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Mapping female consciousness: A feminist stylistic analysis of Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail (2006) and Chimamanda Adichie's Zikora (2020)

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Abstract Contemporary African literature has increasingly explored female subjectivity, trauma, and self-determination, yet limited critical attention has been given to how the stylistic features of these narratives articulate female consciousness across Nigerian and Western contexts. While existing scholarship on Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Zikora* (2020) has addressed their thematic engagement with trauma, motherhood, and identity, the linguistic and formal mechanisms through which female consciousness is constructed in these texts remain underexplored. This study examines how linguistic choices and narrative techniques construct female subjectivity in Becoming Abigail and Zikora, with particular attention to how the body functions as a site of resistance and self-authorship and how female voice and agency are negotiated within transnational spaces of displacement. Drawing on Sara Mills's (1995) feminist stylistics framework, the study conducts a comparative analysis of both texts across three interconnected levels.

The analysis reveals two interrelated thematic formations: (1) the inscription of female pain and memory onto the body as a somatic archive of resistance and self-authorship, and (2) the negotiation of female voice and agency within transnational contexts of displacement. These findings contribute to broader discussions on how contemporary African narratives employ linguistic and structural innovation to represent women's negotiation of changing sociocultural landscapes, and they propose the concept of a "syntax of resistance" as a framework for analysing how marginalised subjects use formal experimentation to contest dominant modes of representation.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African literature has increasingly turned its attention to the interior lives of women, exploring the intimate terrains of female subjectivity, trauma, and self-determination. This shift, which scholars such as Hewett (2005) and Nnaemeka (1994) have identified as a hallmark of third-generation African writing, is characterised by formal experimentation, transnational consciousness, and a willingness to address subjects long considered taboo in African literary culture. These include sexual violence, reproductive autonomy, and the psychic costs of patriarchal kinship structures. Within this broader literary landscape, the works of Chris Abani (2006) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2020) occupy complementary positions. Both writers explore the consciousness of African women navigating hostile social environments, yet they do so through markedly different stylistic registers, narrative architectures, and temporal frameworks.

The representation of women in African literature has a rich and contested history. First-generation and second-generation African women writers (e.g., Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Bâ) focused substantially

on marriage, motherhood, and family as sites of female oppression and resilience (Bonsu et al., 2024; Bonsu & Nkansah, 2024; Curry, 2011; Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022; Nnaemeka, 1994; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987). Their works, sometimes characterised as "domestic literature" or "motherhood literature" (Nnaemeka, 1994), laid essential groundwork by foregrounding the domestic sphere as a legitimate arena of literary inquiry. However, as Osigwe (2021) observes in her review of Adichie's *Zikora*, the third generation of African women writers has reinscribed this tradition by addressing the nuances of female embodiment with an unprecedented directness. Nnaemeka (1994, p. 154) anticipates this development when she argues that the new African woman writer "must reinscribe herself in history on her own terms."

Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) is a lyrical novella that traces the fragmented consciousness of Abigail, a young Nigerian girl named after her mother who died during childbirth. The narrative oscillates between chapters titled "Now" and "Then," constructing a non-linear temporality that mirrors the protagonist's traumatic psyche. In the "Then" chapters, the reader encounters Abigail's childhood in Nigeria, her complex relationship with a grief-stricken father who sees in her the ghost of his dead wife, and her early sexual abuse by male relatives. The "Now" chapters locate Abigail at Cleopatra's Needle on the Thames embankment in London, where she contemplates suicide after being trafficked to England by a relative named Peter, subjected to prolonged sexual exploitation, and then separated from Derek, the social worker who was the only man to truly see her. Abigail's consciousness is defined by a perpetual negotiation between her desire to be seen as herself and the weight of her mother's legacy, a negotiation inscribed quite literally on her body through self-inflicted burns and brandings. The novella culminates in her decision to end her life by following a discarded cigarette into the Thames, an act that can be read simultaneously as capitulation and as a final assertion of agency over her own body.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Zikora* (2020), by contrast, is a short story narrated in the first person by Zikora, a thirty-nine-year-old Nigerian-born lawyer based in Washington, DC, who is undergoing labour while contending with the

emotional devastation of having been abandoned by her partner, Kwame. The narrative moves fluidly between the immediate present of the hospital delivery room and a series of retrospective passages that reconstruct Zikora's relationship with Kwame, her complicated bond with her mother, the story of her cousin Mmiliaku's oppressive marriage, and her own earlier experiences of pregnancy and loss. Unlike Abani's poetic fragmentation, Adichie's prose is conversational and psychologically precise, deploying an autodiegetic voice that grants the reader unmediated access to Zikora's interiority. The story's power lies in its layered exploration of how the physical extremity of childbirth catalyses a reckoning with inherited patterns of female endurance, silence, and acquiescence. By its close, Zikora arrives at a tentative but meaningful recognition of her mother's sacrifices and of the communal networks of care that sustain women through crisis.

Read together, these two texts offer a productive comparative pairing. Both centre on female protagonists who are defined by the absence or failure of male partners and who must navigate hostile institutional landscapes: the immigration and social services system in *Becoming Abigail*, the medical and legal professions in *Zikora*. Both texts are concerned with how female consciousness is shaped by the body's experiences of pain, desire, and violation, employing distinctive temporal structures (i.e., Abani's oscillating "Now/Then" chapters and Adichie's fluid retrospective interruptions) to resist the linear teleology of conventional narrative and to foreground the recursive, layered quality of female memory and selfhood. Yet the stylistic means by which each text achieves these effects remain underexplored in existing scholarship.

Existing critical work on *Becoming Abigail* has tended to focus on trauma theory (Lalhmangaihzauva & Baral, 2023; Okoye, 2022), psychoanalytic readings (Asika, 2023), human rights discourse and sex trafficking (Hall, 2015; Celis, 2021), and identity performativity. Similarly, scholarship on *Zikora* has concentrated on its thematic engagement with motherhood, abandonment, and generational continuity (Osigwe, 2021; Saroj, 2023). Nkansah and Bonsu (2022) conducted a transitivity analysis (verbal processes) of *Zikora* and found that the suffering of women were

deconstructed through dialogue and responsibility sharing. What is absent from these critical conversations is a sustained stylistic analysis that attends to the linguistic and formal mechanisms through which female consciousness is constructed in these texts. This study addresses that gap by employing Sara Mills's (1995) feminist stylistics as an analytical framework to examine how the stylistic choices in both texts construct, constrain, and ultimately liberate female subjectivity. The study is guided by two interrelated analytical themes: (1) the inscription of female memory and pain onto the body, and (2) the negotiation of female voice and agency within transnational contexts of displacement.

Narrative technique: Perspective and the Construction of Consciousness

Narrative technique refers to the ensemble of formal and structural methods through which a story is organised, presented, and mediated to the reader (Bal, 2017). Narrative technique operates at the architectonic level, governing the selection and arrangement of story events, the regulation of the reader's access to characters' minds, and the management of temporal sequence. Narrative structures are themselves realised through specific linguistic resources (Ghassani et al., 2023). An understanding of narrative technique is therefore essential for the present study, which examines how the construction of female consciousness in *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Zikora* (2020) depends on the broader narrative architectures within which those choices function.

A central concept in the study of narrative technique is focalization, a term introduced by Genette (1980) to distinguish between the question of who narrates (voice) and the question of who perceives (perspective). Genette's typology distinguishes among zero focalization, in which the narrator knows more than any character; internal focalization, in which the narrative is filtered through the perceptual and cognitive lens of a character; and external focalization, in which the narrator reports only what is externally observable without access to any character's interiority. Bal (2017), in her updated formulation of narratology, refines this distinction by differentiating between the focaliser, the agent whose perception orients the narrative, and the focalised, the object of that perception, thereby

enabling more precise analysis of how texts position readers in relation to characters' subjectivities. Recent scholarship has continued to develop these categories. Bruhns and Köppe (2024), for instance, advance a definition of internal focalization grounded in the type of imaginative engagement it invites from readers, arguing that internally focalised passages mandate imagining from a character's perceptual standpoint. This refined understanding of focalization is directly relevant to the present study, as the two texts under analysis deploy contrasting focalisation strategies that produce fundamentally different configurations of reader access to female consciousness.

Equally important to the analysis of narrative technique is the management of temporality. Genette (1980) identifies three dimensions of narrative time: order, the relationship between the sequence of events in the story and their arrangement in the narrative discourse; duration, the relationship between the time events are understood to occupy and the textual space devoted to them; and frequency, the relationship between the number of times an event occurs and the number of times it is narrated. Non-linear temporal structures, achieved through analepsis (retrospection) and prolepsis (anticipation), have been widely recognised as a defining feature of modern and contemporary fiction (Ghassani et al., 2023; Abdulrraziq & Geedallah, 2021). In contemporary African fiction, temporal disruption carries particular ideological significance. As recent studies have shown, non-linear narration in postcolonial contexts often resists the teleological assumptions of Western linear narrative and instead foregrounds cyclical, recursive, or fragmented modes of temporal experience that reflect the psychic realities of displacement, trauma, and cultural negotiation (Fernandez-Quintanilla & Stradling, 2023). Both *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Zikora* (2020) employ distinctive temporal strategies that demand analytical attention to how temporal ordering shapes the reader's understanding of female subjectivity.

A third dimension of narrative technique that bears directly on this study is narrative voice, understood as the grammatical and discursive manifestation of the narrator's presence in the text. The distinction between homodiegetic narration, in

which the narrator is a character within the story world, and heterodiegetic narration, in which the narrator stands outside it (Genette, 1980), carries significant implications for the construction of agency and subjectivity. First-person (autodiegetic) narration, as Ziying (2023) demonstrates in her analysis of feminist narrative authority, grants the narrating character grammatical ownership of the discourse, positioning her as the subject of her own sentences and the author of her own story. Third-person narration, by contrast, introduces a mediating consciousness that may grant intimate access to a character's interiority while simultaneously withholding from that character the first-person pronoun that would grammatically perform her selfhood. This distinction is of particular significance for feminist literary analysis, as the choice of narrative voice determines whether a female protagonist speaks or is spoken about, whether she authors her experience or is authored by another's gaze (Mills, 1995; Ziying, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is situated within the broader field of linguistics, the systematic study of language as a structured system of communication. Linguistics encompasses multiple levels of analysis, from phonology, morphology, and syntax to semantics, pragmatics, and discourse, each offering tools for understanding how meaning is produced, negotiated, and interpreted in both spoken and written contexts (Crystal & Alan, 2023; McGregor, 2024). Within this expansive disciplinary landscape, stylistics has emerged as a productive interdisciplinary subfield that applies the analytical apparatus of linguistics to the study of literary and non-literary texts, foregrounding the relationship between linguistic form and interpretive effect (Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007). By grounding literary interpretation in observable linguistic evidence, stylistics provides a principled methodology for analysing how texts produce meaning, and it is this methodological orientation that underpins the present study. The sections that follow provide an overview of stylistics as a discipline before narrowing to feminist stylistics, the specific analytical framework employed in this analysis.

Stylistics: An Overview

Stylistics, broadly defined, is the systematic study of style in language, particularly as it functions in literary texts (Bonsu & Nkansah, 2024; Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022). It operates at the intersection of linguistics and literary criticism, drawing on the analytical tools of the former to illuminate the aesthetic and ideological effects of the latter (Leech & Short, 2007). As Simpson (2004, p. 2) puts it, stylistics is "a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language." The discipline is premised on the understanding that the meanings produced by a literary text are inseparable from the linguistic choices that constitute it—choices at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, and discourse structure. Stylistic analysis therefore attends to what a text says and how it says it, and to the interpretive consequences of those formal decisions.

The development of stylistics has been shaped by various linguistic traditions. Early formalist approaches, influenced by Russian Formalism and Prague School linguistics, focused on the concept of "deviation"—the idea that literary language achieves its effects by departing from an established norm (Leech, 1969). Later developments, particularly those influenced by Halliday's (1971) systemic functional linguistics, shifted attention to how transitivity patterns, modality, and other grammatical systems encode ideological positions and construct particular representations of reality. This functional orientation proved especially productive for critical and politically engaged approaches to stylistics, including feminist stylistics, because it allowed analysts to trace the connections between grammatical structure and social power (Fowler, 1981; Simpson, 2004).

Feminist Stylistics: Definition, Principles, and Application

Feminist stylistics, as articulated by Sara Mills (1995), represents the convergence of feminist literary criticism and linguistic stylistics. Mills defines it as an analytical practice that "identifies itself as feminist and which uses linguistic or language analysis to examine texts" (Mills, 1995, p. 1). The framework is concerned not merely with identifying sexism in texts but with analysing how stylistic features such as point of view, agency, metaphor, and transitivity are "unexpectedly closely

related to matters of gender" (Mills, 1995, p. 1). Feminist stylistics emerged from the recognition that language is a social practice embedded in, and productive of, gendered power relations (Montoro, 2014).

Mills's framework operates across three interconnected levels of analysis: the word, the phrase/sentence, and the discourse. At the lexical level, feminist stylistics examines how word choices construct gendered identities, for instance, through the use of generic masculine pronouns, sexist naming practices, or the semantic asymmetry between paired terms for men and women. At the syntactic level, the framework attends to how grammatical structures distribute agency, examining who acts and who is acted upon, who speaks and who is spoken about, and how transitivity patterns position female characters as agents or patients (Ufot, 2012). At the discourse level, feminist stylistics analyses larger textual structures, including narrative perspective, focalisation, fragmentation, and schemata, to reveal how texts position readers in relation to gendered experiences and ideologies (Mills, 1995; Montoro, 2014).

Several key principles underpin the feminist stylistic approach. First, it insists on the inseparability of form and ideology: stylistic choices carry political implications. There exists a "dialectical interrelationship between language and social structure (Fowler, 1981; Mills, 1995), such that linguistic patterns both reflect and actively constitute social realities. Second, feminist stylistics is attentive to the constructedness of gender in texts; that is, the ways in which textual practices produce, reinforce, or challenge dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. Third, the framework is explicitly political, aiming to describe and intervene in the gendered politics of representation (Bonsu et al., 2024; Mills, 1995).

The application of feminist stylistics to African literary texts has become productive, given the complex intersections of gender, colonialism, and cultural tradition that shape the representation of women in these contexts (Asempasah & Sam, 2016; Bonsu et al., 2024; Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022). Feminist stylistics can illuminate how women writers (and male writers representing female consciousness) deploy distinctive syntactic and lexical strategies to articulate experiences and

subjectivities that resist assimilation into patriarchal narrative frameworks (Ufot, 2012). In the present study, Mills's framework is applied to both *Becoming Abigail* and *Zikora* to examine how their respective stylistic features construct female consciousness and negotiate questions of agency, embodiment, and self-determination across transnational contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative research design grounded in interpretive textual analysis. Qualitative research design is appropriate for studies that seek to examine how meaning is constructed through language, as it enables the analyst to attend to the contextual, layered, and ideologically embedded dimensions of textual production that quantitative methods alone cannot capture (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The comparative dimension of the design enables a systematic examination of the stylistic strategies through which two different authors construct female consciousness in response to related thematic concerns. Comparative literary analysis is productive for revealing how shared themes are articulated through divergent formal and linguistic means, thereby foregrounding the relationship between stylistic choice and ideological effect (Bonsu & Nkansah, 2024; Leech & Short, 2007).

Data Sources

The primary data for this study consist of two literary texts: Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Zikora* (2020). These texts were purposively selected on the basis of four criteria. First, both centre on the consciousness of Nigerian female protagonists navigating hostile social environments, providing a shared thematic basis for comparison. Second, both texts are situated within transnational contexts, with protagonists located in Western settings (London and Washington, DC, respectively), enabling analysis of how spatial displacement shapes the narrative articulation of female agency. Third, the texts employ markedly different narrative modes, offering a productive contrast for

examining how narrative perspective shapes the construction of female subjectivity. Fourth, both texts have received considerable critical attention for their thematic concerns but remain underexplored from a sustained stylistic perspective, presenting a clear scholarly gap that this study addresses.

Analytical Framework

The study employs Sara Mills's (1995) feminist stylistics as its primary analytical framework. As outlined in the Theoretical Review, this framework operates across three interconnected levels of analysis. The framework is explicitly concerned with how stylistic features are related to questions of gender and power (Mills, 1995; Montoro, 2014), making it suited to the present study's focus on how linguistic and narrative choices construct female consciousness.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded through four systematic stages. In the first stage, both texts were read multiple times to identify recurring stylistic patterns and thematic preoccupations related to the construction of female consciousness. This immersive reading phase generated initial observations about the dominant stylistic features of each text. In the second stage, the texts were coded according to the six analytical categories outlined above (transitivity, metaphor, narrative perspective, temporal structure, spatial deixis, and code-switching), with relevant passages identified and extracted for close analysis. In the third stage, the extracted passages were subjected to detailed feminist stylistic analysis, examining how specific linguistic and narrative choices construct, constrain, or enable female subjectivity in each text. In the fourth stage, the findings from each text were compared and synthesised to identify patterns of convergence and divergence, yielding the two interrelated thematic formations discussed in the Findings and Discussions section: "Embodied Memory and the Cartography of Female Pain" and "Transnational Displacement and the Reclamation of Female Voice."

Ethical Considerations

As this study analyses published literary texts that are publicly available, no ethical clearance from a human subject's review board was required. The analysis engages with the texts as aesthetic and ideological artefacts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two major themes are discussed in this section: "Embodied Memory and the Cartography of Female Pain" and "Transnational Displacement and the Reclamation of Female Voice".

Embodied Memory and the Cartography of Female Pain

Becoming Abigail and *Zikora* construct female consciousness through an intimate attention to the body as a site where memory, pain, and identity converge. Embodied memory, as it operates in these texts, refers to the process by which traumatic and transformative experiences are recalled cognitively, registered, stored, and re-experienced through the body's sensory and somatic responses. In feminist theory, the body has long been recognised as a contested terrain, both the site of women's oppression and the potential ground of their resistance (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1993). Feminist stylistics extends this insight by attending to the specific linguistic mechanisms through which bodily experience is textually rendered, asking how metaphor, imagery, and syntactic structure mediate the relationship between the female body and the construction of subjectivity (Mills, 1995). In both Abani's and Adichie's texts, the body is an active medium of self-inscription and meaning-making.

In *Becoming Abigail*, the protagonist's body functions as a literal and figurative map on which her identity is charted. Abani (2006) deploys an extended cartographic metaphor throughout the novella, explicitly linking the act of reading maps, Abigail's favourite pastime, to the reading and writing of the self on skin. This connection is made explicit in a passage where Abigail studies a world map:

> And sometimes the alchemy of her stare transmuted the parchment into her mother's skin. The landmarks taking on deeper significance. The Himalayas marking the slope of Abigail's forehead, spreading into the Gobi desert. The hook of Africa became her nose. Australia her bottom lip. (p. 38)

Several feminist stylistic features operate in this passage. The metaphor of "alchemy" signals a transformative act that positions Abigail as an active agent of interpretation. The syntactic structure of the passage, with its short declarative clauses ("The Himalayas marking the slope," "The hook of Africa became her nose"), enacts a process of incremental construction: identity is assembled piece by piece, continent by continent, in what Abani calls "true cubist form" (p. 38). The use of the verb "transmuted" grants agency to Abigail's gaze ("her stare"), positioning her as the grammatical subject who performs the transformative act. This is a marked departure from the passages in which male characters act upon her body. It suggests that the imaginative mapping of her mother's body onto geography constitutes a form of creative self-authorship that resists the objectification she experiences elsewhere.

The cartographic metaphor extends to Abigail's practice of self-branding, where she inscribes her own body with burns that serve as a counter-archive to the stories others impose upon her. After making love with Derek for the first time, the first sexual encounter she chooses rather than endures, she burns a constellation of dots across her body:

> "This one," she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. "This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here," and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me." (pp. 26–27)

The repetition of the deictic pronoun "here" and the first-person possessive "me" constitutes what Mills (1995) would identify as a linguistic assertion of agency. Through these pronominal repetitions, Abigail claims her body as her own territory, distinguishing between what belongs to her mother's legacy ("words") and

what belongs to her ("dots"). The breathless, comma-spliced syntax ("and here, and here and here and here, here, here, here") enacts a sense of urgency and accumulation, as though Abigail is racing to claim every inch of her body before it is taken from her again. Derek's response, tracing "the map of her, the skin of her world, as she emerged in pointillism" (p. 27), confirms that the burns function as a legible text, a feminist counter-narrative inscribed on the body itself. As Celis (2021) argues, the novella develops a "literacy of the flesh" in which embodied practices constitute a form of self-narration that challenges dominant discourses surrounding agency and consent.

In *Zikora*, the body is similarly central to the construction of female consciousness, though Adichie (2020) renders bodily experience through a markedly different stylistic register. Where Abani's prose is lyrical and imagistic, Adichie's is visceral and precise, deploying somatic metaphor and syntactic rhythm to convey the overwhelming physicality of childbirth. The opening paragraphs of the story establish the body as a site of ungovernable force:

> I had prepared for pain but this was not mere pain. It was something like pain and different from pain. It sat like fire in my back, spreading to my thighs, squeezing and crushing my insides, pulling downward, spiraling. (p. 5)

The feminist stylistic significance of this passage lies in its negotiation of linguistic adequacy. The opening clause establishes a gap between expectation and experience ("prepared for pain but this was not mere pain"), and the subsequent reformulation, "something like pain and different from pain", deploys a "semantic deviation" (Leech & Short, 2007). Semantic deviation as the oxymoronic construction defamiliarises the concept of pain, insisting on the insufficiency of existing language to capture a distinctly female bodily experience (Leech & Short, 2007). The participial verbs that follow ("spreading," "squeezing," "crushing," "pulling," "spiraling") form a chain of progressive present participles that create an effect of relentless accumulation and duration, syntactically enacting the unceasing quality of labour pain. The metaphor of fire ("it sat like fire in my back") echoes the Old Testament imagery that Zikora herself invokes ("It felt like the Old Testament.

A plague"), linking the individual female body to an archetypal register of suffering and endurance. From a feminist stylistic standpoint, this passage foregrounds the phenomenological specificity of a bodily experience that has been historically silenced or sentimentalised in literary representation.

What distinguishes Adichie's treatment of embodied memory from Abani's is the way physical pain becomes a catalyst for intergenerational empathy. The experience of labour compels Zikora to revise her understanding of other women's suffering (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022; Saroj, 2023). She reflects on her mother's history: "a woman from a wealthy family marries a man from a wealthy family, has one daughter, three miscarriages, and an emergency hysterectomy" (p. 23), with a new comprehension that was previously unavailable to her. As Osigwe (2021) notes, the experience of childbirth enables Zikora to empathise with her mother and with her cousin Mmiliaku, whose husband "waits until I'm asleep, then he climbs on me" (p. 10). The syntactic parallelism in Adichie's narration of these interconnected stories of female suffering creates a structural echo chamber in which individual pain reverberates across generations and geographies.

In both texts, the body thus functions as what we might term a "somatic archive", a living repository of female experience that both records trauma and provides the material basis for resistance and self-knowledge. However, the two authors deploy markedly different stylistic strategies to render this somatic archive legible. On one hand, Abani's third-person narration and lyrical, fragmentary prose create an aestheticised distance that emphasises the symbolic dimensions of Abigail's bodily inscriptions. On the other hand, Adichie's first-person narration and visceral, conversational prose brings the reader into immediate, unmediated contact with Zikora's bodily experience (Saroj, 2023). In feminist stylistic terms, these different narrative perspectives produce different configurations of agency. Abani's third-person mode allows the reader to observe Abigail constructing her body as a text, a process that emphasises her creative agency even as it acknowledges her victimisation. Adichie's first-person mode, by contrast, positions Zikora as the authoritative interpreter of her own bodily experience, directly challenging the

institutional voices (doctors, nurses, her own mother) that attempt to define and manage her pain. These stylistic strategies demonstrate that the literary construction of female embodied consciousness requires formal innovation. This finding resonates with the broader feminist stylistic argument that gendered experience demands new modes of linguistic representation (Mills, 1995).

Transnational Displacement and the Reclamation of Female Voice

The second major thematic thread that emerges from the feminist stylistic analysis of both texts concerns the relationship between spatial displacement and the articulation of female agency. Transnational displacement, as it operates in these narratives, is not merely a geographical fact but a condition that fundamentally reshapes the terms on which female identity and voice can be constructed and asserted. Both protagonists are African women inhabiting Western spaces—Abigail in London, Zikora in Washington, DC—and both texts use spatial references and deictic structures to chart the psychological terrain of women caught between cultural worlds. The feminist stylistic significance of this spatial dimension lies in how each text deploys language to negotiate the relationship between place, power, and female self-determination.

In *Becoming Abigail*, the alternating "Now" and "Then" chapter structure is itself a spatial and temporal device that enacts the protagonist's psychic displacement. The "Then" chapters are set in Nigeria and are characterised by a slower, more expansive prose style that lingers on landscape, domestic detail, and the sensory textures of the natural world. The "Now" chapters, by contrast, are set on the Thames embankment in London and are marked by a more compressed, urgent, and fragmented syntax. This structural oscillation does not merely alternate between past and present but, more fundamentally, between two modes of being: one defined by familial connection (however troubled), and one defined by isolation and existential crisis. The spatial deixis of the "Now" chapters consistently locates Abigail in relation to colonial monuments, including Cleopatra's Needle, the sphinxes, the Thames, that carry the weight of imperial history:

> The sphinxes faced the wrong way, gazing inward contemplatively at Cleopatra's Needle rather than outward, protectively, but Queen Victoria had ruled against the expense of correcting the mistake. (p. 8)

The sphinxes' misdirection, "facing the wrong way", operates as a subtle metaphor for the failures of institutional protection that define Abigail's experience in London. The parenthetical attribution of the error to Queen Victoria, a female sovereign, introduces an ironic commentary on the complicity of female power in patriarchal and colonial structures. Abigail's own sardonic observation that the sphinxes are "amused at the ridiculous impotence of the phallus they stared at" (p. 8) deploys gendered imagery (the obelisk as impotent phallus) in a manner that asserts her interpretive authority over the colonial landscape. From a feminist stylistic perspective, this passage demonstrates how spatial description functions as ideological critique: Abigail reads the landscape through a gendered lens that exposes the intersection of patriarchal and imperial power.

The moment that most powerfully crystallises the relationship between space and female consciousness in *Becoming Abigail* occurs at the Greenwich Observatory, where Abigail stands on the meridian line:

> She stood on the line that cut the earth into two time zones, feet inches apart, marveling at how true to life it all was. That one could be only a small step away from another world, another time, and yet caught firmly in one or the other, or as in her case, trapped forever between two. (p. 25)

The meridian line functions here as a spatial correlative for Abigail's divided consciousness: between Nigeria and England, between her mother's identity and her own, between the living and the dead. The syntactic structure of the passage enacts this division: the long subordinate clause ("That one could be only a small step away from another world, another time, and yet caught firmly in one or the other") balances two opposing possibilities before resolving. Or rather, failing to resolve, in the qualifying phrase "or as in her case, trapped forever between two." The word "trapped" is the key verb in this passage, and its placement at the end of the sentence, after the expansive possibilities of "another world, another time," creates a syntactic

deflation that mirrors the collapse of Abigail's hopes. The transitivity pattern here positions Abigail not as an agent but as an experiencer of a static condition, "trapped", that forecloses the possibility of action or transformation (Mills, 1995; Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022). This grammatical stasis prefigures her eventual suicide, suggesting that the transnational space, far from offering liberation, has become a prison.

Adichie's *Zikora* negotiates the dynamics of transnational displacement through a different stylistic strategy. Where Abigail is rendered voiceless in the public sphere—she is a ghost without legal documentation, a minor whose choices are denied institutional recognition—Zikora is a successful professional who commands a powerful discursive presence (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022). Her first-person narration is characterised by a confident, analytical voice that moves fluently between observation, reflection, and sharp social critique (Saroj, 2023). Yet Adichie's text reveals that Zikora's professional assurance masks a deeper vulnerability rooted in her displacement from the communal networks that traditionally support African women through the transition to motherhood. This tension is rendered through a distinctive stylistic pattern in which Zikora's authoritative present-tense narration is repeatedly interrupted by retrospective passages that expose the fragility beneath her composure:

> I no longer had friends, all my time so focused on Kwame. I cried and cried, and even though people said crying made them feel better, it made me feel frightened and small. (p. 14)

The syntactic simplicity of this passage is itself a feminist stylistic statement, but beneath the simplicity is the complex experience they negotiate. Where Zikora's professional discourse is complex and articulate, her expression of emotional vulnerability reverts to simple declarative structures ("I cried and cried") and monosyllabic adjectives ("frightened and small"). The polysyndeton of "and" in "I cried and cried" creates a rhythmic insistence that suggests an emotional state that resists the containment of more sophisticated syntax. The subversion of the conventional wisdom that crying provides relief ("even though people said crying

made them feel better, it made me feel frightened and small") performs a characteristic Adichie move. The move is the deployment of a subordinate clause to challenge a received cultural script and replace it with the authority of individual female experience.

The reclamation of female voice in *Zikora* is further accomplished through the story's attention to the politics of language itself in transnational contexts (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2022; Osigwe, 2021). Adichie (2020) strategically deploys code-switching between English and Igbo to mark moments of emotional intensity and cultural allegiance. When Mmiliaku tells Zikora that she has had enough of bearing children, she switches to Igbo: "Amuchago m" (p. 16). The narrator glosses this for the reader but also comments on its significance: "We mostly spoke English; Igbo was for mimicking relatives and for saying painful things" (p. 16). This metalinguistic observation is a remarkable instance of feminist stylistic self-awareness (Joy, 1993). Adichie explicitly thematises the relationship between language choice and the expression of gendered suffering, suggesting that certain female experiences, particularly those related to the body and to loss, require the resources of the mother tongue because the language of the adopted country is inadequate to contain them. This resonates with Abani's treatment of Abigail's linguistic alienation in London, where she practises her English accent by repeating phrases from British popular culture ("Dreadful about Chechnya," p. 37), recognising that "the English could forgive you anything except a foreign accent" (p. 37). In both texts, language extends beyond simple medium of communication to a terrain of power in which female protagonists must negotiate their visibility and legitimacy.

A particularly significant point of comparison between the two texts concerns the way each protagonist's voice is constrained or enabled by narrative perspective. Abani's choice of third-person narration for *Becoming Abigail* creates a paradox. The reader is granted intimate access to Abigail's interiority, yet Abigail herself is denied the first-person pronoun that would grammatically perform her selfhood. The autodiegetic narrative technique is "appropriate, as emotional anguish

and labour pain can be communicated best by the one experiencing it" (Osigwe, 2021, p. 4). Adichie's choice of first-person narration thus performs at the grammatical level the agency that the story's content dramatizes. Zikora is the subject of her own sentences, the author of her own story, even as she struggles against the social forces that seek to define her. Abigail, by contrast, is rendered in the third person, grammatically positioned as an object of observation rather than a self-narrating subject. This grammatical positioning mirrors her social positioning as a trafficked minor whose choices are not recognised by the institutions meant to protect her. Yet the novella's poetic intensity, its attention to the richness of Abigail's inner world, functions as a counter-discourse that insists on the value and complexity of a consciousness that the social world refuses to see.

Both texts ultimately suggest that the reclamation of female voice in transnational contexts requires the assertion of individual agency and reconstruction of communal bonds. In *Zikora*, this is dramatised through the mother's arrival and her quiet, essential care for both Zikora and her grandson. The story's closing image, Zikora's mother cradling the baby, "touching the skin of his face with the skin of hers" (p. 28), uses tactile imagery to represent a wordless intergenerational connection that transcends the linguistic and geographical distances the story has traversed. In *Becoming Abigail*, by contrast, the failure of communal bonds is precisely what drives the narrative toward its tragic conclusion. Abigail invokes Igbo cosmology, the belief in second chances, the understanding that "destiny isn't a deck of cards stacked up against you" (p. 62). These gestures toward a cultural resource might have sustained her, but the conditions of her displacement rendered inaccessible. The feminist stylistic significance of this contrast is that it reveals how the construction of female voice is an individual achievement and a socio-cultural practice, dependent on the networks of recognition and care that allow women to be seen and heard.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study employed Sara Mills's (1995) feminist stylistic framework to conduct a comparative analysis of how linguistic choices and narrative techniques construct female consciousness in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Zikora* (2020). Through close attention to metaphor, transitivity patterns, narrative perspective, temporal structure, spatial deixis, and code-switching, the analysis has revealed two interrelated thematic formations. The first, "Embodied Memory and the Cartography of Female Pain", demonstrated how both texts position the female body as a somatic archive in which trauma, desire, and selfhood are inscribed through distinctive stylistic strategies. Such strategies are cartographic metaphor and self-branding in Abani, visceral somatic imagery and participial accumulation in Adichie. The second, "Transnational Displacement and the Reclamation of Female Voice", revealed how spatial displacement across Nigerian and Western landscapes shapes the narrative articulation of female agency. Each text deploys different configurations of narrative perspective, spatial deixis, and linguistic code-switching to negotiate the relationship between place, power, and self-determination.

The findings of this study carry several important implications. For gender studies, the analysis demonstrates that the literary representation of female consciousness is fundamentally shaped by formal and stylistic decisions. The difference between Abigail's third-person narration and Zikora's first-person voice is an ideological one, with profound consequences for how female agency, vulnerability, and selfhood are constructed and perceived. This suggests that scholars of gender in literature must attend as closely to the how of representation as to the what, a principle that feminist stylistics makes both possible and necessary. For stylistics, the study contributes to the growing body of work that applies linguistic analytical tools to postcolonial and transnational literary texts. The analysis has shown that traditional stylistic categories (e.g., metaphor, deixis, narrative perspective) remain productive when applied to texts that operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. These stylistic tools should be supplemented by

attention to the specific dynamics of code-switching, cultural intertextuality, and spatial politics that characterise transnational writing. The concept of the "somatic archive" proposed in this study, the body as a textual site where experience is inscribed, read, and contested, offers a conceptual bridge between feminist stylistics and embodiment theory that may prove productive for future analyses of literary texts centred on bodily experience. For feminist theory more broadly, the comparative analysis suggests that the articulation of female consciousness in contemporary African literature operates through what we might call a "syntax of resistance". This syntax focuses on the use of non-linear temporal structures, fragmented narrative forms, and somatic imagery to construct modes of female subjectivity that refuse the linear, rational, and disembodied norms of patriarchal narrative. This syntax of resistance is not uniform (Abani's poetic fragmentation vs. Adichie's conversational immediacy), but it is united by a common commitment to rendering visible the psychological interiority of women whose inner lives have been historically obscured or dismissed. The notion of a "syntax of resistance" could be developed as a conceptual framework for analysing how marginalised subjects use formal innovation to contest dominant modes of representation.

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