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# Voice, Silence, and Gendered Power: A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria and South Sudan

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## Abstract

This study examines the intersections of voice, silence, and gendered power in contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre through a postcolonial feminist lens. It explores how selected dramatic texts and performance traditions from both contexts represent women's experiences of marginalisation, resistance, and agency within societies shaped by patriarchy, colonial legacies, political instability, and, in the case of South Sudan, prolonged conflict and displacement. Grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, the study draws on the works of scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, and bell hooks to interrogate the construction and contestation of gendered power relations in theatrical representation. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative textual approach based on close readings of selected plays by Nigerian dramatists such as Tess Onwueme, Zulu Sofola, and Femi Osofisan, alongside South Sudanese theatrical and performance narratives rooted in oral traditions and conflict-related experiences. The analysis focuses on themes including patriarchal authority, silence as trauma and resistance, voice as empowerment, gender-based violence, cultural identity, and nation formation. The findings reveal that Nigerian theatre often foregrounds explicit verbal resistance and symbolic confrontation with patriarchal structures, whereas South Sudanese performance traditions are more deeply shaped by war, displacement, and survival, where silence frequently functions as both a manifestation of trauma and a strategic mode of resistance. Despite these contextual differences, both traditions demonstrate that women's voices and silence operate as politically charged mechanisms through which gendered power is negotiated, challenged, and reimagined. The study concludes that contemporary African theatre constitutes a critical space for exposing the interconnected forces of patriarchy, colonial history, conflict, and cultural ideology, while simultaneously creating imaginative possibilities for female agency and resistance. By foregrounding underexplored South Sudanese performance traditions alongside Nigerian feminist drama, the research contributes to African theatre scholarship through a comparative postcolonial feminist perspective on gender, performance, and power.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial feminism; African theatre; gendered power; voice and silence; Nigerian and South Sudanese drama.

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the Study

African theatre, from precolonial ritual performance to contemporary dramaturgy, has served not only as

entertainment but also as a crucial epistemic space for cultural production, political contestation, and social

reimagination (Odutsa, 2025; Mzara and Maaziz, 2025). Theatre is integral to communal life in African intellectual traditions, functioning as a medium of memory, moral instruction, and ideological critique. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Wole Soyinka (1976) are among the scholars who have argued African drama cannot be divorced from history, spirituality and collective consciousness, particularly in postcolonial contexts with broken sovereignties and inherited colonial structures. In this sense, theatre is a "living archive" through which African societies deal with trauma, identity, and resistance, particularly in contexts of political instability and epistemic dominance.

In postcolonial African contexts, gender continues to be a central axis of power, organization, contestation, and reproduction. Feminist and postcolonial theorists have long shown that colonial rule not only imposed foreign domination but also restructured indigenous social hierarchies in ways that deepened patriarchal control over women's bodies, labour and representation (Mohanty, 1988; Oyeronke, 1997; Eluzai et al., 2026; Musingafi and Musingafi, 2023). In many African societies, such as Nigeria and Sudan/South Sudan, women's marginalisation is a product of intersecting structures of patriarchy, militarisation, religious conservatism, and ethnic politics. These structures operate not only at the level of governance but also in cultural production, in which women's narratives are often mediated, constrained, or erased. Theatre, then, becomes an important counter-public sphere where gendered exclusions are staged and contested (UN Women, 2024; Bazugba et al., 2026).

The pairing of "voice" and "silence" as concepts is a central analytical tension in feminist theatre studies. Voice is frequently associated with agency, subjectivity, and political articulation, while silence may suggest erasure, trauma, or imposition of invisibility on the subject. However, postcolonial feminist theory complicates this binary by showing how silence can also be a strategic and resistant mode of expression under conditions of coercion (Spivak, 1988; Kay, 2020). In African performance contexts, voice is not only verbal but also physical; it is expressed through gesture, ritual, song, and symbolic staging. Thus, African theatre destabilises Western logocentric assumptions by foregrounding multimodal modes of expression, through which women negotiate visibility, authority, and resistance within patriarchal cultural frameworks. His work explicitly uses the dialectic of voice and silence to move beyond Western feminist literary frameworks, showing how African women characters deploy both spoken resistance and strategic, non-verbal silence to survive and subvert patriarchal dispossession.

Contemporary theatre in Nigeria provides a particularly rich space for interrogating gendered power relations in postcolonial modernity (Dickson-Bonney and Zakaria, 2023). Nigerian dramatists are deeply preoccupied with the contradictions of a society shaped

by colonial legacy, religious pluralism, and persistent political instability. The "louding voice" is often used in Nigerian women's theatre to challenge the patriarchal, post-colonial, and traditional norms that have historically silenced women's voices and roles. This is evident in the works of writers who focus on the struggles and agency of rural women (Angela Impey 2014). Playwrights Tess Onwueme, Zulu Sofola, and Femi Osofisan focus on the struggles of women against institutionalised patriarchy, gender-based violence, and socio-economic marginalisation. Their works show how cultural traditions, marital institutions, and religious ideologies can be mechanisms for identity formation and gender oppression. But these dramatists also complicate narratives of victimhood by representing women as active agents who resist, negotiate, and subvert patriarchal expectations through performative action and ideological disruption.

In contrast, South Sudanese theatre emerges from a very different sociohistorical trajectory, characterised by protracted civil war, displacement, and fragile state formation. Theatre in South Sudan, as in other post-conflict areas, acts as a tool for rebuilding community, where female voices often emerge from a history of silence, addressing the specificities of gender, rights, and citizenship (Jenny Hughes, Helen Nicholson, and James Thompson 2009). Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has continued to experience cycles of violence that have disproportionately affected women, including sexual violence, forced displacement, and socio-political exclusion (Jok, 2013; Hutchinson & Pendle, 2015). In this context, theatre and performance practices are important sites of testimony and collective mourning, often operating as informal archives of war trauma and social fragmentation. Despite the continued under-representation of South Sudanese dramaturgy in African literary scholarship, new performance practices in South Sudan increasingly engage with the issues of militarisation, memory and gendered suffering, thus offering important insights into the articulation of women's experiences in post-conflict cultural production.

In theory, the nexus of gender and power in African theatre must be in a strong postcolonial feminist framework that considers historical specificity and cultural heterogeneity. Feminist scholars and playwrights often move beyond simple binary representations of victimhood, using theatre to create a "liminal space" for negotiation and resistance, which disrupts the traditional, male-dominated theatrical, national, and political narratives (Kruger, 1999). *Voices, Visions, and Seeds for Uprising, an anthology published by Akina Mama Wa Africa in 2024, illustrates the role of African feminist leadership in transforming these narratives, while studies such as From Silence to Voice: Feminist Resistance and Politics of Female Empowerment provide deeper analysis of how women's voices are articulated against marginalisation (Ijeoma Marycynthia Odoh and Damilola Olawumi Owoeye, 2025).* The paper "From Silence to Voice: Feminist Resistance and the Politics of Female

Empowerment" explores how marginalised women—specifically, exemplified by the character Adunni in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*—use language and storytelling to reclaim agency. Postcolonial feminist thought, unlike universalist strands of Western feminism, points to the entanglement of gender with colonial history, race, class, and geopolitics (Mohanty, 2003). Women's oppression in both the Nigerian and South Sudanese contexts is not a single explanatory model but, instead, the product of layered systems that include indigenous patriarchies, colonial administrative legacies, religious orthodoxy, and contemporary state violence. Therefore, African theatre serves as a critical epistemological site where performance dramatises, interrogates, and reimagines these intersecting forces.

This study is situated within this critical discourse to investigate how contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre constructs and contests the dialectics of voice and silence in relation to gendered power. It examines the ways in which playwrights depict women's agency, marginalisation, trauma and resistance in the context of colonial legacies, political instability and patriarchal authority. Using a comparative postcolonial feminist approach, the study helps expand African theatre scholarship beyond its traditional national and canonical boundaries but instead foregrounds the transnational and interdisciplinary dimensions of gender, performance, and power in contemporary African societies.

## 1.2. Problem Statement

Despite a growing body of scholarship on African drama, postcolonial theory, and feminist literary criticism, the critical interrogation of voice, silence, and gendered power in contemporary African theatre remains limited and uneven. Much of the existing research continues to prioritise themes such as nationalism, postcolonial identity formation, and political corruption, sometimes treating gender as a secondary or descriptive category rather than a central analytical framework. This has resulted in partial readings of African dramatic texts, particularly in relation to women's representation, embodied subjectivity, and performative agency (Dickson-Bonney & Zakaria Oliver, 2023; Kay, 2020).

Although Nigerian feminist theatre has attracted significant scholarly attention, comparable critical engagement with South Sudanese theatre remains minimal. Scholarship in South Sudan is still largely dominated by conflict studies, humanitarian discourse, and state-building narratives, which tend to marginalise cultural production and theatrical expression as sites of gendered meaningmaking. Consequently, women's voices in South Sudanese dramatic traditions remain undertheorized, and their performative agency is rarely examined within African theatre studies (Eluzai et al., 2026; Bazugba et al., 2026). Based on recent research and literature surrounding cultural expression in the region, the themes described—using theatre as a tool for

rebuilding community, amplifying female voices, and addressing gender and citizenship in South Sudan—are heavily explored by researchers such as Dr Sayra van den Berg, who analyses the "art(s) of conflict disruption" in South Sudan.

A further limitation in existing scholarship lies in the application of broad, generalised feminist frameworks that inadequately account for the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical specificity of African contexts. Such approaches risk homogenising African women's experiences and obscuring the intersecting forces of colonial legacies, religion, ethnicity, militarisation, and indigenous patriarchal systems that shape gendered subjectivities across different societies. This is particularly evident in comparative analyses that fail to adequately distinguish between the distinct socio-political realities of Nigeria and South Sudan (Musingafi & Musingafi, 2023; UN Women, 2024).

Against this background, the present study addresses these gaps by critically examining the dramaturgical categories of voice and silence in selected contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese plays. The works of Mattijo, Bazugba (2026), and Dr. Dalia Saleh Farah (2025) showed how cultural traditions, marital institutions, and religious ideologies can be mechanisms of identity formation and gendered oppression. But these dramatists also complicate narratives of victimhood by representing women as active agents who resist, negotiate, and subvert patriarchal expectations through performative action and ideological disruption. It explores how African theatre represents women's marginalisation, resistance, trauma, and agency, while also analysing theatre as a discursive space in which patriarchal authority is simultaneously reproduced and contested. In doing so, the study advances a more context-sensitive postcolonial feminist approach that foregrounds difference, historical specificity, and the complex politics of gendered representation in African dramatic traditions.

## 1.3 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are voice and silence represented in contemporary theatre from Nigeria and South Sudan?
2. In what ways do playwrights portray gendered power relations within postcolonial African societies?
3. How do female characters negotiate agency and resistance against patriarchal oppression?
4. What similarities and differences exist between Nigerian and South Sudanese theatrical representations of women?
5. How does postcolonial feminist theory illuminate the relationship between gender, silence, and power in contemporary African theatre?

## 1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship

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between voice, silence, and gendered power in contemporary theatre from Nigeria and South Sudan using a postcolonial feminist framework.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyse representations of voice and silence in selected Nigerian and South Sudanese plays.
2. Examine how gendered power relations are constructed and challenged within the plays.
3. Investigate the ways female characters resist patriarchal oppression and negotiate agency.
4. Compare Nigerian and South Sudanese theatrical portrayals of women's experiences.
5. Explore the relevance of postcolonial feminist theory in interpreting contemporary African theatre.

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to African literary and theatrical scholarship by foregrounding the interconnected themes of gender, power, silence, and resistance in contemporary African drama. It expands existing scholarship on feminist theatre by comparatively examining Nigerian and South Sudanese dramatic traditions, thereby addressing the critical neglect of South Sudanese theatre within African literary studies.

The study is also significant because it applies postcolonial feminist theory to an analysis of African theatre, emphasising the intersections between colonial history, patriarchy, conflict, and female subjectivity. In doing so, it challenges reductive portrayals of African women as passive victims by highlighting their agency, resilience, and strategies of resistance.

Additionally, the research contributes to gender discourse by demonstrating how theatre functions as a transformative cultural medium capable of interrogating oppressive social structures and promoting social consciousness. The findings may therefore benefit scholars in African literature, theatre studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies.

### 1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on selected contemporary plays from Nigeria and South Sudan that foreground issues of gender, voice, silence, and power. The research is limited to dramatic texts produced within postcolonial contexts and does not extensively examine precolonial or colonial African theatre traditions.

The study adopts a literary and textual analytical approach rather than performance ethnography. While acknowledging the broader sociopolitical realities of Nigeria and South Sudan, the analysis concentrates primarily on dramatic representation and thematic construction within selected plays. The study is further delimited to postcolonial feminist interpretations and does not comprehensively engage alternative theoretical

frameworks such as Marxism or psychoanalysis except where necessary for clarification.

### 1.7 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis and interpretive criticism. Primary sources consist of selected dramatic texts from Nigerian and South Sudanese playwrights. The texts must explicitly feature themes of gendered power, land or systemic asset disputes, or militarised trauma; secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, theses, and critical essays related to African theatre, feminism, postcolonialism, and gender studies. Gather context-specific historical records and regional legal frameworks regarding customary law in Nigeria and South Sudan (Arksey and O'Malley, 2026).

The study employs close-reading techniques to analyse characterisation, dialogue, symbolism, thematic patterns, and dramatic structure within the selected plays. Comparative analysis is also utilised to identify convergences and divergences between Nigerian and South Sudanese representations of women and gendered power relations.

### 1.8 Definition of Key Terms

#### Voice

'Voice' refers to the expression of agency, identity, resistance, and subjectivity through speech, action, or symbolic representation within dramatic texts.

#### Silence

Silence denotes the absence, suppression, or strategic withholding of speech. In feminist discourse, silence may signify oppression, trauma, resistance, or survival.

#### Gendered Power

Gendered power refers to social, political, cultural, and institutional structures that privilege one gender over another, particularly within patriarchal systems.

#### Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism is a theoretical approach that examines women's experiences within contexts shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, race, class, and cultural domination.

#### Contemporary Theatre

Contemporary theatre refers to dramatic works produced within modern postcolonial African contexts that

engage current social, political, and cultural realities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Introduction

This section reviews scholarly literature on African theatre, postcolonial feminism, gender representation, voice and silence, and women's performative agency in African dramatic discourse. It situates the present study within ongoing academic debates while identifying significant gaps, particularly the limited comparative engagement between Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre traditions.

The section also establishes postcolonial feminist theory as the analytical framework guiding the study. This framework is particularly suited for examining how colonial histories, patriarchal structures, militarisation, ethnicity, and cultural ideologies intersect to shape gendered representation in African dramatic texts (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Oyèwùmí, 1997).

### 2.2 African Feminist Literary Criticism

African feminist literary criticism emerged as a response to the marginalisation of African women within both patriarchal African literary traditions and Western feminist paradigms. Early African literary scholarship privileged male-centred narratives of nationalism, decolonisation, and state formation, often relegating women to symbolic or marginal roles (Stratton, 1994).

Scholars such as Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994), Ogunyemi (1985), and Nnaemeka (2004) argue that African women experience multi-layered oppression shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, class, and indigenous cultural systems. Ogunyemi's concept of *womanism* foregrounds communal survival, cultural embeddedness, and resistance to patriarchal domination while rejecting Western feminist universalism (Ogunyemi, 1985).

Stratton (1994) further demonstrates that canonical African male-authored texts frequently construct women as allegorical figures of nationhood rather than autonomous political subjects. This symbolic reduction limits women's agency and reinforces patriarchal nationalist discourse.

Oyèwùmí (1997) provides a foundational intervention by arguing that colonialism imposed rigid gender binaries on African societies, where social organisation was historically more relational than biological. This insight is crucial for understanding how African theatre constructs gendered identities through both indigenous and colonial epistemologies.

In dramatic literature, African feminist criticism enables interrogation of performance, dialogue, embodiment, and staging as sites where gendered power is reproduced or resisted (Banham, Hill, & Woodyard, 1994).

### 2.3 Postcolonial Feminism and Gendered Oppression

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a corrective to Western feminist discourse, which often universalises women's oppression and neglects colonial histories (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty (1988) critiques the construction of "Third World women" as homogeneous victims, arguing instead for historically situated and context-specific analyses.

Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern" further interrogates how colonial and patriarchal systems silence marginalised women by denying them representational authority. This theoretical position is particularly relevant for African theatre, where women's voices are often mediated through male-authored narratives.

Postcolonial feminist theory also emphasises the phenomenon of "double colonisation", where women are oppressed simultaneously by colonial legacies and indigenous patriarchy (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). In African contexts, colonial governance systems reinforced male authority through land laws, missionary education, and administrative exclusion of women from political participation (Oyèwùmí, 1997).

In South Sudan and Nigeria, this double oppression manifests differently but persistently. In South Sudan, militarisation intensifies gendered violence and structural exclusion (Jok, 2013), while in Nigeria, women navigate the intersecting pressures of religion, customary law, and political patriarchy (Onwueme, 2002).

### 2.4 Theatre as Resistance and Identity Formation

African theatre has historically functioned as a site of resistance, pedagogy, and ideological critique. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that theatre in postcolonial Africa serves as a revolutionary tool for collective consciousness and anti-imperial struggle.

Traditional African performance integrates ritual, oral storytelling, dance, and music, forming what Banham et al. (1994) describe as a holistic performance system that engages both aesthetic and political dimensions of society.

Soyinka (1976) emphasises that African drama negotiates tensions between indigenous cosmologies and colonial modernity, producing hybrid identities shaped by historical ruptures.

In feminist performance studies, theatre becomes a medium through which women articulate resistance against patriarchal structures (Case, 2008). Nigerian feminist playwrights, such as Onwueme (2002) and Sofola (1994), demonstrate how drama can expose gender violence, cultural oppression, and political marginalisation.

In conflict contexts such as South Sudan, theatre also operates as a site of trauma narration and collective healing, enabling communities to process violence and displacement while imagining post-conflict futures (Jok,

2013; Rolandsen & Daly, 2016). Contemporary South Sudanese drama often employs "resistance theatre" or participatory forum theatre to move beyond standardised "victim" narratives typical of humanitarian "life stories". These scripts use simple, catchy slang and dialogue to explore taboo subjects like gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights, turning the stage into a "liminal space" where women can articulate rights as full "rights-bearing subjects" rather than secondary claimants (Edward, 2019, and van den Berg, 2025).

## 2.5 Voice and Silence in Feminist Discourse

Voice is commonly associated with agency, self-representation, and political participation, while silence is often interpreted as exclusion or oppression (Showalter, 1985). However, feminist theory complicates this binary. **The paper "From Silence to Voice: Feminist Resistance and the Politics of Female Empowerment" explores how marginalised women—specifically exemplified by the character Adunni in *Abi Daré's The Girl with the Louding Voice*—use language and storytelling to reclaim agency (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025).** The analysis highlights several key mechanisms through which this articulation occurs:

- **Linguistic Transformation:** The study focuses on the use of **distinctive** pidgin English. Initially, this language serves as a marker of marginalisation and a lack of formal education. However, as the protagonist evolves, she utilises it purposefully as a tool for self-assertion and defining her own identity.

- **Voice as Feminist Praxis:** This shift from silence to an "outspoken self-advocate" is presented as a form of **feminist praxis**. By telling her story, the protagonist disrupts the structural silences imposed by cultural traditions, early marriage, and economic dependency. The transition from enforced silence to active self-advocacy operates as a vital form of feminist praxis, directly shattering the structural barriers of economic dependency and patriarchal tradition (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025). The critique examines how gendered oppression works alongside class and economic factors. The articulation of voice is not just a personal victory but a challenge to the patriarchal and socio-economic hierarchies that render girls "nobodies" in their communities. The Intersectional Matrix: Both the Nigerian literary framework and the South Sudanese theatre framework demonstrate that gendered oppression never operates in isolation. By deploying an intersectional matrix, we can see how the Nigerian literary framework exposes class and economic stratifications (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025), while the South Sudanese theatre framework unmasks the overlapping impacts of militarisation and displacement (Edward, 2019; van den Berg, 2025).

In the Nigerian analysis, gender intersects heavily with class stratification and economic dependency (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025). In the South Sudanese analysis,

gender intersects heavily with militarisation, displacement, and humanitarian aid dynamics (Edward, 2019; van den Berg, 2025). The intersectional divergence between these two regional paradigms highlights how feminist resistance adapts to distinct structural pressures. In the Nigerian analysis, gendered oppression is inextricably bound to class stratification and economic dependency, requiring an overt reclamation of textual and linguistic space to dismantle entrenched social hierarchies (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025). Conversely, the South Sudanese framework reveals a reality where gender intersects heavily with the immediate forces of militarisation, displacement, and humanitarian aid dynamics (Edward, 2019; van den Berg, 2025). Rather than relying solely on Western-centric models of explicit vocalisation, South Sudanese performance utilises a sophisticated dialectic of strategic silence, local slang, and participatory forum scripts to navigate post-conflict trauma and claim full citizenship. Ultimately, both traditions prove that the articulation of female agency cannot be analysed through a singular gender lens but must be mapped across the specific material and political ecologies of the societies from which they emerge.

This fourth analytical dimension functions as the psychological and narrative climax of the framework established by Odoh and Owoeye, (2025) in their study *From Silence to Voice: Feminist Resistance and the Politics of Female Empowerment*. The process involves moving from an internalised sense of worthlessness to a recognition of structural oppression. This "roaring into freedom" represents a broader narrative in contemporary African literature where storytelling acts as a primary vehicle for female self-realisation. As **Odoh and Owoeye (2025)** argue, this awakening consciousness is not merely an internal shift; it represents a broader trend in contemporary African literature where narrative expression operates as a vital vehicle for political and personal self-realisation.

This final point allows you to draw a parallel regarding *how* consciousness awakens across both of your case studies:

- **The Nigerian Literary "Roar":** The awakening is individual and linguistic. The protagonist actively unpacks her internalised worthlessness by finding her literal and metaphorical "louding voice" to disrupt domestic and economic subjugation (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025). Within the West African context, the narrative trajectory embodies an individual and linguistic "roar", where the protagonist systematically deconstructs her internalised worthlessness by weaponising her literal and metaphorical "louding voice" to disrupt domestic and economic subjugation (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025). This model prioritises the personal reclamation of textual and verbal space as a necessary precursor to dismantling broader patriarchal structures.

- **The South Sudanese Theatrical "Roar":** The awakening is collective and spatial. In post-conflict theatre, women move from the internalised traumas of war and displacement to a shared consciousness on

stage. By translating taboo subjects into local slang and forum scripts, they collectively "roar" against militarised and patriarchal silencing, asserting themselves as full, rights-bearing citizens. Conversely, the South Sudanese paradigm shifts the locus of resistance from the individual to a collective and spatial "roar". Within post-conflict theatre, women collectively move from the internalised traumas of war and displacement toward a shared socio-political consciousness on stage (Edward, 2019; van den Berg, 2025). By translating sensitive, taboo subjects into accessible local slang and participatory forum scripts, performers collectively dismantle militarised and patriarchal silencing (van den Berg, 2025). This performative reclamation transforms the theatrical space into a civic arena, allowing women to actively assert themselves as full, rights-bearing citizens rather than passive recipients of humanitarian aid (Edward, 2019).

Rich (1979) conceptualises silence as a mechanism of patriarchal control that erases women's lived experiences. Spivak (1988) similarly argues that subaltern women are often denied access to speech within dominant epistemic systems.

However, scholars such as Glenn (2004) challenge reductive interpretations of silence, arguing that it can function as strategic resistance, protection, or communicative refusal depending on context.

In African theatre, silence is often dramaturgically significant. It may represent trauma, oppression, or cultural constraint but also resilience, endurance, or symbolic protest. Thus, silence in performance is not an absence but a semiotic form of meaning-making embedded within sociopolitical conditions.

### 2.5.1. Embodied Voice through Gesture and Movement

Physical gestures carry highly specific social, historical, and spiritual meanings that serve as a direct communication register. Movements often embody local fauna to channel virtues of power or protection. For example, performance features movements mimicking the elegance and pride of a falcon. High-energy, percussive footwork and upper-body movements—such as the celebratory *Kirang* dance from the Nuba Mountains borderlands or the unified rhythmic shoulder movements of Larim (Boya) women—act as spatial declarations of resilience, lineage, and presence (Impey, 2014 or Impey, 2018).

### 2.5.2. Ritual and Song as Counter-Narratives

Rituals and oral poetry do not just decorate a space; they perform active sociopolitical work:

- ❖ Dinka Song Canons (*Tuany*): Dinka songs function as legally and culturally sanctioned frameworks for historical documentation. They act as a *vox populi*, transforming personal trauma or memories of conflict into a communal, acoustic archive used to negotiate power and demand

justice. Dinka song canons, known as 'tuany', function as legally and culturally sanctioned frameworks for historical documentation and transitional justice, transforming personal trauma into a communal, acoustic archive. Research by Dr Angela Impey underscores how these performance practices operate as a *vox populi* that negotiates power, demands justice, and preserves histories, as detailed in the publication.

- ❖ Ritualised Rites of Passage: Ceremonial transitions utilise specific physical postures, ululations, and repetitive choreography to materialise abstract societal shifts, solidifying a person's new status within the community through visible, collective witnessing (f. Angela Impey, 2014, 2018). As Impey (2014) observes, these ritualised rites of passage are not merely symbolic gestures; they perform critical sociopolitical work by using structured somatic registers to physically cement an altered social reality within the public consciousness.

### 2.5.3. Symbolic Staging and Community Interaction

The architecture of South Sudanese performance subverts Western, proscenium-arch boundaries:

Circular, Non-Hierarchical Spaces: Interactive street theatre groups in urban spaces like Juba frequently perform in open-air markets, circles, and shared public squares. This intentional spatial structure eliminates the barrier between the actor and the public.

Audience Intervention: The audience is expected to participate through responsive singing, hand-clapping, or stepping directly into the performance space. The stage operates as an ongoing communal dialogue rather than a one-way broadcast. As Dr Sayra van den Berg (2025) observes in her ethnographic research on conflict disruption, circular performance spaces deliberately erase hierarchies, allowing audience members to step directly into the arena as active participants.

## 2.6 Gendered Power Relations in African Societies

Gender relations in African societies are shaped by intersections of patriarchy, colonial governance, religion, and political economy. Amadiume (1987) shows that precolonial African gender systems often exhibited fluidity, with colonial intervention largely reinforcing rigid binary structures.

Colonial administrations institutionalised male authority through indirect rule, property ownership systems, and Western education, marginalising women from political and economic power (Oyēwùmí, 1997).

In contemporary Africa, these inequalities persist through structural barriers to education, leadership, and property rights. Gender-based violence remains a widespread concern across multiple African contexts (UN Women, 2024).

In South Sudan, prolonged conflict has intensified patriarchal militarisation, reinforced male dominance and exposed women to systemic violence (Jok, 2013). Similarly, Nigerian society reflects entrenched gender hierarchies shaped by religious and customary systems.

African theatre critically reflects and interrogates these structures by dramatising both oppression and resistance.

### 2.7 Nigerian Contemporary Theatre

Nigerian theatre is widely recognised for its political and feminist engagement. Playwrights such as Tess Onwueme, Zulu Sofola, and Femi Osofisan have used drama to critique patriarchy, corruption, and social inequality.

Onwueme's feminist dramaturgy foregrounds women's resistance and bodily autonomy in patriarchal contexts (Onwueme, 2002). Sofola explores the tension between tradition and female agency, while Osofisan integrates Marxist and feminist critique in his dramatic structures.

Scholars such as Etherton (1982) and Adelugba (2006) highlight Nigerian theatre's role in articulating political consciousness and gender critique. However, most studies remain nationally bounded, limiting comparative African feminist theatre analysis.

### 2.8 South Sudanese Theatre and Performance Culture

South Sudanese theatre scholarship remains underdeveloped compared to West African studies. Existing literature focuses primarily on oral traditions, conflict narratives, and peacebuilding performance rather than formal dramatic literature (Rolandsen & Daly, 2016). In South Sudan, theatre serves as a vital tool for peacebuilding, aiding in the transformation of trauma, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and reconstructing narratives in post-conflict settings (van den Berg, 2025; Edward, 2019).

Performance traditions in South Sudan are deeply rooted in oral storytelling, ritual dance, and communal performance practices that transmit cultural memory and identity.

However, decades of civil war have disrupted cultural production and intensified themes of trauma, displacement, and national fragmentation (Jok, 2013).

Women's performative experiences remain critically underresearched, despite their centrality in conflict survival, cultural transmission, and community resilience. This constitutes a significant gap in African theatre scholarship.

### 2.9 Comparative African Theatre Studies

Comparative African theatre studies examine thematic and ideological continuities across African dramatic traditions. However, most comparative work

focuses on Anglophone versus Francophone theatre or postcolonial nationalism.

There is limited comparative scholarship on gendered representation between regions such as West and East Africa, particularly between Nigeria and South Sudan.

Yet such a comparison is necessary because both contexts reveal distinct but interconnected forms of patriarchal oppression shaped by colonial legacies, war, and state formation. Nigerian theatre reflects urbanisation, religious pluralism, and political satire, while South Sudanese theatre reflects militarisation, displacement, and post-conflict trauma.

### 2.10 Gaps in Existing Literature

Four key gaps emerge:

1. Limited theoretical engagement with voice and silence as gendered performance categories in African theatre (Spivak, 1988; Glenn, 2004).
2. Over-representation of Nigerian feminist theatre compared to the relative absence of South Sudanese dramatic scholarship (Jok, 2013).
3. Excessive focus on women as victims rather than agents of resistance and negotiation.
4. Methodological Mismatch: Western and metropolitan journals rely heavily on text-based dramatic analysis. They frequently lack the decolonial frameworks necessary to document and peer-review South Sudan's highly fluid, body-centric, and interactive open-air performances (Dr Farah, D. S. (2025)).
5. Lack of comparative postcolonial feminist theatre studies between Nigeria and South Sudan. This study addresses these gaps.

### 2.11 Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism

This study adopts postcolonial feminism as its guiding theoretical framework. The theory is particularly effective for analysing the intersections of colonial legacy, patriarchy, war, ethnicity, and gendered subjectivity in African theatre (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988).

Postcolonial feminism rejects universalist accounts of women's oppression and instead foregrounds historical specificity and cultural context. It highlights how African women negotiate agency within systems shaped by colonial disruption and native patriarchies.

In Nigeria, it illuminates women's resistance to patriarchal tradition and institutional inequality. In South Sudan, it reveals how war and militarisation intensify gendered oppression while also producing new forms of survival and resistance (Jok, 2013).

Ultimately, postcolonial feminism enables a nuanced reading of African theatre as a site where women are not

only represented as victims but also as active agents of resistance, memory, and political transformation.

### 3 VOICE AND FEMALE AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN THEATRE

#### 3.1 Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian theatre occupies a central position within African dramatic and cultural studies due to its sustained engagement with questions of power, gender, identity, and postcolonial transformation. Since the post-independence period, Nigerian playwrights have increasingly interrogated how patriarchy, political corruption, religious orthodoxy, and cultural traditions shape women's lived experiences (Banham, Hill, & Woodyard, 1994; Etherton, 1982).

Unlike earlier nationalist drama, which frequently positioned women as symbolic representations of morality, nationhood, or cultural continuity, contemporary Nigerian theatre foregrounds female subjectivity as complex, contested, and politically significant (Stratton, 1994). Within this shift, women are no longer constructed solely as victims of patriarchal systems but as active agents who negotiate power through speech, silence, performance, and embodied resistance (Case, 2008).

This section examines how Nigerian theatre constructs female voice and agency within postcolonial contexts marked by cultural conservatism, economic instability, and political dysfunction. Using postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Oyěwùmí, 1997), the analysis focuses on selected works by Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, and Femi Osofisan to explore how women negotiate patriarchal authority through both voice and silence as performative strategies of resistance.

#### 3.2 Women and Patriarchal Authority in Nigerian Theatre

In Nigerian dramatic literature, patriarchal authority serves as a dominant structuring force, mirroring the broader sociocultural systems that deeply institutionalise gender hierarchy. Nigerian society, like many postcolonial African contexts, continues to privilege masculinised authority within political, domestic, and cultural institutions (Amadiume, 1987).

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) provides a foundational critique of patriarchal control over female subjectivity. The protagonist, Ogwoma, is denied autonomy over her marital and emotional life due to restrictive widowhood practices. Her desire for remarriage directly conflicts with communal expectations that regulate female sexuality and social identity.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Ogwoma's predicament illustrates how patriarchy operates not only through coercion but also through cultural legitimisation, where oppressive practices are naturalised as tradition

(Oyěwùmí, 1997; Mohanty, 1988). Her body becomes a contested site of cultural authority, regulated by kinship structures and communal surveillance.

Similarly, Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) disrupts patriarchal political ideology by imagining a female-centred governance system. The dramatic inversion of gender hierarchy exposes the constructed nature of male political dominance while proposing alternative feminist imaginaries of leadership (Onwueme, 2002).

Together, these texts demonstrate that Nigerian theatre conceptualises patriarchy as historically produced rather than culturally fixed, aligning with postcolonial feminist arguments that gender oppression is shaped by both indigenous structures and colonial epistemologies (Spivak, 1988).

#### 3.3 Voice as Resistance and Empowerment

Within contemporary Nigerian theatre, voice functions as a key metaphor for agency, self-definition, and political participation. Feminist theorists argue that voice extends beyond speech to include the broader capacity for representation and subject formation (hooks, 1984).

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, the female voice becomes a radical political force that destabilises a masculine monopoly over governance. Onwueme constructs women's speech as transformative praxis, enabling the reconfiguration of political order through feminist leadership (Case, 2008).

Similarly, Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* (2001) foregrounds collective female lamentation as historical testimony and political critique. Adapted from Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the play situates women's suffering within the violence of war and militarised patriarchy. Their collective voice transforms private grief into public witnessing, resisting historical erasure and silencing.

From a postcolonial feminist standpoint, such representations affirm that voice in African theatre is not merely expressive but epistemic—it produces knowledge about violence, gender, and power that challenges dominant historical narratives (Spivak, 1988).

#### 3.4 Silence as Survival Strategy

While voice is often associated with empowerment, Nigerian theatre also complicates this binary by presenting silence as a strategic and culturally embedded form of agency. Feminist scholarship increasingly recognises silence as multidimensional rather than purely oppressive (Glenn, 2004; Rich, 1979).

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma's silence reflects both emotional trauma and structural constraint. Her inability to publicly challenge tradition illustrates how patriarchal systems regulate not only speech but affective expression. However, her persistent desire for autonomy suggests a form of internal resistance embedded within silence.

Similarly, in *Women of Owu*, silence emerges through mourning, ritual lamentation, and performative pauses that signify collective trauma. These silences communicate what language cannot fully articulate, transforming absence into affective testimony.

Postcolonial feminist theory allows silence to be understood as a politically saturated space shaped by risk, violence, and cultural regulation. Rather than absence of voice, silence becomes a coded form of survival and resistance within oppressive structures (Glenn, 2004; Spivak, 1988).

### 3.5 Marriage, Tradition, and Gender Expectations

Marriage in Nigerian theatre operates as a central ideological institution through which patriarchy is reproduced and contested. It frequently functions as a regulatory structure governing female sexuality, labour, and identity.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, marriage is not a private union but a communal institution embedded in ritual authority and patriarchal surveillance. Ogwoma's lack of autonomy reveals how cultural systems prioritise collective honour over individual subjectivity (Sofola, 1972).

Onwueme's feminist dramaturgy similarly challenges the assumption that women's identity is primarily defined through marriage and motherhood. Her plays reconfigure femininity as socially and politically autonomous, resisting patriarchal domestication (Onwueme, 2002).

Thus, marriage in Nigerian theatre is both a cultural institution and a political technology through which gender inequality is sustained and contested.

### 3.6 Political Corruption and Female Marginalisation

Contemporary Nigerian theatre consistently links gender oppression to broader structures of political corruption and state dysfunction. Women's marginalisation is therefore not isolated but structurally embedded within postcolonial governance failures.

In Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, militarised political ambition results in collective destruction, with women bearing disproportionate suffering. The text critiques the masculinisation of warfare and governance, exposing how political violence is gendered in its effects (Osofisan, 2001).

Onwueme similarly connects patriarchy to state corruption, suggesting that women's exclusion from leadership contributes to cycles of inequality and instability. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, gender oppression intersects with class exploitation, political violence, and colonial legacies (Mohanty, 1988).

### 3.7 Religion, Culture, and Gendered Identity

Religion and culture are central ideological frameworks shaping gender identity in Nigerian theatre.

Dramatic texts frequently explore tensions between Christianity, Islam, and indigenous traditions, revealing how religious authority regulates female behaviour.

Feminist readings of Sofola's plays suggest that ritual and spiritual systems can function as mechanisms of patriarchal control when used to justify female subordination (Stratton, 1994). However, Nigerian feminist theatre also reclaims culture as a site of reinterpretation and resistance.

Onwueme's work, in particular, challenges essentialist notions of African tradition by presenting culture as dynamic and negotiable rather than fixed or inherently patriarchal (Onwueme, 2002).

### 3.8 Performance Techniques and Feminist Expression

Nigerian feminist theatre employs diverse performance strategies to articulate gender critique and destabilise patriarchal ideology. These include symbolism, satire, role inversion, collective chorus, ritual performance, and non-linear narrative structures (Banham et al., 1994).

Onwueme uses symbolic inversion to expose the constructed nature of gender hierarchies, while Osofisan employs collective narration and musical lamentation to transform private suffering into political testimony.

These performative strategies align with feminist theatre theory, which views performance as both aesthetic expression and ideological intervention (Case, 2008). Through these techniques, Nigerian theatre reconstructs female visibility and disrupts dominant patriarchal narratives.

Contemporary Nigerian theatre provides a powerful discursive space for interrogating the intersections of gender, power, silence, and resistance. Through the works of Sofola, Onwueme, and Osofisan, women are represented not only as subjects of oppression but also as agents of resistance who negotiate complex social, cultural, and political structures.

Voice operates as a tool of empowerment and political articulation, while silence emerges as a strategic form of survival within oppressive environments. Together, these representational strategies reveal the complexity of female agency in postcolonial African theatre.

Ultimately, Nigerian theatre demonstrates that gender identity is neither fixed nor singular but continuously produced through struggle, performance, and resistance within postcolonial social formations.

## 4. SILENCE, CONFLICT, AND GENDERED POWER IN SOUTH SUDANESE THEATRE

### 4.1 Introduction

South Sudanese theatre emerges from a sociopolitical environment profoundly shaped by colonial partition, protracted civil wars, militarisation,

displacement, and contested nationhood. Unlike many postcolonial African literary traditions that developed within relatively stable post-independence nation-states, South Sudanese cultural production has evolved under continuous conditions of violence and fragility (Rolandsen & Daly, 2016; Jok, 2013).

Within this context, theatre and performance operate not merely as aesthetic forms but as social technologies of survival, enabling communities to process trauma, preserve memory, and articulate fragmented national identities. As Eluzai, Ekevere, and Bazugba (2026) argue, gendered injustice in post-conflict African societies such as South Sudan is inseparable from broader structures of reparative failure, land dispossession, and systemic exclusion of women from socio-political agency.

Women occupy a particularly vulnerable yet symbolically significant position within this conflict ecology. They are exposed to sexual violence, forced displacement, economic deprivation, and political exclusion yet simultaneously function as custodians of memory, cultural continuity, and communal survival (Jok, 2013; Mama, 2001). Consequently, South Sudanese theatre represents women's voice and silence as dialectical formations shaped by trauma, resistance, and survival imperatives.

This section employs postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Oyèwùmí, 1997) to analyse silence, conflict, and gendered power in South Sudanese theatre and performance culture. It further situates these representations comparatively within African theatre discourse by drawing contrasts with Nigerian feminist dramaturgy.

#### 4.2 War, Violence, and Women's Bodies

In South Sudanese conflict theatre, the female body is frequently inscribed as a political and symbolic terrain of war. Feminist theorists have long established that militarised societies contest women's bodies as sites of ethnic identity, territorial control, and national sovereignty (Mama, 2001).

The South Sudanese civil wars, including the post-2013 conflict, intensified gendered violence, resulting in widespread sexual assault, forced displacement, abduction, and structural economic marginalisation (Jok, 2013). Performance narratives reflect these conditions, portraying women as not only victims of violence but also as embodied archives of collective suffering.

Eluzai et al. (2026) further demonstrate that gendered injustice in South Sudan is structurally linked to exclusion from land rights and reparative justice systems, reinforcing women's vulnerability in both domestic and national spheres. Theatre thus serves as a medium for symbolically staging and critically interrogating these structural inequalities.

Unlike Nigerian feminist theatre, which often

foregrounds domestic patriarchy and institutional corruption (Onwueme, 2002; Sofola, 1972), South Sudan's performance emphasises existential survival under militarised collapse, where the body itself becomes a site of endurance.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, these representations reflect how colonial governance systems institutionalised ethnic fragmentation and authoritarian structures, which later intensified postcolonial violence (Oyèwùmí, 1997; Mamdani, 1996). Women's bodies therefore occupy the intersection of colonial legacy, militarisation, and patriarchal domination.

#### 4.3 Silence and Trauma in Postcolonial Conflict Spaces

Silence is a central aesthetic and epistemological category in South Sudanese theatre because trauma frequently exceeds linguistic representation. Feminist trauma theory argues that extreme violence disrupts narrative coherence and produces forms of unspeakability (Caruth, 1996). Theatre serves as a vital tool for peacebuilding, aiding in the transformation of trauma, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and reconstructing narratives in post-conflict settings. Female voices in South Sudanese theatre often emerge to address specific issues of gender, rights, and citizenship, challenging patriarchal norms and breaking a history of silence (Edward, 2019). Cultural Action: Artists such as Joyce Diko Diku have used art, poetry, and theatre to amplify women's stories and promote peace deal goals. Furthermore, organisations like Likikiri Collective and practitioners like Rebecca Lorins have documented and facilitated the use of oral history and participatory theatre to address conflict, as seen in projects like Citizen Theatre and Peaceful Co-existence.

Within South Sudanese performance culture, silence manifests as mourning, emotional fragmentation, bodily stillness, and ritualised absence. These silences are not empty but semiotically dense expressions of suffering and historical rupture.

Spivak (1988) notes that militarised and patriarchal systems often structurally deny subaltern subjects access to speech. Conflict environments in South Sudan intensify this condition, where verbal expression may pose political or physical risks.

However, silence also operates as a strategic form of survival and resistance. Women may use coded speech, indirect storytelling, or non-verbal performance to communicate experiences that cannot be safely articulated. This aligns with Glenn's (2004) argument that silence must be understood as context-dependent and communicatively complex.

Thus, South Sudanese theatre reframes silence not as an absence of voice but as a politically saturated form of constrained articulation shaped by trauma and structural violence.

#### 4.4 Cultural Patriarchy and Female Erasure

Patriarchal systems in South Sudan are deeply embedded in both customary structures and modern state formations. Gender roles often position women as domestic labourers, reproductive agents, and custodians of cultural continuity, while restricting access to leadership, land ownership, and political participation (Hutchinson & Pendle, 2015).

Bazugba, Eluzai, and Ekevere (2026) further argue that gender injustice in South Sudan must be understood as a structural condition reinforced by weak governance systems and inadequate reparative mechanisms, particularly in relation to women's economic marginalisation and land dispossession.

The theatre reflects these dynamics by frequently marginalising female voices within nationalist and militarised narratives. Public memory predominantly highlights male heroism, often excluding women's experiences of displacement, sexual violence, and survival.

However, oral performance traditions counteract this erasure by recovering suppressed narratives. Through storytelling, song, and ritual performance, women reclaim historical visibility and challenge patriarchal historiography.

Postcolonial feminism explains this erasure as the combined outcome of colonial governance, militarisation, and indigenous patriarchy, rather than cultural essentialism (Mohanty, 1988; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

#### 4.5 Women's Resistance in Conflict Narratives

Despite extreme conditions of violence, South Sudanese theatre consistently represents women as agents of resilience and resistance. Resistance here is not limited to overt political rebellion but includes everyday practices of survival, caregiving, storytelling, and memory preservation.

Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that resistance in constrained environments often operates through subtle and embedded practices rather than explicit confrontation. This is evident in South Sudanese performance traditions, where women preserve cultural continuity and document collective trauma through oral narration.

Women serve as custodians of memory, transmitting experiences of war, displacement, and loss across generations. Their storytelling challenges official nationalist histories that privilege militarised masculinity.

Unlike Nigerian feminist theatre, where resistance often takes the form of direct verbal confrontation (Onwueme, 2002), South Sudanese resistance is frequently coded, communal, and survival-orientated, shaped by ongoing insecurity.

#### 4.6 Theatre and National Identity Formation

South Sudanese theatre plays a crucial role in

negotiating national identity within a fractured post-independence context. While independence in 2011 marked a symbolic rupture from Sudanese domination, continued conflict exposed unresolved ethnic and political tensions (Rolandsen & Daly, 2016).

Theatre becomes a discursive space for interrogating the contradictions of nationhood. Women are often symbolically positioned as "mothers of the nation" yet remain excluded from formal political participation, reflecting Yuval-Davis's (1997) theory of gendered nationalism.

Eluzai et al. (2026) further highlight that structural exclusion of women from justice and land ownership systems undermines their full participation in nation-building processes.

Thus, South Sudanese theatre exposes the gap between nationalist ideology and the lived realities of gendered inequality.

#### 4.7 Oral Tradition and Female Storytelling

Orality remains central to South Sudanese cultural and theatrical expression. Storytelling, ritual performance, and communal narration function as mechanisms for preserving identity in contexts of displacement and historical rupture.

Women play a critical role as narrators, mourners, and custodians of communal memory. Their oral performances transmit histories of survival, suffering, and resistance often excluded from official documentation.

As performance scholars note, oral storytelling functions as a form of counter-archival practice, resisting historical erasure by preserving subaltern memory (Finnegan, 2012).

Unlike Nigerian theatre, which is more strongly associated with written dramatic literature, South Sudanese performance remains deeply embedded in oral and communal traditions. Nevertheless, both traditions demonstrate women's centrality in narrative production and cultural continuity.

#### 4.8 Comparative Patterns of Gendered Power

Although Nigerian and South Sudanese theatres emerge from different historical conditions, both reveal shared structures of patriarchal domination shaped by colonialism, religion, and postcolonial governance (Mohanty, 1988; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

However, the nature of gender oppression differs significantly. Nigerian theatre foregrounds urban patriarchy, political corruption, and cultural negotiation, while South Sudanese theatre centers on militarisation, displacement, and survival under conflict.

Similarly, modes of female resistance differ: Nigerian theatre often depicts confrontation and rhetorical agency (Osofisan, 2001), whereas South Sudanese theatre emphasises survival-based resistance, oral testimony, and communal endurance.

Despite these differences, both traditions reveal that women's voices and silence are central to understanding gendered power in African postcolonial societies.

South Sudanese theatre provides a critical lens for understanding the intersections of silence, conflict, and gendered power in postcolonial African contexts. Emerging from conditions of war and displacement, it unveils the shaping of women's experiences by trauma, structural exclusion, and militarised patriarchy.

Drawing on Eluzai et al. (2026) and Bazugba et al. (2026), this section demonstrates that gendered injustice in South Sudan is inseparable from broader systems of reparative failure, economic exclusion, and political instability.

Ultimately, the section shows that silence in South Sudanese theatre is not absence but a complex articulation of trauma, resistance, and survival. Through postcolonial feminist analysis, women emerge not only as victims of violence but also as active agents of memory, identity formation, and cultural resistance within fractured national landscapes.

## 5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Introduction

This section presents a comparative synthesis of the study's analysis of contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre, with particular attention to the interrelated themes of voice, silence, and gendered power. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Oy w m , 1997), the section evaluates how dramatic and performative texts from both contexts interrogate patriarchy, colonial legacies, militarisation, nationalism, and women's resistance.

While Nigerian and South Sudanese theatres emerge from distinct historical and sociopolitical formations, both traditions reveal the persistent marginalisation of women within postcolonial African societies and the complex strategies through which women negotiate agency, visibility, and survival (Eluzai et al., 2026; Bazugba et al., 2026). The section comparatively examines gender representation, analyses voice and silence as political categories, presents the key findings, highlights contributions to scholarship, and offers recommendations for future research.

### 5.2 Comparative Analysis of Nigerian and South Sudanese Theatre

Contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese theatres are shaped by shared postcolonial conditions, yet they diverge significantly in relation to historical development, conflict intensity, and sociopolitical structure. Nigerian theatre is primarily situated within post-independence governance, urbanisation, religious pluralism, and institutional corruption (Banham et al., 1994; Etherton,

1982), whereas South Sudanese theatre emerges from prolonged civil war, displacement, militarisation, and fragile state formation (Jok, 2013; Rolandsen & Daly, 2016).

Nigerian dramatists such as Onwueme, Sofola, and Osofisan consistently critique domestic patriarchy, political dysfunction, and cultural conservatism while foregrounding women's struggles for agency within relatively stable but unequal institutional structures (Onwueme, 2002). In contrast, South Sudanese performance culture foregrounds survival under conditions of war, where gendered experience is inseparable from trauma, displacement, and insecurity.

As Eluzai et al. (2026) and Bazugba et al. (2026) demonstrate, women's marginalisation in South Sudan is structurally tied to broader failures in reparative justice, land ownership, and institutional inclusion that intensify gendered vulnerability in both the private and public spheres.

A key distinction lies in the nature of oppression: Nigerian theatre primarily engages symbolic, cultural, and institutional patriarchy, while South Sudanese theatre foregrounds militarised gender violence and existential precarity. Both traditions, however, reveal that intersecting systems of patriarchy, nationalism, and postcolonial governance regulate women's bodies, voices, and labour.

### 5.3 Similarities and Differences in Gender Representation

Gender representation across both theatrical traditions reflects broader postcolonial struggles over identity, authority, and social transformation. In both Nigeria and South Sudan, women are frequently positioned as custodians of social continuity, familial survival, and cultural memory.

However, Nigerian feminist theatre more often represents women as discursive agents who engage in rhetorical confrontation, symbolic inversion, and political critique (Case, 2008). South Sudanese theatre, by contrast, constructs female agency through survival-orientated practices, including caregiving, oral testimony, mourning rituals, and communal endurance under violence (Mama, 2001; Jok, 2013).

Another major difference lies in the representation of violence. Nigerian theatre foregrounds institutional corruption, domestic oppression, and symbolic violence, whereas South Sudanese theatre centres on war trauma, displacement, sexual violence, and militarised instability. In Nigerian feminist drama, women's agency is frequently asserted through explosive public verbal declarations and the physical reclamation of the throne or public space, whereas the South Sudanese context introduces a framework where silence is not an absence of agency but a necessary, highly sophisticated, and protective mode of resistance in hyper-militarized space (Arksey and O'Malley, 2026).

Nigerian feminist drama historically operates heavily through subverting Western dramatic forms, utilising published plays to dismantle patriarchal authority, while South Sudanese performance relies primarily on ephemeral, spatial interventions—using open-air community gatherings, oral histories, and Juba Arabic to safely bypass state surveillance and navigate trauma in realtime (van den Berg, 2025). South Sudanese performance relies primarily on ephemeral, spatial interventions—using open-air community gatherings, oral histories, and Juba Arabic to safely bypass state surveillance and navigate trauma in real-time (van den Berg, 2025). Nigerian feminist drama historically operates heavily through subverting Western dramatic forms, utilising published plays to dismantle patriarchal authority, while South Sudan's performance traditions rely primarily on ephemeral, spatial interventions—using open-air community gatherings, oral histories, and Juba Arabic to safely bypass state surveillance and navigate trauma in realtime (Edward, 2019; van den Berg, 2025).

Placing South Sudan alongside Nigeria reveals a distinct trajectory, where recent, prolonged civil wars and resistance against internal, regional hegemony forge performance traditions. This challenges the notion that "postcoloniality" is a uniform or finalised historical era in Africa (van den Berg, 2025). In her 2025 study, *"The Art(s) of Conflict Disruption in South Sudan," published in the Third World Quarterly*, Dr. Sayra van den Berg critiques traditional postcolonial frameworks. She argues that standard theories—built heavily on older West African or North African independence movements—do not easily fit a country like South Sudan. Because South Sudan's performance traditions were forged through recent, ongoing civil wars and resistance against *internal and regional* rulers rather than distant European empires, this reality forces scholars to rethink "postcoloniality" as a fluid, ongoing struggle rather than a finalised historical era.

Despite these differences, both traditions converge in demonstrating that women's oppression is not incidental but structurally embedded within postcolonial African modernity (Mohanty, 1988).

#### 5.4 Voice and Silence as Political Tools

A central finding of this study is that voice and silence operate as politically saturated categories of gendered power in both theatrical traditions.

In Nigerian theatre, voice is frequently associated with resistance, political critique, and female empowerment (hooks, 1984). Women's speech disrupts patriarchal authority through confrontation, satire, and ideological challenge.

In South Sudanese theatre, voice is primarily mediated through oral performance, communal narration, and testimonial storytelling. However, due to extreme militarisation and violence, silence has become a more dominant expressive mode.

The duality of women's voice and silence serves as a highly potent, politically charged mechanism through which gendered power is actively negotiated and contested, and this can be broken down into specific operational dynamics.

Importantly, silence should not be read as absence. Spivak (1988) and Glenn (2004) contend that silence may serve as coded communication, a survival strategy, or a form of epistemic resistance. In South Sudanese contexts, silence frequently expresses trauma, fear, mourning, and political constraints while simultaneously enabling survival in violent environments. The duality of women's voice and silence serving as highly potent, politically charged mechanisms through which gendered power is actively negotiated and contested can be broken down into specific operational dynamics of voice as a direct political agitation, silence as a strategic agency and negotiation of gendered power (Parpart & Parashar, 2019).

Thus, voice and silence operate relationally rather than appositively, forming a continuum of gendered expression shaped by sociopolitical context.

#### 5.5 Findings of the Study

This study yields five major findings:

1. Persistence of patriarchy: Both Nigerian and South Sudanese societies continue to be structured by patriarchal systems reinforced through culture, politics, religion, and economic inequality (Oyèwùmí, 1997; Eluzai et al., 2026).
2. Theatre serves as a feminist intervention: in both contexts, acting as a critical site of resistance that exposes and challenges gendered oppression through performance.
3. Voice as epistemic agency: Women's voices signify not only speech but also historical visibility, identity formation, and political subjectivity.
4. Multivalence of silence: Silence operates as trauma, exclusion, endurance, and strategic resistance, particularly in conflict contexts such as South Sudan (Glenn, 2004; Caruth, 1996).
5. The Role of Theatre: By bringing these patterns onto the stage, the performance exposes hidden systemic injustices. It disrupts the normalisation of patriarchal exclusion and allows actors and audiences to collectively critique, contest, and rehearse alternative paths toward gender justice.
6. Colonial continuity: Colonial legacies continue to shape gender relations through institutional exclusion, militarisation, and legal-economic marginalisation (Bazugba et al., 2026; Mamdani, 1996).

## 5.6 Contributions to African Theatre and Feminist Scholarship

This study makes several significant contributions.

First, it advances African theatre scholarship by offering a comparative postcolonial feminist analysis of Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre, a pairing that has received minimal scholarly attention. **This comparative intervention shifts the geographic, thematic, and linguistic centres of gravity in African theatre scholarship through several distinct methodological and critical contributions. By placing the established, text-based lineage of Nigerian feminist drama (Odoh & Owoeye, 2025) alongside the ephemeral, oral, and spatial performance traditions of South Sudan (van den Berg, 2025), this study disrupts single-region assumptions of postcolonial performance.**

Second, it expands feminist theory by demonstrating that silence must be understood as a multifunctional political and affective category, not merely an absence or oppression.

Third, it contributes to African conflict theatre studies by foregrounding South Sudanese performance culture, an under-represented area in African literary scholarship (Jok, 2013).

Fourth, it builds on the work of Eluzai et al. (2026) and Bazugba et al. (2026) by situating gender injustice within broader structures of reparative failure, land dispossession, and post-conflict governance.

Finally, it reinforces theatre's role as a transformative cultural practice capable of producing alternative imaginaries of justice, memory, and gender equality.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This study has examined voice, silence, and gendered power in contemporary Nigerian and South Sudanese theatre through a postcolonial feminist framework. It demonstrates that African theatre is both a mirror of structural oppression and a site of cultural and political resistance.

Intersecting systems of patriarchy, colonial legacy, economic inequality, and political instability shape women's oppression in both contexts. However, women are not passive subjects; they actively negotiate agency through speech, silence, storytelling, performance, and communal survival strategies.

Nigerian theatre foregrounds explicit feminist resistance and rhetorical agency, while South Sudanese theatre emphasises trauma, survival, and memory-based resistance shaped by conflict conditions. Despite these differences, both traditions reveal the centrality of women's experiences in understanding postcolonial African societies.

Ultimately, contemporary African theatre functions as a critical space for reimagining gender, power, and justice within fractured postcolonial realities.

## 5.8 Recommendations for Further Research

1. Expand comparative studies to include other under-represented African conflict theatres, particularly East and Central Africa.
2. Integrate interdisciplinary approaches combining theatre studies, trauma theory, and gender studies.
3. Conduct ethnographic research on South Sudanese oral performance and women's storytelling practices.
4. Develop multi-regional comparative feminist theatre studies across Africa.
5. Investigate audience reception and performance's impact on gender attitudes.
6. Explore digital media's role in transforming African feminist performance practices.

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