SEMIOTIC RESISTANCE AND CULTURAL LAG IN ABI DARÉ'S *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE*

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Abstract

This study applies semiotic analysis to Abi Daré's *The Girl With The Louding Voice*, exploring how signs, symbols, and language construct meaning within the novel and reflect cultural lag in gender equality and education. Drawing on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Roman Jakobson, the paper examines how the protagonist, Adunni, embodies the conflict between outdated patriarchal traditions and contemporary educational aspirations. While legal frameworks and modern ideologies promote female empowerment, the persistence of child marriage, female subjugation, and linguistic oppression highlights the dissonance between societal progress and ingrained cultural norms. Through an analysis of cultural codes, linguistic structures, and narrative techniques, this study demonstrates how the novel critiques the slow adaptation of African societies to modern gender rights discourses. By decoding the novel's semiotic elements, this paper reveals how literature serves as a tool for challenging cultural lag and advocating for social change.

Keywords: Semiotics, Cultural Lag, Nigerian Literature, Gender Oppression, Child Marriage, Patriarchy

Introduction

As the study of signs and symbols, semiotics comprehensively analyses the use and interpretation of these signs to provide a good framework that uncovers the deeper meanings one can find within texts. Semiotics is a study that allows for the exploration of the diverse ways in which signs; whether linguistic, cultural, or symbolic not only construct but communicate meaning. As Chandler opines, it is the study of signs and their meanings as semiotics offers a sturdy base for understanding the diverse layers of meaning found in a text (Chandler 4). By examining how signs interact within a literary work, semiotic analysis illuminates how the relationships between symbols, cultural practices, and societal values offer knowledgeable insights into both individual and collective experiences.

Furthermore, semiotic approaches are used in relevant literary works that seek to address urgent issues in society because they assist in unveiling the interplay in existence between context, the text, and cultural critique. For semiotic analysis, it is critical to examine how signs interact with each other to build meaning. An example in Abi Daré's work is that the protagonist's "louding voice" is not merely her personal aspiration but is in direct conflict with the societal and cultural practices that seeks to suppress it. The tension that exists between her educational desires and the traditional expectations heaped upon her creates a narrative that explores the wider implications

of power and gender. This interplay of societal values and personal aspirations is a core aspect of identity formation, which is itself constructed and mediated through semiotic elements.

As it stands, literature has always been a key tool that allows for the deep reflections of man and his society, both in its oral and written forms. Literature continues to be a reliable tool for the portrayal, understanding, and interpretation of human endeavours such as religion, class conflict, politics, interpersonal relationships, societal conflicts, and identity creation. Literature cannot possibly portray society without mentioning the people (Glicksberg 24). In this regard, *The Girl with The Louding Voice* stands as a semiotic text that not only tells a story but encodes within it; cultural symbols, linguistic patterns, and identity struggles that reflect broader societal concerns. Applying semiotic analysis, this study investigates how signs, symbols, and language construct meaning within the novel and reflect cultural lag in gender equality and education.

Semiotics in Literature

Semiotics is crucial in literature because it is the study of signs and symbols and how they are used to construct meaning. In literary analysis, semiotics examines how meaning is created through various signs i.e. images, words, and textual elements and how these signs relate to one another within the context of a literary work. The core of semiotics involves analysing and explaining meaning formation within a given system. According to Yücel, "the specific meaning of a term or sign is determined by evaluating its connections to other terms or signs within a system" (58). Culler asserts that literary works function as linguistic events that project fictional worlds (20). Meanwhile, Todorov posits that the language used in literature is systemic, meaning that literary language must possess qualities that distinguish it from everyday language (15). Since literary texts consist of encoded messages, implicit feelings, ideologies, and layered meanings, their interpretation requires a structured approach. The primary components of semiotic analysis include signs, codes, and context.

Furthermore, semiotic analysis aids in plot and character development. By analysing the signs associated with characters and their actions, readers gain insights into relationships and motivations. This analytical process enhances the understanding of character arcs and the progression of the storyline. Additionally, semiotics serves as a vehicle for cultural critique; by analysing signs within a text, readers can explore how the work reinforces, challenges, or reflects societal norms and ideologies. This is particularly relevant to discussions of representation and identity.

Lastly, semiotics plays a role in reader response. Different readers interpret signs based on their personal experiences and backgrounds, thus emphasizing the subjective nature of meaning in literature.

Theoretical Framework

Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Signs

Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Signs is one of the most influential ideas in modern linguistics and semiotics; the study of signs and symbols. His work, particularly in Course in General

Linguistics (1916), laid the foundation for how we understand language as a structured system of meaning. Instead of viewing language as a collection of words referring to objects in the world, Saussure proposed that meaning comes from relationships between signs within the language system itself.

At the heart of Saussure's theory is the concept of the sign, which he explains as a combination of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form of the word, sound, or image (like the word "tree" or an actual drawing of a tree), while the signified is the mental concept or idea that the signifier represents (our understanding of what a tree is). He emphasized that this relationship is arbitrary; there is nothing inherent about the word "tree" that makes it connected to the concept of a tree. Different languages use different words for the same concept, proving that the connection is based on convention rather than natural association.

Another key aspect of Saussure's theory is that language works through differences. A word doesn't gain meaning on its own but through its distinction from other words. For example, we understand the meaning of "night" because it is different from "day." Similarly, "cat" and "rat" are distinct words because of the slight variations in their sounds and meanings. This idea shows that language is a structured system where the value of every word is dependent on its relationship with others.

Saussure also introduced the distinction between langue (the structured, shared system of language) and parole (individual speech or language use). He argued that linguists should focus on langue because it reflects the underlying rules and patterns that shape meaning. His emphasis on studying language as a system at a particular point in time (synchronic analysis) rather than tracing historical changes (diachronic analysis) also transformed linguistic studies. Beyond linguistics, Saussure's ideas influenced fields like anthropology, literary theory, and cultural studies.

Explaining Roland Barthes' Notion of Mythologies

Barthes, a French literary theorist and semiotician, argued in his 1957 book *Mythologies* that popular culture is filled with these myths; constructed meanings that serve social and ideological purposes. He believed that myths shape how we see the world, often reinforcing dominant ideas without us even realizing it. For example, a simple image of a French soldier saluting the flag is not merely about patriotism; it carries ideas about national pride, duty, and possibly even the unquestioning acceptance of authority. In an advertisement for a luxury watch showing a well-dressed man, exuding confidence and success, the watch itself is just a timepiece, but the ad suggests it represents prestige, power, and sophistication. This is what Roland Barthes (1915–1980) meant when he talked about mythologies—not myths in the traditional sense of ancient stories, but rather the ways in which every day cultural objects and practices carry deeper, often hidden, meanings.

According to Barthes, myths operate through semiotics, the study of signs. He broke this down into two levels: Denotation – The literal meaning of a sign (e.g., the watch in the advertisement is

just a watch). Connotation – The cultural or ideological meaning layered on top of the literal one (e.g., the watch symbolizes wealth and status).

These myths serve the interests of those in power because they make certain values feel "natural" when, in fact, they are socially constructed. A good example is how advertisements, films, and media often reinforce traditional gender roles such as the idea that women should be beautiful and nurturing while men should be strong and ambitious. These roles are not universal truths but cultural myths that have been shaped over time.

Roman Jakobson's Opinions on the Functions of Language

Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) was a Russian linguist who wanted to understand how language actually works in human communication. He didn't just see language as a tool for passing on information; he believed it served multiple functions, each shaping how we interact with the world.

Jakobson identified six functions of language, which he linked to different aspects of communication as:

1) Referential Function – This is when language is used to convey factual information. For example, if you say, "It's sunny outside," you are just giving information about the world.
2) Emotive (or Expressive) Function – This function focuses on the speaker's emotions or attitude. When someone exclaims, "I love this movie.!" They are expressing their feelings rather than just providing neutral information.
3) Conative Function – This is about directly influencing the listener or reader, often through commands or requests. Think about advertisements that say, "Buy now!". Or a parent telling a child, "Shut up right now."
4) Phatic Function – Ever had small talk that didn't seem to carry any deep meaning, like "Hey, how are you?" or "Nice weather today"? That's the phatic function. It is about maintaining social connections and keeping communication open rather than exchanging important facts.
5) Metalinguistic Function – This is when language talks about language itself. For instance, if someone asks, "What does 'ambiguous' mean?" and another person explains it, they are using language to discuss language.
6) Poetic Function – Here, the focus is on the beauty and form of language itself. This is common in poetry, slogans, and even jokes. For example, a poetic line like "Time is a thief" is not meant to be taken literally but rather to evoke emotion or a deeper meaning.

Jakobson's model shows that language is not just about communicating ideas but also about shaping emotions, relationships, and even power dynamics. His theory helps us understand why, for example, political speeches are structured in a way that both informs and persuades, or why poetry can move us emotionally even if it does not give us clear-cut facts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the semiotic elements in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The qualitative approach is suitable for an in-depth analysis of

the novel's linguistic, cultural, and symbolic representations, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how semiotic expressions contribute to meaning-making and identity construction within the text. The novel is examined through the lens of semiotic theory, focusing on the use of language, symbols, and cultural signifiers that shape the protagonist's narrative and development.

To facilitate a structured analysis, the study adopts Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Signs. Saussure's approach enables an exploration of how linguistic structures influence meaning. The theory is applied to examine the ways in which signs, symbols, and language function as tools of oppression, resistance, and self-definition in the protagonist's journey. The study critically analyses key passages in the novel, identifying patterns of symbolic representation in relation to gender, education, and socio-economic mobility.

Discussion

In conducting a semiotic analysis of *The Girl with The Louding Voice*, this work draws upon works of theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure with his theory of language as a system of signs, Roland Barthes' with his notion of mythologies, and Roman Jakobson's with his opinions on the functions of language. Note that, these theories will be used to analyse the symbols, cultural codes, and underlying structures in the novel and explore how meaning is constructed and conveyed.

Ferdinand de Saussure is a structuralist who is regarded as one of the founders of semiotics. He introduced language as a system of signs that is split into signifier and signified. For Saussure (1983), this clear distinction helps in showing that there is an arbitrary relationship between a word and its meaning, and it is shaped by cultural conventions. Using his theory of signs to analyse this novel, the signifier lies within the phrase "louding voice". Here, "louding" does not mean a person who speaks loudly or who shouts but it is a signifier for empowerment and the struggle a young girl faces to be heard in a society bent on making women view themselves as nothing more than a housewife and mother. Meanwhile, the signifier goes beyond Adunni, the protagonist, and can be traced to the experiences of girls and young women who currently face discrimination, abuse and oppression. Within this framework, Adunni is presented as the vessel, that is, the voice, for these women as she is a reflection of their pains, dreams and longing for freedom in a patriarchal community. In her determination to obtain an education and using her voice alongside, she stands as an embodiment of the bigger struggle for empowerment, which many girls in her circumstances face to date.

All through this text, the protagonist's pursuit of education is a symbol of not only her personal growth but also a fight for change. She is of the belief that education will offer her the tools needed to speak up for herself and others. And she says:

> That day, I tell myself that even if I am not getting anything in this life, I will go to school. I will finish my primary and secondary and university schooling and become teacher because I don't just want to be having any kind voice . . . I want a louding voice.

With the louding voice, Adunni is determined to be heard and if she must be heard, she needs an education. All through, Adunni fights to gain an education as this would be her stepping stone to having a voice. A voice that would change how girls should be seen. A voice that would speak on the dehumanizing ways women are treated especially after she witnesses the ritual Tia Dada had to go through only to find out that Tia Dada's husband was the one who had fertility issues. An excerpt from the book states:

> But there are words in my head, many things I want to say. I want to tell Ms. Tia I am sorry I made her come here. I want to ask why the doctor didn't come too. Why didn't he come and get a beating like his wife? If it takes two people to make a baby, why only one person, the woman, is suffering when the baby is not coming? Is it because she is the one with breast and the stomach for being pregnant? Or because of what? I want to ask, to scream, why are the women in Nigeria seem to be suffering for everything more than the men?

Tia Dada also reveals the truth to Adunni when she states:

> He cannot get me pregnant. His mother didn't know. He didn't tell anyone. Ken is infertile, unable to- He didn't think he needed to tell me. He . . . Shit. Shit! (271)

The protagonist in this work does not simply long for an education as a form of escapism, but she yearns for it as she was told by her mother that she would only be listened to or be heard, if she is educated. Irrespective of how terrible her spoken English had been all through the novel, Adunni was never one to be mute. Without having a good grasp of the English language, she was already a "voice" fighting against patriarchy in her own life/right. As a witness to the atrocities committed by men in the case of Papa (selling her off to marriage), Morufu (marrying her at 14 and sexually abusing her), Big Daddy (spending his wife's money on other women and physically abusing Big mummy) and Tia Dada's husband (not saying a word about his fertility issues), she had a reason to desire a louding voice. If not for the pressure on Khadija to have a male child, Adunni believed she would not have had the affair which led to her death.

Adunni is disappointed when her father arrives with the "good" news that Morufu will be coming over with the dowry as he will be acquiring her as his third wife that will birth his heir. At this point, all Adunni could think of was to change her gender so she could live a life without any worries about being married off to whoever bids first. She says,

> I want to be just like Kayus, to have no fear of marrying a man, to not have any worry in this life. All Kayus ever worry about is what food to eat and where he can kick his football. He doesn't ever worry about no marriage or bride-price money. He don't even worry about schooling because I been the one teaching him school since all this time (34).

For the systems of signs, the novel builds a system where the elements like cultural practices, language, and social structures are linked to showcase the realities of gender inequality. The struggles of Adunni to learn "English" amidst her domestic chores with Big Madam highlights how education tends to be out of reach for girls in specific socio-economic contexts. In the novel, we discovered that language creates a complex system of signs that seek to reflect cultural realities. Adunni's village was one where educating the girl child was pointless. The moment the female child is birthed, she beings her training into motherhood. Rather than waste time on them, its best to give them out in marriage to begin the process of birthing kids. Her mother tells her,

> In this village, if you go to school, no one will be forcing you to marry any man. But if you didn't go to school, they will marry you to any man once you are reaching fifteen years old. Your schooling is your voice, child. It will be speaking for you even if you didn't open your mouth to talk. It will be speaking till the day God is calling you come.

Adunni also says,

> Marriage is a good thing in our village. Many girls are wanting to marry, to be wife of somebody, or of anybody; but not me, not Adunni.

Women were seen as nothing more than a vessel for conceiving the next generation of men and the vicious cycle continues. In desiring to be educated, Adunni would break out of the expectations heaped on her from birth by her culture. Adunni does not take her English lessons with Tia Dada for granted and this is evident towards the end of the book where the style of writing changes from the broken English used from the start to almost its end. The model employed by Ferdinand de Saussure works within the Nigerian context as there are a large number of marginalized women who are unable to have a "louding" voice because of how women are viewed in our culture. Even Kike (Morufu's first daughter) states,

> I wish I am a man. All the mens in our village, they are allowing them learn school and work, but us the girls, they are marrying us from fourteen years of age. I know i can be a good tailor (64)

The journey of Adunni is a perfect reflection of her struggle to transform her aspiration into reality. And this transformation is seen in her resistance of patriarchal structures seeking to silence her. Rather than give birth to a male child for her husband, Morufu, she pleads with Khadija for the potion that will ensure that she does not get pregnant. This is because she believes having a child will disrupt her educational dreams. Khadija says,

> I am not making you any promise, Adunni. There is something you can take. A mixing of strong leafs. I will see if I can find the leafs for it in Ikati farm. You must

> drink it five days after your monthly visitor and every time you and Morufu are doing the thing. (52)

In reality, we have women letting go of their dreams and aspiration because it is believed that her duty is tied to birthing and catering to her kids. By the time the kids are of age and she decides to get back into the labour force, enough years have been wasted. Although, the narrative has been changing as women now balance childcare with a career, it is still a struggle.

Furthermore, Ferdinand clearly distinguishes between the system of language (langue) and individual speech acts (parole). Langue is referred to as the cultural norms and societal structures responsible for dictating women's roles in the country. In this book, it is metaphorically applied to explain the societal and cultural expectations of Adunni. These roles include the expectations towards education, marriage and total obedience to male figures. Even Morufu brags to Adunni that he has special canes he uses in flogging his two wives, Labake and Khadija when they misbehave. There are men who in the real world believe women should be "corrected" like kids and this is done by beating them up. He says,

> Yes, Labake and Khadija, they will be jealousing you. Khadija is having small sense, but Labake, she will want to make you to be sad. You will not allow her, you hear? If Labake do you anyhow, talk you one kind, call me and I will flog her very well (32)

While she is just 14 and should be considered a child by all standards, Adunni is sold into marriage with her hopes of returning to school, dashed. The pressure by cultural standards for girls to marry young is a clear manifestation of a construct that dictates the role of women in the society. Her friends Enitan and Ruka yearn for men that would marry them so they can have good food to eat, Adunni is confused on how to escape her reality.

As the individual's personal usage of language either via their unique expressions, acts of speech or choices, parole reflects the individual's personal agencies. Here, Adunni's statements and her personal narrative actively serve as her parole. She says,

> I am not a goat to be given away. I am a girl with dreams and a voice.

Such an expression depicts her fight against the langue of oppression by the patriarchy. Even with her personal use of language, her expressions are able to convey her fight against what her father and society expect of her. She is expected to marry Morufu so that he can provide for her family back home, thus forgoing every dream of aspiring to be a teacher like her mother wanted. The villagers found nothing wrong in sending children into marriage. In the Northern part of Nigeria today, young underage girls are given off to men older than their fathers. Some of the women have nothing to say against it as they too were given off in marriage at such a young age.

While Ferdinand's model gives a better understanding of what having a "louding" voice signifies, Roland Barthes in his breakdown of language, further explains the difference between literal meaning (denotation) and cultural/symbolic meaning (connotation) as he explores how cultural myths are found within daily signs. In the literary text, the "louding voice" denotatively refers to the literal voice of Adunni. However, its connotative meaning is that it represents empowerment and a fight against the oppression of women. Adunni aims to use her voice to speak and impact the girls in her village.

Denotatively, she already began using her literal voice to speak up against injustices meted on her. She used her literal voice to beg Papa to change his mind from giving her away to Morufu, reminding him of his promise to Mama, that he would send her back to school. She uses her literal voice to address Big Mummy when she questions her on the whereabouts of the previous maid, Rebecca, and she also uses her literal voice to seek for the potion to stop her from getting pregnant. Connotatively, her quest for education is to be able to be listened to. It is to become a teacher so when she speaks, people will not dismiss her. And she can have a standing in society to fight for young girls in similar situation as she found herself. This brings us to the denotative meaning of "education" as it serves as a symbol in the book. The denotation of education is linear as it refers to the process of learning. Nevertheless, the connotation of education here is more complex because for Adunni, getting an education is a symbol of hope that will give her a chance to break free from the constraints of gender roles. She says to Tia Dada,

> If I can go to school and become a teacher, then I can collect my salary and maybe even build my own school in Ikati and be teaching the girls. The girls in my village don't have much chance for school. I want to change that, Ms Tia, because those girls, they will grow up and born more great people to make Nigeria even more better than now (224)

Adunni wastes no time in applying for the scholarship Chef Kofi told her about and she made sure she approached Tia Dada to make out time to be her tutor. Ms Tia even encourages her by saying,

> When you get up every day, I want you to remind yourself that tomorrow will be better than today. You must believe this, regardless of what happens with the scholarship. Okay? (224)

According to Barthes' theory, education here connotatively means a pathway to empowerment. Through his exploration of myths, this cultural narrative that shapes Adunni's reality is examined. The cultural myth in Nigeria is the belief that women are to prioritize getting married and starting a family over education. The central theme of this novel is Adunni's struggle against the myth that reinforces this form of gender inequality. The minute Adunni got married to Morufu she never had a peaceful night as she was sexually abused and had to follow his orders. In fact, Adunni's value as a woman in society could be seen in her father's prayer on her wedding day,

> This is your wife now, from today till forever, she is your own. Do her anyhow you want. Use her till she is useless! May she never sleep in her father house again! (31).

This excerpt reinforces the fact that Nigerian girls are seen as subordinates and used as commodities. Furthermore, there is also the myth of the African woman as the carer and nurturer. As useless as Big Daddy was in his marriage, Big Mummy followed the line of being committed to him. He lived in her home, spent her money and beat her up when she complained about the girls he is seen frolicking with around town.

Meanwhile, Big Mummy is steadily on the grind to grow her business and keep her family unit intact. She also complains to Big Daddy that he is the reason why the kids are no longer visiting Nigeria. When asked by Adunni why she allows Big Daddy to treat her this way, her sad response was "What will people say?". Even when she kicks him out of her house, his family arrives pleading that she takes him back as it is not right that he is left on the street.

> Look at him on his knees. He is suffering enough as it is. He has nowhere to live. Please, Florence take him back (300)

Adunni challenges the myths around femininity when she refuses to be the gracious submissive wife to Morufu. The option she got to run away, she took it. The chance she got to not get pregnant, she took it as well. Meanwhile, Khadija also got married to Morufu at fourteen but rather than fight in her little way like Adunni, she remained humble as a docile wife and began the process of child bearing. The same also happened to Labake, in fact, before the book ends, her first daughter who was only fourteen like Adunni, was also given off in marriage. In other words, this book uses the personal to comment on the social thus Adunni's voice is not just a symbol of resistance against patriarchal norms, it also serves to deconstruct the myths known to define the role of women.

Finally, Roman Jakobson states that language serves diverse functions, and it is not simply linear. In this literary work, the poetic function of language is evident in how Adunni tells her story in non-standard English thus able to convey emotions. Her non-standard/broken English is a stylistic feature that easily captures the reader's attention. With his functions of language, the message of the novel is underscored with the power of self-expression and storytelling.

Through the referential function of language, which is to disseminate factual information to an audience, *The Girl with The Louding Voice* discusses factual issues such as child marriage and domestic servitude. These are socio-cultural issues as the book referenced the concept of dowry which people have argued, puts a price on the female child. Morufu was more than excited to be receiving four goats, thirty thousand naira, and a big agricultural fowl for Adunni's hand. This gives a vivid depiction of the cultural practice that sees girls as economic assets and not priceless individuals. For this reason also that focuses on an in-law having the means to feed his wife's family, Khadija has an affair so she could birth a boy for Morufu, thus, revealing that a male child is more valuable than the female child in the society. She says,

> When Morufu say he will not give my family food if this is not a boy child, I do something to make it sure. What I do is a shame but I didn't have a choice. I cannot born another girl-child, Adunni. This one is a boy. It cannot die. (68)

These examples from the book are general real-world issues. Rather than check himself or see himself as the problem for generating X chromosomes, Morufu decided to keep getting married. With an education, Morufu would have no need to keep marrying wives but focus on himself as the issue. Tia Dada also goes through a similar fate. With her education, her mother-in-law convinces her to embark on a fertility bath where they ended up flogging the poor woman with brooms. It is only when she gets brutalized that her husband, a doctor, confesses that he has fertility issues. She was being laughed at by the women in the estate for not having a child, mocked by her mother-in-law, meanwhile her husband, the problem, said nothing.

It is evident that there are issues in the lives of both the rich and the poor: educated and uneducated. Child marriage is another systemic issue and this book scratches its surface as Adunni begs her father and seeks the help of Enitan to join in begging Papa not to sell her into marriage. Khadija was also fourteen when she was sent off in marriage to Morufu and Labake's 14-year-old daughter was sent off as well to a friend of Morufu's. Also, the issue of domestic servitude was referenced in this novel. Adunni did not have the perfect life with Big Mummy. She was placed on one meal per day, and faced the wrath of Big Mummy's anger whenever Big Daddy annoyed her. There was the transfer of aggression that led to Adunni being beaten up daily whether she was in her right or wrong. An excerpt:

> I see Big Madam. She is holding one leg of her red shoe, and before I can say another word, she smash the shoe right inside the middle of my head (166)

We have seen such cases happen in the real world with people treating their domestic help as nothing more than actual slaves. At one point, Big Mummy broke Adunni's head with the heel of her shoe. There have been reported cases online in actual reality where women have been stated to have used hot irons to burn the backs or hands of their maids, flogged them to the point of fainting and beating the proverbial daylight out of them for the tiniest and biggest things. Abi Daré's work is essential as it references the real world.

With Roman's emotive function of language, emphasis is laid on the expression of the sender as moods and feelings are interpreted. Written in broken English and subtly moving to a more refined speech, Adunni's language evolves and showcases how language is a powerful emotive tool. Through her dialogue and thoughts, the reader gets to understand her determination and frustration. The character's monologues have a strong emotional depth that is able to capture her aspirations and pain. She is a character that is well-written as she is able to evoke sympathy from readers. Her emotions are fully expressed when she says,

> I am wanting to go back to school and learn teacher work and become a adult woman and have moneys to be driving car and living in fine house with cushion sofa and be helping my papa and my two brothers (6).

From the rawness of Adunni's words, a reader is deeply immersed in her story and with the evocative power of this book, one is led to reflect on the realities the girl child, born into poverty and left to face the real world without help or guidance.

Another function of language is in its conative ability which comprises getting a reaction from the addressee. *The Girl With The Louding Voice* serves as a tool that promptly calls readers into the action of fighting against oppression. It is not simply a book but a reminder of the happenings in our society and the part we can all play to not look away when women are being silenced. Even for Adunni, her aim of having an education is not for her personal goal alone but to be able to fight for others. When she realized all Adunni had suffered and will suffer from Big Mummy's hands, Tia Dada made it her mission to ensure Adunni writes her essay, and she also made the move to get her out of Big Mummy's house. Tia Dada can be said to have swung into action rather than look away like most people would have done in order to avoid Big Mummy's trouble.

For the phatic function, it is used in establishing social connections without truly communicating any real information. Tia Dada and Adunni met when Tia attended a function hosted by Big Mummy and in no time, they formed a bond and where able to bridge the gap in their social class as they shared different experiences of their womanhood. Adunni is able to form connections with other young girls like Chisom and the chef, Kofi. This helped in offering a sense of community. The conversations between Adunni and Kofi lays emphasis on why solidarity is important in the fight for societal change as their conversations led to him being interested in ensuring Adunni gets an education. He provided her with the scholarship news and encouraged her to go for it. The characters share their struggles and create a good supportive network.

And from the relationships that are depicted in this book, there is a deep emphasis on the need for mentorship and solidarity, especially in the bond between Adunni and other women like Iya and Tia Dada. In sharing their diverse experiences, a sense of community is created that helps to foster resilience among women. From Mama's (Adunni's mother) relationship with Iya, Adunni could escape to her home when Khadija died and papa needed to report her to the traditional council. From this already established relationship, Iya introduces Adunni to her brother who took her out of the village to work for Big Mummy in Lagos. Iya says,

> Your mother was a kind woman, God rest her soul. Stop crying Adunni, I can help you. I have one brother, Kola. He is doing job of helping girls like you. Tonight we sleep, tomorrow we talk. (101).

Adunni went ahead to build a relationship by herself with Tia Dada. Tia also found a friend in Adunni as she ensured Adunni followed her for the fertility bath when she needed a friendly face by her side.

There is also the metalingual function of language which focuses on the definition of words and their clarifications. In Abi Dare's work, the use of Nigerian English and other local expressions gives the book a genuine voice and helps in reflecting the cultural background of Adunni. Some of the words such as "louding" highlights her special way of expressing herself and the use of Nigerian Pidgin alongside her local dialect when she sings enriches the cultural context of the novel. Her Pidgin English gives her voice authenticity as it showcases not just her socio-economic background but her level of education. An excerpt:

> My mama say education will give me a voice. I want more than just a voice, Ms. Tia. I want a louding voice. I want to enter a room, and people will hear me even before I open my mouth to be speaking.

Finally, language serves a poetic function which focuses on both the message and how it is communicated. Here, Adunni's imaginative metaphors and descriptions bring depth to the plot. Adunni's way of speaking has a lyrical quality that is able to bring her experiences to life. When Adunni says,

> My chest is burning that she is talking bad about Ms Tia. I am feeling fire in my heart, angry fire, and I am wanting to shout on Big Madam to tell her that Ms Tia is having honey voice and a kind heart, that Ms Tia didn't pregnant because of all sorts o f reasons, but I am fearing that she will slice my throat with knife if I say anything. (174)

Conclusion

Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is much more than a coming-of-age novel; it is a deeply symbolic and semiotic text that speaks to issues of gender, education, oppression, and resilience. Through Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs, the novel's language, symbols, and cultural codes are revealed as powerful tools in shaping meaning and conveying the struggles of the girl child in a patriarchal society. The phrase "louding voice" transcends its literal meaning, becoming a signifier of empowerment, self-expression, and the refusal to be silenced. Adunni's journey highlights the broader challenges faced by young girls who are denied education and autonomy, making her story a microcosm of real-life struggles across many cultures.

The novel also demonstrates how language functions beyond mere communication—it acts as a call to action. Through the conative function, it urges readers to engage with the issues of child marriage, domestic servitude, and gender inequality rather than passively observe them. By experiencing Adunni's pain, hopes, and victories, readers are invited to reflect on their roles in either perpetuating or dismantling systems of oppression. This is further reinforced by the phatic function of language, which fosters relationships and solidarity among women. The bonds Adunni forms with Tia Dada, Kofi, and even the memory of her mother create a network of support that strengthens her fight for a better future.

Moreover, the metalingual function of language in the novel enriches its authenticity. The use of Nigerian English, pidgin, and local dialects does not just define Adunni's socio-economic status; it celebrates the linguistic diversity that shapes her identity. Her distinctive way of speaking adds depth to her character, making her voice unique, raw, and powerful. Language, in this context, is not just a means of storytelling but a marker of culture, struggle, and resilience.

Through a semiotic lens, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is more than a novel; it is a testament to the power of words and education. Adunni's unwavering determination to gain knowledge and use her voice is symbolic of a broader fight for freedom and self-actualization. The novel challenges readers to acknowledge the realities of inequality and take active steps toward change.

It reminds us that silence is not an option and that every voice, no matter how small, deserves to be heard.

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