows use formal legal language to discuss their rights, especially in films that center on shrine as courtroom or legal battles. They may cite specific laws or advocate for reforms, showcasing their knowledge of the legal system and their determination to claim their rights.

Example: “According to the Constitution, I am entitled to inherit my husband’s property. No customary law can override that.”

Elders: “Based on the allegation that you killed your husband and I want you to prove your innocent by placing hand on his casket and say that you know nothing about his death.

Widow: “Nna anyi, I am innocent. I didn’t kill my husband. If I am responsible for my husband’s death, may it never be well with me but if I am innocent... god will vindicate..”

Through dialogue, widows may explicitly call for changes to outdated laws, demanding that both the government and the community recognize their rights as women and individuals.

Examples: Nna anyi, I am still a human being.

When women mobilize to fight for their rights, their language reflects organization and unity. They may use slogans, chants, or collective declarations during protests or group meetings, furthering their advocacy efforts.

Examples: Monica in *Crazy Widows*

Leachi and Anyanwu in *Silent Widows*

In a religious society like Nigeria, widows sometimes employ religious language to invoke justice, appeal to divine intervention, or question the morality of those perpetuating their oppression.

Examples: “God did not create women to suffer after losing their husbands. Is it not written that all are equal in His eyes?”

“Olisa bi n’igwe” (God in heaven) “Chei, Akwa imanu n’akam di ocha” (You are aware that my hand is clean)

“Nna kperem onum.” (Father be my advocate)

Kwuo na ozuwo “meaning” (declare Your word.)

Ka ebili nmiri we dereju “meaning” (let the storm be calmed)



Widows often use moral arguments to shame those who mistreat them, appealing to a higher sense of right and wrong. By framing their struggles as moral failings of society, they advocate for ethical reform.

Examples: Nkechi: Father, thank you so much, you mean we can go home. Shame unto those who didn't believe.

In some cases, widows use strategic silence or minimal speech as a form of resistance. Their refusal to speak can be a powerful way of rejecting oppressive norms or customs, forcing others to reflect on their actions.

Example: Nkechi the widow refuses to respond to those who accuse her of causing her husband's death, using silence as a statement of dignity.

Through these linguistic strategies, widows in Nigerian films not only reflect their personal struggles but also advocate for broader social and legal reforms concerning widowhood. These portrayals raise awareness of the injustice faced by widows, while also empowering them to demand change

CONCLUSION

The linguistic strategies in Nigerian films is pivotal in the fight against the injustices faced by widows. Widows in Nigeria, especially the southeast, often endure discrimination, social stigma, and exploitation due to deep-seated patriarchal norms. This study examines how women's expression using language in Nigerian films serves as a medium for combating these injustices, providing a voice to the marginalized and fostering societal change. By giving voice to the silenced, these films bring to light the oppressive practices that widows endure and challenge societal norms that perpetuate their suffering. Through language, women in these films advocate for their rights, confront patriarchy, and demand justice. The power of their words extends beyond the screen, influencing audiences and contributing to the broader movement for social change in Nigeria. Women's language in Nigerian films serves not only as a medium for storytelling but also as a tool for empowerment and activism. As filmmakers continue to highlight the plight of widows, the narratives around widowhood are slowly evolving, with language playing a critical role in this transformation. Through these stories, Nigerian films help to dismantle injustice and pave the way for a more equitable society. This study underscores the transformative potential of women's language in Nigerian cinema.



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