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# Negotiating Silence: Feminine Agency and the Limits of Voice in Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice and* Olisakwe's *Ogadinma*

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**Abstract**
This study examines the complex relationship between voice, silence, and feminine agency in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright*. Situated within postcolonial feminist discourse, the paper interrogates how Nigerian feminist fiction constructs agency not as absolute empowerment but as a negotiated survival strategy within patriarchal structures. Drawing primarily from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, alongside African feminist perspectives by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, the study argues that voice and silence function not as dual but as interdependent modes of survival and resistance. Through a close comparative reading, the paper demonstrates that Dare's Adunni embodies an aspirational model of agency through language and educational attainment, where the desire for a 'louding voice' signals an insistence on visibility and narrative control. In contrast, Olisakwe's Ogadinma exposes the limits of this paradigm, revealing a socio-cultural landscape in which speech is neutralized, and survival rather than self-expression emerges as the more urgent and viable form of resistance through Ogadinma's navigation of cyclical violence. This illustrates institutional failure and the normalization of female suffering. Ogadinma deconstructs the redemptive promise often attached to voice. In all, the paper contends that contemporary Nigerian feminist narratives resist simplistic trajectories of empowerment by exposing the ineffectuality of voice as a site of liberation. Instead, they foreground a more complex reality in which agency is fragmented, negotiated, and persistently constrained; where being heard remains uncertain, and survival itself becomes a radical form of resistance.
**Keywords:** Feminine agency; Voice; Silence; Subalternity; Nigerian Fiction; Postcolonial feminism; Gender violence.

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**Introduction**

What does it really mean for a girl to survive in a society that is structurally designed not simply to silence her, but to reshape her into silence itself? Contemporary Nigerian fiction does not approach this question sentimentally. Instead, it exposes girlhood as a space already burdened by expectation, restriction, and violence. Survival, in this context, is never neutral; it is always negotiated. In *The Girl with the Louding Voice and Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright*, the young female protagonists are not merely coming of age; they are becoming aware of the systems that seek to define and limit them. These systems—patriarchy, economic dependency, cultural expectations- do not operate in isolation. They intersect, overlap, and reinforce one another, creating an environment in which agency is constantly under pressure. While both novels focus on gendered violence and structural inequality, they diverge in their treatment of resistance. Abi Daré presents voice particularly through education and self-expression as a pathway toward transformation. Ukamaka Olisakwe, however, presents a more unsettling reality in which survival itself becomes a form of agency, one that is often compromised and incomplete. This paper argues that feminine agency in these texts emerges not through the simple acquisition of voice, but through the negotiation of silence, its imposition, limits, and, at times, its strategic use.

Contemporary African feminist criticism increasingly recognizes that the experiences of African women cannot be fully explained through Western feminist paradigms that universalize women's oppression without sufficient attention to the historical realities of colonialism, economic dependency, communal structures, and indigenous patriarchal formations. Within African literary discourse, postcolonial feminism therefore emerges as a critical framework concerned not only with gender inequality, but also with the ways colonial histories, socio-economic structures, and cultural institutions intersect to shape women's experiences in postcolonial societies. African postcolonial feminist writers and critics consequently interrogate how women negotiate subjectivity within systems that simultaneously marginalize them socially, culturally, economically, and politically. In this regard, silence and voice become important conceptual categories through which African women's struggles for recognition, survival, and self-definition are represented in literature.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on postcolonial feminist theory, drawing primarily on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation of subalternity in *"*Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's argument that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p. 308) is not a denial of speech, but a critique of the structures that determine whether speech is heard, validated, or rendered meaningful. Her assertion that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (83) is particularly relevant to this study, as it foregrounds the intersection of gender and marginalization in shaping access to representation. Within this framework, voice is not treated as self-sufficient empowerment, but as something mediated by power relations that regulate visibility and recognition.

Spivak's formulation is particularly important within postcolonial feminist discourse because it redefines silence as structural rather than merely individual. Her argument does not suggest that marginalized women are literally incapable of speech; rather, it demonstrates how dominant ideological systems condition whose speech becomes recognizable as legitimate knowledge. In colonial and postcolonial societies, the female subaltern occupies a doubly marginalized position because she is constrained both by patriarchal authority and by broader political structures that regulate representation. Thus, the crisis of the subaltern woman lies

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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not simply in muteness, but in the impossibility of being fully heard within systems already organized to invalidate her experience.

Within African literary criticism, this postcolonial feminist concern becomes especially significant because African women's realities are shaped not only by gender oppression, but also by histories of colonialism, poverty, illiteracy, class inequality, religious conservatism, and communal expectations. African feminist scholars therefore challenge Western feminist models that universalize female experience without sufficient consideration of African socio-cultural conditions. Rather than framing African women solely as passive victims of patriarchy, African feminist criticism emphasizes negotiation, adaptability, survival, and communal realities as central dimensions of feminine experience.

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a critical response to both colonial discourse and mainstream Western feminist thought, particularly its tendency to universalize women's experiences without adequate attention to race, culture, history, and geopolitical realities. The theory interrogates the ways colonialism and patriarchy intersects to shape the lives of women in formerly colonized societies. Unlike Western feminist models that often prioritize gender as the primary category of oppression, postcolonial feminism emphasizes that women's experiences are simultaneously shaped by colonial histories, economic inequality, class structures, religion, ethnicity, and cultural traditions. Consequently, postcolonial feminist critics are concerned with questions of representation, voice, marginalization, identity, and the politics of speaking for or about women in postcolonial contexts. The theory therefore seeks to recover and foreground the experiences of women whose voices have historically been suppressed or misrepresented within colonial, nationalist, and patriarchal systems.

Building on this, the study adopts the African feminist perspective of Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, particularly her social transformation framework, which situates women's experiences within intersecting structures of culture, class, economy, and institutional power. Ogundipe-Leslie's emphasis on structural conditioning provides a lens for understanding feminine agency not as abstract autonomy, but as action constrained by socio-cultural realities. This study benefits from her perspective in reading the actions of Adunni and Ogadinma as shaped responses to systemic limitation rather than purely individual expressions of will. Ogundipe-Leslie's theoretical position significantly complements Spivak's postcolonial feminist argument. While Spivak explains the mechanisms through which marginalized women are rendered socially and discursively invisible, Ogundipe-Leslie extends this discourse into the African context by examining how African women negotiate agency within intersecting social realities. Her concept of STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) advocates feminism rooted in African material conditions rather than abstract universal assumptions. Unlike Western radical feminist positions that often frame resistance primarily through confrontation with patriarchy;

Ogundipe-Leslie emphasizes structural participation, social inclusion, and transformation. In this regard, her theory may be understood as an African-centered continuation of postcolonial feminist concerns about representation, exclusion, and voice. Together, Spivak and Ogundipe-Leslie provide a complementary framework for understanding feminine agency in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Spivak's theory explains the structural production of silence and the instability of female voice within patriarchal systems, while Ogundipe-Leslie's framework foregrounds the strategic ways African women negotiate survival, inclusion, and

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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selfhood within those same systems. Their combined perspectives therefore allow this study to interpret silence not merely as absence or weakness, but as a condition shaped by institutional power relations, cultural expectations, and survival realities. Similarly, voice is understood not as automatic liberation, but as a negotiated and often precarious form of visibility.

Another African feminist theory that further helps explain adaptive feminine negotiation and strategic survival is Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail-sense Feminism, which theorizes African women's resistance as strategic, gradual, and adaptive rather than confrontational. This perspective is particularly useful in interpreting silence not as an absence of agency, but as a calculated or imposed strategy within oppressive environments. It enables a reading of Ogadinma's silence as a form of survival, while also complimenting the assumption that vocal expression is the only valid marker of empowerment. In addition, the study incorporates Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalized feminist discourse, which insists on the importance of context-specific analysis of women's oppression. Mohanty's emphasis on historical and cultural specificity supports a reading of both novels as grounded in Nigerian socio-political realities, where gendered violence, economic precarity, and cultural expectations shape the conditions of feminine subjectivity.

Taken together, these theoretical positions frame feminine agency in this study as neither fixed nor absolute, but as relational and context-dependent. Voice and silence are not treated as binary opposites; rather, they are understood as interdependent modes through which subaltern female subjects negotiate visibility, survival, and resistance within patriarchal structures. This framework, bolsters reading of *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright,* as renditions or texts that go beyond celebratory notions of voice, but moves towards a more nuanced understanding of agency as fragmented, constrained, and continuously negotiated.

**Literature Review**

Critical debates on feminine agency within postcolonial and African feminist studies challenge the idea that voice automatically equals empowerment. Scholars shift attention from whether women speak to the conditions that determine whether their speech is heard, valued, or ignored. This perspective is central to reading *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright*, where the protagonists' experiences resist any easy celebration of voice. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on subalternity sharpens this argument by showing that marginalized subjects are often not recognized within dominant systems, even when they speak. The issue, therefore, is not silence, but recognition. This distinction is particularly relevant within African feminist literary studies, where scholars increasingly argue that the problem confronting women is not simply the inability to speak, but the institutional refusal to acknowledge female testimony, suffering, and subjectivity. Consequently, African feminist discourse often shifts attention from celebratory notions of empowerment toward more complicated questions of audibility, legitimacy, and survival within patriarchal social structures. This is evident in Adunni's journey in *The Girl with the Louding Voice,* where her desire for education and expression does not immediately grant her agency. Her 'louding voice' remains aspirational, marking the distance between expression and actual power. A similar pattern appears in *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright,* where Ogadinma's voice is repeatedly constrained within domestic and economic structures that diminish her autonomy. Her attempts at self-assertion are not absent, but they are limited

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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by the conditions in which she lives. Here, agency does not appear as open defiance but as something negotiated, partial, and often fragile.

This concern with structural silence is further deepened in African feminist thought, particularly in the work of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (1996), who explicitly theorizes the cultural production of female silence. She argues that "the 'silencing' of women, which further led to their 'invisibility' was encouraged by their own tendency to accept the status quo and their lack of political will to change the situation… Society has always prescribed 'silence', 'reticence', 'complaisance', 'patience', and 'gentleness' as the greatest virtues of the feminine gender" (Akachi, 1996, p.15). She further observes that fear of social punishment reinforces this silence, noting that "Many refrain from speaking out because of their fear of opposition, persecution or reprisal… The result is that even when women are right, they fail to raise their voices… they feel that if they speak out, they would be labeled as aggressive or masculine" (15). However, she complements this by insisting that education can disrupt this silence, "the acquisition of education has emboldened many a woman and made her more articulate and more assertive… we need more and more women to speak out in public" (p. 16). This theoretical position is crucial to understanding Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, where education becomes a mechanism of emancipation and speech becomes a political act of resistance. Ezeigbo's argument that women have a "social and moral responsibility… to give voice to their indignation" (16) is reflected in Adunni's evolving consciousness and her insistence on being heard. Building on this, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues that African women's experiences must be understood through intersecting structures of oppression, culture, class, and institutional power. For Ogundipe-Leslie, agency is never autonomous but always negotiated within material constraints, reinforcing the idea that voice alone cannot dismantle systemic inequality. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the universalization of women's experiences in Western feminist discourse, insisting that oppression must be understood within specific socio-cultural contexts (Mohanty, 1984, p. 17). This is particularly relevant to Nigerian feminist fiction, where gender violence is deeply embedded in familial, economic, and religious structures.

Critical scholarship on Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* has approached the novel from several interconnected perspectives, particularly girl-child education, social inequality, linguistic resistance, marriage, trauma, and female empowerment. Adewuyi and Oyedeji (2022) examine the novel alongside Lola Akande's *What It Takes* and argue that both texts expose the structural barriers confronting the girl-child within patriarchal societies. According to the scholars, cultural narratives and gendered social expectations function as mechanisms through which women are denied educational opportunities and economic advancement. Their study demonstrates that education in Daré's novel is not merely an institutional process but a site of ideological struggle where patriarchal values determine who is permitted access to knowledge and social mobility. Adunni's persistent desire for education therefore emerges as resistance against structures designed to limit her future possibilities.

Similarly, M'vouende, Epounda and Makosso (2024) investigate the representation of marriage in the novel and argue that Daré uses Adunni's experiences to interrogate the sociocultural assumptions surrounding womanhood and matrimonial expectations in African societies. Their study reveals that marriage functions not as a space of fulfilment but as an institution through which patriarchal authority regulates female bodies and choices. While these studies provide valuable insights into education and marriage as mechanisms of female

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oppression, their primary concern remains the external structures that shape Adunni's experiences rather than the complex relationship between voice, silence, and agency that emerges from those experiences.

The question of language and identity has also attracted significant scholarly attention. Alfadlilah (2024) examines *The Girl with the Louding Voice* through a postmodern framework and argues that Daré's use of fractured English serves as a form of resistance against linguistic and social hierarchies. According to the study, Adunni's distinctive speech pattern reflects both marginalization and self-assertion, demonstrating how language becomes a site of identity construction within unequal social systems. Rather than presenting linguistic difference as deficiency, the novel transforms it into a vehicle for challenging dominant structures of power and recognition. A related but more recent intervention is provided by Rathee and Pareek (2025), who analyze the novel through the combined lenses of intersectionality and trauma theory. Their study argues that Adunni's experiences cannot be understood solely through gender because her oppression emerges from the intersection of age, poverty, class location, and patriarchal authority. The scholars further contend that the novel exposes the psychological consequences of exploitation, particularly through forced marriage, domestic servitude, and systemic violence. By foregrounding trauma and intersectionality, the study demonstrates how Adunni's struggle for self-expression develops within conditions of persistent vulnerability. Although these critical engagements successfully illuminate the novel's concerns with education, language, trauma, and structural oppression, they largely treat voice as a marker of empowerment without fully interrogating the limitations that continue to condition the effectiveness of that voice even after it is articulated.

Scholarly discourses on Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright* has developed along somewhat different trajectories. Ben-Daniels (2022), in "Discovering the Self in Ukamaka Olisakwe's Ogadinma (2020)," examines the novel as a narrative of self-discovery and identity formation. The study argues that Ogadinma's experiences reveal the complex process through which women negotiate societal expectations, family obligations, and personal aspirations in pursuit of self-fulfilment. According to Ben-Daniels, the novel demonstrates that identity is neither fixed nor naturally attained but emerges through difficult encounters with social restrictions and personal disappointments. The emphasis of his study therefore falls on personal growth and the gradual realization of selfhood. Similarly, Anuonye's discussion of the novel foregrounds the themes of patriarchy, marriage, and female development, arguing that Ogadinma's experiences illustrate the burdens imposed on women within deeply gendered social structures. The study interprets her journey as an attempt to negotiate oppressive expectations while searching for autonomy and dignity. These readings contribute significantly to understanding of the novel's engagement with womanhood and personal transformation, though they primarily focus on developmental and experiential dimensions of the protagonist's life.

In his review of the novel, Umezurike (2020), posits that the discussion of receptive masculinity in Ogadinma shifts attention from female suffering alone to the representation of male identities within the novel. He argues that Olisakwe constructs Nnanna as an alternative model of masculinity that resists patriarchal domination and embraces feminist empathy. Through this characterization, the novel challenges conventional assumptions about gender relations and proposes the possibility of more humane and equitable social interactions. Umezurike's intervention is particularly valuable because it demonstrates that the novel's

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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critique of patriarchy is not limited to exposing female oppression but also extends to reimagining masculine identities. Nevertheless, while studies on Ogadinma have examined self-discovery, patriarchy, marriage, female autonomy, and masculinity, little attention has been paid to the role of silence itself as a mode of survival, negotiation, and resistance. Existing scholarship tends to privilege visible acts of self-assertion while paying comparatively less attention to the ways silence functions as a response to social constraint and institutional power.

A synthesis of the existing scholarship reveals an important gap - studies on *The Girl with the Louding Voice* have largely concentrated on education, linguistic resistance, trauma, marriage, and social inequality, while scholarship on *Ogadinma* has focused on self-discovery, patriarchal oppression, female autonomy, and alternative masculinities. Although these studies offer valuable insights into the experiences of women within patriarchal societies, they generally approach voice as a positive indicator of empowerment and silence as evidence of oppression or marginalization. Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to the complex relationship between voice and silence as interconnected rather than oppositional categories. Moreover, there is a noticeable absence of comparative scholarship that places both novels in dialogue with one another through the lens of feminine agency. This study, therefore, addresses that gap by examining how Daré and Olisakwe construct agency through both speech and silence, demonstrating that feminine empowerment is not always achieved through vocal expression alone. Instead, the study argues that voice and silence operate as overlapping strategies through which women negotiate survival, visibility, resistance, and selfhood within patriarchal structures. By foregrounding the limits of voice and the strategic possibilities of silence, the study extends existing discussions of feminine agency beyond celebratory narratives of empowerment toward a more nuanced understanding of women's lived realities in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

**Voice, Education, and Construction of Feminine Agency in Abi Dare's *The Girl with the Louding Voice***

In *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, Adunni's desire for voice is not abstract; it is shaped by lived deprivation, gendered control, and a deep awareness of structural injustice. Her now-iconic declaration: "I want a louding voice" (Daré, 2020, p. 21) is deceptively simple. What appears linguistically "incorrect" is, in fact, ideologically precise. Adunni is not merely asking to speak; she is demanding audibility, recognition, and impact. This desire is rooted in an early understanding of education as power. Captured in the instructive voice of Mama, she recalls, "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" (p.21). Here, education is personified; it becomes a proxy voice, it becomes a form of symbolic power—one that extends beyond physical speech and grants legitimacy to her existence. This aligns with Spivak's concern about mediated speech: Adunni understands that in a system that refuses to hear her, she must acquire a voice that cannot be easily dismissed. Her resistance to marriage further clarifies her consciousness, "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" (Daré, 2020, p.17). Adunni's struggle reflects the postcolonial feminist tension between articulation and recognition identified by Spivak. Although she possesses consciousness, aspiration, and critical awareness, the patriarchal structures around her consistently attempt to reduce her existence to domestic and reproductive functions. Her insistence on education, therefore, becomes more than personal ambition; it becomes an attempt to reposition herself from the margins of social invisibility toward acknowledgement

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and agency. However, the novel simultaneously reflects Ogundipe-Leslie's African feminist position that feminine agency emerges within existing social realities rather than outside them. Adunni does not completely detach herself from her society; instead, she negotiates pathways toward self-definition from within oppressive structures.

This refusal is radical, not because marriage is rejected universally, but because Adunni recognizes it as a premature closure of possibility, of her own agency. She is not rejecting tradition blindly; she is rejecting what it would cost her. This demonstrates an awareness of how cultural expectations function to limit her future. Her refusal is not impulsive; it is grounded in an understanding of what marriage would cost her. Her critique deepens when she reflects on motherhood and systemic silence: "But I don't want to born anything now. How will a girl like me born childrens? Why fill up the world with sad childrens that are not having a chance to go to school? Why make the world to be one big, sad, silent place because all the childrens are not having a voice" (Daré, 2020, pp.50–51).

This is no longer personal; it is philosophical. Adunni is linking reproduction to silence, suggesting that systemic inequality is not just experienced, but reproduced across generations. Her gender consciousness sharpens further. Later, she exposes patriarchal hypocrisy with striking clarity, "How is Morufu and Big Daddy different from each other? One can speak good English, and the other doesn't speak good English, but both of them have same sickness of the mind" (p.213). Here, language is stripped of its assumed moral superiority. Education alone does not dismantle patriarchy; mindset does. Her understanding of voice evolves, and she asserts her agency; "My mama say education will give me a voice. I want more than just a voice… 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" (p. 224). This marks a shift from voice as possession to voice as presence. Her feminist consciousness becomes explicitly systemic, "If it takes two people to make a baby, why only one person, the woman, is suffering… why are the women in Nigeria seem to be suffering for everything more than the men?" (p. 266). This assertion shows critical awareness, the one lived, not taught.

Finally, her insistence on 'her-story' - "Not his-story… My own will be called her-story. Adunni's story" (p. 276) and her vision of amplifying other girls' voices (p. 312) transform her personal struggle into collective resistance. Voice becomes not just survival, but a means of reshaping the narrative itself. Adunni is no longer seeking a voice for survival, but for collective transformation, "A day will come, when my voice will sound so loud all over Nigeria… when I will be able to make a way for other girls to have their own louding voice…" (p. 312). In contrast, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* constructs a narrative in which voice is both a desire and a strategy. Adunni's declaration— "I want a louding voice" (Daré 2020, p.21), captures the essence of her struggle. It is not merely about speaking, but about being heard within a system that consistently renders her invisible.

**Structured Violence and the Limits of Feminine Agency in Ukamaka Olisakwe's *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright***

*Ogadinma, Or, Everything Will Be All Right* presents a narrative in which violence is not episodic but cyclical. Ogadinma's life is marked by a series of disruptions that reveal how deeply entrenched patriarchal control is within her environment. Her experience with Barrister Chima is particularly significant because it exposes the betrayal embedded in structures of authority. What is presented as opportunity, education, and advancement quickly becomes exploitation. The promise of empowerment is transformed into violation. "Are you

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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afraid of me? … . You don't have to be. He cupped her face, rubbed the sides of her lips with his fingers. Bent down and pressed himself against hers". (Olisakwe, 2020, p.19), and Ogadinma recoils and affirms, "I have never done this before, she said. 'Please'." (19). Ogadinma is promised educational advancement, but is sexually violated instead. Education becomes a trap of power, voice is neutralized through deception, and agency is suspended at the point of 'consent manipulation'. Barrister Chima's promise of helping her further her education becomes a gateway to abuse. Ogadinma's inability to translate ambition into safety reveals structural betrayal. And, this aligns with Spivak's idea that the subaltern female is simply silenced through dominant structures that disguise exploitation as opportunity. This moment is not isolated; it sets the tone for what follows. Ogadinma's unwanted pregnancy following the rape incident, and subsequent abortion, did not lead to care or protection from her father, but to shame, rejection and exile as retribution: "You went and got pregnant, and then killed the child. Under my roof? …You will go to Lagos…until I decide what to do with you" (Olisakwe, 2020, pp.33 &37). Her father's response reflects a broader cultural logic in which the girl-child is held accountable for the violence done to her. This normalization of blame reveals how deeply internalized patriarchal values are within familial structures.

Olisakwe's narrative strongly illustrates the convergence of Spivak's subaltern theory and Ogundipe-Leslie's African feminist thought. Ogadinma's experiences repeatedly demonstrate that female suffering is normalized within patriarchal institutions that neither protect nor adequately acknowledge women's realities. Even when she attempts articulation, her speech fails to produce meaningful institutional response. Thus, her condition reflects the postcolonial feminist crisis of audibility in which female pain is heard superficially yet structurally disregarded. At the same time, Ogadinma's continued endurance reflects the STIWANIST understanding of feminine survival as negotiation within difficult material conditions rather than simplistic liberation from them. As a naive young girl, she falls in love with her aunt's brother, who is fifteen years her senior. Her marriage to Tobe, at the subtle prodding and manipulation of Aunty Ngozi, further reinforces this pattern. Aunty Ngozi cajoles Ogadinma into enduring as Tobe takes out his frustrations on her, saying, "…That is the burden we women have to bear." Initially framed as stability, the relationship becomes another site of control and abuse – marked by verbal and physical assaults, a miscarriage, and even a near-death experience. The shift from apparent care to domination underscores the precarious nature of female security within patriarchal systems. Marriage, rather than offering protection, becomes a continuation of the same structures that have already failed her.

Against Ogadinma's naivety is her mother's assertiveness as Mama Nnukwu implied, "You know what you mother's problem was? She was too ambitious. She wanted everything in the world as though she was a man, reducing my son to the wife, and it didn't work" (p. 102). This goes on to affirm the argument of this paper that voice is a direct antagonist to patriarchal structures or systems and silence is duly rewarded, thus negating and breaking down all forms of feminine agency. The recurring phrase "Everything will be all right" operates ironically. It functions not as reassurance, but as a mechanism that encourages endurance in the absence of change. It reflects a cultural tendency to normalize suffering rather than confront its causes. Within this context, Ogadinma's silence cannot be dismissed as passivity. It is shaped by a reality in which speaking does not necessarily produce change. Her survival depends on navigating systems that are structurally indifferent to her voice, "Tobe wanted to kill me, Papa... I spoke out of turn, but that is not the reason he would try to kill me…" (p. 168) she complained to her father when she ran back to Kano following Tobe's brutal abuse on her and the father retorted, "You think you have endured what others

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haven't?" (p. 168) "… you do not burn down your house to kill a rat. You will not let anger destroy the bond that holds you together…" (p. 171) This aligns closely with Spivak's argument that the problem is not that the subaltern cannot speak, but that her speech does not translate into recognition or justice.

Consequently, Ogadinma's silence emerges not as weakness, consent, or helplessness, but as the psychological and social consequence of a patriarchal culture that disciplines female resistance while normalizing women's suffering. Olisakwe portrays a society in which speaking out against violence does not necessarily guarantee protection, recognition, or justice; instead, it often results in blame, isolation, and further victimization for women. In this way, the novel reinforces Gayatri Spivak's assertion that the crisis of the subaltern lies not merely in the ability to speak, but in the impossibility of being genuinely heard within structures fundamentally designed to invalidate female testimony. Thus, survival in *Ogadinma or Everything Will Be Alright* is tied less to justice or social transformation than to a woman's capacity to endure systems that continuously silence, dismiss, and negotiate her humanity.

**Voice and Silence: A Fundamental Divergence**

The divergence between the two novels lies in how they conceptualize the relationship between voice and agency. In Adunni's narrative, voice is constructed as something that can be developed, strengthened, and ultimately mobilized as a tool of transformation. Her journey suggests that articulation, when supported by education and self-awareness, can disrupt the structures that seek to silence her. Ogadinma's experience, however, complicates this optimism. Her narrative demonstrates that voice does not always produce recognition or change. Even when she experiences violence and attempts to navigate it, her position within patriarchal structures limits the impact of her actions. Her silence is not simply imposed; it is shaped by the knowledge that speaking may not alter her reality. The divergence between both protagonists therefore does not suggest a contradiction between silence and voice, but rather reveals different manifestations of postcolonial feminine negotiation. Adunni represents a model in which voice gradually becomes attainable through education, mentorship, and self-awareness. Ogadinma, however, exposes the uncertainty of that possibility within more violently restrictive environments where articulation itself may fail to secure justice or protection. Together, both narratives reinforce the postcolonial feminist argument that feminine agency remains contingent upon the structures within which women attempt to speak, survive, and define themselves. This contrast highlights a crucial insight: voice is not inherently liberatory. Its effectiveness depends on the structures within which it operates. Without recognition, speech risks becoming another form of silence. Thus, while Adunni moves toward voice as a means of transformation, Ogadinma navigates silence as a condition for survival. Together, they reveal that agency exists within, and is constrained by, the limits of both.

**Patriarchy as System, Not Event**

Both novels insist on the systemic nature of patriarchy. It is not presented as a series of isolated incidents, but as a network of practices and beliefs that shape every aspect of the protagonists' lives. In Adunni's case, her forced marriage—"so he can collect the bride price" (Daré, 2020, p. 23). "Girls are only good for marriage, cooking food and bedroom work". (Dare, 2020, p. 37) —demonstrates how economic necessity and cultural tradition intersect to commodify the female body. Her value is determined not by her aspirations or intellectual potential, but by what she can contribute materially to the family. Similarly, In *Ogadinma*,

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
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patriarchy operates through multiple agents, including family members, intimate partners, community expectations, and cultural assumptions of womanhood. The violence and restrictions experienced by Ogadinma are not isolated occurrences caused by a single individual; rather, they emerge from a social environment that normalizes female subordination and legitimizes male authority. The recurring nature of these experiences underscores the structural character of patriarchal oppression, revealing how deeply embedded gender inequality remains within social institutions. By presenting patriarchy as systemic rather than incidental, both novels challenge the assumption that individual acts of resistance alone can dismantle oppression. Instead, they suggest that meaningful transformation requires confronting cultural, economic, and ideological structures that continually reproduce inequality. Through their portrayals of Adunni and Ogadinma, the novels expose patriarchy as a self-sustaining system whose effects extend beyond personal relationships into broader social arrangements that regulate women's lives and possibilities.

**Education and the Limits of Hope**

Education occupies a central position in both *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright*, yet the novels differ significantly in the extent to which they present it as a viable pathway to feminine agency. In *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, education functions as both a personal aspiration and social instrument through which Adunni seeks self-definition and social recognition. From the beginning of the narrative, Adunni repeatedly insists that education is the means through which she can acquire what she calls a "louding voice" (Daré, 2020), a phrase that symbolizes not merely the ability to speak but the capacity to be heard and taken seriously within a society that routinely dismisses the voices of poor girls. Her commitment to education persists despite forced marriage, domestic exploitation, poverty, and social prejudice, suggesting that learning represents a form of hope capable of challenging structures of marginalization. Through characters such as Ms. Tia, the novel further reinforces the transformative potential of education by presenting mentorship and literacy as mechanisms through which marginalized girls may gain confidence, articulate their experiences, and imagine alternative futures. This representation aligns with Ezeigbo's (1996) argument that education enables women to become more articulate, self-aware, and capable of resisting the social conditions that sustain their subordination. However, the novel does not suggest that education alone is sufficient to dismantle entrenched inequalities. Adunni's struggles reveal that access to knowledge remains dependent upon broader social and economic conditions that continue to privilege male authority and restrict female mobility. Consequently, education emerges not as an automatic guarantee of liberation but as an important resource through which resistance becomes possible.

In contrast, *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be Alright* presents a more complicated and less optimistic relationship between education and empowerment. Although education appears as a potential avenue through which Ogadinma might improve her circumstances, her aspirations are repeatedly interrupted by forces beyond her control, including sexual exploitation, economic hardship, abusive relationships, and deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations. Unlike Adunni, whose educational ambitions remain a constant source of motivation throughout the narrative, Ogadinma encounters circumstances that continually postpone or undermine the realization of her goals. The novel therefore exposes the limitations of viewing education as a universal solution to women's oppression. Olisakwe demonstrates that access to knowledge does not automatically eliminate structural barriers, particularly when those barriers are reinforced by economic dependency, gendered violence, and social expectations that prioritize women's domestic roles over their personal ambitions.

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Through Ogadinma's experiences, the text suggests that empowerment cannot be reduced to educational attainment alone because women often remain vulnerable to systems of domination even when they possess the desire and capacity for self-improvement. By placing these contrasting narratives side by side, both novels ultimately offer a nuanced understanding of education as a site of possibility rather than certainty. While education provides a framework through which women may imagine alternative futures and negotiate greater autonomy, its effectiveness remains contingent upon wider social transformations capable of addressing the structural inequalities that constrain women's lives. Thus, the novels collectively demonstrate that education is necessary for feminine agency, but it is not sufficient on its own to guarantee liberation from patriarchal oppression.

**Narrative Style and the Representation of Feminine Experience**

The stylistic choices of both authors play a crucial role in shaping the reader's experience. Daré's use of non-standard English immerses the reader in Adunni's perspective, making her voice immediate and intimate. By allowing Adunni to narrate her experiences in a language that reflects her educational background and social circumstances, Daré creates a strong sense of authenticity. Readers encounter the world as Adunni understands it, experiencing her frustrations, aspirations, fears, and hopes through her own linguistic framework. This narrative strategy challenges conventional assumptions about correctness and authority in language. Rather than presenting Standard English as the only legitimate mode of expression, the novel demonstrates that meaning, intelligence, and emotional depth can exist outside formally sanctioned linguistic structures. Consequently, Adunni's speech becomes an important aspect of the novel's broader concern with visibility and recognition. Her language reflects both the limitations imposed upon her and her determination to overcome them. As her confidence develops throughout the narrative, readers witness not only personal growth but also a gradual strengthening of her capacity for self-expression. The stylistic form of the novel therefore reinforces its thematic exploration of feminine agency and the struggle for social recognition.

Olisakwe's approach, by contrast, is marked by restraint. Her narrative is direct, forcing the reader to confront the realities of Ogadinma's experience without distraction. This stylistic choice reinforces the novel's thematic focus on survival. Episodes of abuse, disappointment, economic hardship, and emotional vulnerability are presented with a clarity that prevents the reader from romanticizing or minimizing their impact. Rather than relying on elaborate descriptions or sentimental language, Olisakwe allows events to speak through their cumulative weight. This narrative restraint heightens the realism of the text and underscores the everyday nature of the challenges confronting women within patriarchal environments. The reader is therefore compelled to focus not on dramatic moments of resistance alone but also on the quieter processes of endurance and adaptation that characterize Ogadinma's journey. In this way, the novel presents survival itself as a significant dimension of feminine experience. The simplicity of the prose mirrors the harsh realities of the protagonist's circumstances and reinforces the argument that agency often operates within conditions of severe constraint. Through this stylistic approach, Olisakwe exposes the structural forces that shape Ogadinma's life while emphasizing the resilience required to navigate them. Together, these narrative strategies highlight different dimensions of agency: one through expression, the other through exposure. While Daré foregrounds the importance of voice as a means of self-definition, Olisakwe draws attention to the social realities that often limit the effectiveness of that voice. Both approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of feminine experience by demonstrating that agency is neither singular nor absolute. Instead, it emerges

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through complex negotiations with structures of power, inequality, and cultural expectation. The novels therefore complement one another in their representation of women's struggles and aspirations within contemporary Nigerian society. Their differing narrative styles ultimately reinforce the study's argument that feminine agency is multifaceted, context-dependent, and continually shaped by the conditions within which women live.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, these novels offer a complex and layered understanding of feminine agency within contemporary Nigerian society. They do not present a unified narrative of resistance, but rather a spectrum of experiences shaped by differing circumstances and constraints. Adunni's journey suggests that voice, when cultivated and supported, can serve as a powerful tool for transformation. Ogadinma's experience, however, reminds us that such transformation is not always accessible. Her story insists on the reality of structural limitations, in which survival itself becomes a form of resistance. By placing these narratives in dialogue, it becomes clear that agency is neither fixed nor universally attainable. It is contingent, negotiated, and often incomplete. Through the combined theoretical insights of Spivak and Ogundipe-Leslie, it becomes evident that feminine agency in both novels cannot be reduced to simple acts of speech or resistance. Rather, agency emerges through complex negotiations with structures that continuously attempt to regulate female existence. While Spivak illuminates the structural silencing embedded within patriarchal and postcolonial systems, Ogundipe-Leslie provides an African feminist framework for understanding how women navigate those systems through endurance, adaptability, and gradual self-assertion. The novels therefore reveal that African women's struggles for voice are inseparable from broader socio-cultural realities that shape the possibilities and limitations of feminine subjectivity.

Ultimately, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* and *Ogadinma Or, Everything Will Be AlRight* challenge simplistic understandings of voice and silence. They reveal that the relationship between the two is far more complex than a binary opposition. Voice can empower, but it can also be limited. Silence can be imposed, but it can also function as a strategy. Adunni's journey affirms the possibility of transformation through voice. Ogadinma's story exposes the limits of that possibility within restrictive systems. Together, they offer a more honest representation of what it means to navigate girlhood within patriarchal societies. What emerges is not a resolution, but a tension, one that reflects the ongoing struggle for recognition, agency, and survival. And it is within this tension that the true significance of these narratives lies.

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