

## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC EXAMINATION OF GENDERED LANGUAGES AND URBAN SLANG IN KEMI ADETIBA'S "KING OF BOYS"

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### **Abstract**

This study engages with the performance of gendered language and urban slang in Kemi Adetiba's "King of Boys" specifically the sociolinguistic behaviours of the cast crew, focusing on language as subversive strategy in the Nigeria's patriarchal cinematic space. Despite Nigeria's significant media production capacity, there exists notable scholarly dearth of research on gendered language in Nollywood and how female protagonists manage linguistic encounters in contexts of sustained marginalisation. Where it has received widespread attack for its political narratives, sociolinguistic maneuvers in the Nigerian film industry have attracted meager scholarly attention, reflecting the intense attendant cultural rivalries in which female leadership is habitually delegitimised. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the study therefore examined how gendered language challenge and rearticulate dominant gendered power relations. The strategic uses of sociolinguistic concepts like hyper-masculine slang and proverbs are shown to be mechanisms that constitute and reconstitute hybridized gender identity to break binary categorizations and thereby establish validity and expose the inherent misogyny in the Nigeria's cinematic space. The study proves how such linguistic resources function both in reproducing as well as challenging gendered biases in a patriarchal setup. The study concludes on a note that linguistic agency reflects authentic challenges of Nigerian women holding leadership positions.

**Keywords:** Gendered Language, Sociolinguistic Inquiry, Proverbs, Urban Slang, Judith Butler Performativity, Nollywood Discourse

### **Introduction**

Sociolinguistics examines how language and society interact. It examines how variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class influence the use of languages and how language contributes to social relationships and identities. According to Labov (1972) "The study of language in its social context is essential for understanding the structure of language itself." Language is not only for speaking; it also involves social conventions. Sociolinguistics assists in analysing literature and film in examining how an individual's speech, represented through their accent, speech patterns, or mode of communication, represents their social identity and culture. Tannen (1990) clarifies the concept with the statement, "Conversational style is not something extra or fancy; it is the basic way we connect with other people." This indicates that word choice in speech conveys meaning and emotion, which allows us to comprehend how characters relate in films and novels. Eckert (1989) adds that variation in language is able to demonstrate group membership as well as social standing, usually realised through the way writers and filmmakers construct their characters' voices. Eckert went on to say, "Language is a primary means through which individuals construct their social worlds" which assists in the analysis of language in films and novels as well as in how they reinforce or subvert social norms. Applying sociolinguistic methods of analysis in films assists in identifying the multiple meanings embedded in language.

Nigeria's cinema, particularly Nollywood is one of the most prolific film industries in the world, only behind Hollywood and India's Bollywood in terms of their annual output. As a cultural ambassador, Nollywood production mirrors the everyday realities of the Nigerian people. Extant literature on Nollywood films have analysed some of these Nollywood films for their various thematic engagement such as postcolonial identity, governance, verisimilitude, etc. Yet, a critical gap persists in sociolinguistic studies interrogating how gendered language, specifically the interplay of urban slang, and proverbs shapes gendered power relation in Nollywood narratives with Kemi Adetiba's "King of Boys" as analytical point of reference. This gap is striking, given that gender operates as a foundational organizing principle in African culture and, by extension, Nigerian screenwriting (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2009). As Adegbite (2009) theorizes, gender transcends biological binaries go a socially constructed identity often used to mark the distinction between males and females. This subject has been a major source of scholarly inquiries across disciplines. Gender issues abound in the scholarship of Nigerian films across disciplines: theatrical, film, and performance: Amoneyeze & Agbo, 2022; Ezeajugh & Anijah, 2017; Okafor, 2017; Shaka & Uchendu, 2012 (Oladoja and Tomere 2022). While these studies examine gender representation in Nollywood through theatrical or sociological lenses, few dissect the linguistic mechanisms through which Nollywood narratives contest patriarchal hegemony.

Nigeria's film industry serves as a reflection of the country's social dynamics. This is mostly evident in its linguistic ingenuity. Gendered language, including urban slang and proverbs are recurring leitmotifs in some of these films. Essentially, this linguistic engagement specifically reproduces societal norms. The linguistic patterns of these slang and cultural proverbs upholds some patriarchal structures that appear to be present in the larger Nigerian culture. This assertion is supported by Okome (2007) where he advances that "Nollywood is the medium of the Nigerian city. ...indeed, a cultural child of circumstances" in that Nollywood narratives articulate ongoing tensions in the Nigerian society. Sometimes they can be satirical, to lampoon ills of the society. Essentially, Nollywood narratives serve as a mirror reflecting the issues in the larger society. Similarly, Haynes (2016) notes that Nollywood narratives tend to "encode social realities through linguistic hybridity," enabling writers and directors to discreetly critique societal norms. These observations point to language and its significance in deconstructing gendered power, especially in its subversive potential through urban slangs and its ethical burden via proverbs, which generally have the function of reinforcing patriarchal ideologies African story telling traditions.

Urban slangs as one of the most used languages in Nollywood films serve as an object for contesting gender norms in society. This slang, mixed with touches of English, Pidgin, and local languages like Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa, allows the cast crew, particularly female ones, to claim agency in storylines that are often controlled by male characters. For instance, female lead characters in movies like "Glamour Girls" use slang to negotiate urban spaces in real time, actively undermining traditional expectations of subordination. Some linguistic patterns are gendered-restricted. To lay this bare, proverbs is used many African cultures as a tool for verbal negotiation. This then became an important tool of communication for men, who are expected to be savvy in it to mark the strength of their wisdom, but not for women, because most negotiations in most, if not all are done by men. The woman is then duly informed of the outcome and resolution taken. This then makes the use of proverbs in communication a gender-restrictive language in the control of men. The linguistic agency that urban slangs grants women, as our study observes, is in line with Adegbiya (2005) submission that code-mixing in Nigerian media is a deliberate strategy to assert social identities and resist hegemonic norms. In addition, the informal register of slang is juxtaposed with formal, patriarchal discourse often summarised in proverbs, which male characters use to assert dominance. Ogunleye (2008) also contends that the use of urban slang in Nollywood scripts creates a linguistic space that allows women to perform modernity and agency, defying patriarchal norms. slangs in dialogues, Nollywood scripts allow women to actively engage with power negotiations, thus mirroring the changing gender relations in the rapidly urbanizing environment of Nigerian society.

Proverbs are highly ingrained in African oral culture. They largely serve to reinforce patriarchal values where they are used. Nwabudike (2020) advances that there is male dominance in the use of proverb. In most African narratives, the male protagonists use proverbs to reaffirm traditional gender expectations as well as to trivialize the role of women. In "Your Excellency" for one, the male protagonist uses proverbs to affirm traditional masculinity and gendered expectations (Olawuyi and Odesola, 2023). However, female protagonists sometimes reappropriate these proverbs by using irony or colloquialisms and sometimes postproverbs to challenge male hegemony. This subversive use aligns with Onukaogu and Onyerionwu's (2010) argument that Nollywood's "linguistic creativity remakes traditional forms into instruments of feminist critique." Likewise, Azeez (2014) argues that proverbs used in Nollywood are "double-edged, capable of reinforcing or deconstructing gendered organising of societies depending on their use in context." Through the examination of these linguistic features, our study illustrates how Nollywood films both reflect and refract expressions of gendered power relations, thus providing a fertile ground for sociolinguistic inquiry. Our study rejects in its entirety the view held by Nwabudike (2020) where he presses that Nigerian proverbs are a literary device used to embellish speech. We seek to establish in part that language, for which proverbs are a part and parcel of is a carrier of culture. The research keys into Adesida (2015) assertion that proverbs are an important part of African culture because they provide vivid imagery for the expression of a people's worldview.

This study draws on concepts from sociolinguistics in its analysis of urban proverbs and slang in "King of Boys. We will observe how they are used for discussions of gender power as well as depiction of Nigeria's social reality. Our research: (1) examine the patterns of urban slang and proverbs in "King of Boys" as well as their contribution in creating or reconstructing gender roles; (2) analyse how the lead female characters retakes agency through various means of speaking. All in all, our research is closing an existing gap in the studies of sociolinguistics as well as demonstrating how Nollywood is an ideal platform for analysing how language constructs and reconstructs gender identity.

### **Kemi Adetiba's King of Boys: An Overview**

Kemi Adetiba's "King of Boys" tells a story that revolves around themes of power struggles, crime, and political maneuvering in the city of Lagos. Released in 2018, the film has received critical reviews for its rich drama and

characters. The story centers on Alhaja Eniola Salami, an entrepreneur and philanthropist who is well-respected in society. She exerts her influence in her capacity as a dominant force in the Lagos crime underworld. Sola Sobowale who plays this character, brings Eniola to life in a character whose desire to consolidate her political control creates conflict with enemies, law enforcement officials, and even members of her family, pushing her to deal with consequences of her past decisions. The film focuses on Eniola's quest to balance her public image as a benevolent leader with her dark, violent activities, thus shedding light on heavy prices of betrayal and aggression in trying to grab power.

The geographical setting of Lagos frames the story as a crime film with its congested roadways, numerous factions of different political inclination, and many gang networks. It is the environment in which Eniola's troubles arise. The film shows how in Lagos, control oftentimes goes hand in hand with financial capabilities, social prestige, and coercion, features Eniola employs to exert control over people in her environment. Eniola's journey is bedeviled with setbacks such as the investigation by authorities into her life of crime, fights with other criminal gangs, and family strife. The tension builds until Eniola is exposed to past misdemeanors in a bloody encounter, forcing her to face tough decisions. The story continues in a follow-up entitled "King of Boys" released in 2021 in a series form comprising seven episodes on Netflix. Eniola returns to Lagos after a long exile with a clear intention of reinstating her control; nonetheless, she faces new enemies such as a former protégé, Mekaniki, who has taken over a very deadly gang and her son, Obembe, who becomes involved in her violent lifestyle.

One of the major themes in "King of Boys" is the consequences of power and moral concessions people make in maintaining it. Eniola is a perfect representation of double-faced character in that she is both a hero and a villain depending on people's interpretations of her. She is involved in positive contributions to society that include creating schools and supporting poor communities, and she is also involved in assassination and bribery to protect her own interests. The film depicts the darker sides of ambition, specifically consequences of Eniola's decisions on her children, who struggle to deal with what she has inherited. While her daughter tries to disown the family business involved in crime, Obembe gets more involved in them to a point of conflict and tragedy. The film also depicts corruption in the larger society - street gangs to government bodies - thereby diluting what it means to be a "good" or "bad" person.

One of the noteworthy aspects of the film is its use of Nigerian cultural elements, which helps add authenticity to the story. The characters use a mix of English, Yoruba, and Pidgin, successfully capturing the linguistic diversity of Lagos. The musical soundtrack is made up of Nigerian music, and the movie features local customs, clothing, and community events, thus giving audiences a strong sense of place. Together, these components work to ground the dramatic story in a believable setting, making the characters' conflicts more relatable. The sequel continues this trend as it explores deeper into the political landscape through Eniola's methods of manipulating elections and forging alliances in a bid to reclaim power, as well as an exploration of the personal sacrifices that come with her ambitions.

Another very strong element of the film is its use of Nigerian cultural motifs, which help to augment the realism of the story. The characters use a mixture of English, Yoruba, and Pidgin to communicate, thus perfectly reflecting the linguistic patterns of Lagos. The soundtrack incorporates Nigerian musical elements, while the movie presents local customs, clothing, and interpersonal interactions, thus giving audiences great contextual understanding. These elements help to place the dramatic action in an extremely realistic environment, making the problems faced by the characters more accessible. The sequel builds on this element, exploring the political environment and showing how Eniola engages with electoral systems and how she forms tactical alliances to restore power to herself, while also investigating the interpersonal implications of her ambition.

### **Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity**

Butler's theory of performativity is fully elaborated in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler radically challenges traditional views of gender as a stable, inherent category. Butler (1990) contend that gender is not an inherent essence; instead, it is developed through a stylized repetition of acts that produces the illusion of a stable identity. Butler's model of performativity draws on J.L. Austin's theory of speech-acts. Austin's speech-acts theory suggests language has the power to create realities rather than merely to describe them. Butler expands on Austin's model to include not just verbal utterances but physical acts as well, synthesizing it with Foucauldian notions of power and Derridean notions of iterability, thus claiming that gender is a "ritualised production" sustained through the repeated citation of normative scripts (Butler, 1993). Butler importantly refuses the distinction between sex and gender, suggesting instead that even biological sex is produced through discourse; for example, the performative announcement of sex at birth (e.g. a medical practitioner saying "It is a girl") interpellates subjects into social roles that work to reinforce heteronormative structures (Butler, 1993).

One of the most basic elements of Butler's framework is the thesis that there exists no pre-discursive "self" that is prior to gender's performance. Butler (1990) states that "the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of gendering, but emerges only in the matrix of gender relations themselves. This view counters readings of identity and locates subjectivity as resulting from power-loaded performative acts. Performativity is oftentimes misunderstood as willful act, but Butler (1990) makes it explicit that it is performed vis-à-vis certain constraints: gender norms are "reiterated under and through prohibition". Agency is therefore based on the capacity to carry out subversive repetitions that show inconsistencies of these norms.

Our study employs this theory to examine the linguistic properties of this film to find out how gendered languages and urban slang are employed in this important film, and how language is employed by women as a site of resistance against cultural biases in the Nigerian film industry that is dominated by men. Nollywood is speculated to produce around 2,500 films annually. This makes the industry one of the most important in the world. Nollywood productions cover various aspects of the Nigerian social life that should immediately catalyze scholarly inquiry from various sociolinguistic angles, however, there is minimal understanding of how aspects of language like slang (re)presents gender in Nollywood films. Existing studies have considered the problems in Nollywood, but how language produces gender power roles, as Butler (1990) advances, is oftentimes rendered culturally illegible. In an environment where female power is in constant question, applying Butler's concept of performativity which establishes that gender is a "stylized repetition of acts" that constructs identity using language, our analysis shall establish how the main female protagonists in the film challenge and deconstruct strict gender biases and exposing sexism in Nigerian film culture.

### **Exploring Gendered Languages and Slang in "King of Boys"**

It is imperative to situate proverbs as a sociolinguistic genre, especially gendered proverbs, within Butler's idea of performativity because the theory foregrounds how language constructs gender identities. Proverbs, as Ebim (2024) advances, is a cultural linguistic tool. Similarly, Moshood (2023) submits out that proverb occupies a prominent position in the interface between language and culture. In essence, it is part of a people's cultural identity. Proverbs do not just reflect a people's identity, they construct them. Within this oral culture are evidences of gender biases that mostly target women, and this is not just in the African setting. We find evidences to there are elements of sexism in them. It is the sexism in these proverbs that this study examines as gendered languages. Adesida (2015) notes that gendered proverbs are bias with tendencies to portray women in "dark colours", which are not truly representative of women. Butler (1990) notes that gender is not an identity that exists in isolation but is instead a series of repeated actions and words that reinforce or challenge existing conventions. Essentially, these "dark colours" repeated, unchallenged, becomes reality. The dictions situated within the proverbs in Adetiba's "King of Boys" challenge the male-dominated power regimes in order to construct hybrid identities that poses a problem to held simplistic binary. Butler's theory of performativity allows for the exploration of how language is used as a tool of subversion by the female protagonists in order to assume authority and challenge misogyny.

Eniola's statement "The slow crawling of a lion is not due to fear" redefines her slowness as strength and not weakness. Within the patriarchal space, inaction by a woman may be taken as cowardice, but by referencing the lion and therefore taking on masculine authority, she overturns these dominant expectations. Her statement is characterised by duality: one, it subscribes to the 'masculine' power or ferocity but also maintaining the "feminine" aspect of measured slowness. According to Buttler (1993):

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.

This resistance to adherence to prevailing gender roles that Eniola displays work in support of Butler's argument that performance has the ability to subversively challenge dominant norms through the act of modifying iterations. Likewise, in the use of the metaphor of the ram ("The ram that moves backwards has gone to call in more power") Adetiba brings out the symbol of masculine tradition (ram fighting) in order to legitimise strategic withdrawal. Redefining restraint as strength, Adetiba resists the cultural link between aggression and masculinity, thereby reconceptualizing power in the context of prudence and bravery. Moreover, Butler (1990) assertion that "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" suggests that gendered norms can be modified when the repetitions that foregrounds them are challenged.



Eniola's use of proverbs continually challenges existing traditional hierarchies. Her rebuking of Mekanaki, "You have taken your finger, drenched it in hot pepper and stabbed your mother in the eye with it" has in it a parental voice that is normally reserved by male elders. Proverbs are dominant in many different African cultures as the methods by which elders rebuke youths, but in this case, Eniola, as the female participant, uses them to rebuff a male counterpart and thus declare superiority. This verbal approach confirms her authority in a culture that often excludes women on account of gender. Her clever reversal of roles in comparing Mekanaki to "a child that will not recognize deadly herb" serves to portray herself in the dangerous and wise elder role and undermine the masculinity and world-awareness of Mekanaki. Her argument in this encounter challenges the patriarchal presumptions tied to age and masculinity and allows her to take on a role that society normally denies her.

Butler's view on the fluidity of identity is validated by Eniola's blend of care and firmness. The saying "The teeth that the dog uses to play with her puppies are the same teeth that she uses to discipline them" captures her identity as both nurturing and authoritative. This metaphor from dogs effectively blends care and strict discipline, thus defying the binarism that frames women between the poles of nurturing or obtrusiveness. Eniola's performance discourse, therefore, is a realization of an identity that defies simplistic gender definitions in emphasising adaptability in power systems. This doubleness is in agreement with Butler's argument that gender is not a fixed feature but one that is conditioned by context. According to Butler (1990): There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. This view is supported by Adesida (2015) view noting that masculinity is not exclusive to men. Essentially, it is a product of the "iteration" or repetition of certain sociolinguistic patterns where narrative is seen as reality just for its dominance.

Mekanaki's response "A tree that cannot support us when we lean on it cannot kill us when it falls" demonstrates the struggle between normative and subversive performances. In likening Eniola to a useless tree, he uses proverbs as a means to deligitimise her authority, thus showing resistance to female power within society. However, his recourse to the same linguistic tools used by Eniola represents the contestable nature of performativity. Their battle illustrates the use of proverbs as sites of contesting gendered power relations, where language reinforces or disputes authority depending on the speaker's identity and the mode of articulation.

Moreover, the film uses language as a site for the exploration of power relations, and acts of resistance, specifically through gendered slang and urban vernaculars. The dialogue which is full of Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba proverbs, and Lagos Street vernacular, acts as a tool for the characters to establish dominance, contest prevailing hierarchies, or negotiate survival within the patriarchal landscape of cinema. For example, Mekanaki's declaration "Mekanaki is my name and I don't have a mother" immediately positions his character as an independent and brutal street boy that renounces any link to traditional family affiliations, thereby displaying his masculinity as autonomous and subversive. The statement exemplifies the hyper-masculinity found in urban crime dramas, where slang terms such as "area boys" (street gang members in Lagos) lend to the rough, localised verisimilitude of his character while also mirroring the larger societal problems.

The linguistic strategies in slang, especially as utilised within the film are closely tied to struggles over gendered power relations. Eniola (Oba) the main female protagonist, navigates a male-dominated underworld through both assuming and undermining male linguistic norms which urban slang has been known to be. Her teasing question "You don chop?" (Have you eaten?) directed at a failed spy mocks his vulnerability while also asserting her power through acts brutality, showcasing maternal imagery with a veiled threat. This dual nature in Eniola's (Oba) challenges traditional stereotypes of women as passive or nurturing, instead portraying her as a hybrid figure who uses language as a tool for subverting patriarchal norms. This lends credence to Bucholtz & Hall (2005) in their study on sociocultural linguistic approach where they maintain that:

Identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon... We argue instead, in line with abundant sociocultural linguistic research, that identity is a discursive construct that emerges in interaction.

This foregrounds our view that language use such as Eniola's deployment of this slang which is sometimes called "gutter language" constructs an identity for her rather than reflecting them. And, again, it buttresses Butler (1990) notion that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

Similarly, Mekanaki's scorn for Oba "Which crown? You are afraid of a lion that has lost its claws and teeth" uses imagery to challenge her legitimacy, characterizing her leadership as outdated. However, this insult also

reveals the nature of male power in the face of a woman's strength, as Qba's later resurgence contradicts his dismissal. The use of urban vernacular in the film narrative has a dual function: it unites marginalized groups based on shared language while, at the same time, upholds negative power dynamics. Meanings like "Old glory, old school!" and "Mama, your time is up. Drop the crown" are not only employed as insults but also as sociolinguistic mechanisms intended to challenge Qba's power. These sentences reflect common societal opinions that demote older women in power, representing leadership by them as incompatible with new ideals. Qba's responses to these, in the form of calculated silences or exasperatedly articulated threats, work against this trend.

The film's use of Yoruba-inflected slang further complicates the dynamics of gender. Makanaki's utterance "To ba be, ma ko won wa ba e pelu 40-seater" (If you trespass, I will come with my goons in a 40-seater), which is taken from Reminisce's rap background, combines cultural authenticity with a hint of menace, thereby grounding his masculinity in local linguistic practices. Qba, on the other hand, uses a more cultivated speech that involves frequent code-switching, reflecting her double identity as a businesswoman and an underworld boss. Her language use acts as a bridge between the politics of respectability and "street credibility", thus troubling the assumption that women must adopt a single mode of communication to wield power.

The film also challenges the misogyny embedded in urban street language. Terms like "area boys" or "old school" are not free from bias; they have gendered underpinnings that reinforce the exclusion of women from leadership roles. The male characters addressing Eniola (Qba) as "Mama" revolves between admiration and detestation, showing how society does not wish to be patient with female authority. Nevertheless, Qba's repudiation of this name, adopting instead the title "Qba" (King) subverts the gendered regulation of language, pushing against the patriarchal assumption that leadership is masculine, while using verbal ambiguity to reimagine power in her own right. This linguistic complexity of the film uncovers the tensions between tradition and modernity. Makanaki's use of Yoruba proverbs and street slang grounds his identity in urban Lagos culture; however, his refusal to compromise linguistically (e.g., calling Qba "old school") represents his rigid and ultimately harmful masculinity. On the other hand, Qba's code-switching and her strategic use of silence reveals a degree of adaptability, a necessary trait for survival. On a larger scale, "King of Boys" uses gendered language and urban slang not only as narrative devices but also as sites of resistance. With the linguistic examples set by Makanaki and Qba, the film demonstrates how language constructs, challenges, and redefines power in Nigeria's patriarchal society. Slang is both a mirror of social inequalities and a means of undermining them, thus reflecting the ways in which marginalised groups manage oppressive conditions.

## Conclusion

The deployment of proverbs as well as slang in the Nollywood movie "King of Boys" has been fully analysed in order to reveal their functions in capturing gender power relations as well as in their reflection of the social conditions of Nigeria. The study proves how such linguistic resources, masterfully deployed through the main female character function both in reproducing as well as subverting typical gendered roles in a patriarchal setup. The use of proverbs assertively by the heroine in combination with parental tone in speaking with male colleagues is an indication of the power of language in reconfiguring power as well as identity. This study not only enhances our knowledge of the complexities that exists between language, power, as well as gender in Nigeria, but also depicts Nollywood an important site of sociolinguistic inquiry, thus contributing decisively towards enriching the larger corpus of research on African cinema as well as its cultural importance.

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