Language and Power Relations in African Female Writing: A Reading of Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Housemaid*, and Fall's *the Beggars' Strike*

Lilian Nwobiandu Maxwell-Akani PhD
University of Africa, Toru-Orua

Prof. Augustine Nwanyanwu
University of Port Harcourt
Sender: drlilyanndhml@gmail.com

Prof. Oyeh Otu
University of Port Harcourt
amadiokeylilian@gmail.com
07066813467

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Abstract
Scholarly discourse has long examined domination through predominantly gendered lenses, with feminist criticism focusing almost exclusively on male power and female subjugation. This paper challenges that binary by demonstrating that power in human social relations is neither exclusive nor static but relational, circumstantial, and continuously contested. Drawing on Foucault's theory of power, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and New Historicism, this study argues that language is the primary instrument through which power is constructed, maintained, and subverted in social relationships. It reveals a dyadic, interactive process in which no one person remains wholly powerful or wholly powerless; rather, power shifts as circumstances change and as characters deploy strategies of resistance. Evidence is drawn from close textual analysis of Amma Darko's Beyond the Horizon (1995) and The Housemaid (1998), and Aminata Sow Fall's the Beggars' Strike (1981), supplemented by additional evidence extracted directly from Fall's novel. The method is qualitative close reading informed by critical discourse analysis. The article includes a theoretical framework, a conceptual framework, and a review of related literature spanning 2019–2026, positioning the study within current scholarship on language, power, and African female writing.

Keywords: *Power; Powerlessness; Resistance; Language; Social Relations; Critical Discourse Analysis; African Female Writing*

Introduction

The relationship between language and power occupies a central place in contemporary literary and sociolinguistic scholarship. In every social relation, power is functional and language is indispensable. Language is the medium through which power is constructed, maintained, and

maximised, as well as the medium through which power is resisted, deconstructed, and reversed. This accords with the widely held view that language is a social practice by which power relations are established and sustained at all levels, and it supports Fairclough's (1989) view that power is not only built via coercive means but also through indirect, discursive channels (pp. 2–3). Language, in this sense, is the operating system of every power relation. This article examines how this relationship works in African female writing, specifically in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and *The Housemaid* (1998), and Aminata Sow Fall's *the Beggars' Strike* (1981), originally published in French as *La Grève des bàttu* (1979). The central argument is that power in these texts is not the exclusive possession of any gender or social group; rather, it is relational, circumstantial, and continuously challenged through language and action. This study situates itself within growing contemporary scholarship that reconceptualises power away from simple patriarchal models toward more fluid and interactive understandings. The three novels were chosen because they place power, language, and gender in unusually close contact. Darko, a Ghanaian novelist born in 1956, made her debut with *Beyond the Horizon*, which follows an African woman into the German sex trade, and her second novel, *The Housemaid*, appeared in the African Writers Series in 1998, the year in which she won the Ghana Book Award. Sow Fall, born in 1941 in Saint-Louis, Senegal, writes in French, and *La Grève des bàttu* satirises officialdom in an unnamed West African city whose authorities expel its beggars. Although the three novels differ in setting, language of composition, and narrative form, each shows character negotiating domination and subordination largely through what they say, withhold, and refuse to say.

Much of the existing criticism on African women's fiction treats power as a male possession and powerlessness as a female condition. That approach illuminates real structures of oppression, but it leaves unexplained those moments in which the apparently powerless reverse the direction of power, as when officials in Fall's novel are brought to plead with the beggars they had driven from the city. The study therefore asks three questions: how do characters use language to acquire, exercise, and lose power; how do those who are powerless in one relationship resist; and what do the answers imply for the way power is theorised in African female writing. Its significance is twofold. It offers a language-centred account of power that complements thematic readings, and it brings texts from Ghana and Senegal into a single comparative frame, demonstrating that the dynamics it describes are not confined to one national or linguistic tradition.

The article is structured as follows: a theoretical framework grounding the study in CDA, New Historicism, and Foucauldian power theory; a conceptual framework clarifying the key concepts of power, powerlessness, and resistance as used in this study; a review of related literature; a statement of method; followed by the textual analyses and a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three mutually reinforcing theoretical paradigms: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), New Historicism, and Michel Foucault's theory of power.

Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA, as developed by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk, holds that language is never socially neutral. It is a site where ideological struggles are waged and power relations are negotiated, reinforced, or contested. Wodak (2001) defines CDA as "fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (p. 2). Van Dijk (2008) further explains that CDA investigates how discourse reproduces and resists social power abuse, dominance, and inequality (pp. 1–5). The application of CDA to literary texts allows us to examine how the language of characters, including their dialogue, internal monologue, commands,

silences, and gestures, constructs positions of dominance and submission, and how that positioning is contested and reversed. Statham's (2022) more recent codification of CDA as a "practical introduction to power in language" confirms the framework's ongoing utility, and contemporary studies have extended its application to fictional texts to illuminate power dynamics at word, sentence, and discourse levels. Fairclough's work supplies the analytical architecture on which this article relies. In *Language and Power*, Fairclough (1989) distinguishes power in discourse, where discourse is the site on which power relations are exercised and enacted, from power behind discourse, where the very conventions of discourse are shaped by relations of power, and he shows how ideologies become naturalised as common sense. Fairclough (1992, 1995) later formalised this insight in a three-dimensional model in which a communicative event is analysed as a text, as an instance of discursive practice involving production, distribution, and interpretation, and as an instance of social practice. Van Dijk (1993, 1995, 2001) adds that dominance is enacted and reproduced through control over discourse and over access to it, so that text and talk are among the resources through which social power is exercised and challenged. Lazar (2007) extends this tradition to gender, arguing that feminist critical discourse analysis must attend to the complex and shifting ways in which gendered power is sustained and contested in discourse. Taken together, these positions justify reading characters' speech acts as moves in a continuing negotiation of power rather than as reflections of a fixed social hierarchy.

New Historicism. New Historicism, as theorised by Stephen Greenblatt and elaborated by John Brannigan, departs from the view of literature as mere reflection of a period's worldview. Instead, it treats literary texts as active participants in the production and contestation of power. Brannigan (1998) defines new historicism as "a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds" (p. 6). Crucially, new historicism holds that subversion is not external to power but is produced within power relations: domination and resistance are inseparable. Literature is thus viewed in this study not as a representation of reality but as a living organism: a social product that constructs, deconstructs, and re-enacts "the conflicting power relations that underlie all human interactions" (DiYanni, 2002, p. 2083).
Greenblatt's essays supply useful points of reference for the present argument. In his study of Renaissance authority, Greenblatt (1981) shows that subversion is both produced and contained by the power it threatens, so that opposition and authority are bound together rather than set against one another from outside. In *Learning to Curse*, Greenblatt (1990) treats language itself as an instrument of domination and, at the same time, as a resource appropriated by the dominated, as when the colonised subject turns the master's language into a means of cursing. Veeser (1989) gathers the principal statements of the approach and stresses that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably and that no discourse gives access to unchanging truths. Abrams and Harpham (2012) summarise the approach in similar terms, describing it as one that situates literary works within the power relations and cultural practices of their time. For a study of Darko and Fall, the lesson is that acts of resistance in these novels are best read as performed within the very systems of power they contest.

Foucault's Theory of Power. Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power is foundational to this study. For Foucault, power is not a personal property, nor does it emanate from one specific location such as the state. Rather, "power is diffused throughout social institutions, as it is exercised by innumerable replaceable functionaries" (Leitch, 2001, p. 1618). Power is relational and circumstantial; it operates through daily disciplines, routines, and discourse. Crucially,

wherever there is power, there is resistance. This means that one in a position of power today may be in a position of powerlessness tomorrow, and vice versa. Foucault's framework enables us to move beyond the static feminist binary of powerful men and powerless women, toward a more nuanced understanding of how power flows, shifts, and is contested across gender, class, and institutional lines in the texts under examination. Foucault's later formulations reinforce this reading. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, power is described as coming from everywhere, as exercised from innumerable points in unequal and mobile relations, and as inseparable from resistance, which is not external to power but exists wherever power operates (Foucault, 1981). His interview on power, moral values, and the intellectual adds that even moral and intellectual authority are implicated in these relations (Foucault, 1988). Gramsci's (1971) account of hegemony, in which dominance is secured as much through consent and cultural leadership as through coercion, complements Foucault by explaining why subordinate groups often take part in arrangements that disadvantage them, and why such consent can be withdrawn. Read together, Foucault and Gramsci explain how a character in Darko or Fall can be dominant in one relationship, compliant in another, and openly defiant in a third, and why the language of command, consent, and refusal carries so much weight in the narratives. The three paradigms are not applied in sequence but together. CDA supplies the means of describing how characters use language, new historicism situates each exchange within the structures of authority that make it possible, and Foucault's account of power explains why no position of dominance is secure. The practical consequence is a method of reading in which every command, refusal, or silence is treated as evidence of a relation that could have been otherwise, and in which the analyst asks not only who holds power in a scene but what that power depends on and how it might be lost.

Conceptual Framework

Three key concepts govern the analysis in this study: power, powerlessness, and resistance. Their conceptualisation here departs from the dominant feminist tendency to treat these as fixed gendered states. Power, in this study, refers not to force or domination alone but to any capacity, derived from social position, economic resources, language, knowledge, fertility, or cultural tradition, that enables an individual to impose their will, define reality, or constrain the choices of others. Following Foucault, power is understood as relational: it does not belong to any single individual or group but exists in and through relationships. MacKinnon (1987) argues that to hold power is, among other things, to have one's description of reality accepted as reality itself. Power is thus a performative and discursive reality, constantly produced and reproduced through language. Powerlessness is the converse: it is the condition of one whose assertions about reality are not taken as authoritative, who cannot impose their will, and who is constrained by the power of another. Crucially, powerlessness in this study is not a permanent state; it is contingent on circumstances and on the strategies deployed by those who find themselves in it.

Resistance is the mechanism by which the powerless contest, subvert, and ultimately overturn the domination exercised over them. Resistance may be verbal, through commands, refusals, insults, mockery, silence, or strategic disclosure, or physical, through bodily language and collective action. Following new historicist insight, resistance is always produced within, and not merely against, the structures of power it contests. The dyadic, interactive nature of power and resistance is the conceptual core of this study: the two operate together, each producing and necessitating the other. The conceptualisation also draws on research that treats language and power together. Kramarae et al. (1984) brought together studies showing that access to speech, the right to be heard, and the experience of being silenced are shaped by social position, an insight that underlies

this study's attention to commands, refusals, and silences. Within African feminist thought, the view that women's lives are shaped by more than male authority has a long history. Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) argues in her articulation of Stiwanism that African women's burdens are layered, arising from tradition, poverty, colonial and racial subordination, and women's own internalised attitudes as well as from men, while Nwapa (2007) reflects on women's creative writing in Africa as a continuation of women's long role in storytelling and as a space in which women define their own experience. Emecheta (2007) declines to adopt a rigid feminist programme and describes her position as feminism with a small f, and Head's (1974, 1990) fiction and autobiographical writing probes how power operates psychologically as well as politically, within communities as well as between men and women. Even Chinweizu (1990), writing from a polemical masculinist standpoint, maintains that women exercise substantial informal power over men. This study does not endorse that polemic, but it notes that the claim shows how contested the assumption of exclusively male power has been. These perspectives support the decision to treat power, powerlessness, and resistance as relational and mutable rather than as fixed attributes of gender.

A fourth term, language, is used throughout in a broad sense. It covers spoken words, narrated thought, commands and refusals, and also silence and gesture, since each of these can assert, withhold, or contest authority. Treating language this way allows the analysis to follow power across the full range of ways in which characters communicate, including the moments in which they deliberately say nothing.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarship on Amma Darko's fiction has grown substantially since the early 2000s. Early collections of critical essays and doctoral studies laid the foundations of this criticism, and later work extended it. One study reads *The Housemaid* and *Faceless* as works of social commitment in which characters and settings serve as forces for moral and social transformation in contemporary African society. While studies of this kind illuminate the patriarchal pressures Darko depicts, they risk reproducing the static binary that the present study contests.

More recent scholarship on *Beyond the Horizon* introduces important nuance. A study of the novel's spatial dynamics and character pairs argues that Darko associates specific characters with particular geographical settings in order to rethink conventional discourses on the African woman, proposing sisterhood, education, financial freedom, and bodily integrity as routes to emancipation. A 2023 stylistic study attends to parallel structures and word choices to show how the novel brings gender representation and the abuse of women to the fore, which suggests that the linguistic patterning of the text is itself evidence of how subordination is represented. Okolo and Ogbele (2023), working with objectification theory, examine the girl-child as a victim of forced marriage, sex trafficking, and domestic and sexual abuse, and identify patriarchal culture as the principal cause of her ordeal, one that silences women and obstructs their self-actualisation. A comparative study of Darko and Emecheta, written from a moderate feminist position, adds that women's negative attitudes toward one another reinforce male domination, a finding that complicates any account of power as a male monopoly. These readings foreground women's vulnerability and agency alike, concerns that the present article pursues through critical discourse analysis.

Research on *The Housemaid* has followed a similar course. A study of role reversal argues that the novel makes visible women's supremacy over men through husbands' battery and maltreatment and through women's leadership, and suggests that violence and decision-making are no longer the privilege of men. Another reading treats the novel as an attempt to free women from male ascendancy by giving power to the so-called weaker sex, with its male characters rendered as

irresponsible companions. A 2022 study links the novel's portrait of women's lives to questions of economic empowerment and sustainable development, and a study of child trafficking traces the exploitation of the young housemaid Efia to poverty and cultural complicity and to consequences that include psychological trauma and social marginalisation. These readings confirm that power in the novel is not uniformly male, but some of them simply invert the binary, replacing male dominance with female dominance. The present study argues instead that power in *The Housemaid* is relational and reversible, and that its circulation is visible in the characters' language.

Studies of Darko's other fiction and of her work as a whole point in a similar direction. A 2022 reading of *Not without Flowers* shows how the fear and anxiety surrounding illness, including mental illness and HIV and AIDS, create fertile ground for the religious exploitation of vulnerable women, and argues that Darko uses fiction to challenge culturally sanctioned patriarchal and religious hierarchies of gender-based dominance. A 2024 postcolonial study of *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Housemaid*, and *Faceless* contends that reading Darko's fiction as a quest for a stable image of the postcolonial African woman restricts the feminine to a linear movement. The latter claim supports the view, developed here, that Darko's fiction resists fixed positions of power and powerlessness. Scholarship on Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* similarly spans a range of critical approaches. The novel has commonly been read in relation to class, to the satire of officialdom, and to the failings of postcolonial governance. Ripert (2019) shifts attention to gender and discourse, arguing that the strike reveals a discrepancy in the ownership of discursive power among women, since not all women in the novel can act with the same agency, and that the beggars' strategy of resistance at once places their agency at the centre of a society that expects their silence and displaces them from the city where that agency matters. This reading is close to the dyadic understanding of power advanced here. The most recent work on the novel is particularly germane. Research employing pragmatic and socio-cognitive discourse analysis examines the beggars' subversive rhetoric and argues that they reclaim voice and moral authority, so that they are better understood as agents of discourse than as mere social outcasts, since their rhetoric contests the ideologies that justify their exclusion. A 2025 comparative study applies a postcolonial framework to set the novel beside the realities of street begging in Nigeria. It argues that the exclusion of beggars exposes contradictions in postcolonial moral, political, and religious systems, that Sow Fall's narrative critiques elite hypocrisy and the commodification of suffering, and that the beggars' otherness is constructed through power dynamics and systemic neglect. These readings corroborate the present study's argument that language is the instrument of both domination and resistance, and that those at the bottom of social hierarchies are not without discursive power.

On the theoretical and methodological front, research on critical discourse analysis has continued to develop and to move closer to literary texts. Statham (2022) offers a comprehensive account of the discipline and demonstrates the range of linguistic methods through which CDA exposes and demystifies ideologies in institutional discourse, while Wodak and Meyer (2009) present it as a family of approaches united by an interest in power, ideology, and critique. Studies applying the approach to literature have shown its value for reading power in fiction and drama. Negm (2021) uses Fairclough's (1989) model to analyse Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and concludes that power is not only a source of domination but also a stimulus for resistance, which Caliban expresses through rejection and negative evaluation of Prospero. Barkindo and Ibrahim (2026) apply Fairclough's three-dimensional model to Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alkali's *The Stillborn*. They find that patriarchal power is naturalised in the former through unmodalised declaratives, possessive constructions, and metaphors that restrict women to relational and reproductive roles, whereas the latter increasingly foregrounds overt resistance through assertive

declaratives, negation, and first-person pronouns. A 2025 study of an Indonesian diaspora novel, also grounded in Fairclough's approach, likewise finds resistance expressed through symbolic narrative, critical questioning, and claims to alternative histories rather than through physical action. Other work has applied CDA to fiction to show that power can be analysed at word, sentence, and discourse levels at once, a methodology that this article adopts.

A recurring concern across these studies is the place of voice and silence. Okolo and Ogbele (2023) show how patriarchal culture silences women, Ripert (2019) shows that the capacity to speak and be heard is unevenly distributed even among women and among beggars, and Barkindo and Ibrahim (2026) show that female resistance in two Nigerian novels is confined to inner thought in one and erupts into direct speech in the other. Voice, in other words, is not a single possession that women either have or lack; it is a position within a network of relations that shifts from scene to scene. This observation is directly relevant to the analyses that follow, since commands, refusals, and silences are the principal evidence on which the present study relies.

Taken together, this body of scholarship confirms two things. First, readings of Darko and Sow Fall have increasingly moved beyond the model of male oppression and female victimhood toward attention to agency, complicity, and reversal. Second, studies that bring critical discourse analysis to African women's fiction, such as that of Barkindo and Ibrahim (2026), show that the linguistic mechanisms through which power and resistance are produced have been insufficiently examined. None of the studies reviewed here reads Darko's two novels and Sow Fall's novel together as evidence of a single dyadic and reversible structure of power, and few ground such a reading in the characters' language. This is the gap that the textual analyses below set out to fill.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on close textual analysis. The primary data are passages from Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995) and *The Housemaid* (1998) and Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* (1981), selected purposively because in them characters exercise, contest, or reverse power through language. Selection was guided by three considerations: the passage shows a character commanding, persuading, refusing, mocking, or keeping silent; the speaker and addressee stand in an identifiable relationship of social, economic, or gendered power; and the exchange affects the distribution of power within the narrative. Secondary data are the scholarly sources reviewed above. The analysis proceeds in three steps that follow the logic of critical discourse analysis. First, the language of each passage is described, attending to commands, questions, refusals, silences, and the ways in which character’s name or fail to name one another. Second, the passage is interpreted as a discursive practice, that is, as a move in a continuing negotiation of power between particular characters. Third, the move is explained in relation to the wider social setting of the novel, drawing on new historicist attention to the structures of authority within which characters speak and on Foucault's account of power as relational and reversible. Because the study treats power as circumstantial, each novel is read as a sequence of shifting positions rather than as a fixed hierarchy. The study has deliberate limits. It deals with three novels from two national traditions, and it reads Fall's novel in its English translation, so that observations about wording are made with that qualification. Its findings are interpretive rather than statistical: they claim analytic rather than numerical generalisability, and they invite comparison with other novels by African women writers rather than asserting that every text will behave in the same way. Quotations are reproduced from the editions cited, and Fall's novel is cited from the English translation by Blair, so that page references are to that edition.

Language, Power and Powerlessness in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

Darko's first novel, *Beyond the Horizon*, is narrated by Mara, an African woman whose marriage to Akobi and subsequent trafficking to Germany constitute the text's central action. The novel addresses the institution of marriage and views it as a cage for the African wife, while simultaneously tracing the process of her emancipation. Record shows that Darko spent part of her life in Germany and that *Beyond the Horizon* was written there. As a rebranding text, it captures the image of the powerful and powerless in family relations and projects the circumstantiality of power through characters in both Africa and Europe. The word-structures in the novel are precisely calibrated to reveal power relations. Words are structures of power and powerlessness. Akobi's social origins, his father's wealth and education, which earned the family "respect" in their village and made Akobi "the first child of Naka to earn a Form Four General Certificate" (Darko, 1995, pp. 4–5), establish the linguistic and social foundation of his power over Mara. Education and exposure become tools with which Akobi merchandises and silences his wife. Mara introduces herself as "his property" (Darko, 1995, p. 7), the word signalling from the outset her absolute reduction to an object. Akobi's commanding discourse, "Now listen to me" (Darko, 1995, p. 11), and Mara's submission, "Yes" (Darko, 1995, p. 11), exemplify the CDA principle that commanding and complying are discursive acts that enact power. His instruction that Mara should dispose of their neighbour's rubbish in exchange for foodstuffs, thereby reducing the "chop money" he gives her (Darko, 1995, p. 11), is an exercise of economic and linguistic control simultaneously. When Mara asks why she may no longer walk to the bus stop with Mama Kiosk, Akobi's response, "Because I say so . . . and who taught you to put whys to my orders?" (Darko, 1995), not only denies her epistemic access but also frames her resistance as a transgression of an established linguistic order. Mara's powerless state is compounded by spatial control: "And sleep on your mat today. I want to sleep on the mattress alone" (Darko, 1995, p. 12), Akobi commands, and she lies on the floor with her eyes open until morning. Such moments are, in CDA terms, performances of absolute domination: the more powerful speaker determines not only what the other may say but where the other may physically exist. Yet the novel demonstrates that Akobi's power is contingent, not absolute. The scene in which Mara runs screaming from their house, her "extended belly leading" her, to escape a beating, is strategically significant. Her action exploits Akobi's craving for recognition as "a civilised person and a gentleman" (Darko, 1995, pp. 21–22): public exposure destroys the very image on which his authority rests. By transforming her body and her scream into a form of language, a public announcement of his brutality, Mara shifts power. Akobi, chastened, makes love to her, "the same person he had avoided for months" (Darko, 1995, p. 22). This is the dyadic movement of power: Mara's body language undoes what Akobi's verbal commands had imposed. Mara's most decisive assertion of agency comes through her language in Germany. Having been trafficked into sex work, she reconstitutes her subjectivity through a pivotal interior monologue: "If I was sleeping with men and charging them for it, it was me giving myself to them. The body being used and misused belonged to me. What had that got to do with Akobi? . . . What power did he have to decide my fate in Germany?" (Darko, 1995, pp. 118–119). This passage, analysed through CDA, shows language doing triple work: it strips Akobi of discursive authority over Mara's body; it reconstitutes Mara as a subject with proprietary rights over herself; and it frames economic agency as a form of liberation. Mara's language here deconstructs Akobi's power and paralyses his aims. In Europe, the power relation is inverted further: Gitte, Akobi's German contact, exercises power over Akobi through dismissive gestures and reproachful language. "Gitte responded reproachfully and gestured towards the kitchen. To this, Akobi got up and went into the kitchen" (Darko, 1995, p. 97). The European setting exposes the circumstantiality

of Akobi's power: in Africa, his education and economic position dominate; in Europe, they count for nothing. Power shifts with geography, and Darko uses language to make that shift visible.
The exchange between Mara's mother and Mara at the opening of the novel also repays attention. Mara's mother says: "Your father has found a husband for you." She dare not even name the man, because "your father would consider it rude if I disclosed him to you before he did" (Darko, 1995, p. 4). Both women are rendered speechless by the father's power, but the very excess of that power, the prohibition on naming, signals its fragility. Power that must prohibit naming is power that fears language.

Dyadic Structures of Power in Darko's *The Housemaid*

In *The Housemaid*, Darko constructs a more intricate web of power relations in which every character is simultaneously powerful over some and powerless before others. Critics have noted that the novel ends tragically, with retribution befalling the women whose hunger for power turns them into exploiters. The novel's tragic structure is, in Foucauldian terms, the logical outcome of power understood as relational and contingent: those who exploit do not escape the consequences of their exploitation. The opening market scene is a precise staging of the dyadic movement of power. The tomato seller's declaration to the cart pusher, "You either take what I am offering, or me and you have no deal" (Darko, 1998, p. 7), is a speech act of economic domination: she names the terms of the transaction and threatens its dissolution. The male cart pushers, their business dependent on female customers, are economically powerless: "the all-male cart pushers realised that they had better not provoke their all-female customers any further" (Darko, 1998, pp. 7–8). One cart pusher openly acknowledges the inversion: "Then as for this, my brother, let me shut my big mouth up, before my madam customer here decides to let someone else cart her yams" (Darko, 1998, p. 8). The message is clear: whatever makes one powerful makes another powerless. Economic dependency produces circumstantial powerlessness regardless of gender.
The relationship between Madam Sekyiwa and her daughter Tika demonstrates the same principle in the domestic sphere. Sekyiwa's failure as a mother, her abandonment of her marital obligations in favour of "young, good-looking male gold-diggers" (Darko, 1998, p. 18), forfeits her linguistic authority over Tika. When she begs: "I should have known how unqualified I am to even suggest anything to you . . . I am still begging you. Please reconsider aborting this baby. I beg you" (Darko, 1998, p. 27), her language performs her powerlessness. The shift from statement to plea to supplication enacts, in discourse, the loss of maternal authority. Tika does not reconsider. Money cannot buy back what moral failure has lost: "when Tika said nothing after she handed over the fat cheque to her and asked, 'So am I forgiven?'" (Darko, 1998, p. 21), Sekyiwa learns that forgiveness, like power, is in the hands of the other. The case of Tika's father and Sekyiwa illustrates the irony that wealth, commonly a source of masculine power, can become an instrument of feminine control. The man "invested every pesewa" in Sekyiwa (Darko, 1998, p. 18), making her powerful and himself dependent. His real wife, abandoned and barren, recovers power when he returns for reconciliation: "Bury any shred of hope you have for a possible reconciliation down a million-mile pit!" (Darko, 1998, p. 20). Her language, including curses, ultimatums, and ritual egg-breaking, constitutes an assertion of power through the only resource available to the dispossessed: the performative force of language itself. Critics have rightly observed that the female self is quite often diminished and devalued by the nature of the gains made in these struggles. The women of *The Housemaid* gain power through strategies of fertility, sex, subservience, and exploitation, but they pay dearly for those gains. Sekyiwa's temporary power condemns her to years of suffering, loneliness, and poverty. This outcome does not negate the reality of female power in the text;

rather, it confirms Foucault's point that power is never fully stabilised: it always produces the conditions of its own resistance and eventual reversal. Efia's family presents yet another instance of involuntary power transfer. Efia's father's drunkenness and laziness strip him of domestic authority: he is literally absent, described as "far asleep" and as "the spring of laziness," when the crucial meeting about Efia's future takes place. Into the vacuum steps his corrupt mother-in-law, whose hatred and greed direct the family toward ruin. The novel thus proposes that irresponsibility in power is not merely a moral failure but a structural one: it opens the field to less scrupulous actors. Efia's mother, lacking the knowledge or courage to resist her own mother, "succumbed to her in every stage until later end when things were already out of hand" (Darko, 1998). Ignorance and fear are as productive of powerlessness as any external coercion.

Power and Powerlessness in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*

Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* extends the analysis of language and power beyond the domestic sphere into the political, institutional, and spiritual domains. The novel stages a collision between two power systems: modern state bureaucracy and traditional religious-cultural practice. The Director of Public Health and Hygiene, Mour Ndiaye, is the agent of the former; the beggars, led by Nguirane Sarr and Salla Niang, embody the latter. Their confrontation is mediated entirely through language. The institutional power structure runs in a clear vertical chain: "The President-Minister-Director-Assistant Director-other staff" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 13). Mour channels power downward in commands: "Keba, the situation is getting more and more worrying. These beggars . . . must be cleared" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 8). Keba relays this downward: "You must keep on the move throughout the City, until it's completely cleaned up. The Chief insists on this. He's received very clear instructions from the Minister" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 13). This chain of command is a chain of language: each transmission is a discursive act that reproduces institutional power. Yet its weakness is exposed early: despite raids, the beggars return. The language of command cannot produce the effects it intends.

The traditional power system operates through a different discursive register: religious prescription, oral tradition, and communal memory. Salla Niang's provocative assertion, "Name me any part of the City where it isn't everyone's first action, first thing in the morning, to give something to the beggars. Even in the white areas; the black Toubabs and the white Toubabs all respect this ritual" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 8), invokes the authority of collective practice to frame almsgiving as a social truth that no official order can nullify. Sagar Diouf articulates this explicitly: "You know, Keba, you're wasting your time with the beggars. They've been here since the time of our great-great-grandparents . . . religion teaches us we must help the poor" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 15). Cultural memory and religious prescription are wielded as discursive counter-powers against the state's claims. The spiritual power system is equally significant. The marabout Serigne Birama exercises power over Mour not through force but through language: his pronouncement that Mour must sacrifice a white ram and distribute its meat to seven beggars in order to achieve the Vice-Presidency (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 19) makes Mour's political ambition entirely dependent on the very population he has tried to eradicate. Serigne's power lies precisely in the performative force of his utterance: by prophesying, he creates the condition that makes the beggars indispensable to Mour. Language here enacts what it describes. The beggars' strike itself is a collective speech act of the most profound kind: by withdrawing from the streets, they do not speak: they let their absence speak for them. Their silence is the loudest possible assertion of their power. As recent pragmatic analysis of the novel argues, the beggars are discursive agents who challenge dominant ideologies, employing subversive rhetorical strategies that expose the moral and structural

dependency of the powerful on the marginalised. Nguirane Sarr's revelation is the novel's analytical key: it is not charity but necessity that drives almsgiving. The donors "whisper their dearest and most secret desires to the alms they tender" (Fall, 1979/1981): long life, prosperity, political advancement. The beggars hold the spiritual currency of the society. Their power flows upward from the base of the social ladder, precisely the Foucauldian model of power as omnipresent, not located at the top. The scene in which Mour visits Salla Niang's compound to beg the beggars to return to the streets is a complete inversion of the novel's opening power arrangement. Mour, the Director, arrives as a supplicant. His elaborate self-justifications, "We bosses, we're in an awkward position . . . God only knows that we haven't the slightest idea of half the actions that our inspectors commit" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 83), are performative failures: the beggars remain silent, their non-response a devastating refusal of his claims to authority. Nguirane Sarr's question, "So, governor, you drove us away and now you're here?" (Fall, 1979/1981), strips Mour of institutional dignity through a single sentence. Salla Niang, laughing, delivers the final discursive blow: "What a liar, what a damned liar!" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 85). Her laughter, her derision, her command, "Monsieur Ndiaye, you can go" (Fall, 1979/1981), enact her total reclamation of power. Yet Salla's promise that the beggars will return to their posts is itself a stratagem: once Mour has passed through the gate, she tells her fellow beggars, "Don't budge from here. No one is to budge from here ever again! Tomorrow, we shall see that he bites the dust!" (Fall, 1979/1981, pp. 85–86). Language is used to deceive the powerful, demonstrating that those who have been silenced and ejected can wield language as a weapon of the most subtle kind. Serigne's earlier question, "You waged war against the beggars . . . Who won?" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 66), is not a question but a verdict. Mour "is convinced that from this moment his whole fate is in the hands of the beggars whom he had driven away from their vintage points" (Fall, 1979/1981, p. 66). The reversal is total. Keba Dabo's role in this reversal is also instructive. When Mour asks him to reinstate the beggars, Keba refuses "with anger and rage" (Fall, 1979/1981). This refusal, from a subordinate, is an act of power exercised upward. As this study observes, "now the boss is bossed." Keba implicitly falls back on the very cultural system that his official duties required him to suppress. This confirms Foucault's proposition that power is never securely held: the teacher's power over the student is "only as a function of his place in the institution" (Leitch, 2001, p. 1618), and once that institution's legitimacy is questioned, the power collapses.

Conclusion

A close reading of Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Housemaid* and Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*, informed by CDA, New Historicism, and Foucault's theory of power, confirms that language is the primary medium through which power relations are constructed, maintained, and contested in these texts. More importantly, it demonstrates that power in these texts is relational, circumstantial, and dyadic: no character remains wholly powerful or wholly powerless. Power shifts as circumstances change and as characters deploy resistant strategies, verbal and physical, to reclaim dignity and agency. This finding challenge feminist critical traditions that treat power as a simple patriarchal possession. As Emecheta (2007) reminds us, "Men did not put us there, my sisters, I think sometimes we put ourselves there . . . real achievement is . . . when we ourselves have the confidence to value our contributions to the world" (pp. 556–557). The novels examined here do not deny the reality of patriarchal oppression; they trace its mechanisms with precision. But they also show that oppression is never total, that resistance is always already present, and that language, the commanding word, the refusing word, the mocking word, the silent word, is the terrain on which power is won and lost.

The review of related literature, which extends through 2026, confirms that contemporary scholarship is moving in precisely this direction: away from static gendered binaries toward more dynamic understandings of power as relational, discursive, and reversible. The three novels examined here remain as relevant as ever to that evolving conversation.

Several directions for further research follow from these findings. The relational model of power employed here could be tested on other novels by African women writers, in French as well as in English, and on texts by male writers whose characters negotiate power in comparable ways. Studies that combine close reading with systematic linguistic analysis, such as the work of Barkindo and Ibrahim (2026), would also allow the claims made here about commands, refusals, and silences to be examined at the level of grammar and modality. Finally, comparative work on translation might ask how the shifts of power traced in Fall's novel are carried across from French into English. The findings carry implications for literary pedagogy as well as for criticism. In the classroom, the relational model of power allows students to read dialogue closely, asking who speaks, who is silenced, and who is obliged to listen, and then to ask what each choice reveals about the relationship between the characters. Such questions make the language of a text the starting point of interpretation rather than an illustration of themes already decided in advance, and they equip readers to see agency in characters who might otherwise be dismissed as passive. For criticism, the same approach cautions against reading any character as simply an oppressor or a victim, and it invites readers to follow how a single character's position changes from one relationship and one scene to the next.

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