

LANGUAGE AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BIODUN STEPHEN'S
THE WILDFLOWER

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Abstract

The issue of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) has become topical following the mortality rate among women and trauma. Extant studies have mostly been sociological and psychological, with little attention paid to the role of language and power dynamics in GBV-centred discourses. However, there is a clear gap in the linguistic and pragmatic representation of social actors in GBV Nollywood films, particularly Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower*. This study, therefore, focuses on how the politeness strategy is applied in the representation of social actors in Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower*. It is anchored on Theo van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation and Geoffrey Leech's Grand Strategy Politeness theories and adopts the qualitative descriptive research design. Findings reveal that the actors are classified into three categories: the violator, the violated and organisations. The violators are represented as authoritative/ dominant and cunning through the tact and modesty maxims, but end up flouting the tact maxim. The violated are represented as silenced, vulnerable and bold survivors through the sympathy and approbation maxims, while at some points they flouted the tact, generosity, sympathy and approbation maxims. The organisations represented are family as a collective ideological frame of culture, legal and protective agencies as powerful and active and human rights/ non-governmental organisations as support systems. While these organisations were represented mostly through flouting communication maxims, they observed the agreement and sympathy maxims.

Keywords: Nollywood, Gender-Based Violence, *The Wild Flower*, Grand Strategy Politeness, Social Actors, Ideology.

Introduction

One issue that has shaped media discourse is violence, and in recent times, there have been more reports and cases of violence against women, with more attention on males as violators rather than as victims. Gender-based violence (GBV) has been a prevalent social problem globally and within Nigeria; and beyond its physical manifestation, it is a discursive, cultural, institutional, and

ideological practice that is sustained, normalised, resisted, or contested through various forms of discourses ranging from social media posts to news media outlets and films (Ajayiper, 2021). According to Idowu et al. (2023), GBV encompasses harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is used interchangeably with Violence Against Women (VAW), which encompasses all violent acts, including rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and harassment, spousal abuse and sex trafficking (UNFPA). Thus, GBV can take different forms, ranging from physical, sexual, or psychological intimate partner violence (IPV). It also includes child marriage, sex trafficking, honour-killing, sex-selective abortion, female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual harassment, abuse and digital violence such as cyberbullying (UN WOMEN).

The prevalence of GBV in Nigeria, as asserted by Imomotebegha & Martin (2024), indicates that it is alarmingly high despite the challenges in data collection. It is estimated that 28% of women in Nigeria have experienced physical violence, while 14% have reported to experiencing sexual violence at some point in their lives. The findings reveal that physical violence, including beatings and assaults, is the most common form of GBV, leading to various injuries such as burns, bruises, fractures, severe head trauma, and even fatalities. Additionally, sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault, is widespread, resulting in psychological and emotional trauma, unwanted pregnancies, fistula, reproductive health issues, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and sexually transmitted infections.

In Nigeria, GBV is embedded within sediments of historical and cultural patriarchal ideologies, religious moral orders, and socio-legal structures that shape the interpretive frameworks through which violence is understood, accepted, or resisted. Factors such as cultural acceptance, substance abuse, lack of punishments for GBV offenders, indecent female dressing styles, social media influences, effects of COVID-19 lockdown, gender, marital status, religion and attitude have been the significant predictors of past GBV (Ajayi, 2021; Tamale, 2020; Idowu et al., 2023).

Media texts are powerful sites where ideological frames and opinions are presented and negotiated (Odebunmi and Oloyede, 2016; Osisanwo, 2016; van Dijk, 2018). These media platforms have played major roles in how GBV is seen in any society based on how social actors choose to talk about it on any medium of communication. The mass media have, over time, successfully granted individuals and organisations a common ground to express their perception of and role towards the encouragement or discouragement of GBV. They have also helped victims to speak about their experiences publicly, which generally is an attempt to cry for help and justice. While social media platforms have served this purpose more, films have also been employed in recent times to not just share the experiences of victims but also engage as instruments for instructing and guiding victims and the public on how to spot violators and escape being victims early enough. They have also served as tools for educating the public on what to do in situations of GBV.

As multimodal texts, films have been an effective tool in shaping awareness of violence, victimhood, accountability and institutional responsibility. Nollywood films have served as powerful discursive sites where such sociocultural ideologies are constructed, reinforced, or challenged (Ogunleye, 2008; Eze & Oloruntoba, 2022; Musa, 2020). This study, therefore, is an examination of how politeness strategies are employed in the representation of social actors in Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower*. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. to identify how the violators, the violated and institutional actors are represented through social actor configurations; and
- ii. to examine how politeness strategies facilitate the representation of the social actors.

Synopsis of the Film

Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower* centres on three interconnected narratives of GBV in the workplace and domestic space. Rolake Dabiri (Rolly) is a young architect who lands her dream job as a personal assistant to the charismatic CEO, Mr. Gowon Williams. Her admiration for him turns to horror when he rapes her during a business trip. Traumatized, Rolake films a video testimony and shares it publicly, sparking a viral movement that encourages other survivors to come forward. Mama Adaolisa, on the other hand, endures severe physical abuse from her husband, King Jimi. The abuse escalates tragically, leading to her death at her husband's hands, who then flees, leaving their two daughters orphaned. Adaolisa, Mama Adaolisa's teenage daughter, faces constant sexual harassment from a neighbour, Johntana, who lures her in and attempts to rape her. She fights back and escapes. These three stories converge, as Rolake, dealing with her own trauma, becomes a protector and advocate for the orphaned sisters while battling her own perpetrator in court.

Literature Review

In the context of GBV, lexical framing influences moral evaluation, and this establishes the notion that discourse is not neutral but ideologically loaded. GBV has been theorised as structurally embedded within patriarchal systems, and according to Aihie (2009) it is normalised in marital authority discourse. Connell (2012) further asserts that acts of violence are mostly products of institutionalised gender hierarchy rather than isolated incidents. Earlier studies on GBV in Nigeria have focused on the causes and triggers (Idowu et al, 2024, Krisagbedo & Agbedo, 2024) and as a phenomenon that negates the fundamental human rights and equality of the human race, irrespective of gender, race, colour and communication accommodation, GBV underscores the need to understand the role of language in perpetuating gender-based violence. This calls for the development of communication strategies that can facilitate gender equality and promote non-violent communication.

The Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, has been identified as a key ideological apparatus in the Nigerian society (Okome, 2007; Haynes, 2016). Adesokan (2011) and Okome (2017) opine that Nollywood films often reflect social anxieties while simultaneously reflecting moral instructions. Ogunleye (2008) asserts that early Nollywood films often depicted women within relational domestic roles, indicating that male characters are decision-makers. This frequently projected the female characters as emotional reactors who are at the mercy of the male characters (Ekwuazi, 2011). In cases of domestic violence, Adesokan (2011) posits that it is often contextualised through jealousy, financial stress, or spiritual interference. Audience reception studies show ambivalence. While viewers increasingly condemn physical abuse, many prioritise reconciliation over legal intervention.

Recent empirical CDA-informed studies (Musa, 2020, Eze & Oloruntoba, 2022) demonstrate that narratives on violence in Nollywood oscillate between victim-blaming discourse and feminist resistance narratives. Nwobia & Umezurike (2019) show that despite the benefits and positive role of religion in society, some men hide under the cloak of religion to perpetrate violence and abuse against women. Hence, they legitimise and justify such acts by influencing the women to concede in their own subjugation and ill-treatment and to uphold their false religious ideologies. Also, Osisanwo & Ojo (2022) submit that in newspaper editorials, female rape victims are represented as objects of sexual fulfilment, objects of sympathy, patriarchal prey, victims of dual jeopardy, and anonymous and pseudonymised victims, which mirrors patriarchal behaviours such as androcentrism, incest, mental abuse, and sexual assault. Hence, females are projected as inferior, helpless and emotional based on the gender prejudices at play in their depiction. Furthermore, Akindele, Akano & Babalola (2024) affirm the view of Osisanwo & Ojo (2022) by revealing that newspaper reports rely heavily on action-focused language, ideologically representing violators as cruel and evil, victims as helpless and disadvantaged, and law enforcement agents as proactive and effective in meting out punitive consequences on violators.

Furthermore, Ejiaso (2024) shows that even as victims, women are often blamed and defamed in discourses of ritual killings on social media in Nigeria. By implication, the violators are excused and the patriarchal subjugation of women is sustained. This is in agreement with earlier studies and retains the fact that females are more often than not victims of GBV. It also reveals that survivorship is key, as Rashid & Al-Zubaie (2024) emphasise that survivors are admonished to take steps towards ensuring that the violators are punished. The concentration on group effort implies that GBV is a societal problem that is influenced by cultural practices and attitudes in addition to being a personal problem for each victim. 75% of the speeches are uttered to enhance the discriminated individuals to take action, showing a high comprehension of the necessity of societal and cultural adjustment.

Obiora & Uche (2024) show how violence against females is represented in *Oloture* and *The Wildflower* films. The study shows the high level of complicity, conspiracy and corruption replete in society that are often targeted against women and girls, thereby perpetuating violence against them. Specifically, *Oloture* depicts systemic exploitation and the concomitant physical and psychological violence inherent in human trafficking, while *The Wildflower* focuses more on domestic abuse and the emotional toll it takes on female victims. Both films highlight the strength and resilience of women in the face of violence, deprivation and exploitation thus advocating awareness, behavioural and systemic change. Furthermore, they highlight the unique experiences that females face for being females and how they are able to navigate their way through. This study therefore, seeks to examine how politeness strategies are employed in the representation of social actors in Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower*.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation Theory and Geoffrey Leech's (2005) Grand Strategy Politeness Theory as its framework. The Social Actors Representation Theory proposes that discourse constructs social actors through various strategies such as activation, passivation, nomination, categorisation, and authorisation. These categories determine how agency and legitimacy are distributed. This approach to critical discourse analysis focuses on how discourse participants are represented in any kind of discourse or communicative event and the effect that the actions of the discourse participants have in establishing social structures that affect discourse and meaning construction.

Geoffrey Leech's (2005) reformulation of politeness as the Grand Strategy of Politeness (GSP) theory is aimed at maximising harmony between politeness in different cultures based on context and minimising impoliteness. Building on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the theory highlights face management in interaction. He posits that a general principle that underlines polite communicative behaviour is placing high value on what pertains to the hearer and low value on what pertains to the speaker. GSP can be applied and adopted to explain politeness in any form of interaction, but different degrees of politeness may occur in different interactions. These influences are defined by different maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. The tact maxim is being considerate of the feelings of others and minimising impositions. The generosity maxim is maximising the benefit of others and minimising one's own benefit. The approbation maxim is a strategy that minimises dispraise and maximises praise for others. The modesty maxim focuses on minimising self-praise and maximising self-dispraise. The agreement maxim focuses on maximising agreement or common ground and minimising disagreement. The sympathy maximises empathy and understanding between self and others.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design justified by its suitability for discourse-based textual analysis. It examines how social actors are represented in Biodun Stephen's *The Wildflower* by integrating van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation theory, which accounts for representational strategies through which agency, responsibility, and legitimacy are allocated; and Leech's (2005) GSP, which reveals how interactional choices manage face, authority, and coercion. While van Leeuwen enables an analysis of structural positioning (who acts, who is acted upon, who is erased), Leech's framework allows for examination of interpersonal dynamics (how politeness mitigates, conceals, or legitimises violence) through the different maxims. *The Wildflower* is purposefully selected based on its focus on GBV contents. Data extracted were thematically read, interpreted and presented to arrive at the findings.

Analysis and Discussion

The movie is a social commentary designed to raise awareness about its central themes: The pervasiveness of GBV, depicting violence across different settings—domestic, workplace, and community— and showing it as a widespread societal issue, breaking the culture of silence and providing practical pathways to justice and healing. In presenting these themes, three principal actors were represented: violators (violators), the violated (victim), and organisations (family, law enforcement agencies and community).

Representation of the Violators

The violators are represented as authoritative and dominant. They are often construed as active agents in the film. They are predominantly carrying out action-based processes where they are seen to carry out actions that place them in positions of dominance over their victims. Also, they are often nominated by their personal names, Prince Jimi, Mr. Gowon, Johntana and simultaneously functionalised as husband, employer and neighbour respectively. This embeds violence within marital legitimacy, loyalty and familiarity, which implies authority. The violators are also mostly in positions where they have some level of authority over their victims. This is seen when Prince Jimi asks his daughters to stop calling him daddy "... My name is Jimi, call me Prince Jimi... ". He employs the modesty maxim here because he did not like the responsibility that comes with it (7mins.: 58secs.-8mins.: 10secs.). The violators are framed and justified in cultural norms as patriarchal entitlement through culturally embedded statements that constitute authorisation and this in turn makes violence licensed. Prince Jimi eventually goes on to ask for his food, but from Mama Adaolisa's response, he did not provide money for food. His violent response showed that whether he did or did not provide for his family, he had every right to demand food as the head of the home. Thus, he employs authorisation by employing the modesty maxim to deny his responsibility as a husband and father and to demand for food by flouting the tact maxim to achieve his goal when he said, "Woman, I say go and get me my food eh... I need food now" (08mins.: 28secs.-09mins.:50secs.).

Furthermore, the violators are represented as cunning. Johntana's attempt to violate Adaolisa was evident from the beginning of the film when he calls her "stingyko" and tells her:

"... See, I'm harmless o, and you know I like you. Come inside first, you're a big girl, come and watch BBNaija.... See, Ada, if you no enter here, I no go pay you.... Is that why you're shouting and rapping at the same time?... I no need your thank you. Very stingy human being. You no fit just dey, do bonanza make boys enjoy." (15mins.: 58secs.- 17mins.: 22secs.)

Johntana does not directly ask Adaolisa for sex but tactically asks her to come inside his apartment to watch the popular BBNaija show, which is rated 18PG. He attempted this after employing the approbation maxim. Seeing that neither the approbation nor the tact maxim worked, he decided to go against her face want by flouting the tact and sympathy maxims. At this point, he tries to exercise authority over her as an older person but Adaolisa decides to raise her voice so his close-by neighbours can hear. His response to her appreciation for the payment shows that he does not like the fact that he was unable to achieve his goal of having sex with 17-year-old Adaolisa. In many scenes before the actual act of violating the females, the violators usually use their words to send signals that are contextually uncomfortable, as seen in the scene where Mr Gowon asks Rolake about her hair and makes comments about how females barely carry "... natural hair these days. All you have is bone straight hairs, lash extensions, fake bum bums" (14mins.: 39secs- 14mins.: 53 secs.). He employs the approbation maxim and this makes Rolake uncomfortable and she is unable to speak about it but in the next scene, he comments on her being uptight around him because it is her first time working closely with a male boss. Here, he applies the approbation maxim in order not to sound too bold in expressing his desires to the fore but to create a context that justifies his action as her boss. However, while activated narratively, agency is mitigated by backgrounding agency where violence is constructed as an emotional overflow rather than a deliberate harm carried out on the victims.

Representation of the Violated

The abused females are represented as silenced, vulnerable, and bold survivors. They are frequently passivized because they are the goal of material processes and receivers of verbal aggression. The use of passive constructions backgrounds the actor and foreground suffering. In the film, the victims are an employee, a wife and a neighbour's child. Rolake is represented first as an excited employee who ends up as a victim of her boss' desire. At first, she could not speak up to her boss's uncomfortable comments about females and their bodies and was eventually raped and forced to stay quiet about it. He does not let her speak; neither does he give her the chance to express herself after he has had his way. This more often than not creates fear and results in unwanted silence. The abused is thus constructed through tears, silence, fear and endurance. Mama Adaolisa ends up being silenced forever because she died in the process of one of the fights

between her and her husband, Prince Jimi. In expressing his displeasure at how she speaks to him when she calls him "... very useless and shameless..." (27mins.: 40secs- 30mins.: 04secs.), he kills her and runs away. As a victim scared of being called a "black sheep", she is unable to speak of her experiences explicitly to her children or neighbours and often employs the sympathy maxims to escape the truth behind her experiences. However, before her death, she flouts the tact, generosity and sympathy maxims to express how she felt to her husband. However, she is silenced and reduced to a background figure who does not deserve to be heard either by her husband or the community at large. This emphasises vulnerability rather than resistance. She did not speak to anybody about it and kept employing the approbation maxim whenever she talked about her husband in order to make him look good before others.

However, when Rolake and other survivors of Mr Gowon's abusive ways start speaking up for justice to be served, the discourse shifts. Adaolisa turned an easier target for Johntana after her mother's death and father's disappearance. At the news of her incident, Rolake was triggered to fight for her to get justice but gains courage after learning that she is not the first and her silence means injustice for every victim, especially after losing her job. She specifically states in her social media live recording that,

"... and I have been feeling pretty helpless...because society has raised women to mute their voices, but I refuse to be muted. I speak for every woman that this man has ever raped or molested or looked at in the wrong way.... I was raped by Mr. Gowon Williams of Ocean Heights Constructions..." (1hr.: 17mins.: 5secs.- 1hr.:20mins.:41secs.)

In a bid to speak up for violated females, she calls out Mr. Gowon and verbally processes every act of violation that he did to her by flouting communication maxims in order to pass her intended information clearly to the public. She started by being assertive and going against the patriarchal system that has silenced women like Mama Adaolisa without any form of justice, and goes on to call out her violator, Mr. Gowon, despite the traumatic effect of being stigmatised. From this point, Activation increases, and her verbal processes become assertive. Rolake becomes an actor of material processes as she takes steps to report, confront and face and Adaolisa's violators. This discursive shift marks empowerment and represents her as bold. At this point, her submission is strategic, and she employs the sympathy maxim when victims like her listen and flouts the approbation maxim when she talks about Mr Gowon. This represents GBV as a punishable public offence rather than a private matter, as earlier victims decide to speak up following her courage. This brings the media, human rights platforms and law enforcement agencies into the narrative.

Representation of Organisations

In the film, the organisations represented are family, legal and protective organisations and human rights/ non-governmental agencies. Family is construed contextually in the film as a collective

ideological frame of culture. Family actors are represented through collectivisation with the use of “Dem”, the Pidgin equivalent of “They”. In a scene, Mama Adaolisa replies Rolake with:

“... I no want to be black sheep eh. You want make I con turn to black sheep. Dem go con dey say: ‘see am, see am, Mama Adaolisa na im be the first Yoruba woman wey her husband beat wen she pack comot for her house.’ Ah ah. Ah no o! God will not let me to be black sheep’. (11 mins.: 51 secs. – 12mins.: 54 secs.)

The speaker, Mama Adaolisa, indirectly portrays the mental picture of what her family, a group of people bound by a similar ideology think about domestic violence. She infers that violence is not a valid reason to leave her husband’s house because other women in her family experience it and have continued to stay with their husbands despite the effects of it. The moral evaluation she shares here is that victims be patient with the hope that an end will come to the incessant violation of their rights. The females are activated in verbal processes such as advising, warn, and dismiss as Mama Adaolisa does in this scene towards Rolake. Their role and representation often discourage reporting and normalises endurance. They rely heavily on the agreement maxim, sympathy framed as endurance: “It’s a normal thing o. Husband and wife are fighting. You no know say, hmm, marriage no easy? And everybody na im dey face am.” Family is indirectly represented as supportive, facilitated through moral normalisation by framing GBV as a family issue meant to be handled within the confines of marriage and family.

Another organisation represented is the legal and protective organisation. This organisation is presented as powerful and active. However, their first appearance shows that they could be employed for injustice. The first mention of the police force in the film is after the death of Mama Adaolisa. Here, the law is impersonalised through the tact and agreement maxims. Mommy Osapolo reveals this when she says: “We don call the police tire. Dem say eh, night don reach. Say even fuel for their patrol, dem no get fuel, say until tomorrow” (32mins. 52secs.- 33mins.: 04secs.). This strategy abstracts accountability and presents justice as a procedural autonomous process rather than a relational one. It distances human accountability and this is realised by flouting the generosity and agreement maxims. The legal and protective organisation was also employed by Johntana’s mother to silence the victim (Adaolisa) and support the perpetrator (Johntana). However, the narrative changes when Adaolisa is released from police detention after a medical report was presented to the police as evidence of her being violated (1hr. 12mins. 00secs. – 1hr.12mins.54secs.). At this point, Rolake and Dr. Naomi had to flout the tact maxim and employ the sympathy maxim to achieve her goal of releasing Adaolisa from police detention. This is also the case of Rolake who with the dearth of substantial evidence, was at the verge of being judged guilty of character defamation. Eventually, Johntana and Mr. Gowon face the consequences of their action after substantial evidence was presented. The legal and protective organisations are represented as active agents who depend mostly on the information presented to them by the public.

Through media platforms, human rights and non-governmental organisations are also represented as support systems, and they play a major role in seeing that Mr Gowon pays for his evil acts. They are represented passively but play a major role in seeing that Rolake have a good representation in court. One of such is the role played by Yinka, a pastor's wife who shows up towards the end with proof that Mr Gowon has been violating his personal assistants for years without any form of repentance. She is a survivor who was not bold enough to speak up like Rolake and her husband, Dotun, who initially did not want his wife to "be a cover girl for rape victims", (1hr.: 28mins.: 38secs.) supported this. This act, by extension, presents the church as a non-governmental organisation and human rights platform that speaks up when necessary. Yinka's singular evidence was enough to serve Mr Gowon the justice he deserved, and this is achieved by flouting communication maxims.

Findings

Violators are represented as authoritative/ dominant and cunning. The violated are represented as silenced, vulnerable and bold survivors. The organisations represented are family as a collective ideological frame of culture, legal and protective agencies as powerful and active and human rights/ non-governmental organisations as support systems. This finding directly addresses Objective 1 by showing how the violators, the violated and institutional actors are represented through social actor configurations. In relation to Objective 2, politeness strategies such as tact, modesty, sympathy, approbation and agreement maxims were observed by the social actors, while on different occasions, the tact, generosity, sympathy, and approbation maxims were flouted by the social actors. The representation of the violators as authoritative/ dominant and cunning is achieved through the tact and modesty maxims, but they end up flouting the tact maxims. The violated/ abused are represented as silenced, vulnerable and bold survivors through the sympathy and approbation maxims, while at some points they flouted the tact, generosity, sympathy and approbation maxims. Also, the organisations represented are family, legal and protective agencies and human rights/ non-governmental organisations. While these organisations were represented mostly through flouting communication maxims, they observed the agreement and sympathy maxims.

Conclusion

The film foregrounds survivor resilience and reflects persistent ideologies that form how violators, their victims, survivors and concerned organisations are represented. The politeness strategies function as discursive armour. Through van Leeuwen's and Leech's frameworks, this article has shown that *The Wildflower* shows how actors are strategically included, excluded, activated, and backgrounded. Through Leech's politeness theory, how face-management and relational harmony discourse operate as subtle mechanisms of control are revealed.

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