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The Louding Voice as Semiotic Rebellion: Language, Space, and Narrative in Abi Daré's Novel

Kennedy Kangwa
kennedykangwa@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Abi Daré's The Girl with the Louding Voice (2020) from a semiotic perspective, arguing that the novel is not just a narrative of resistance, but also a performance of resistance, in terms of form and signification. Drawing on Saussure's theory of the sign, Barthes's notion of mythology and Jakobson's model of linguistic functions, the analysis identifies three interconnected dimensions of semiotic rebellion: the non-standard English of Adunni as a site of linguistic subversion and creative reclamation; the symbolic opposition between domestic interiors and outdoor spaces as an encoding of patriarchal captivity versus liberatory possibility; and the first-person narrative structure of the novel as a challenge to dominant patriarchal mythologies. The study shows how Daré's linguistic innovations, spatial symbolism and narrative strategies combine to denaturalise patriarchal norms, reclaim female narrative authority and participate in a wider project of cultural transformation. This analysis adds to the body of work on African women's writing, feminist narratology, and postcolonial semiotics.

Keywords: cultural transformation, feminist narratology, Louding Voice, semiotic rebellion, symbolic opposition.

I. Introduction

Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) has struck a chord with readers worldwide, travelling from Lagos to London and beyond to earn both commercial success and critical acclaim. The novel follows Adunni, a spirited fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl determined to secure an education despite the formidable obstacles posed by poverty, tradition, and patriarchy. Critics have praised the novel's emotional power and its unflinching portrayal of gender inequality, yet the semiotic structures that give it such resonance have not received the sustained attention they deserve. This article addresses that gap by examining the systems of signs, symbols, and codes through which Daré constructs the novel's meanings.

Semiotic analysis matters here because it reveals how texts produce meaning not simply through *what* they say, but through *how* they say it. When viewed through this lens, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* emerges as a carefully orchestrated system of signs encoding a critique of what sociologists' term 'cultural lag'—the persistence of oppressive practices like child marriage even as modern ideologies of individual rights circulate with increasing force. Daré operates at the intersection of linguistic experimentation, symbolic resonance, and narrative subversion to challenge the naturalisation of patriarchal norms. The novel's engagement with these issues is not merely thematic but formal; its structure and style participate in the critique it articulates.

Adunni's distinctive narrative voice functions as a semiotic act of resistance, subverting conventional linguistic relationships through deliberate grammatical and lexical innovation. The novel's symbolic geography—particularly the opposition between domestic interiors and the open outdoors—encodes the broader conflict between patriarchal constraint and liberatory possibility. The narrative's insistence on centring a young woman's first-person account constitutes a semiotic intervention that unsettles dominant cultural mythologies about gender and agency. This article contends that Daré's work functions not merely as a narrative about resistance but as a performance of resistance at the level of form and signification itself.

The analysis proceeds in five sections. Following this introduction, the literature review situates the novel within existing scholarship on African women's writing, linguistic innovation, and feminist narratology. The theoretical framework section outlines the semiotic concepts drawn from Saussure, Barthes, and Jakobson that structure the analysis. The methodology section details the

approach to textual analysis employed. The findings and discussion section examine three interconnected semiotic dimensions of the novel: Adunni's linguistic voice, the symbolic significance of domestic and outdoor spaces, and the narrative's subversion of patriarchal mythologies. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings and reflects on the broader implications of semiotic resistance in contemporary African women's literature.

II. Literature Review

Since its publication, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* has generated considerable scholarly and critical discussion. Reviewers celebrated its emotional depth and its fearless engagement with difficult subjects, with early praise focusing on Daré's creation of an unforgettable protagonist whose voice registers with an authenticity that feels almost uncanny (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2021). Scholarly attention has since shifted towards the novel's contribution to contemporary debates around African feminism, postcolonial literature, and the politics of representation. The novel has been positioned within a growing body of work that interrogates the intersections of gender, class, and colonial legacy in contemporary African societies.

Existing studies have explored themes of child marriage, economic exploitation, and the transformative potential of education, establishing the text as an important addition to the growing body of African women's writing that challenges reductive stereotypes (Ogunyemi, 1985; Uwakweh, 2020). These readings foreground the novel's counter-narrative function, its refusal of stereotypical portrayals of African women as passive victims, and its insistence instead on their capacity for resistance, creativity, and transformation. The novel's engagement with these themes is situated within a broader tradition of African feminist literature that seeks to reclaim narrative authority and representational agency.

Some critics have attended to the novel's unusual linguistic texture. Uwakweh (2020) examines Daré's use of non-standard English as a stylistic device that registers both Adunni's social marginalisation and her growing confidence, arguing that Adunni's narrative voice—with its distinctive grammatical patterns, its code-switching between registers, and its playful coinages—tracks her intellectual and emotional development. Adunni's language functions as a kind of linguistic map of her journey from silence to voice, from being an object of others' narratives to becoming the subject of her own. These studies illuminate the novel's stylistic choices but do not fully theorise how its linguistic innovations operate as a semiotic system that actively reconfigures the relationships between language, identity, and power.

Feminist and postcolonial readings have situated the novel within broader traditions of African women's literary production. Daré joins a lineage of Nigerian female writers—from Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—who have reshaped representations of female identity and agency in literature (Ogunyemi, 1985; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2021). These analyses have productively traced the novel's engagement with the politics of representation and its investment in narrating marginalised experience. However, these readings have not systematically engaged with the semiotic mechanisms through which the novel accomplishes its ideological work. The formal dimensions of the text's political intervention remain undertheorised in much of the existing scholarship.

Scholarship on spatial symbolism in African women's fiction has begun to address how domestic and public spaces encode gendered power relations. Wauthion and Moussa (2022) examine semiotics of space in contemporary African women's fiction, demonstrating how the opposition between interior and exterior spaces maps broader conflicts between tradition and modernity, confinement and liberation. While their analysis does not focus specifically on Daré's novel, their framework offers valuable tools for understanding the symbolic geography of *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The spatial dynamics of the novel have been noted in passing by several critics, but a systematic semiotic analysis of these dimensions remains to be undertaken.

Research on child marriage and education in African literature has provided important contextual background for understanding the novel's themes. Scholars such as Oduyoye (2001) and Oyewùmí (1997) have examined the cultural and historical factors that sustain practices like child marriage and the denial of girls' education, arguing that these practices are embedded in broader systems of patriarchal control. The novel's engagement with these issues is consistent with a growing body of literary and scholarly work that seeks to expose and critique the structural violence of gender inequality in African societies.

Postcolonial approaches to language in African literature have also informed readings of the novel. The debate about the use of European languages in African writing, famously articulated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and others, provides a framework for understanding the political stakes of linguistic choice. Daré's use of non-standard English can be read as a negotiation of this complex terrain: she writes in the language of the coloniser but subverts it through her protagonist's distinctive voice, creating a hybrid linguistic form that challenges both colonial and patriarchal linguistic norms. The thematic, linguistic, and feminist approaches have addressed different aspects of the text in isolation without offering a comprehensive account of how meaning is generated through the interplay of signs, codes, and symbolic systems that structure the narrative as a whole. This gap matters because semiotic analysis makes visible the mechanisms through which power is encoded in language and representation. Attending to the novel's semiotic architecture reveals how Daré's work functions not merely as a narrative about resistance but as a performance of resistance at the level of form and signification itself.

III. Theoretical Framework

To read the novel semiotically, this article draws on three interconnected theoretical resources from the semiotic tradition: Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, Roland Barthes's concept of mythology, and Roman Jakobson's model of linguistic functions. These frameworks, while distinct, together provide a comprehensive apparatus for analysing how Daré's novel generates meaning and performs ideological work through its signifying practices. Each framework illuminates a different dimension of the novel's semiotic project, and their combined application reveals the complexity and sophistication of Daré's engagement with questions of language, power, and representation.

A. Saussure's Theory of the Sign

Saussure's (1916) foundational contribution to semiotics lies in his theory of the linguistic sign, which comprises the signifier (the sound-image or written form) and the signified (the concept it evokes). Crucially, Saussure argued that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary rather than natural; there is no inherent connection between the word 'tree' and the concept of a tree. This arbitrariness means that signs are culturally contingent and can be contested, reconfigured, and subverted. Saussure's insights have profound implications for understanding how power operates through language and how linguistic norms can be challenged.

Saussure's framework also introduces the concept of value, which holds that signs derive their meaning not from any inherent properties but from their difference from other signs within a system. Language is thus a system of differences without positive terms. This insight is crucial for understanding how Adunni's non-standard English derives its meaning not from any inherent quality but from its systematic difference from standard English, a difference that registers social marginalisation and simultaneously opens space for creative subversion. The value of Adunni's linguistic innovations lies precisely in their difference from the standard, a difference that the novel celebrates rather than apologises for.

Daré exploits this possibility by rendering Adunni's narrative in non-standard English, foregrounding the constructedness of linguistic convention and exposing it as a site of power struggle. Adunni's deviations from standard grammar and syntax are not errors but deliberate choices that challenge the naturalisation of linguistic norms and the social hierarchies they encode. Saussure's

framework helps us understand these deviations not as failures but as alternative systems of signification that carry their own meanings and values.

The implications of Saussure's theory for literary analysis are significant. If signs are arbitrary and culturally contingent, then literary texts can participate in the reconfiguration of signifying systems. Daré's novel, through its linguistic innovations, contributes to a broader project of resignification, challenging the meanings and values embedded in standard English and asserting alternative forms of expression. The creative reconfiguration of signs is central to the novel's semiotic project and to its political intervention.

B. Barthes's Concept of Mythology

Barthes (1957) extends Saussure's framework through his concept of mythology, which examines how signs operate at two levels: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural associations). When connotations become so naturalised that they seem commonsensical, they crystallise into 'myth'—a secondary signifying system that legitimises existing power relations. For Barthes, myth functions to transform history into nature, making contingent social arrangements appear inevitable and timeless. This process of naturalisation is a key mechanism through which dominant ideologies maintain their hold on cultural imagination.

Patriarchal myths, for instance, naturalise women's subordination by presenting it as the natural order of things rather than as a historically produced system of power. The task of semiotic critique is to denaturalise these myths, exposing their constructedness and the interests they serve. Barthes's framework provides a powerful tool for analysing how literary texts can challenge dominant ideologies by exposing the mechanisms through which they achieve naturalisation and by creating alternative systems of signification.

The Girl with the Louding Voice works to denaturalise patriarchal myths through its narrative strategies. The novel challenges myths that women should be silent and obedient, that girls' education is unnecessary, and that marriage constitutes a girl's primary destiny. By placing these myths within a narrative that exposes their consequences for individual lives, Daré performs what Barthes would call 'demythification'—the exposure of myth as ideology rather than nature. The novel does not merely assert alternative values but demonstrates, through its narrative, how patriarchal myths are sustained and how they can be resisted.

Barthes's concept of mythology also illuminates the novel's engagement with broader cultural narratives about Africa and African women. The novel challenges Western stereotypes of African women as passive victims, presenting instead complex, agentic characters who navigate oppressive structures with creativity and resilience. By doing so, the novel participates in a process of demythification that extends beyond the specifically patriarchal to encompass broader representational politics.

C. Jakobson's Model of Linguistic Functions

Jakobson (1960) adds a further dimension through his model of linguistic functions, which distinguishes between the referential function (communicating content) and the poetic function (focusing on the message itself). In the poetic function, language draws attention to its own form and materiality, making the medium of communication itself a subject of interest. This model provides a framework for understanding how literary texts foreground their own linguistic operations and how they engage readers in reflection on language and meaning.

Daré's novel consistently activates the poetic function by foregrounding Adunni's linguistic struggle and her conscious preoccupation with finding her voice. The narrative does not merely use language transparently to tell a story; it makes language itself a subject of the story, compelling the reader to attend to the material conditions and political stakes of linguistic production. This self-referential quality is central to the novel's semiotic project, inviting readers to reflect on their own position in relation to the linguistic and cultural codes that structure meaning.

Jakobson's framework also illuminates how the novel's first-person narration operates as a semiotic intervention. The emotive function—the expression of the speaker's attitude toward what is being spoken about—is central to Adunni's narration, as her distinctive voice constantly registers her emotional and psychological state. The conative function—orientation toward the addressee—is activated through the novel's address to readers, who are positioned as witnesses to Adunni's struggle and as participants in the interpretive work of decoding her world.

Together, these three theoretical resources provide a comprehensive apparatus for analysing how *The Girl with the Louding Voice* generates meaning, challenges dominant cultural myths, and performs resistance at the level of form and signification. The combination of Saussure's focus on the sign, Barthes's attention to mythology, and Jakobson's model of linguistic functions allows for a multi-dimensional analysis that captures the complexity of the novel's semiotic project.

IV. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative semiotic analysis of Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020), examining how the text constructs meaning through its systems of signs, symbols, and narrative structures. The analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks outlined in the previous section and proceeds through close reading of selected textual passages. The methodological approach follows established practices in literary semiotic analysis as articulated by Eco (1976) and Lotman (1977).

Eco's emphasis on the cultural codes that structure signification informs the analysis of how the novel mobilises and subverts conventional symbolic meanings. Eco (1976) argues that every act of signification is governed by cultural codes that determine what signs mean and how they can be combined. Literary texts, in this view, are particularly interesting because they often subvert or innovate upon these codes, creating new meanings through the strategic violation of established conventions. Daré's novel, through its linguistic and symbolic innovations, exemplifies this process of creative subversion.

Lotman's concept of the artistic text as a secondary modelling system—a system that builds upon primary language to create new meanings—provides a framework for understanding how Daré's novel generates significance beyond its literal content. Lotman (1977) argues that literary texts construct entire worlds through their signifying practices, modelling the structures and values of the societies they depict. The novel's symbolic geography, its linguistic innovations, and its narrative structure together constitute a secondary modelling system that encodes a critique of patriarchal structures and imagines alternative possibilities.

The analysis focuses on three interconnected semiotic dimensions of the novel. First, the linguistic analysis examines Adunni's narrative voice, identifying patterns of grammatical deviation, lexical innovation, and syntactic variation. This analysis draws on Saussure's theory of the sign to understand how Adunni's non-standard English operates as a signifier of marginalisation and simultaneously as a site of creative reclamation. The analysis also traces the developmental trajectory of Adunni's language, examining how her linguistic resources expand as she gains education and experience.

Second, the spatial analysis examines the novel's symbolic geography, focusing particularly on the opposition between domestic interiors and the open outdoors. This analysis draws on the framework of Barthes's mythology to understand how the house functions as a signifier of patriarchal captivity and how outdoor spaces signify freedom and possibility. The analysis traces Adunni's journey through a series of homes—from her father's house to her husband's residence, and finally to Big Madam's mansion—examining how each dwelling functions as a signifier of a different mode of confinement.

Third, the narrative analysis examines the novel's first-person structure and its challenge to dominant cultural mythologies. This analysis draws on Jakobson's model of linguistic functions to understand how the narrative activates the poetic function through its self-referential attention to

language and voice. The analysis also examines how the novel's insistence on 'her-story' rather than 'his-story' constitutes a semiotic intervention that unsettles patriarchal monopolies over representation. The analysis is limited to the primary text of Daré's novel and does not extend to paratextual materials such as interviews or critical reception. The findings are presented in thematic sections that integrate textual evidence with theoretical analysis, following established conventions in literary semiotic scholarship.

V. Findings and Discussion

The semiotic analysis reveals three interconnected dimensions of resistance in *The Girl with the Louding Voice*: Adunni's linguistic voice as a site of semiotic reclamation, the symbolic significance of domestic and outdoor spaces, and the narrative's subversion of patriarchal mythologies. Each dimension contributes to the novel's overarching project of semiotic resistance, and together they form a comprehensive critique of the systems of signification that sustain gender inequality. The analysis demonstrates how Daré's novel operates not merely at the level of content but at the level of form, using the resources of language and narrative to challenge dominant meanings and create alternative possibilities.

A. Adunni's 'Louding Voice': Linguistic Subversion and Semiotic Reclamation

Adunni's distinctive narrative voice is the novel's most fundamental semiotic act of resistance. Her narration in non-standard English—marked by grammatical departures, lexical inventions, and syntactic variations—is not merely a stylistic flourish but a deliberate subversion of the conventional relationship between signifier and signified. The novel's linguistic project is not simply to represent Adunni's voice but to make that voice itself a site of political intervention, challenging the linguistic norms that encode social hierarchy.

Consider the novel's opening lines: 'This morning, Papa call me inside the parlour. He was sitting inside the sofa with no cushion and looking me.' (Daré, 2020, p. 1)

The deviations from standard English grammar—the missing past tense marker on 'call', the non-standard preposition in 'sitting inside the sofa', the absence of the preposition 'at' in 'looking me'—immediately signal Adunni's linguistic marginalisation. As a signifier, her 'broken' English registers her deprivation of formal education and her positioning at the margins of the English-speaking world. Yet this very deviation becomes, paradoxically, a site of agency and creativity. Adunni's language, while deviating from the standard, communicates with remarkable power and clarity, demonstrating that linguistic 'correctness' is not necessary for expressive force.

Drawing on Saussure's (1916) framework, Adunni's non-standard English operates through a different system of linguistic value. Where standard English derives meaning through its systematic differences from other forms, Adunni's language derives its meaning through its difference from the standard, a difference that registers social marginalisation but also opens space for creative expression. Her grammatical 'errors' are not failures to achieve standard forms but alternative constructions that generate distinctive meanings. The novel's representation of Adunni's language thus challenges the assumption that standard English is inherently superior or more expressive.

Adunni's coinage of 'louding voice' exemplifies this semiotic reclamation: 'My voice is not small, it is louding. I am not a quiet girl, I am a louding girl.' (Daré, 2020, p. 216)

'Louding' does not exist in standard English; it is a neologism that transforms the adjective 'loud' into a present participle. This linguistic invention creates a new sign that does not simply describe a quality of voice but performs the act of voicing itself. The 'louding voice' is not just loud; it is actively, continuously, purposefully becoming loud. This coinage is what Barthes (1957) would call a 'myth' of selfhood—a secondary signification that challenges the dominant cultural myth that women should be silent and obedient. The creation of this neologism is an act of linguistic resistance, asserting the legitimacy of alternative forms of expression.

Adunni's language operates on two levels: it communicates her experiences and desires (the denotative level), and it signifies her refusal to accept linguistic and cultural subjugation (the connotative level). The denotation of her words conveys the content of her narrative; their connotation registers her resistance to the linguistic norms that encode social hierarchy. This double operation is central to the novel's semiotic project, creating a layered text that works simultaneously as narrative and as critique. The novel's readers are required to engage with Adunni's language on both levels, recognising its communicative power while also appreciating its political significance.

A developmental trajectory in Adunni's language mirrors her journey towards empowerment. As she gains education and experience, her linguistic resources expand, but she never fully abandons her distinctive voice. This resistance to complete assimilation matters: it suggests that empowerment does not require the erasure of one's origins but rather the creative reconfiguration of available linguistic resources to articulate one's own experience on one's own terms. The novel thus challenges the assumption that education and empowerment require the adoption of dominant linguistic norms.

The developmental pattern is itself a semiotic mapping of Adunni's psychological and social transformation. Her growing repertoire of expressive resources registers her expanding agency, while her retention of non-standard forms registers her refusal to accept the terms of assimilation. This dialectic—between acquisition and retention, between standard and non-standard—is central to the novel's semiotic project. Adunni's language becomes a site of negotiation between competing cultural forces, a space where the pressures of assimilation are confronted and resisted.

Jakobson's (1960) model of linguistic functions shows how this linguistic subversion operates. Adunni's narration consistently activates the poetic function by drawing attention to its own linguistic form. When Adunni says her voice is 'louding', she does not simply communicate information; she directs attention to the linguistic act itself. The novel thus does not merely use language transparently to tell a story; it makes language itself a subject of the story, compelling the reader to attend to the material conditions and political stakes of linguistic production. This self-referential quality is crucial to the novel's political work, as it prevents readers from taking linguistic norms for granted.

The novel's engagement with language also activates the emotive function through Adunni's distinctive voice. Her narration constantly registers her emotional and psychological state, making the reader witness her inner experience. This immediacy challenges the patriarchal convention that women's interiority is either insignificant or inaccessible. Adunni's language, in its raw and unmediated quality, asserts the importance of her emotional experience and the legitimacy of her perspective.

The implications of this linguistic analysis extend beyond the novel itself. Daré's use of non-standard English participates in a broader tradition of African writing that challenges colonial linguistic norms and asserts the legitimacy of African expressions. The novel can be read as a contribution to the ongoing project of decolonising language, creating a space for African voices to articulate their own experiences in their own terms.

B. Houses as Cultural Codes: Spatial Symbolism and Patriarchal Captivity

The novel's symbolic landscape reveals its semiotic architecture through the recurring symbol of the house, which functions as a signifier of patriarchal captivity and entrapment. Adunni's journey through a series of homes—from her father's house to her husband Morufu's residence, and finally to Big Madam's mansion—maps her escalating entrapment in patriarchal and class-based structures. Each dwelling represents a different mode and intensity of confinement, and the progression from one to other traces the increasing complexity of the systems that constrain her.

Her father's house, while impoverished, at least contains family bonds. Daré (2020) describes it as a space of partial belonging:

'The house was small, but it was our house. Mama had cooked there, and her spirit was still inside the walls.' (p. 24)

This description establishes the house as a signifier of both belonging and lack. The house is small and impoverished, but it is also the site of family memory and connection. The presence of

Mama's spirit suggests that the house holds meaning beyond its physical structure, signifying the continuity of family and tradition. However, this meaning is already shadowed by loss—Mama is dead, and the house cannot provide the security it once might have.

Morufu's house enforces the subjugation of a child bride, transforming Adunni from daughter to wife without her consent: 'I am not a wife, I am a child. But Morufu don't care. He say I am his wife now and I must obey him.' (Daré, 2020, p. 78)

In this house, the domestic interior becomes a site of coercion and violence. The house that should signify home and security instead signifies captivity and exploitation. Adunni's status as a child bride is registered through her physical and emotional entrapment within the domestic space, which becomes a symbol of the patriarchal institution of marriage. The house is no longer a space of belonging but a space of subjection.

Big Madam's mansion subjects her to the double oppression of gender and class, as she must serve an elite woman whose own power is secured by patriarchal and colonial legacies. Each house, progressively more lavish in its material comfort, paradoxically represents a more complex and inescapable form of oppression. The mansion is grand and impressive, but it is also a prison, signifying the ways in which wealth and power can be complicit in the maintenance of patriarchal structures.

Drawing on Barthes's (1957) framework, the house becomes a 'myth'—a cultural code that naturalises the confinement of women to domestic space and domestic labour. The domestic sphere is presented not as a choice but as the natural destiny of women, with marriage as the gateway to this destiny. By placing Adunni's experience of this confinement at the centre of the narrative, Daré denaturalises the myth and exposes it as a social construction. The house as a myth is exposed as ideology rather than nature, and its naturalisation is revealed as a mechanism of patriarchal control.

The house operates as a signifier whose signified shifts across the course of the narrative. On the literal level, each house is simply a physical dwelling; on the cultural level, each signifies a different mode and intensity of confinement. The progression from one house to another is thus a chain of signification that builds cumulatively, each house embedding and intensifying the meanings established by the previous ones. This chain of signification traces Adunni's journey through increasingly complex systems of oppression, mapping the intersections of gender, class, and age in her experience.

Lotman's (1977) concept of the artistic text as a secondary modelling system illuminates how this spatial symbolism operates. The houses in the novel do not simply represent physical spaces; they model a broader system of power relations. The domestic interior becomes a semiotic space that encodes the confinement of women within patriarchal structures, just as the open outdoors encodes the possibility of liberation. This modelling function gives the novel's spatial symbolism its political power, as it allows readers to see how individual experiences are shaped by broader structural forces. In contrast to the closed, oppressive space of the house, the outdoors functions as a sign of freedom, education, and possibility. Adunni's first English lesson with Ms Tia takes place outside under a palm tree—a setting that physically embodies the liberatory potential of education: 'We sit under the tree, the palm tree at the back of the house, and she show me a book. "This is the beginning," she say.' (Daré, 2020, p. 147)

The outdoor space is open, associated with nature, growth, and the possibility of movement, while the domestic space is closed, artificial, and confining. This binary opposition—inside/outside, domestic/open, confinement/freedom—structures the novel's symbolic geography and maps the broader conflict between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. The opposition between these two types of space is not merely descriptive but evaluative, with the outdoors consistently associated with positive values.

Wauthion and Moussa's (2022) analysis of semiotics of space in contemporary African women's fiction provides a framework for understanding this symbolic geography. They argue that the opposition between interior and exterior spaces in African women's writing encodes the conflict between patriarchal tradition and liberatory modernity. Daré's novel conforms to this pattern while

also subverting it through Adunni's ultimate escape from domestic confinement. The novel thus engages with a well-established tradition of spatial symbolism while also innovating upon it through its specific treatment of Adunni's journey.

The 'outside' world becomes the semiotic space of possibility, education, and eventual liberation, a spatial code for the alternative futures that Adunni's education represents. When Adunni finally escapes Big Madam's mansion, the outdoor space she enters is not merely a physical location but a symbolic space of freedom: 'I am outside. I am breathing the air and the air is sweet and the sky is open and I am free.' (Daré, 2020, p. 312)

This moment of escape is also a moment of semiotic significance. The outside is not just a place but a conditional state of being that signifies liberation from the systems of confinement that have structured Adunni's life. The sweetness of the air and the openness of the sky register the emotional and political significance of escape, making the outdoor space a symbol of the freedom that education and determination can bring.

The spatial symbolism of the novel thus operates on multiple levels. On one level, it provides a geographical structure for Adunni's journey, tracing her movement through different physical spaces. On another level, it encodes a critique of patriarchal and class-based systems of confinement, exposing how domestic space is used to control and constrain women. On a third level, it imagines alternative possibilities, using the outdoor space as a symbol of liberation and transformation.

C. 'Her-story' and Patriarchal Myth: Narrative Subversion and Semiotic Intervention

Beyond individual signs and symbols, the novel's overarching narrative structure functions as a semiotic system that challenges dominant cultural myths. *The Girl with the Louding Voice* works to denaturalise patriarchal norms by exposing their constructedness and contingency. By placing Adunni's first-person account at the centre of the narrative, the novel performs a crucial act of representational reclamation, replacing the sanctioned 'his-story' with her own authentic narrative.

Adunni's declaration of narrative intent constitutes a manifesto of semiotic rebellion: 'Not his-story. My own will be called her-story. Adunni's story.' (Daré, 2020, p. 215)

This line does not simply announce a thematic commitment; it performs a linguistic and semiotic act. The coinage 'her-story' creates a new sign that explicitly challenges the gendered assumptions embedded in the conventional 'history'. It asserts that women's experiences and perspectives constitute a legitimate and necessary subject of narrative representation, and that their absence from dominant histories is not a natural oversight but a political erasure. The act of renaming is itself a form of resistance, asserting the power to define and represent one's own experience.

Drawing on Barthes's (1957) framework, this act of renaming is a 'demythification'—the exposure of myth as ideology. The patriarchal myth that women's stories are less important than men's is naturalised through its embeddedness in linguistic convention. By coining 'her-story', Adunni exposes this naturalisation and creates a new sign that can carry the signified of female experience and agency. The invention of this new term disrupts the taken-for-granted quality of patriarchal discourse, revealing it as a system of power rather than a reflection of natural order.

This act of renaming is central to the novel's semiotic project. 'Her-story' functions as a new signifier that can carry the signified of female experience and agency, challenging the patriarchal monopoly over representation. The creation of new signs is, for Barthes, a crucial act of resistance, as it disrupts the naturalised meanings that sustain unequal power relations. Daré's novel, through its linguistic innovations and narrative structure, participates in this broader project of resignification.

The novel's first-person narration operates as a semiotic intervention that disrupts the patriarchal monopoly over representation. In conventional narrative forms, women's voices are often mediated through male narrators or framed within patriarchal conventions. Daré's novel refuses this mediation, presenting Adunni's experience directly and without patriarchal filter. This directness is not merely a technical choice but a political act that asserts the legitimacy of women's narrative authority.

The first-person form is itself a signifier of authority and agency, a claim to the power of self-representation.

Jakobson's (1960) model of linguistic functions illuminates how this narrative structure operates. The novel's first-person narration activates the emotive function—the expression of the speaker's attitude toward what is being spoken about—through Adunni's distinctive voice. Her narration constantly registers her emotional and psychological state, making the reader a witness to her inner experience. This immediacy challenges the patriarchal convention that women's interiority is either insignificant or inaccessible. By making Adunni's inner life the centre of the narrative, the novel asserts the importance of her perspective and the legitimacy of her emotional experience.

The novel also activates the conative function—orientation toward the addressee—through its address to readers. Adunni's narration positions readers as witnesses to her struggle and as participants in the interpretive work of decoding her world. This positioning creates an ethical demand: readers are called upon to recognise their own complicity in the systems of signification that produce and naturalise inequality. The novel's address to its readers is thus not merely informational but performative, seeking to transform readers' understanding of their own position in relation to the systems of power the novel depicts.

The novel's self-referentiality—its constant return to the question of voice, language, and storytelling—activates the poetic function and demands that readers reflect on their own position in relation to the linguistic and cultural codes that structure meaning. This reflexive dimension is crucial to the novel's political work, inviting readers to recognise their own complicity in the systems of signification that produce and naturalise inequality. The novel does not simply tell a story but asks its readers to think about what it means to tell stories, who gets to tell them, and who gets to be heard.

The novel's narrative structure also challenges conventional genre expectations. While it draws on the Bildungsroman tradition—the story of a young person's development—it subverts this tradition by centring a female protagonist from a marginalised background. The Bildungsroman has historically been a genre about white male development, and Daré's novel challenges this tradition by adapting its conventions to tell a different kind of story. Adunni's development is not simply individual but collective, as her voice speaks for and to a community of women who have been silenced.

The novel's engagement with narrative form is thus inseparable from its political content. The choice of first-person narration, the use of non-standard English, and the focus on female experience are all formal decisions that carry political significance. Daré's novel demonstrates that form and content cannot be separated, as the way a story is told is itself a statement about who is entitled to tell stories and whose stories are worth telling.

The novel's semiotic project ultimately forms what might be called 'semiotic resistance'—a strategic intervention in the systems of signification that produce and maintain unequal power relations. By subverting linguistic conventions, reconfiguring symbolic meanings, and challenging narrative norms, Daré's work participates in a broader project of cultural transformation. The 'louding voice' is thus not only a metaphor for individual empowerment but a sign of a new cultural language in the making, one that can speak of freedom and equality in terms that are both newly invented and deeply rooted in the experience of those who have been silenced.

VI. Conclusion

What makes Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* remarkable is not simply its heart-wrenching story but its masterful semiotic construction. Through its subversive use of language, its richly resonant symbolic landscape, and its narrative reclamation of voice, the novel functions as a potent cultural artefact that challenges the naturalisation of patriarchal norms. Adunni's non-standard English operates as a signifier of marginalisation that is simultaneously transformed into a site of creative agency and linguistic innovation. Her 'louding voice' is not merely a metaphor but a semiotic creation that performs the act of voicing itself, challenging the cultural myth that women should be

silent and obedient. The novel's linguistic project thus participates in a broader reconfiguration of the relationship between language, identity, and power.

The novel's symbolic landscape—particularly the opposition between domestic interiors and the open outdoors—encodes the binary between patriarchal captivity and liberatory possibility. Each house in Adunni's journey functions as a signifier of a different mode of confinement, while the outdoor spaces where education occurs signify alternative futures. This symbolic geography maps the broader conflict between traditional expectations and modern aspirations that structures the novel's political vision. By decoding these symbols, readers can appreciate how Daré's work exposes the socially constructed nature of gender inequality and imagines pathways beyond it. The novel's spatial symbolism thus functions as a critique of the systems that confine women and a vision of the possibilities that emerge when those systems are challenged.

The narrative structure—its foregrounding of first-person female experience—constitutes a semiotic intervention that unsettles dominant mythologies. By creating a space for 'her-story', Daré disrupts the patriarchal monopoly over representation and asserts the legitimacy of women's narrative authority. This act of semiotic rebellion is central to the novel's political work, participating in the broader project of cultural transformation through the strategic reconfiguration of signs. The novel's narrative form is not merely a container for its content but an integral part of its political message, demonstrating that the struggle for voice and representation is inseparable from the struggle for justice. This analysis demonstrates how literary texts can function as instruments of social critique and semiotic resistance, advocating for change through the strategic deployment and subversion of signs. For scholars and readers alike, attending to the semiotic architecture of narratives like Daré's opens up possibilities for understanding how cultural texts construct meaning and how they might be mobilised for social justice. Adunni's 'louding voice' continues to resonate with readers around the world, offering a powerful reminder of the political stakes of language and the transformative potential of signifying practices.

Future research might extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies could examine how other contemporary African women writers employ similar strategies of semiotic resistance. Reception studies could investigate how readers from different cultural backgrounds interpret the novel's linguistic and symbolic codes. Postcolonial analyses could explore how the novel's engagement with English—the language of the coloniser—complicates its project of resistance. These avenues promise to deepen our understanding of how literary texts function as sites of semiotic struggle and cultural transformation.

The novel's success in reaching a global audience suggests that its semiotic project has found resonance beyond its immediate cultural context. Readers around the world have been moved by Adunni's story, and this emotional response is inseparable from the novel's semiotic construction. The power of the 'louding voice' lies not simply in its content but in its form—the way it transforms language itself into a site of resistance and liberation. As such, Daré's novel offers a model for how literature can participate in the struggle for justice, not by describing the world but by creating new ways of signifying that make the world anew.

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