

Feminist Contestation of Child Marriage in Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike*: A Stylistic Analysis

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Abstract

The present study explores a feminist contestation of child marriage in Omoni Oboli's film, *Wives on Strike*. The study analyzes performance data purposively selected from the film to justify the feminist challenge of child marriage as a form of patriarchal violence against the girl-child and support a feminist advocacy of appropriate reforms to end its practice in Nigeria. Deploying a stylistic approach, the study engages the Conversation Analysis (CA) theoretical framework notable for defining the significant role of talk and its linguistic resources in enacting social action to effect change. Showcasing the perceived Nigerian experience, the study establishes that child marriage violates the rights of the girl-child to health, education, and consensual marriage. It argues that patriarchy and its manifestations, including wrongful gender stereotyping and resultant disempowerment of women, apathy, and lack of political will to protect the girl-child are inflexible drivers of child marriage, unacceptable, and contestable. The study concludes that social action is a feminist catalyst for positive social change and concomitant reforms to eliminate child marriage in Nigeria.

Keywords— child marriage, film, girl-child, Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is any marriage involving at least a child below the age of 18 [1]. It is a gender-based violence rooted in patriarchy, a systematic determinant of gendered social norms and structural economic factors that perpetuate gender inequity [2]. It mostly affects underage girls who lack the physical, physiological, and psychological fitness to bear all the attendant responsibilities [3]. There are more than 1.1 billion girls below the age of 18 world-wide, and at least 12 million of them are married in childhood annually [4], [5]. Child marriage is a violation of human rights, contravening the rights of girls to health, education, consensual marriage, and unrestrained prospects [2]. Being a public health concern, child marriage increases girls' risk for early pregnancy, maternal morbidity, and maternal mortality [6].

Nigeria has the 3rd highest number of child brides globally, given an estimate of 22 million

and a highest prevalence in the Northern part of the country where 48% of girls become child brides by age 15 [1], [7]. The appalling burden is sustained by the legal right of states in the region to operate internal laws that authorize child marriage, constituting a breach of the Federal Child Rights Act (2003) that prohibits its practice in Nigeria [8]. Presently, seven Northern Nigerian states, namely Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Kano, Kebbi, Yobe, and Zamfara States, are yet to sign the Act into law [9]. The hesitancy compounds an age-long debate and dissatisfaction that stem from the retention of Section 29(4) (b) of the Nigerian constitution which, according to [3], recognizes any woman who is married to be of full age, amounting to a tacit legalization of child marriage.

In subSaharan Africa, gender activism focuses on challenging oppressive, conservational practices [10]. Major stakeholders of child marriage are grandparents, parents, men that marry children, interest groups, and high-level

decision makers in government [8]. Feminist activism is a powerful means to drive any meaningful and productive liaison with the stakeholders in a subSaharan country like Nigeria where [11] confirms that patriarchy is an integral part of culture.

By challenging discriminatory norms and presenting an option to rigid patriarchal thoughts and structures [12], feminist struggles work towards the abolition of all forms of patriarchal discrimination against the female gender, including child marriage. Moreover, when patriarchal manifestations are unwilling to open negotiations with feminist activists, social action becomes the only recourse to forcibly alter the social structure, bringing about social change that ultimately “reshapes people’s behavioral patterns, how they think, their attitudes of legitimacy and authority,” [13] and facilitates favorable social and political conditions for decisive and far-reaching reforms.

Gender representation in media like film shapes public perception of gender issues [14]. Therefore, concerned Africans produce feminist films to gain public support for what [15] describes as intellectual feminism, a concept that expostulates with patriarchal aspects of the African culture, forced or early marriage in particular. Contemporary feminist films are being used to campaign for the rights of the female gender such as “respect, dignity, equality, lives free from violence, and the threat of violence.” [15]. The emancipatory themes of feminist films push changes essential to stop child marriage, revolving around “the transformation of norms, culture, roles, and institutions as well as legal reform and policy action.” [3], [13], [16]. Omoni Oboli’s *Wives on Strike* is one such film.

Omoni Oboli doubles as the director and co-producer of the film *Wives on Strike*. A 43-year-old woman from Delta State in Nigeria, Omoni Oboli is a popular award-winning actress, scriptwriter, producer, and director trained from the New York Film Academy with twenty-five progressive years in the Nollywood industry [17]. In this paper, I attempt a stylistic

analysis of Omoni Oboli’s *Wives on Strike*, a Nollywood film outstanding for a recurring motif of child marriage and accompanying themes that criticize its practice as a patriarchal injustice to the girl-child and necessitate its elimination in Nigeria.

Set in contemporary Nigeria, *Wives on Strike* gives child marriage a human face by featuring a father’s attempt to marry off his 13-year-old daughter, Amina, to an Alhaji. This triggers a conflict into which the prevailing patriarchal tradition and a feminist, formidable opposition are drawn. Unsuccessful attempts at a negotiation precipitate an ensuing sex strike initiated by Mama Amina’s four friends (Mama Ngozi, Madam 12:30, Iya Bola, and Christy). Even as the four women forcefully stop Alhaji from having Amina as wife, the strike action soon spreads nationwide, evolving into an inexorable, reformative social movement.

Eventually, the transition from the climax of the clash between the opposing ideologies to a radical resolution envisions positive social change that achieves positive transformation and related reforms necessary to end child marriage in Nigeria. The feminist themes of the film display an auspicious capacity for lending antichild marriage activism high visibility in Nigeria. Hence, I prioritize tapping into the applicability of the film’s performance data to the advocacy of the abolition of child marriage in Nigeria in the study.

II. STYLE AND STYLISTICS

Style is the way a speaker exploits language, subsuming linguistic choices that clarify the personality, thoughts, and ideas of a person [18]. Stylistics studies style in language, concentrating on how factors such as context and purpose determine language variation [19]. As a branch of applied linguistics, stylistics is useful for showing the relationship between the form and effects of the resources of a particular language variety [20], [21]. And integral to a stylistic perspective is the inextricability of style, language, and identity [22].

Known for the study and analysis of literary texts, stylistics also covers film analysis, applying traditionally textual, analytical tools or

existing, proven frameworks [23], [24]. A stylistic approach to dramatic performance, film inclusive, analyzes performance data such as transcribed talk and reported nonverbal features like facial expression and gesture to create an objective and systematic presentation [25]. The basis of every stylistic presentation is the viewpoint of “language as a product of style and a reflection of ideology.” [22]. Likewise, a stylistic interpretation pays attention to peculiarities of conversation at any of the linguistic levels of analysis comprising the phonological, graphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic aspects [21].

III. THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT

I observe that the style of the feminist contestation of child marriage in Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike* is purposefully conversational. The mode entails social interactions that actualize the feminist call for significant change in a tyrannical, patriarchal society. This informs the choice of Conversation Analysis (CA) as the theoretical framework for analysis in the study. CA is an approach to the study of social interaction developed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) [26]. Though primarily concerned with the examination of conversations in real-life settings, CA has become highly adaptable to the investigation of all types of discursive orders [27].

Inspired by Harold Garfinkel's (1967) Ethnomethodology and Goffman's (1974, 1981) Frame Analysis, CA has transformed from a mainly sociological method to a prominent approach across the humanities, especially linguistics [26], [28]. Specifically, CA functions as an effective approach to dramatic performance studies in stylistics [24]. CA studies of naturally occurring conversations have become applicable to film discourse, which is structured according to natural rules and norms of interaction [29].

As a mainly qualitative approach, CA surveys language as a resource for social action, focusing on accomplishing actions through talk and their real-life consequences [30]. While exploring the construction of social order through talk as interaction, CA has a growing

interest in how linguistic resources like lexical and morphosyntactic compositions in a turn drive interactional practices [31]. These validate the potential of CA for a substantial analysis of the language of film which encompasses fictional conversational behaviors, including verbal and nonverbal features that have inherent cultural values [29], [32]. Some verbal features directly relevant to the theoretical framework of CA are “turn, turn-taking, adjacency pairs, backchanneling, and showing disagreement.” [30], [33], [34].

According to [30], a turn is basically a speaker's complete utterance in a specific context, consisting of one or more turn-construction units (TCUs) or linguistic units such as words, phrases, and clauses. Explaining further, [30] notes that turn transfer to other participants is realized at the point of completion or transition-relevance place (TRP) by turn allocation techniques composed of other selection by current speaker and self-selection by others or the current speaker. As stated by [30], an orderly arrangement of the turn production and transfer process makes the turn-taking system. Being the core of sequence organization, which is the connection of consecutive turns to create coherent courses of action, an adjacency pair is formed by conditionally relevant pair parts that perform actions like question and answer, challenge and reaction [30], [35].

Backchannels are verbal or nonverbal responses and reactions of a listener to a speaker's speech, maintaining a successful conversation by eliciting the former's approval or solidarity with the latter's utterance [33]. And showing disagreement is a disagreement strategy in conversation, which [34] stresses can involve expressing opposing opinions, raising rhetorical questions, adopting a personal stance, and/or presenting facts. These speech features are mostly analyzed in CA alongside nonverbal components to arrive at an objective and systematic study.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study obtained data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data included

performance data purposively selected from Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike*. Preferences were turns and exchanges highlighting adjacency pairs, backchannel, showing disagreement, key lexical and syntactic stylistic features, facial expressions, and gestures that are pertinent to the aim of the study, to explore the feminist contestation of child marriage in *Wives on Strike*. The importance of the feminist thrust of *Wives on Strike*, to advocate adequate reforms to stop child marriage in Nigeria, bolstered the film's relevance as the object of study.

The secondary data were a biography website, an inaugural lecture, books, journal articles, and publications of the European Institute for Gender Equality, Save the Children Nigeria, and the United Nations Children's Fund. A stylistic, conversational approach fundamental to the Conversation Analysis theory was used for data analysis. The analysis projected revealing, investigative, and activist potentialities of deployed conversational resources to corroborate the crusade against child marriage in Nigeria.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the data show that child marriage is a practice that violates the rights of the girl-child to health, education, and consensual marriage. Also, they emphasize that patriarchy and its manifestations which comprise the wrongful stereotyping and disempowerment of women, apathy, and lack of political will to protect the girl-child are primary, rigid drivers of child marriage in Nigeria, unacceptable, and contestable. In this respect, the study employs corresponding, conversational features accented in twelve extracts from the feminist film, *Wives on Strike*. The highlights expose the negative effects of child marriage and investigate the causative role of patriarchy in child marriage. Also, they demonstrate an entrenched resistance of patriarchal manifestations to change, which engenders social action as a radical option to attain social change and important reforms required to end child marriage in Nigeria. Succeeding sections classify and unravel the predominant problems as found in the data.

A. Negative Effects of Child Marriage

Madam 12:30. (Lamenting) Mama Ngozi, do you not know that there is a *disease* that attacks children that are married off before they are developed?... It is a big English word. I cannot remember it. But they start urinating even when walking.

Mama Ngozi. (Exclaims) Hey!

Madam 12:30. They smell like they are already dead.

Mama Ngozi. (Exclaims) Hey!

Madam 12:30. It is a *death sentence for these children* [36, 0:05:06].

In the excerpt above, Madam 12:30 and Mama Ngozi are feminist voices critical of some health consequences of child marriage. In layman's terms, Madam 12:30's turns disclose Vesicovaginal Fistula as a deadly morbidity, a medical condition that [37] links to early childbirth and describes as an abnormal hole between the urinary bladder and the vagina. Madam 12:30 publicizes the health risk with a highly suggestive noun and headword "disease". She laments symptoms of the condition, such as urinary incontinence and foul smelly discharge, that heighten the risk of maternal mortality the noun phrase "a death sentence for these children" echoes. The horrific exposure evokes Mama Ngozi's exclamatory backchannel turns, "Hey"! that approve of the condemnatory motive of Madam 12:30's disclosure and deplore the fatal outcomes in a manner that craves public outcry against child marriage in Nigeria.

Subsequently, more effects are communicated by Vera, another feminist mouthpiece, while disputing the compromise of her husband, Senator Isong, on child marriage. She utters:

Vera. (frowning) [...] Tell that to the girl-child, *who will not be able to get the well needed education* to grow as a person, or understand, *or better still, get out of the relationship she is being forced into* [...] [36, 01:06:32].

Vera frowns on the encroachments on girls' rights to education and consent in child marriage. This is well captured by the post-modifying relative clauses "who will not be able to get the well-needed education..." "or

better still get out of the relationship she is being forced into.” Her turn brings into the open how early marriage forces underage girls to drop out of school and hijacks their lives, dashing their hope of getting an empowering education and rendering them incapable of making independent and informed choices. By halting the education of child brides, forced marriage increases their susceptibility to “domestic violence and abuse, increased economic dependence, denial of decision-making power, inequality at home that further perpetuates discrimination, and low status of girls.” [38].

B. Causative Role of Patriarchy

Getting to the root of child marriage, a social problem infamous for persistently violating human rights, is critical to fostering a workable, lasting change. For this reason, an adjacency pair uttered in a conversation between Mama Amina and Mama Ngozi pinpoints its primary source:

Mama Ngozi. (Anxious) What did *he* do?

Mama Amina. (sobbing) *He* wants to give Amina away as wife to *an Alhaji* [36, 0:3:46].

In a question-and-answer format, the female discourse participants topicalize patriarchy as the principal cause of child marriage. Both pair parts use the gender exclusive third person pronoun “*he*” to give prominence to the masculine gender of their referent and Mama Amina’s husband, Baba Amina. Mama Amina sobs because of her husband’s imperious stance on marrying off their underage daughter named Amina to a much older man. Her response to Mama Ngozi’s inquiry: “He wants to give Amina away as wife to an Alhaji,” categorically voices her husband’s unilateral intention and foregrounds the masculine gender of the older man in the masculine vocative and prepositional completive headword “Alhaji.”

That way, the masculine gender is indicted for child marriage, an act which metaphorizes and places the blame on patriarchy notorious for being “an order in a society in which authority, rights, and privileges are dominated by men.” [39]. This portrays patriarchy as the master-minder of child marriage by virtue of affording

typified perpetrators the authority and sexual entitlement that normalize asymmetrical power relations between the sexes along with resulting despotism and high-handedness of men as husband and/or father which expedite the domination and oppression of the female gender. Correspondingly, [2] supports the perception, affirming that such normative, social construction of sexuality in a patriarchal order gives rise to child marriage.

C. Entrenched Resistance of Patriarchal Manifestations to Change

The pervasion of patriarchal manifestations that aid child marriage into major social institutions is an unacceptable, destructive trend worsened by an entrenched resistance of the manifestations to change. Baba Amina confirms the ubiquity of the manifestations in the family institution during a conversation with his wife. He stresses:

Baba Amina. A woman's place is *in the house*. That is *how it has been in our families* [36, 0:40:02].

Baba Amina personifies patriarchy. He broaches the perennial stereotyping of women in a patriarchal society in his turn. With the equational verb “*is*,” the turn locates and permanently limits the usefulness of women to the home, as the prepositional phrase “*in the house*” connotes. This sustains power over women by reducing them to full-time housewives. Besides, the nominal clause “*how it has been in our families*” depicts the patriarchal gender ideology that underlies the stereotype as ancestral. It outlines the discriminatory ideology as a multigenerational belief and a habitual means of impinging severely on the economic rights of women like the right to work and the right to empowerment, mindless of the abysmal poverty the deprivation can cause.

Baba Amina enforces the notion in his family, notwithstanding his meager earnings as a driver. He forbids Mama Amina from working, plunging his family into perpetual, financial misery. Rather than reconsider his overbearing stance, he prefers to marry off their 13-year-old daughter, Amina, to beat the hardship.

Sequentially, Mama Amina contests the anomaly in an ensuing face-off between the couple in an adjacency pair:

Baba Amina: (stern) My wife will not take care of this home.

Mama Amina. Oh! *But our daughter can take care of the home?* [36, 0:40:41]

Baba Amina's obstinacy in the first pair part challenges Mama Amina, who reacts: "Oh! But our daughter can take care of the home"? Raising the rhetorical question, the force of her insubordinate response shows a firm disagreement with the typified patriarchal culture that is unrelenting in its dismissal of women empowerment and the propagation of child marriage as a poverty alleviation scheme. In futility, her turn demands reason with the reality that the custom is oppressive, as it imposes inimical gender role restrictions to blatantly increase the financial vulnerability of families and the exposure of girl children to all forms of abuse in Nigeria. A further resistance to change is perpetrated in another dialogue between Mama Ngozi and her husband, Baba Ngozi:

Mama Ngozi. [...] She said I should plead with you to talk to Baba Amina about it. We cannot have this.

Baba Ngozi. I cannot! I cannot do a thing like that.

Mama Ngozi. My husband, you say you cannot?

Baba Ngozi. Hmmm...

Mama Ngozi. Why?

Baba Ngozi. [...] *Because it does not concern me* [...].

Mama Ngozi. *A 13-year-old girl is about to be given away as wife to a man and you say it does not concern you?* [36, 0:8:16]

Baba Ngozi tries to justify his decline of a humane request that he should help Mama Amina convince her husband to desist from marrying Amina off in the above excerpt. He utters: "Because it does not concern me." The reason stated in the turn manifests a defiant, patriarchal indifference to the plight of endangered girls, clashing with Mama Amina's feminist empathy with them. Hence, she reacts:

"A 13-year-old girl is about to be given away as wife to a man and you say it does not concern you"? She brings up the rhetorical question to show an outright disagreement with the obvious irrationality of the daring insouciance.

In vain, the turn anticipates reason with the fact that such a gendered, intractable casualness from typified men is inhumane and escalates into a social apathy that indirectly consents to child marriage and worsens the vulnerability of the girl-child in Nigeria. Also, the ingrained trend extends to the political institution as the following adjacency pair underlines:

Senator Isong. What is the matter with you, Vera? I mean, you are much more enlightened than these village women you are dragging these child bride issues with. *Issues that have not been specifically addressed in the House yet.*

Vera. Yes. But it has been implied by the law on ground, which should have been properly amended to protect the child. Instead, they conveniently *leave* the old law, giving room for anyone to interpret to suit... *And why are the states not compelled to implement the Child Rights Law?* [36, 0:56:28]

Senator Isong's turn clearly tells that Vera's compassion for child brides and passionate interest in the eradication of child marriage are causing him discomfort. On that account, the designation and proper noun "Senator Isong" displays his highly respectful political status, but quite qualifies his turn as an expression of an unbecoming political position bereft of concern for child brides. Furthermore, the noun phrase in his turn "Issues that have not been specifically addressed in the house yet" admits the lack of political will to accelerate policy formation to criminalize and end child marriage, implying an aberrant, political tolerance of its practice.

At variance with the challenging political obduracy, Vera's reaction faults the nonamendment of the controversial clause in the Nigerian constitution interpretable to legitimize child marriage, condemning the political order for inaction that the lexical verb "leave" reverberates. Also, Vera's turn

vocalizes the rhetorical question “And why are the states not compelled to implement the Child Rights Law”? to push for reason among typified political stakeholders, with the truth that silence on the nonimplementation of the Child Rights Act in disinclined Nigerian states is an overt political support for child marriage which puts the girl-child at risk of dream-shattering and life-threatening human rights violations.

Nevertheless, the expectation is crushed as the conversation reaches an impasse, connotatively falling short of citizens’ expectation of adequate policy responsiveness to outlaw child marriage in Nigeria. Overall, the deep-rooted manifestations of resistance to change apparently constitute what [40] construes as a patriarchal force deliberately created to retard the realization of gender equity severely and sustain discrimination against girls.

The Power of Social Action

Mama Ngozi. [...] We, the women, have agreed to go on *strike* [36, 23:28].

The extract above is Mama Ngozi’s response to her husband, Baba Ngozi, who accuses her of starting a wives’ uprising that starves husbands of sex and cites her refusal to have sex with him as proof. Her turn avouches the allegation, for it acknowledges the unanimous decision of a women’s movement to resort to denying men sex indefinitely in protest at their unacceptable intransigence on child marriage. The noun and prepositional compleitive “strike” ascertains the denial as a sex strike, hankers after urgent change in the face of futile negotiation attempts, and signals the genesis of a social action that rapidly turns into an unstoppable countrywide protest. The feminist movement successfully stops Alhaji from marrying Amina while spreading, a feat that strengthens its clamor for reforms.

Consequentially, the men in society and in government succumb to the overwhelming pressure of the action, causing social change and associated reforms. The change begins with social transformation, reshaping the mental psyche of the patriarchal figures, particularly Baba Amina, Baba Ngozi, and Senator Isong. The men’s utterances verify the alteration at the

climax of the mass action. Rather than being mad at his wife for accepting a sewing machine which her friends gift her to work with and earn money as a seamstress, Papa Amina declares when he finds out:

Baba Amina. (smiling) This is *good news* [36, 01:12:18].

Baba Amina wears a shocking smile at the discovery. He uses a noun phrase “good news” typical of a great development in his turn to picture the empowering gift gesture. The appreciation symbolizes an endorsement of women empowerment, indicating a positive application of male authority as husband that forms the basis for being a constructive father. This expressively reflects a progressive, behavioral change that supports the regeneration of womanhood. Moreover, during an interactive session with the press alongside friends, Baba Ngozi pleads:

Baba Ngozi. Let us leave our daughters *to mature* before giving them out in marriage [36, 1:09:40].

Baba Ngozi’s passionate appeal proves him a changed personality. Astonishingly, he exhibits genuine concern for vulnerable, underage girls. With the turn, he urges fellow men to desist from marrying off underage daughters. Thus, the turn attempts to correct perverted, patriarchal thoughts that objectify girls in society. As a matter of necessity, the turn resonates with the to-infinitive nominal clause “to mature” that rejects child marriage by championing girls’ right to maturity before marriage, a requisite to a healthy and fulfilling marital experience. Also, when discussing with colleagues, Senators Bello and Pedro, Senator Isong articulates a stunning disapproval of child marriage:

Senator Isong. If early marriage could not have been good for my late daughter, then it is not good for any girl child. Enough is enough [...] [36, 01:19:16].

Senator Isong’s turn works as a sympathetic political statement from a formerly unsympathetic political leader. It denotes an attitudinal shift from an unbending apathy to a genuine political commitment to addressing

child marriage. The turn contributes to a political conversation a gender-awareness strategy that censures the marginalization of unprotected girls. It upholds the political preservation of girls' dignity, regardless of background, by confronting political actors with the fact that their biological girl-children and every other girl have an equal right to protection from child marriage.

Additionally, the noun phrase "Enough is enough" in the turn challenges the legitimacy of child marriage, an unmitigated threat to the wellbeing of every girl-child, in any Nigerian state. It stands out as a conspicuous, political demand for an end to child marriage in Nigeria. It strives to inspire political will to repudiate all patriarchal manifestations and safeguard the girl-child through making and enforcing mainly gender responsive policies and accordant legal reforms in all Nigerian states. Eventually, the change births the hope for radical reforms to the Nigerian constitution and the application of the Child Rights Act as Cordelia broadcasts for the Star Rainbow Channel:

Cordelia Eti. [...] The government has now agreed to revisit the law concerning the section of the constitution of making the age of 18 the age of consent regardless of marital status. The president has put his full weight on all governors of the state who have not yet implemented the Child Rights Law [36, 01: 22: 06].

As broadcast above, the government yields to the feminist demand for the abolition of child marriage just as the discontinuous verb phrase "has now agreed" verbalizes. That enunciates the authority's willingness and readiness to amend the constitution to recognize age 18 as the age of consent and compel reluctant states to adopt the Child Rights Act. Strikingly, indicators of social change that mark the film's denouement prove the power of social action to realize change in a patriarchal society. The indicators are the suppression of gender role stereotypes, the generation of genuine masculine and social concern for the respect of girls' rights, and the successful motivation of political will to ensure appropriate reforms to

outlaw human rights violations like child marriage.

Exceptionally, the outcomes demonstrate the applicability of social action to the Nigerian situation. They offer social action as an effective means of promoting feminist activism and rekindling public optimism that the elimination of child marriage in Nigeria is achievable. Indeed, they are influencing constant activism that has attracted government responsiveness in accused Nigerian states, where [41] affirms that the process of the domestication of the Child Rights Act is already at varying levels. This gives hope to every girl in Nigeria that child marriage, a legal albatross and the bane of their existence, will eventually cease to be.

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