DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S FEMINIST RHETORIC

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Abstract

The study explores how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* employs language to challenge patriarchal ideologies and reframe gendered subjectivity. Drawing on Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), the paper critically examines selected excerpts that foreground themes such as socialisation, ambition, sexuality, and marriage. Through a close reading of stylistic and discursive features—including agency, nominalisation, and metaphor—the analysis demonstrates how Adichie exposes the ideological workings of gender norms while offering counter-discourses that empower women. The findings highlight the text's rhetorical power in questioning normalized gender roles and contribute to broader conversations on language, feminism, and social inclusion.

Key Words: Feminist Discourse Analysis, Nominalization, Agency

Introduction

Gender inequality remains a persistent global issue, often perpetuated not only through overt structures of power but also through the subtleties of language. Feminist theorists have long argued that language is not a neutral medium but a site where ideological meanings are constructed and contested. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

We Should All Be Feminists presents a compelling example of how discourse can be used both to expose and to resist patriarchal norms. Rooted in personal narrative yet deeply political, the text critiques how women are socialised into limiting roles, policed in their sexuality and evaluated based on marital aspirations rather than personal achievement.

The paper examines Adichie's linguistic strategies through the lens of Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), focusing on how she assigns agency, unmasks ideological assumptions, and constructs resistant subject positions. By analysing key excerpts from the text, the study aims to uncover how language functions as a tool of both oppression and empowerment in the construction of gender identities. The paper also situates its findings within existing feminist linguistic scholarship to evaluate the extent to which Adichie's discourse aligns with, expands upon, or diverges from previous feminist critiques.

Aim/Objectives

This study aims to critically analyse Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* through the lens of Feminist Discourse Analysis (FDA), with a focus on how language is used to construct, challenge, and resist gender ideologies in contemporary society. Its objectives are:

1. To examine how linguistic choices such as agency, nominalisation, and passive constructions are used to construct gendered subjectivities in Adichie's discourse.
2. To explore how Adichie's rhetorical strategies challenge patriarchal ideologies and promote feminist resistance.
3. To analyse how discursive representations of gender reflect broader social norms related to class, sexuality and social inclusion.

Review of Related Literature

Recent gender scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to structural inequality, media representation and digital activism. However, despite these important contributions, many studies fall short of addressing the subtle linguistic mechanisms that shape gendered subjectivity and power. For instance, Moorti's exploration of "mediated activism" through survivor testimonies on digital platforms illustrates how marginalized voices gain visibility, yet it overlooks how syntactic choices such as nominalisation might obscure or highlight agency. Similarly, Rottenberg and Gilchrist's analysis of neoliberal discourses surrounding menopause in UK workplaces reveals the regulation of gendered bodies within corporate spaces but does not engage with the grammatical structures—such as passive voice or abstraction through nominalisation—that may underpin such regulation.

In the same vein, Gilbert's feminist ethical model for mentoring socially disadvantaged women rightly emphasizes relational care and ethical practice but remains focused on praxis rather than discourse. It leaves unexamined the linguistic strategies that might reinforce or resist disempowerment within mentoring narratives. Likewise, a NYU study on framing gender gaps—whether they are portrayed as "too many men" or "too few women"—demonstrates the power of framing in shaping public perception, yet it fails to explore how specific linguistic forms like nominalisation and passive constructions contribute to those framing effects ("Too Many Men or Too Few Women?"). These studies, while rich in content, largely treat language as a neutral vehicle for meaning, rather than a constitutive force in the construction of gendered realities.

Further examples from technology and healthcare reveal similar limitations. Reports from The Australian highlight the gender gap in trust toward generative AI, identifying broad social causes without analysing how language may encode such technological exclusion ("We

Must Keep an Eye on GenAI Gender Trust Gap"). Criado Perez's *Invisible Women* and a report from The Guardian both expose structural biases in medical research, particularly the underrepresentation of women in clinical trials (Criado Perez; "'Concerning' Lack of Female-Only Medical Trials"). Yet, these investigations stop short of asking how discourse itself—through lexical choices, grammatical forms, and textual structures—may reinforce the very exclusions they document. The absence of a discourse-analytic lens in such critical domains suggests a blind spot in much of the gender scholarship to date.

The absence of linguistic analysis is also noticeable in feminist literary criticism. Ordu, Stanley, Egu, and Nkechinyere, in their work on Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*, argue that gender issues are socially constructed and experienced by both men and women. While the study emphasizes education as a tool for female empowerment, it relies on a broad gender theory framework and overlooks how discourse itself constructs notions of empowerment or victimhood. It does not explore how linguistic forms like nominalisation might erase or assign agency to characters, leaving a significant analytic gap. This pattern continues in the work of Clair Judith et al., who explore how social class backgrounds influence women's career narratives. Their study finds that women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attribute success to self-reliance, while those from higher classes often cite luck or connections. While insightful, the study's focus remains on content rather than on the discursive strategies through which these narratives are constructed.

A similar limitation is found in McGinn and Oh's analysis of gender and social class in women's employment. Their research reveals that women's identification with class or gender varies according to socioeconomic background, which affects beliefs and behaviours in the workplace. Although the study calls for a more nuanced gendered-class framework in psychological research, it does not explore how linguistic

patterns may reflect or resist these identities. This neglect reinforces the broader trend in feminist literature: a tendency to foreground content and context while leaving the linguistic form largely unexamined.

Feminist theory itself, while offering foundational tools for understanding power, patriarchy, and gendered experience, has not consistently emphasized language as a site of struggle. Concepts such as intersectionality and gender as a social construct open the door for discourse analysis, but many feminist scholars have yet to walk through it. While some traditions in feminist linguistics have begun to explore how language reflects or reinforces patriarchy, more needs to be done to bridge feminist theory with rigorous grammatical analysis.

The study at hand aims to fill this critical gap by applying Sara Mills's feminist discourse theory to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's We Should All Be Feminists, with particular attention to how nominalisation and agency are linguistically encoded. Adichie's text, widely recognized for its accessible yet radical feminist stance, offers fertile ground for analysing how language itself becomes a site of resistance. By interrogating how subjectivity is foregrounded or backgrounded through linguistic choices, this research contributes not only to feminist ideology but also to feminist grammar. In doing so, it expands the current discourse beyond thematic or ideological critiques, offering a syntactic and discursive lens through which to understand how feminism operates not only ideologically, but grammatically.

Theoretical Anchorage

The study deploys Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis to investigate the significant role English plays in advancing or challenging gendered and class-based power structures.

Sara Mills' approach to Feminist Discourse Analysis provides a critical and nuanced method of examining how gender is constructed in texts. Unlike traditional discourse analysis which often focuses on overt power structures and institutional ideologies, Mills' FDA places

emphasis on the subtle ways language constructs subject positions, and how readers may interpret these constructions differently based on context (Mills 1997). She argues that language is not inherently sexist but can be used in ways that reflect or challenge dominant gender ideologies. This theoretical stance is crucial for understanding the dynamics of feminist writing, where meanings are fluid and situated.

Mills further maintains that feminist texts often occupy a contested space, wherein female subjects are represented in multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ways (Mills, Language and Sexism 2008). She highlights the importance of examining both what is said and how it is said, especially in terms of grammatical choices like nominalisation that may obscure or highlight agency. In this sense, FDA offers a more reader-sensitive approach than traditional CDA by recognising the variability of interpretations and the multiplicity of female experiences.

Nominalisation is the process by which verbs or actions are transformed into noun phrases (e.g., oppress becomes oppression), often leading to the abstraction or depersonalisation of agency. According to Halliday and Matthiessen, nominalisation is a feature of grammatical metaphor which can serve to compress information and increase textual density (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). However, in critical and feminist discourse studies, this process is often scrutinised for its ideological implications. Fairclough argues that nominalisation can be used to obscure agency, making it unclear who is responsible for an action (Fairclough 2001). This characteristic becomes significant in feminist discourse where naming and locating power is crucial. While some scholars view nominalisation as a means of concealing responsibility, others argue that it can also serve to universalise and legitimise feminist struggles by framing them as structural issues (Machin and Mayr 2012).

Agency in feminist discourse analysis refers to the capacity of individuals—especially women—to act, speak, and be recognised as

subjects within discourse. Mills contends that feminist texts often navigate a tension between portraying women as victims of structural oppression and as active agents of change (Mills 2003). This tension is frequently reflected in grammatical choices such as the use of active versus passive voice, or the employment of nominalisation. The suppression or foregrounding of agency through grammatical forms influences how responsibility is allocated in texts. For instance, the difference between "men oppress women" and "the oppression of women" is not merely syntactic but ideological. The former foregrounds male agency, while the latter abstracts it, potentially softening the accountability.

Data Analysis

Excerpt: 1: "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller."

In this excerpt, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a powerful critique of gendered socialisation through a direct and unambiguous statement. The use of the active verb phrase "we teach girls" explicitly assigns responsibility to societal actors, parents, educators, media, and broader cultural institutions, who shape the behaviours and expectations of girls from an early age. Unlike constructions that rely on nominalisation to obscure agency, Adichie deliberately retains the subject "we," emphasizing the collective complicity in reinforcing patriarchal norms. This linguistic choice ensures that agency is visible and accountable, aligning with Sara Mills's emphasis on uncovering how power operates through discourse.

From the perspective of Feminist Discourse Analysis, the phrase "to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" represents the internalisation of oppressive expectations. The verbs "shrink" and "make" construct the female subject as someone compelled to conform to limiting ideals physically, intellectually, and emotionally. These

actions are not inherent but are taught, revealing how women's subjectivity is discursively shaped to suit patriarchal standards of acceptability. Mills's framework highlights that such representations contribute to the creation of gendered identities where women are positioned as passive, compliant, and subordinate.

The excerpt functions as both an exposé and a form of resistance. She disrupts the naturalisation of these gender norms, prompting readers to reflect on the taken-for-granted practices that perpetuate inequality by naming the teaching process and its outcomes. In doing so, Adichie asserts that the systems shaping women can and should be questioned.

Excerpt 2: "The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are."

This excerpt encapsulates Adichie's central critique of gender as a socially constructed and restrictive system. The sentence begins with a nominalised phrase "the problem with gender" which abstracts the issue, framing "gender" not as an individual attribute but as a structural and ideological system. Nominalisation here functions to universalise and elevate the critique, positioning gender not merely as a personal identity, but as a societal apparatus that imposes norms. While nominalisation can sometimes obscure agency, Adichie avoids this by immediately clarifying what gender does, that is, it "prescribes." This verb restores agency to the abstract system of gender, representing it as an active force shaping human behaviour.

Adichie's choice of the verb "prescribes" is ideologically loaded. It evokes authority, control, and rigidity suggesting that gender dictates how individuals should behave based on societal expectations rather than personal realities. The modal phrase "how we should be" points to the normative function of gender discourse: it doesn't describe but rather commands. This aligns with Sara Mills's notion that discourse is

not just a reflection of reality, but a tool through which power is exercised.

Furthermore, the contrast between "how we should be" and "how we are" draws attention to the gap between socially imposed identities and authentic selves. Adichie's language challenges patriarchal ideology by disrupting the assumed naturalness of gender roles. In Mills's framework, such disruption is central to feminist resistance: exposing how what appears to be neutral or biological is in fact ideological.

Excerpt 3: "We raise girls to see each other as competitors—not for jobs or accomplishments, which in my opinion can be a good thing, but for the attention of men."

Here, Adichie foregrounds a key dynamic in patriarchal ideology which is the social conditioning of women to compete, not for empowerment or self-fulfilment, but for male validation. The phrase "we raise girls" assigns agency directly to collective social actors, making it clear that the unequal treatment of women is neither accidental nor divine, but rather a product of deliberate, repeated cultural practices. This assignment of agency is critical because, unlike constructions that might nominalise the process ("the socialisation of girls"), Adichie keeps the action visible and direct. In Sara Mills's terms, this linguistic strategy resists the tendency of dominant discourse to obscure the roles of institutions and individuals in maintaining inequality.

The contrast that Adichie sets up, competition for "jobs or accomplishments" versus "the attention of men", is central to the ideological critique. She acknowledges that ambition and competition can be constructive, but the redirection of female ambition toward gaining male approval exposes how deeply entrenched patriarchal values are in the formation of gendered identities. This is an instance of identity shaping where girls are positioned within a social framework

that trains them to derive worth from their desirability rather than their capabilities. Mills's framework encourages us to look at how these discursive formations create and limit the positioning of girls as rivals in a patriarchally defined economy of value.

Moreover, the excerpt reveals how patriarchal discourse is internalised. The use of "see each other as competitors" points not only to external imposition, but also to internal acceptance and enactment of these roles among girls themselves. This reflects the subtle workings of power, where oppressed subjects become unwitting agents of their own marginalisation.

Excerpt 4: "Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage."

This concise statement powerfully encompasses the societal expectations placed upon women and offers a pointed critique of gendered roles. The phrase "Because I am female" foregrounds biological sex as a determinant of social destiny, setting up a causal relationship in which being a female automatically invites prescriptive norms. In this case, the norm is the expectation to "aspire to marriage", a passive construction that reflects how cultural discourses shape and limit women's ambitions.

The use of the passive structure "I am expected" is critical as it removes the agent performing the action, thereby obscuring the source of power or control. Who expects her to aspire to marriage? Society, culture, family? The absence of an explicit subject is itself a reflection of how deeply embedded and naturalised these expectations are within patriarchal discourse. The ideology becomes so pervasive that it is no longer attributed to any single institution. Mills emphasizes that such passive constructions are one-way patriarchal discourse sustains its power, by presenting gender norms as inevitable rather than constructed.

In addition, the phrase "aspire to marriage" reflects how subjectivity is constructed through ideological language. The word "aspire" is typically associated with ambition and success, yet here it is ironically tied to a singular, gendered life goal. It implies that for women, marriage is not just one possible path but the primary metric of fulfilment. This framing restricts women's subject positions to being future wives, whose social worth is validated through marital status rather than personal achievements.

Adichie's language here mirrors a broader critique of the ways in which female identity is institutionally tied to relational roles, especially roles in relation to men. By naming this expectation and grounding it in her personal experience, she also resists the discourse. She does not accept this expectation as natural or appropriate rather she exposes its ideological function. In Mills's terms, Adichie is actively engaging in repositioning, that is, she situates herself as a subject who recognizes and resists the constraints imposed by dominant gender ideologies.

Thus, this excerpt demonstrates how nominalisation and passive constructions work to conceal the sources of patriarchal power, while Adichie's rhetorical strategy reclaims agency by unmasking these ideologies. Through her precise and critical use of language, she articulates the subtle but powerful ways in which women's subjectivities are shaped by social norms, and in doing so, challenges their continued acceptance.

Excerpt 5: "Marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support. But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same?

In this excerpt, Adichie exposes the gendered imbalance in social expectations around marriage. She begins with a balanced acknowledgment of marriage as a positive institution, but swiftly shifts to a critique of the unequal discursive burden placed on girls. The

phrase "we teach girls to aspire to marriage" clearly assigns agency to society much like in earlier excerpts, and highlights how subject positions are taught rather than naturally developed. There is no nominalisation here; the language remains active and direct, reinforcing the idea that these expectations are socially constructed, not inevitable.

Through the contrast with boys "we don't teach boys the same" Adichie draws attention to the gendered asymmetry in upbringing, revealing a patriarchal discourse that ties women's worth to relationships, while allowing men to pursue broader ambitions. This contrast supports Mills's point that discourse not only constructs gender, but does so unevenly, privileging male autonomy and female dependency.

The rhetorical question functions as both a critique and a prompt for reflection, pushing readers to examine the invisible ideologies they may take for granted. Adichie's language, while accessible, effectively disrupts patriarchal norms by juxtaposing equality with ingrained bias, a hallmark of feminist discourse that seeks to transform rather than merely describe.

Excerpt 6: "We say to girls: 'You can have ambition, but not too much.'"

This excerpt sharply critiques the conditional encouragement often given to girls. The phrase "We say to girls" clearly attributes agency to society, maintaining visibility of those responsible for shaping gender roles. Unlike nominalised constructions, this direct speech highlights how discourse actively forms subjectivity.
The contradiction embedded in "you can have ambition, but not too much" illustrates the double bind women face: ambition is allowed only within limits that preserve traditional gender expectations. This reveals how patriarchal discourse pretends to support progress while

simultaneously disciplining women's behaviour, a dynamic that Sara Mills emphasizes in her theory.

Excerpts 7: "We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are."

In this line, Adichie points to the gendered policing of sexuality, emphasizing how societal discourse permits male sexual freedom while restricting female sexual expression. The phrase "we teach girls" maintains the direct assignment of agency, a hallmark of her feminist rhetorical strategy. By avoiding nominalisation, Adichie makes visible the process and responsibility behind the shaping of gendered identities.

The contrast "in the way that boys are" exposes a double standard, highlighting how patriarchal ideology constructs male sexuality as natural and female sexuality as dangerous or shameful. From Sara Mills's perspective, this reflects the creation of distinct subject positions: girls are positioned as passive or morally bound, while boys are given autonomy.

Adichie's clear, unembellished language challenges the reader to confront how normalized and unequal these expectations are. She critiques not just the norm but the discursive mechanism that sustains it, reinforcing FDA's focus on uncovering the power dynamics embedded in everyday speech.

Findings/Discussion

1. Gendered socialisation is discursively taught and reinforced.
2. Patriarchal ideology operates through language and structure.
3. Power is maintained through nominalisation and passive constructions.
4. Feminist resistance is performed through visibility and repositioning.

5. Sexuality and ambition are discursively policed.
6. Competition among women is constructed through male-centric validation.

Adichie’s depiction of ambition as conditional—“You can have ambition, but not too much”—supports Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, where social norms constrain the range of acceptable gender performances (Butler 179). The way ambition is linguistically regulated aligns with Butler’s (1990) view that femininity is not a natural identity but a repeated performance within “a regulatory frame” (33). Adichie's critique of how girls are subtly disciplined to be non-threatening echoes this understanding of gender as discursively constructed and policed.

The finding that women are socialised to compete “for the attention of men” aligns with bell hooks’s (2000) argument that patriarchy maintains control by fostering divisions among women, especially around sexuality and desirability. Hooks notes that “patriarchy teaches women to hate one another,” particularly when male attention is involved (hooks 124). Adichie’s reflection on female rivalry driven by male validation supports this by showing how gender discourse shapes women's identities in ways that discourage solidarity and collective agency.

Moreover, Adichie’s rhetorical strategy of naming and resisting gendered norms positions her work within what Lazar (2005) terms “feminist critical discourse analysis,” which seeks not just to analyse language, but to expose and challenge patriarchal ideology. The consistent contrast between boys and girls in Adichie’s statements—e.g., “we teach girls... and not boys...”—functions as an ideological critique, unmasking the asymmetrical discursive burdens placed on women.

The ideological critique of female sexual repression— “we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are”—connects with Michel Foucault’s analysis of how sexuality is regulated

through discourse (Foucault 27). However, Adichie takes this further by directly localising the agents of repression, unlike Foucault's more abstract treatment of power, thus aligning more closely with feminist perspectives like those of Chris Weedon (1997), who emphasises that language is the site where meaning, subjectivity, and power converge.

Finally, the findings from this analysis confirm that Adichie's discourse not only reflects but actively engages with critical feminist frameworks. Her language choices mirror broader feminist concerns about how women are positioned within and by discourse, and her rhetorical strategies reflect ongoing efforts to resist, reframe, and reclaim subjectivity in the face of normative constraints.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis of *We Should All Be Feminists* reveals that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie effectively uses discourse to expose and challenge the linguistic foundations of patriarchal ideology. Through strategic use of active constructions, metaphor, repetition, and rhetorical questions, she foregrounds the social processes that condition and constrain female subjectivity. Her refusal to obscure agency—opting instead for direct attributions disrupts the naturalisation of gender roles and forces recognition of collective complicity in sustaining gender inequality.

The study affirms the relevance of Feminist Discourse Analysis as a methodological tool for uncovering the ideological work performed by language. It also demonstrates how feminist literary texts can serve as powerful discursive interventions that not only critique societal norms but also envision more equitable alternatives. In doing so, Adichie's work contributes meaningfully to feminist scholarship and activism by using accessible yet ideologically potent language to inspire critical reflection and social change.

While giant steps have been taken towards fostering holistic inclusivity, a constellation of challenges remain. These challenges can

be resolved via a multidimensional approach, one that takes into consideration the nuanced crisscrossing of language and culture and prioritises the grievances and voices of marginalised groups. For a more equitable and inclusive society, all hands must be on deck to ensure that policies are not simply a function of political rhetoric but, that implementation and enforcement follow every policy pronouncement.

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