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Language, Stigma, and Feminist Agency: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Childless Wives' Voices in Nollywood

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Abstract

This study examines how childless wives linguistically construct identity, reproduce, and resist patriarchal stigma in selected Nollywood films. Guided by Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (1995, 2003), Goffman's stigma management theory (1963), and radical feminism (Firestone, 1970), it analyses the wives' utterances in five purposively selected films. Findings reveal a trajectory from silence and self-blame to confrontation and resistance. Early utterances marked by guilt, repetition, and spiritual lexis (barren, cursed, my fault) reflect internalised pro-natalist ideology that equates womanhood with motherhood. Silence, sustained by loyalty and unequal power relations, preserves family harmony at women's cost. When humiliation becomes intolerable, wives shift to evidential and imperative counter-discourse (medical report, low sperm count, Enough!, get out of my house), rejecting imposed labels and exposing concealed male infertility. The study concludes that language is both mechanism of oppression and resource for feminist agency in Nollywood.

Keywords: Nollywood, Childlessness, Infertility stigma, Feminist resistance, Critical Discourse Analysis, Patriarchy

Introduction

In Nigerian patriarchal frameworks, motherhood frequently serves as the primary metric of female fulfilment, leaving childless wives to navigate a hostile social reality. Infertility is not only a medical condition but a cultural stigma, often framed as a woman's failure despite medical evidence that male factors contribute equally (Esan et al., 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Nigerian films frequently portray infertility as a female problem linked to curses, witchcraft, or spiritual punishment, depicting women as distressed and verbally abused while men are rarely held accountable (Labinjo, 2025; Lekey, 2024).

From a feminist perspective, such portrayals reduce women's identity to reproduction, silence agency, and legitimise generational enforcement of stigma through mothers-in-law. Yet Nollywood also provides space for resistance, depicting women who confront stigma, expose male infertility, and assert autonomy through economic independence. Existing scholarship focuses largely on broad thematic representations of women, gender violence, and domestic conflict, with limited micro-linguistic scrutiny of how childless characters articulate and negotiate identity in dialogue. Most studies adopt thematic or content analysis, overlooking granular linguistic strategies.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the lexical choices and discourse strategies childless wives use to represent themselves. The objectives are to (a) examine how childless wives linguistically construct identity, (b) show how their language reproduces patriarchal stigma, and (c) show how it resists that stigma. The guiding



research questions are: (1) How do childless wives linguistically construct identity in the selected films? (2) How does their language reproduce infertility stigma and patriarchal ideology? (3) How does their language contest stigma and enact feminist agency?

The study contributes to feminist film scholarship by centring wives' voices as sites of cultural negotiation, advances discourse analysis by showing utterances as instruments of both oppression and resistance, and enriches Nollywood studies by positioning wives' speech acts as indicators of struggle between tradition and modernity.

Literature Review

Socio-cultural construction of childlessness. In many sub-Saharan African cultures, marriage and motherhood are linked to a woman's status and identity. Esan et al. (2022) argued that motherhood is a mandatory socio-cultural institution. Involuntary childlessness is thus viewed as anomaly, spiritual curse, or personal failure, exposing women to ostracism, trauma, economic vulnerability, and marital instability. Maduako (2021) similarly showed that traditional gender ideologies place reproductive burden entirely on women. The childless woman therefore occupies a contested space in which her humanity is negotiated through dominant pro-natalist discourses.

Representation in Nollywood. Nollywood both mirrors and magnifies these values. Onuzulike (2008) demonstrated the influence of home videos on gender expectations. Representation has relied on restrictive stereotypes, casting the childless woman as villain, seeker of unorthodox remedies, or object of pity. Oloruntobi (2024) noted that even when assisted reproductive technologies appear, the gaze remains moralistic. Adegbenro et al. (2025) observed routine verbal aggression, often by mothers-in-law, normalising marginalisation. Haynes (2016) noted that narratives reproduce expectations of women as wives and mothers, positioning childlessness as identity crisis. Studies applying CDA show how naming, metaphor, and evaluative language construct identities (Omoniyi, 2010; Okome, 2013). Ezeigbo (2012) and Nwachukwu (2015) showed how childless women are portrayed as victims of scorn bearing psychological burden. What remains unexamined is how the women themselves negotiate this positioning linguistically.

Theoretical Framework

This study triangulates Fairclough's CDA (1995, 2003), Goffman's stigma management theory (1963), and radical feminism (Firestone, 1970). CDA provides the method at three levels—textual (lexis, pronouns, transitivity, modality, metaphor), discursive practice (production and consumption of film dialogue), and social practice (pro-natalist patriarchal ideology). It reveals how language sustains and challenges hierarchies.

Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) explains process: stigma as socially constructed discrediting attribute managed through concealment, self-blame, and later disclosure and resistance. This maps directly onto wives who absorb blame to shield husbands and later disclose male infertility.

Radical feminism situates patriarchy as root of oppression and politicises private life, especially reproductive control. Applied here, it illuminates reduction of female identity to reproduction and the use of mothers-in-law as generational enforcers, while identifying truth-telling and economic autonomy as agency. Together, CDA traces how language works, stigma theory traces why silence shifts to speech, and feminism traces whose interests are served—converging on a trajectory from oppression to resistance.

Method

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive CDA design. Five Nollywood films purposively selected for central childless-wife plots served as primary data: *Tears of My Childless Wife*, *When the Faith of a Childless Wife Is Tested*, *Fate of a Childless Woman*, *A True Life Story of How My Mother-in-Law Made My Marriage a Living Hell*, and *My Mother-in-Law Called Me Barren* (see Filmography; years/directors to be verified against release credits). Selection criteria were centrality of childlessness, presence of extended wife utterances, and mother-in-law conflict. Only focal wives' turns were transcribed verbatim in English. Analysis followed three steps: (a) identification of salient textual features (repetition, pronouns, modality, evidential lexis, imperatives); (b) mapping to Goffman's strategies (internalisation, covering, disclosure, rejection); and (c) feminist interpretation of patriarchal power and resistance. Triangulation ensured robust interpretation of how language dramatises stigma and agency.

Results

Tables 1–3 summarise salient choices, cross-cutting patterns, and framework mapping. Table 1 presents film-by-film features; Table 2 synthesises patterns; Table 3 interprets each excerpt through the three lenses, showing movement from internalisation (Movies 1–3) to disclosure and resistance (Movies 4–5).

Table 1

Salient Linguistic Choices in Childless Wives' Utterances

Film / Excerpt	Salient choices	Interpretation
1. <i>Tears of My Childless Wife</i> : "What's there to celebrate? ... if I had known I was barren, I wouldn't have allowed you to marry me."	Rhetorical question; self-label barren; modality supposed to; repetition we don't have	Dismisses affirmation; internalised stigma; marriage equated with reproduction.
2. <i>When the Faith of a Childless Wife Is Tested</i> : "We are cursed, we are cursed. There's nothing anyone can tell me."	Exact repetition; collective we; absolute nothing; spiritual lexis cursed	Shared spoiled identity; closes alternatives; complete internalisation.
3. <i>Fate of a Childless Woman</i> : "I want to be mother of his children... For six years... it is my fault."	Possessive his children; temporal repetition six years; rhetorical how much longer; self-blame	Wifely duty to lineage; prolonged suffering; helplessness; patriarchal self-blame.
4. <i>A True Life Story... Living Hell</i> : "Enough! ... Your son is the cause ... Get yourselves out of my house."	Exclamative Enough!; accusation Your son; possessive my house; imperatives Get out	Silence to resistance; reverses blame and power; economic independence.
5. <i>My Mother-in-Law Called Me Barren</i> : "Medical report certifying I am fit ... it is your son ... sick and tired."	Evidential medical report; assertive I am fit; conditional If...; redirective accusation	Biomedical challenge to barren label; exposes bias; breakdown of silence.

Table 2

Cross-Cutting Linguistic Patterns Across the Five Films

Pattern	Examples	Significance
Repetition	we are cursed x2 (M2); we don't have (M1); six years (M3)	Intensifies affect; normalises loss as identity.
Self-labelling	I was barren (M1); it is my fault (M3)	Internalised stigma; acceptance of blame.
Pronoun / possessive shift	we/I → you/your son; his children → my house/money	Core marker: concealment to disclosure; power reversal.
Modality	supposed to have children (M1)	Deontic mandate; motherhood as obligation.
Rhetorical questions	What's there to celebrate? (M1); How much longer? (M3)	Despair; dismissal of non-maternal identity.
Confrontational + imperatives	Enough!; Get out (M4–M5)	Counter-discourse; authoritative subject position.
Medical / evidential	medical report, fit, low sperm count (M4–M5)	Biomedical legitimation; exposes male factor.

Table 3

Comparative Framework Analysis

Excerpt	CDA	Stigma	Feminism
M1: self-blame despite affection	Question + barren + supposed to constructs marriage nullified	Internalised stigma; shields husband	Worth = reproduction; self-policing
M2: curse as collective identity	Cursed + repetition naturalises fate	Collective spoiled identity	Motherhood as success marker
M3: waiting as failure	His children + six years = prolonged incompleteness	Anticipatory self-stigma	Sole female responsibility
M4: rupture	Your son + my house + Get out reverses power	Disclosure; rejects witch/barren	Economic autonomy; confronts enforcer
M5: evidence	Medical report reframes to biomedical	Rejection via credential	Politicises private pain

Discussion

The analysis confirms a systematic discursive trajectory across the five films, moving from self-blame and spiritualised resignation to evidential confrontation and expulsion. This trajectory is not merely thematic but is encoded at the level of lexis, pronouns, modality, and transitivity, validating the choice of Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional model. At the textual level, early wives favour first-person self-incrimination, deontic obligation, and metaphysical vocabulary; late wives favour second-person accusation, imperatives, possessives of ownership, and biomedical vocabulary. At the level of discursive practice, this marks a shift from private endurance of stigma to public disclosure of concealed male-factor infertility. At the level of social practice, it marks a shift from reproduction-defined womanhood to an emergent counter-ideology in which economic autonomy and medical literacy authorise female speech. Each film occupies a distinct position on this continuum.

Movie 1, *Tears of My Childless Wife*, illustrates self-blame despite conjugal affection, and is therefore theoretically pivotal: oppression here requires no immediate male aggressor. The

husband eulogises the wife, yet she interrupts with “What’s there to celebrate? We don’t have a child ... if I had known I was barren, I wouldn’t have allowed you to marry me.” The rhetorical question nullifies praise; the repetition of absence recentres childlessness as the sole truth of marriage; the conditional constructs the wife as having defrauded a “good man.” Deontic modality in “we are supposed to have children” is critical: motherhood appears not as desire but as dues. In Goffman’s (1963) terms, this is anticipatory self-stigmatisation — she inhabits a spoiled identity before anyone names it, shielding the husband without medical evidence. Consistent with Esan et al. (2022) and Maduako (2021), who describe motherhood as mandatory institution, the scene shows how pro-natalist ideology is most powerful when internalised. The husband’s counter-discourse of love fails, demonstrating Fairclough’s point that individual goodwill cannot easily dislodge naturalised social practice.

Movie 2, *When the Faith of a Childless Wife Is Tested*, collectivises that stigma. Expelled after their husbands father children with other women, the two sisters declare, “We are cursed, we are cursed. There’s nothing anyone can tell me.” Exact repetition, the inclusive pronoun we, and absolute negation (nothing ...) close the discursive space to medical or relational explanations. Infertility is recontextualised from condition to destiny and from private pain to shared fate. This aligns with Labinjo (2025) and Oloruntobi (2024) on supernatural framing — curse, punishment, spiritual attack — and with Haynes (2016) on marriage as validation. The husbands’ extramarital fertility operates semiotically as proof of female defect, legitimising expulsion and polygynous replacement. Sociologically, the sisters’ certainty illustrates what Goffman called a collectively sustained spoiled identity: they confirm each other’s defectiveness rather than questioning the double standard by which male fertility elsewhere enhances status while female childlessness diminishes moral worth. Radical feminism clarifies the mechanism: power persists not by coercion but by women naming themselves cursed.

Movie 3, *Fate of a Childless Woman*, temporalises suffering and makes duration itself evidence of failure. “I want to be mother of his children ... It’s been six years ... How much longer am I to wait? ... it is my fault” combines possessive lineage logic (his children), durational repetition (six years, good six years, still childless), and interrogative helplessness. The adverb still presupposes deviation from a norm; the question to God personalises structural expectation as spiritual trial. She decodes her husband’s silence as condemnation — “Your actions speak louder than your words” — showing how stigma distorts perception even absent explicit insult, a classic Goffmanian vigilance. By excusing him (“I won’t blame him for getting upset”) and indicting herself, she reproduces the feminisation of reproductive failure documented by Omoniyi (2010), Ezeigbo (2012), and Nwachukwu (2015). Where Movie 1 shows momentary guilt and Movie 2 shows fated curse, Movie 3 shows chronic endurance: waiting as identity.

Movies 4 and 5 constitute the rupture on which the study’s claim to feminist agency rests, and they do so through two interlocking resources largely absent earlier: biomedical evidence and material independence. In *A True Life Story of How My Mother-in-Law Made My Marriage a Living Hell*, prolonged tolerance — insult, maltreatment, and the introduction of a rival wife into the matrimonial home — ends with “Enough! If you don’t want to talk to your mother, I’ll do it myself ... Your son is the cause ... my house ... Get yourselves out.” The exclamative performs boundary-setting; second-person attribution reverses transitivity; possessives (my house, my car, my money) substitute ownership for lineage; imperatives appropriate patriarchal command. Crucially, the wife names the

imposed lexicon in order to refuse it — witch, barren woman, man — exposing what Goffman would call the labelling work of stigma. Disclosure of low sperm count, long concealed “for love’s sake,” transforms private covering into public truth-telling. The mother-in-law is confronted not as a domestic irritant but, in radical feminist terms, as a generational enforcer who protects male privilege by policing younger women, consistent with Adegbenro et al.’s (2025) findings on intra-female bullying. Here accountability is dual and must be distinguished: the mother-in-law is held responsible for persecution, the son for infertility.

My Mother-in-Law Called Me Barren radicalises the same move by introducing documentary authority. “Enough of this mama ... This is a medical report certifying I am fit to bear children ... If there is anyone to question, it is your son ... I am sick and tired” replaces metaphysical lexis (cursed, witch, barren) with institutional lexis (report, certifying, fit). The conditional (If ... it is your son) is a formal redirective that preserves logic while reversing target. The narrative’s additional allegation within the fiction — that the husband sacrifices unborn children in a secret cult for money — should be read as plot-specific moral counter-accusation rather than a general aetiology of infertility; analytically, its function is to shift scrutiny from female deficiency to male culpability and greed. Affect (“sick and tired,” pointing to the neck: “up to here”) marks the threshold Goffman identified where covering costs exceed disclosure costs. Together, Movies 4 and 5 show pronoun reversal (I to you/your), modality reversal (supposed to / how long to Enough! / get out), and lexis reversal (curse to report). Silence, previously sustained by love, fear of expulsion, desire to shield husbands, and lack of proof, breaks when humiliation becomes public and when wives possess counter-capital: a certificate and a house. Economic independence does not merely accompany voice; it authorises it.

Findings

Three interrelated findings emerge, corresponding to text, stigma management, and patriarchal structure.

First, internalised stigma is linguistically accomplished as self-blame. Early utterances — “I was barren” (Movie 1), “we are cursed” (Movie 2), “it is my fault” (Movie 3) — reproduce dominant ideology that equates womanhood with motherhood. Repetition naturalises loss as essence; spiritual lexis removes contingency; obligation modality presents childbearing as dues. Wives exonerate husbands without evidence and interpret silence as condemnation, confirming that infertility stigma in Nollywood operates first inside the self. This extends Omoniyi (2010) and Okome (2013) by showing precisely which grammatical resources — self-labelling nominals, first-person agency for failure, timeless presents — perform deficiency.

Second, silence is a power-conditioned discursive strategy rather than passivity or absence of knowledge. Wives knowingly withhold exculpatory information — notably suspected or known male-factor infertility — to preserve harmony, protect husbands’ face, and forestall replacement by a second wife, in line with cultural scripts demanding that wives “keep the man’s secret.” From a CDA perspective, such silence is productive: it allows accusatory discourse by mothers-in-law and husbands to circulate unchallenged and privileges male voice by default. It reflects unequal relations, not consent, and explains why affectionate husbands (Movie 1) or silent husbands (Movie 3) do not prevent self-condemnation. Silence endures while its social rewards (marital retention, avoidance of shame) outweigh its psychic costs.

Third, rupture into counter-discourse reorders blame, knowledge, and space. Markers “Enough!,” “Your son is the cause,” “medical report ... fit,” and “get out of my house” reject imposed categories, introduce verifiable evidence, and claim domestic territory. Transitivity is inverted: wives become Sayers and Judges; husbands and mothers-in-law become Accused. Stigma management moves from covering to disclosure and rejection; patriarchal structure is contested both ideologically through truth-telling and materially through ownership (“my house ... acquired with my hard-earned money”). The shift does not romanticise resistance as cost-free — it follows years of abuse and is triggered by intolerable thresholds such as public shaming before a rival — but it demonstrates that discourse can dismantle the very stigma it once reproduced. Language is thus both the site where spoiled identity is learned and the instrument by which it is refused, moving wives from victimhood to agency.

Conclusion

This study establishes that childlessness in the selected Nollywood films is constructed less as a biological condition than as a socially negotiated struggle over identity, power, and voice, conducted primarily through the wives’ own utterances. Initial guilt, shame, spiritualised resignation, and prolonged silence reflect deep internalisation of pro-natalist patriarchy that assigns reproductive failure to women and conditions them to endure humiliation and shield husbands even where male-factor infertility is implicated. Silence is revealed as structural — sustained by love, loyalty, fear of expulsion, and evidentiary disadvantage — rather than as personal deficiency.

When stigma becomes unbearable, silence breaks into assertive, evidential, and imperative speech that destabilises entrenched blame. Through Fairclough’s lens, wives produce counter-discourses that denaturalise the equation of marriage with reproduction; through Goffman’s lens, they move from covering and self-stigma to disclosure and stigma rejection; through radical feminism, they contest a structure that reduces female worth to childbearing and deputises older women to police younger ones. The linguistic journey from “I was barren / we are cursed / it is my fault” to “Your son is the cause / medical report / get out” encapsulates both the enduring force of cultural ideology and the capacity of marginalised speakers to disrupt it, redefining womanhood beyond reproduction.

Practically, the findings invite Nollywood stakeholders, health communicators, and family counsellors to broaden representation: to script male-factor infertility openly, to replace curse and witchcraft frames with medically informed explanations, to portray supportive mothers-in-law, counsellors, and peer networks rather than only persecutors, and to imagine fulfilling female identities beyond motherhood while still honouring the grief of involuntary childlessness. Methodologically, the study is limited to five English-language films and to focal wives’ turns, without audience ethnography; transcription from commercial releases constrains prosodic detail. Future research should test transferability in Yoruba-, Igbo-, and Hausa-language productions, examine male and mother-in-law speech symmetrically, and investigate how viewers — especially childless women and their families — take up or resist these on-screen trajectories in everyday talk and care-seeking.

Recommendations

Nollywood producers and scriptwriters should challenge narratives equating womanhood with motherhood by creating diverse female identities not defined solely by reproduction and by portraying support systems such as counselling and empathetic family members. Gender-inclusive health narratives should acknowledge male infertility, replace curse and

witchcraft frames with medically informed explanations, and reposition mothers-in-law from enforcers of stigma to agents of support.

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