



Journal homepage: <https://ssarpublishers.com/sariahss>  
Abbreviated Key Title: SSAR J Arts Humanit Soc Sci  
ISSN: 3049-0340 (Online)  
Volume 1, Issue 2, (Sept-Oct) 2024, Page 56-63 (Total PP.08)  
Frequency: Bimonthly



## Article History

Received: 18/10/2024 - Accepted: 29/10/2024 - Published: 30/10/2024

## Language, Power Dynamics, and Societal Hierarchies in Post-Osofisan Nigerian Drama

By

Corresponding author: **Olusegun Oladele Jegede** E-mail: [jegede.olusegun@lcu.edu.ng](mailto:jegede.olusegun@lcu.edu.ng)  
Department of Languages and Literature Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria.

**Abstract:** This paper argues that in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language serves as both a tool for reinforcing power dynamics and a medium for subverting societal hierarchies. Through an examination of key works by playwrights such as Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, the paper explores how language functions to perpetuate or challenge class, gender, and ethnic inequalities. It asserts that language in these plays is not merely a means of communication but a strategic instrument through which characters explore, contest, and redefine societal structures. The paper reveals how formal English is used by elites to assert dominance, while marginalized characters employ vernaculars and indigenous expressions to resist and reclaim their identity. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a framework, the study investigates how linguistic choices reflect and influence power relations, both within the plays and in the broader socio-political context of postcolonial Nigeria. Through case studies from plays such as *The Chattering and the Song*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, and *Once Upon Four Robbers*, the paper demonstrates how language becomes a powerful tool for challenging entrenched power structures. Ultimately, it emphasizes the transformative potential of language in both drama and society, emphasizing its role in shaping narratives of resistance and empowerment.

**Keywords:** language, power dynamics, post-Osofisan drama, resistance, Critical Discourse

### INTRODUCTION

Post-Osofisan Nigerian drama represents a crucial phase in Nigerian literary history, marking a transition from the traditional, often didactic narratives of earlier playwrights like Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi to a more complex and dynamic exploration of sociopolitical realities. Femi Osofisan, renowned for his politically charged and socially conscious works, redefined Nigerian drama by blending Marxist ideology with African aesthetics. His innovative approach influenced a new generation of playwrights who not only continued to interrogate Nigeria's socio-political context but also delved deeper into the significant power dynamics underpinning societal

hierarchies. In the post-Osofisan era, drama became a mirror reflecting the diverse struggles of a nation grappling with corruption, inequality, and identity crises. This literary evolution emphasises how drama serves as a platform for dissecting societal structures, with language functioning as a key medium through which these themes are articulated and contested.

Language, as a vehicle of communication, is inherently tied to power, authority, and resistance, particularly in a postcolonial context like Nigeria. It is not merely a neutral medium of expression but a dynamic force that constructs and

deconstructs social realities (Saxena, 2024). In post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language shapes societal narratives by revealing the underlying ideologies and power imbalances within the social sphere. For instance, the use of English, Pidgin, and indigenous Nigerian languages within these plays reveals the socio-political tensions and cultural intersections that characterize Nigerian society. English, often seen as the language of the elite and colonial legacy, symbolizes authority and exclusion, while Pidgin and indigenous languages serve as tools of resistance and solidarity among marginalized groups. Therefore, the synergy of different linguistic registers in Nigerian drama emphasises the dual role of language: it is both a mechanism for reinforcing existing hierarchies and a potent instrument for challenging them.

To analyze the significant relationship between language, power dynamics, and societal hierarchies in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust and relevant framework. Rooted in the works of scholars like Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, CDA examines the ways in which discourse constructs, perpetuates, and challenges power relations in society (Fairclough, 1995). Focusing on the socio-political context of language use, CDA enables an in-depth exploration of how playwrights in the post-Osofisan era use linguistic choices to represent and critique societal structures. This analytical approach is particularly pertinent to Nigerian drama, where the tension between colonial and indigenous influences is often played out through language. Furthermore, CDA's emphasis on the interconnections between discourse, power, and ideology makes it an ideal tool for unpacking the layers of meaning embedded in the dialogues and narratives of post-Osofisan plays.

This paper argues that language in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama serves as both a tool for reinforcing power dynamics and a medium for subverting societal hierarchies. On one hand, the deliberate use of formal English by authoritative characters reflects and perpetuates the socio-political dominance of the elite. On the other hand, the strategic incorporation of vernacular speech and Pidgin English by marginalized

characters represents an act of resistance against these hierarchies. Adopting CDA as an analytical framework, this study seeks to illuminate how playwrights explore and challenge linguistic power structures, contributing to broader discussions on the role of drama in shaping and reshaping societal narratives. Ultimately, the dual role of language in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama emphasises its transformative potential, revealing the capacity of literature to interrogate and influence the socio-political context of Nigeria.

## II. Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach to studying the relationship between language, power, and society. Originating from the works of scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, CDA posits that discourse is not merely a medium of communication but a form of social practice that reflects, constructs, and challenges societal power structures (Fairclough, 1995). This theoretical framework is especially relevant to drama studies, where dialogue and narrative serve as powerful tools for representing social realities. In the context of Nigerian drama, CDA enables scholars to examine how language is used to embody and critique the socio-political tensions within a postcolonial society. The dramatization of power dynamics through linguistic choices reveals the potential of drama as a platform for socio-political commentary. Thus, CDA provides a lens through which the significant synergy between discourse and societal hierarchies in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama can be critically analyzed.

Central to CDA are the concepts of power, ideology, and hegemony, which are crucial in understanding how discourse shapes and is shaped by societal structures. Power in discourse refers to the capacity of language to control, influence, or manipulate others, often reinforcing societal hierarchies (van Dijk, 2008). Ideology, on the other hand, pertains to the underlying beliefs and values embedded within discourse, which perpetuate the dominant worldviews of certain groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Hegemony, as conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci and later

integrated into CDA, describes the process by which dominant ideologies are normalized and accepted as common sense, thereby maintaining existing power relations. These concepts are particularly evident in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, where language serves both as a vehicle for the elite to assert control and as a tool for the marginalized to resist oppression. Analyzing the dialogues, character interactions, and narrative structures within these plays, CDA uncovers how playwrights expose and challenge the hegemonic ideologies that underpin societal inequalities.

Applying CDA to post-Osofisan Nigerian drama is justified due to the significant role of language in mediating the socio-political and cultural contexts depicted in these works. Nigerian playwrights of the post-Osofisan era, influenced by his legacy of politically engaged drama, often use language as a site of struggle where competing ideologies and power dynamics are negotiated. For instance, the synergy of English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages within these plays mirrors the tensions between colonial legacies and indigenous identities (Adeoti, 2003). Furthermore, CDA allows for an exploration of how playwrights critique societal hierarchies by giving voice to marginalized characters who use language to resist domination. This analytical approach not only reveals the dual function of language as a tool of both oppression and resistance but also emphasises the transformative potential of drama in shaping societal narratives. Consequently, CDA serves as a valuable framework for uncovering the socio-political underpinnings of language use in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama and contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of literature, power, and society.

### III. Language as a Tool for Reinforcing Power Dynamics

In post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language is not just a means of communication but a powerful tool used to reinforce and maintain power structures. Characters and their interactions reveal the underlying social hierarchies that permeate Nigerian society. The dramatization of these power dynamics through dialogue emphasizes how language can be a vehicle for establishing

authority and dominance. Through an analysis of character dialogues and relationships, playwrights illustrate the systemic use of language as a way to assert control, validate social status, and perpetuate the dominance of the elite. Examining the language choices made by characters and how these choices reinforce hierarchical structures helps us better understand the extent to which language acts as an agent of power in Nigerian drama.

A clear example of how language perpetuates power dynamics is seen in the way characters with higher social status use formal English and educated speech. This linguistic choice often signifies power and authority, distinguishing the elite from the marginalized. For instance, in plays such as "The Jero Plays" by Wole Soyinka, the use of formal, polished English by characters such as the prophet Jero illustrates their elevated status and dominance over others. Similarly, post-Osofisan plays continue this tradition, where the ruling classes and those in positions of political or economic power use language to assert superiority. In contrast, characters who represent the lower classes or marginalized groups frequently use vernacular languages or Pidgin English, which can signify solidarity but also reflects their lower social standing. This linguistic duality emphasises the notion that language in Nigerian drama is a marker of social division and a tool for maintaining hierarchical boundaries.

Furthermore, language serves as a strategic device for asserting authority and establishing dominance in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama. The power of language to establish control is exemplified in how powerful characters speak over others, command respect, and dictate the direction of the narrative. For instance, in Femi Osofisan's "The Chattering and the Song," the characters in power use language as a weapon to silence dissenting voices and maintain their hold over the populace. These characters often engage in monologues or authoritative dialogue that reflects their confidence and influence. The choice of words, tone, and cadence conveys power, emphasizing the disparity between those who hold authority and those who do not. Moreover, the use of direct commands and assertive language creates an

environment where subordinates feel compelled to conform or face the repercussions of defiance, reinforcing the established social order.

One notable aspect of language that reinforces power dynamics is the employment of political and bureaucratic jargon by elite characters. This form of specialized language not only serves to set the elite apart from others but also to exclude those who do not belong to their social class. For example, in "The Wives" by Bode Sowande, the use of complex and often bureaucratic expressions by the political figures reflects their authority and the institutionalized nature of power. This specialized language becomes a barrier, keeping the marginalized from engaging in meaningful discourse or challenging the status quo. Through the use of such language, playwrights illustrate how power is maintained by those in authority, revealing the ways in which language functions to sustain structures of inequality.

The reinforcement of power dynamics is also evident in the portrayal of how different classes respond to language-based power. In post-Osofisan plays, the subaltern characters are often depicted as resisting these power structures through language. However, despite their efforts, the dominant use of language by the elite continues to reflect their authority. For instance, in Osofisan's "Once Upon Four Robbers," the protagonists who defy the system use defiant, sometimes subversive language that challenges the authority of the oppressive figures. While this resistance speaks to the potential of language as a tool of empowerment, it is clear that the dominant linguistic practices remain a powerful force that sustains the established hierarchy. The dual nature of language—both a tool of resistance and oppression—emphasises its role in reinforcing power dynamics.

There are multiple examples from post-Osofisan Nigerian drama that illustrate the institutionalization of power through language. One example is "The Train" by Wole Soyinka, where language is used to reveal the power of colonial and postcolonial political figures. The dialogue reflects the way colonial authorities established their dominance through linguistic

practices that marginalize indigenous languages and reinforce their own influence. Another example can be found in "The Gods Are Not to Blame" by Rotimi, where the use of proverbs and authoritative speech by the king character illustrates both the power of leadership and the tension between fate and free will. In Osofisan's "Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels," language is depicted as an essential element of social struggle, where characters explore power dynamics through songs, chants, and spoken word. These examples show that language is not only a tool of communication but a mechanism of power that solidifies the boundaries between the powerful and the powerless.

A further illustration can be found in "The Interpreters" by Wole Soyinka, where characters in positions of power use language as a means of maintaining control over social and political structures. The narrative depicts how the discourse of political leaders, filled with rhetoric and propaganda, shapes public perception and reinforces their dominance. Similarly, in Osofisan's "Tango with the Night," the use of language and dialogue by authoritative figures emphasises their power to dictate the terms of engagement and manipulate narratives. These examples collectively emphasize that in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language is an integral part of power dynamics, used to establish and sustain the structures that define the social hierarchy.

#### **IV. Language as a Medium for Challenging Societal Hierarchies**

In post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language is a powerful tool not only for reinforcing but also for challenging societal hierarchies. Through dialogue and performance, playwrights use language to expose the inequities embedded within society and to provide a platform for marginalized voices to resist and subvert the existing power structures. This use of language reflects the dual nature of drama as both a mirror of society and a potential agent for change. Through the subtle portrayal of characters and their interactions, playwrights depict how language can empower the disenfranchised and undermine the status quo. Analyzing how language is used to resist and

subvert hierarchies in post-Osofisan plays provides an understanding of its transformative potential.

The resistance and subversion of power structures through language is often seen in the way dialogue is crafted in these plays. Marginalized characters use their speech to challenge the dominant narrative, question authority, and articulate alternative perspectives. In Femi Osofisan's "Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels," the characters, who are essentially societal outcasts, use their songs, chants, and spoken word to critique the injustices they face. The language in this play becomes a means of defiance against those who wield power and seek to maintain control. The use of vernacular and songs imbued with symbolism creates an atmosphere where subversion is not just an act of protest but a form of empowerment. The subversive use of language thus serves as a testament to the resilience and creativity of the marginalized in resisting oppression.

Another way that language challenges societal hierarchies is through the use of vernacular expressions and dialects. These linguistic choices are not just reflective of cultural identity but also serve as acts of resistance. In post-Osofisan drama, the deployment of Pidgin English, indigenous languages, and local dialects by marginalized characters emphasizes their rejection of the dominant linguistic norms associated with power and authority. This is evident in Osofisan's "Once Upon Four Robbers," where the robbers' use of Pidgin English is not just a means of communication but a symbol of solidarity and defiance against the establishment. Choosing vernacular over the formal English often used by the elite, these characters affirm their identity and challenge the linguistic hierarchy that positions the elite's language as the benchmark of power.

The use of vernacular and local dialects to challenge hierarchies can be seen as a deliberate effort to reclaim cultural and linguistic agency. For example, in "The Chattering and the Song," Osofisan portrays the marginalized characters as using their speech to question and subvert the dominant order. The language of the play moves between traditional Yoruba expressions and

modern dialogue, creating a hybrid linguistic space where resistance is articulated. The juxtaposition of traditional and modern forms of expression demonstrates how language can bridge generations and empower marginalized groups to resist oppression. Showcasing linguistic hybridity, the play reflects how language can become a form of subversion, capable of destabilizing entrenched social hierarchies.

Several case studies from post-Osofisan plays illustrate how language functions as a medium for challenging societal hierarchies. In Wole Soyinka's "The Interpreters," language is used by the characters to question the postcolonial condition and the new power structures that mimic the colonial ones. The characters' use of complex language and satire reveals the irony and hypocrisy within the societal and political structures. Similarly, in Osofisan's "Tango with the Night," the play's dialogue is peppered with poetic and dramatic expressions that evoke themes of rebellion and liberation. The characters' use of language becomes a tool for creating a new reality, a way to redefine social norms and challenge the prevailing order.

Another example is "The Gods Are Not to Blame" by Rotimi, where language serves as a medium for resisting fate and asserting individual agency. The use of proverbs and oratory by the characters signifies a way of transcending the predestined roles imposed by the societal order. This linguistic approach questions the inevitability of power structures and suggests that language, rich with cultural and historical significance, can be harnessed to fight against them. Through dialogue and performance, characters defy the narratives imposed by those in power and seek to carve out their paths, challenging the societal hierarchies that would confine them.

In Bode Sowande's "The Wives," language becomes an act of resistance when the female characters speak against the male-dominated world they inhabit. Their use of expressive, strong language exposes the gender inequalities embedded in the structure of society. The characters' linguistic defiance provides an avenue for raising awareness about their plight and

articulating their demands for equality. This use of language goes beyond mere communication—it becomes a form of protest, a powerful tool to challenge the power dynamics that govern their lives. This example serves as a poignant reminder that language is a vital part of social transformation and can be harnessed to confront and dismantle hierarchies.

Through these examples, it becomes clear that post-Osofisan Nigerian drama utilizes language not just as a narrative device but as a potent means of resistance. Choosing to represent marginalized voices and incorporating vernacular expressions, playwrights create spaces where societal norms can be questioned and power dynamics subverted. The use of language in these plays emphasises the transformative power of dialogue and performance, proving that even in the face of systemic oppression, language remains a vital instrument for change.

### V. Intersection of Language, Identity, and Socio-Political Realities

In post-Osofisan Nigerian drama, language plays a crucial role in representing class, gender, and ethnicity, reflecting how these social dimensions intersect and shape individual identities. The use of language in these plays is not just a matter of communication but a deliberate reflection of societal structures. Class distinctions are often depicted through the language choices made by characters; those in positions of power typically use formal English or educated speech to signify their superiority, while marginalized characters often employ vernaculars or Pidgin English, signaling their social status. For example, in Femi Osofisan's "The Chattering and the Song," the use of language by the characters reveals the struggle between the elite and the disenfranchised, with the former employing refined speech to assert control and the latter using indigenous expressions as a form of resistance (Osofisan, 1998). Similarly, gender roles are reinforced and contested through language. In Bode Sowande's "The Wives," the female characters use powerful and assertive language to challenge the male-dominated structure of their society, illustrating how language can be an instrument for challenging gender norms and advocating for equality

(Sowande, 1997). Ethnic identity, too, is often expressed through language, with characters switching between languages or incorporating proverbs and idioms to assert their cultural heritage, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity that counters the homogenizing influence of colonial languages.

The influence of postcolonial and indigenous linguistic frameworks on dramatic discourse is evident in the ways language is employed to critique the lingering effects of colonialism and assert indigenous identity. The hybrid use of language, which blends English with local dialects, Pidgin, and indigenous proverbs, reflects a complex postcolonial reality where colonial legacies coexist with native traditions. This linguistic hybridity creates a dramatic discourse that is both resistant and affirming, showcasing the tension between colonial and indigenous cultural values. In Ola Rotimi's "The Gods Are Not to Blame," the characters' use of proverbs and traditional speech emphasizes the importance of Yoruba culture and its resistance to the impositions of Western thought (Rotimi, 1971). Similarly, in Osofisan's plays such as "Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels," the playwright uses language to depict the conflict between traditional values and the changes brought by colonial and postcolonial influences. The characters' speech patterns reflect a blending of linguistic frameworks, representing the struggle to reclaim indigenous identity while exploring the pressures of modernity and colonial legacies (Osofisan, 1991). This linguistic choice not only reinforces cultural pride but also reveals the dynamic relationship between language and the socio-political context of postcolonial Nigeria.

The broader implications of language as a medium for expressing identity and exploring socio-political realities are significant for Nigerian society and politics. Language, as represented in Nigerian drama, reveals the fractures within society and the ways in which individuals and groups respond to the challenges of social inequality, power dynamics, and cultural preservation. The use of language as a form of resistance and a marker of identity points to the importance of linguistic diversity in understanding

the dynamics of Nigerian society. Examining how language reflects and influences social structures, playwrights reveal the ways in which language can either reinforce divisions or foster unity. For instance, the portrayal of marginalized voices using Pidgin English in plays such as Osofisan's "Once Upon Four Robbers" shows how language can empower the lower classes to articulate their grievances and challenge systemic injustices (Osofisan, 1988). This focus on language demonstrates that socio-political change is not just about political movements but also about the reclaiming and redefining of cultural and linguistic heritage. In a broader context, the plays reveal the importance of valuing linguistic diversity and ensuring that all voices, regardless of their social or economic status, have a platform. This can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society where language is not only a tool of communication but also a means of empowerment and social transformation.

### VI. Conclusion

The dual role of language in post-Osofisan Nigerian drama is evident in how it both maintains and contests power dynamics within society. Through the strategic use of language, playwrights reveal the ways in which authority and social hierarchies are reinforced, while also demonstrating how language can be wielded as a tool for resistance and social change. The use of formal English by the elite often signifies their dominance and maintains social order. Conversely, the marginalized characters' use of vernaculars, Pidgin English, and indigenous expressions reveals their efforts to challenge the status quo, reclaim their identities, and push against entrenched power. This linguistic duality reveals how language functions as both a weapon of oppression and a means of empowerment, serving as a mirror to the diverse nature of society.

Post-Osofisan Nigerian drama makes significant contributions to critical discussions on societal structures by illustrating the ways in which language is tied to class, gender, and ethnicity. The portrayal of these themes provides insight into the socio-political challenges faced by Nigerians, showcasing how language acts as a reflection of social and cultural identity. The use

of hybrid language forms, blending English with local dialects, proverbs, and Pidgin, creates a space where postcolonial realities and indigenous values intersect. This exploration of language emphasises the complex interactions between colonial legacies and local traditions, offering a platform for dialogue on cultural preservation, social justice, and empowerment. The plays not only reveal the persistent inequalities within Nigerian society but also reveal the resilience of those who challenge these structures, encouraging audiences to reconsider how power is distributed and contested.

Ultimately, the transformative potential of language in drama and society is significant. Through their works, playwrights like Soyinka and Osofisan demonstrate that language is more than a means of communication—it is a tool capable of shaping societal narratives and driving change. The subversion of traditional power structures through language shows how the marginalized can assert their voices and challenge dominant ideologies. This powerful use of language serves as a reminder that drama, as an art form, can contribute to a broader social discourse that fosters inclusivity and unity. When language is embraced as a means of resistance and empowerment, it can create transformative experiences that reverberate beyond the stage, inspiring action and fostering an environment where societal hierarchies can be questioned and dismantled.

### References

- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Osofisan, F. (2001). *Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State*. Ibadan: University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Adeoti, G. (2003). *Naked Soles: Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London:

Longman.

van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2016). *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.

Adeoti, G. (2003). *Naked Soles: Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre*. Ibadan:

Kraft Books.

Osofisan, F. (1998). *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Ibadan: University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1963). *The Trials of Brother Jero*. London: Oxford University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1971). *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. London: Oxford University Press.

Sowande, B. (1997). *The Wives*. Lagos: Lantern Books.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2016). *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.

van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Soyinka, W. (1963). *The Jero Plays: The Trials of Brother Jero and Jero's Metamorphosis*. London: Oxford University Press.

Osofisan, F. (1998). *The Chattering and the Song*. Ibadan: University Press.

Sowande, B. (1997). *The Wives*. Lagos: Lantern Books.

Osofisan, F. (1988). *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Ibadan: University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1983). *The Train*. In *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*. London: Methuen.

Rotimi, O. (1971). *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. London: Oxford University Press.

Osofisan, F. (1991). *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*. Ibadan: University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1965). *The Interpreters*. London: Oxford University Press.

Osofisan, F. (1996). *Tango with the Night*. Ibadan: University Press.

Saxena, A. (2024). Gender dynamics and societal pressures: Exploring women's representation in Arthur Miller's *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*. *Integral Research*, 1(3), 15-20.

\*\*\*\*\*

**THE END**