

Gendered Language and Patriarchal Control in Jamaica Kincaid's Girl (1978): A Feminist Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The urgency of this study lies in its critical examination of how gendered language functions as a tool of patriarchal control in Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* (1978), revealing how linguistic practices shape female identity, social expectations, and power relations within a cultural context. This study examines gendered language in Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978) by focusing on how linguistic forms function as mechanisms of social control over women. Rather than treating gendered language as a general phenomenon, this research specifically analyzes the dominance of imperative sentences, repetition, and normative diction used by the mother figure to construct female identity within a patriarchal cultural framework. Using a qualitative descriptive method and feminist discourse analysis, the study identifies how directives and prohibitions directed at the female subject reflect expectations of obedience, domestic responsibility, and moral discipline. The findings reveal that language in *Girl* does not merely mirror gender norms but actively reproduces them by normalizing patriarchal values through everyday maternal discourse. The study concludes that Kincaid's *Girl* demonstrates how language operates as an ideological tool that shapes and limits women's identities, highlighting the importance of feminist linguistic analysis in literary studies.

Keywords: *Gendered Language; Feminism; Discourse Analysis; Literature; Jamaica Kincaid; Gender*

Introduction

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a social and ideological tool that shapes how individuals understand their roles within society (Davis & Reynolds, 2018; Baker & Cornelson, 2018). In linguistic and literary studies, language is often examined as a means through which power relations, cultural values, and social norms are constructed and maintained (Ohito, 2016; DeFranza et al., 2020). One such manifestation is gendered language, which refers to linguistic choices that encode and reinforce expectations about gender roles (Gygaz et al., 2019; Hoyle, 2019; Fauziah, 2026). Through sentence structure, diction, and discourse patterns, language can subtly regulate behavior and normalize unequal power relations between men and women (Fatah & Muhammed, 2025; Munira et al., 2020).

Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978) presents a compelling example of how gendered language operates within everyday discourse. Written as a continuous monologue delivered by a mother to her daughter, the text consists largely of advice, instructions, and prohibitions that define proper female behavior (Suwan, 2024). The dominance of imperative sentences and repetitive directives reflects how women are taught obedience, discipline, and domestic responsibility from an early age. Rather than functioning as neutral guidance, the mother's

language constructs a narrow framework of acceptable female identity shaped by social and cultural expectations (Naeem & Zaidi, 2024; Alifia, 2026).

Previous studies on *Girl* have largely focused on feminist themes, female identity, and criticism of patriarchal society (Jayasree, 2018; Hendriani, 2022). While these studies provide important insights, many of them emphasize thematic interpretation rather than close linguistic analysis (Rahmah & Nurholis, 2024). As a result, the specific ways in which language itself functions as a mechanism of gender control often remain underexplored. A linguistic approach is essential to reveal how seemingly ordinary expressions, such as advice and moral instruction, actively participate in reproducing gender inequality through everyday speech (Suhardi, 2026).

Therefore, this study examines *Girl* from the perspective of feminist linguistics and discourse analysis, with particular attention to sentence structure, word choice, and discourse patterns. By analyzing the use of imperative sentences, repetition, and normative diction, this research seeks to demonstrate how language shapes and constrains women's gender identities within a patriarchal social context. Through this approach, the study aims to contribute to feminist linguistic research by highlighting the central role of language in constructing gendered power relations in literary texts (Chen, 2024).

Studies on language and gender have developed significantly since the emergence of feminist linguistics in the 1970s. One of the most influential contributions, who argues in *Language and Woman's Place* that language is not a neutral system but reflects and reinforces patriarchal social structures (Correll et al., 2020). Women's language is often associated with politeness, obedience, and emotional restraint, which limits women's authority and scope of expression. This perspective provides an important foundation for understanding how linguistic forms can function as tools of gender inequality in both everyday communication and literary texts (K Aghasiyev, 2024).

Building on this idea, Zimmerman and West's Dominance Theory emphasizes that differences in male and female speech patterns are rooted in unequal social power relations. From this viewpoint, language becomes a site where dominance and subordination are enacted. Importantly, dominance does not only occur in interactions between men and women; it can also appear in interactions among women themselves. In literary works such as *Girl*, the dominance embedded in language is transmitted through the mother-daughter relationship, illustrating how patriarchal authority can be internalized and reproduced by women through everyday discourse.

Another relevant approach is Feminist Stylistics, which focuses on how linguistic choices at the level of sentence structure, diction, and narrative voice contribute to the construction of gender ideology in texts. Feminist stylistics treats literary works not only as aesthetic products but also as social texts shaped by gendered assumptions. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing *Girl*, as it allows for a systematic examination of imperative sentences and repetitive structures that position the female subject as passive and regulated.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed, further strengthens this study by conceptualizing language as a social practice closely linked to ideology and power. CDA highlights how discourse constructs identities, relationships, and social norms. In the context of *Girl*, the mother's uninterrupted flow of instructions and prohibitions functions as a discourse of control that shapes female identity. Through CDA, the study examines how linguistic structures in the text implicitly reproduce gender norms and sustain patriarchal ideology within the domestic sphere.

Previous studies on Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* have primarily focused on feminist interpretation, postcolonial identity, and social criticism. Many scholars have explored how the narrative reflects the struggles of women in patriarchal societies, emphasizing the restrictive gender roles and expectations imposed on young girls. Others have examined the text through a postcolonial lens, highlighting the ways in which colonial legacies shape family dynamics, social hierarchies, and cultural identity. In addition, *Girl* has been analyzed as a vehicle for social criticism, illustrating the pressures of conformity, class distinctions, and societal norms that govern behavior, particularly for women. While these studies provide valuable insights into the socio-cultural and political dimensions of the story, there remains a need for further research on linguistic strategies and gendered language used by Kincaid, as well as their impact on readers' perception of authority, obedience, and identity formation. This opens opportunities to examine the text from a more interdisciplinary perspective, combining sociolinguistics, literary stylistics, and gender studies (Roseline & Mohammed, 2024).

Several scholars have explored how *Girl* represents the pressures placed on women in Caribbean society, particularly the ways in which colonial legacies and patriarchal structures continue to shape expectations of female behavior. These studies often focus on thematic and ideological aspects, examining issues such as gender inequality, social norms, and power relations within family and community contexts. However, while these analyses provide valuable insight into the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of the text, they tend to overlook the linguistic mechanisms that Kincaid employs to convey these themes. Specifically, the role of sentence structure, repetition, and discourse patterns in constructing gendered meaning has not been fully addressed.

By examining the ways in which syntax, punctuation, and narrative rhythm contribute to the authoritative and prescriptive tone of the text, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how language itself enforces social norms and gender expectations. Therefore, a detailed linguistic analysis of *Girl* offers an opportunity to complement existing thematic studies, bridging the gap between literary interpretation and the study of language as a tool for shaping identity and social behavior (Rabea & Almahameed, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by integrating feminist linguistic theory and discourse analysis to examine how gendered language operates at the micro-linguistic level in *Girl*. By focusing on imperative sentences, repetition, and normative diction, this research extends previous studies by demonstrating how language itself functions as a mechanism of gender control. Through this approach, the literature review establishes a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing the relationship between language, gender, and power in literary texts.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with an interpretive orientation, as the focus of the analysis lies in understanding meaning, ideology, and power relations embedded in language. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining literary texts because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of linguistic forms that cannot be quantified. In this study, language is treated not merely as a structural system but as a social practice that reflects and constructs gender relations within a specific cultural context.

The research design of this study is descriptive qualitative, employing a feminist discourse analysis framework. Feminist discourse analysis is particularly suited to investigate how language in Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* (1978) functions as a mechanism for reinforcing patriarchal ideology and regulating women's behavior. This approach foregrounds the interrelationship

between language, gender, and power, allowing for a critical examination of how linguistic choices both reflect and sustain social hierarchies.

The data collection technique used in this study is documentation, as the primary data are obtained from the written text of *Girl* (1978). The text is carefully read, identified, and documented to collect utterances relevant to gendered language and patriarchal control. The research instrument employed in this study is a textual analysis sheet (coding table), which is used to classify and categorize linguistic features such as imperative sentences, repetition, prescriptive statements, and normative expressions. This instrument systematically guides the identification, coding, and interpretation of data to ensure analytical consistency.

By focusing on specific linguistic structures such as imperative sentences, repetition, prescriptive statements, and normative expressions, this study aims to uncover the ways in which the text constructs female identity and enforces societal expectations. Moreover, feminist discourse analysis facilitates an understanding of how seemingly mundane everyday language operates as a tool of social control, subtly shaping behavior, attitudes, and perceptions of gender roles. Through this lens, the study not only interprets the content of *Girl* but also illuminates the underlying mechanisms by which language mediates power relations, providing insight into the broader dynamics of gender, authority, and compliance within Caribbean society. Ultimately, this methodology enables a nuanced exploration of the text, bridging literary analysis with sociolinguistic inquiry.

The analysis therefore moves beyond merely identifying linguistic forms to examining their broader ideological and social implications. It considers how specific language features such as imperative statements, repetition, and prescriptive expressions function to reinforce patriarchal norms and regulate women's behavior. By linking linguistic structures to social context, the study investigates how Kincaid's text not only reflects but also actively constructs gendered expectations, shaping perceptions of female identity within Caribbean society. This approach emphasizes that language is not neutral; rather, it is a vehicle through which power relations and societal hierarchies are maintained. Consequently, the analysis seeks to uncover the subtle ways in which discourse enforces conformity, authority, and gender roles, offering insights into the intersection of language, ideology, and social control. In doing so, it bridges the gap between formal linguistic analysis and critical social interpretation, highlighting the transformative potential of feminist discourse analysis in understanding literature.

The primary data source of this study is Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978). Since this is a literary analysis, the concepts of population and sample are not applied. Instead, the text itself is treated as a complete data corpus. The units of analysis include words, phrases, clauses, and sentences that contain directives, prohibitions, advice, or moral judgments directed at the female subject. These linguistic units are examined to identify patterns of gendered language within the discourse.

Data collection was conducted through a documentation method. The text was read repeatedly to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its narrative context and linguistic structure. During this process, segments of the text containing gendered language were identified and marked. Particular attention was given to imperative constructions, repetitive sentence patterns, and lexical choices that reflect social expectations of women. These selected data were then recorded and organized for further analysis.

The data analysis process involved several stages. First, the identified linguistic units were reduced by selecting only those most relevant to the research focus. Second, the data were

categorized based on linguistic features such as sentence structure, word choice, and discourse function. Third, the categorized data were interpreted using feminist linguistic theories and discourse analysis principles to reveal how language constructs and sustains gendered power relations. This analytical process allowed for a systematic examination of both form and meaning.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, several validation strategies were employed. Theoretical triangulation was applied by interpreting the data through multiple complementary frameworks, including feminist linguistic theory and critical discourse analysis, to avoid reliance on a single theoretical perspective. Analyst triangulation was conducted through peer discussion and consultation with academic supervisors to review the coding categories and interpretations, thereby minimizing individual bias. In addition, interpretive validation was implemented by repeatedly re-reading the text and cross-checking interpretations against the broader socio-cultural context of Caribbean patriarchal society to ensure that the analysis remained contextually grounded and logically consistent with the textual evidence.

Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing the findings of the analysis in relation to the research questions. The results were interpreted to demonstrate how gendered language in *Girl* contributes to the construction and internalization of female gender identity within a patriarchal framework. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a coherent, credible, and context-sensitive explanation of how language operates as an ideological tool in literary texts.

Results

This section discusses the findings of the study by addressing the research questions concerning sentence structure, word choice, and discourse patterns that reveal gendered language in Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* (1978). The analysis demonstrates that gendered language in the text is systematically constructed through linguistic forms that function as instruments of social regulation. Rather than operating as neutral communication, language in *Girl* serves as an ideological mechanism that shapes female identity according to patriarchal norms embedded within everyday domestic discourse.

In response to the first research question, the study finds that sentence structure plays a central role in revealing gendered language. The text is dominated by imperative and prohibitive sentences delivered in a continuous monologue by the mother figure. The absence of dialogic pauses or reciprocal interaction reinforces an unequal power relationship between speaker and listener. This structure positions the daughter as a passive recipient of instruction, emphasizing obedience and submission as essential aspects of female identity. Such linguistic dominance reflects broader gender hierarchies in which authority is exercised through control of speech.

Word choice further reinforces gendered expectations placed upon women. Lexical items related to domestic work, moral behavior, and social respectability recur throughout the text, emphasizing the limited roles available to women. Instructions concerning household chores, personal conduct, and sexual propriety illustrate how female behavior is narrowly defined through language. These findings align with feminist linguistic perspectives that argue language encodes social values and restricts women's agency by normalizing specific behavioral standards.

Addressing the second research question, the analysis reveals that repetition functions as a powerful tool for controlling women's behavior and identity. Repeated directives concerning cleanliness, obedience, and reputation create a sense of inevitability and discipline. This

repetition is not merely stylistic but ideological, as it reinforces internalized surveillance over the female body and behavior. By continuously reiterating expectations, the discourse normalizes compliance and discourages resistance, illustrating how language participates in the reproduction of gender norms.

The findings also demonstrate that imperative sentences serve as mechanisms of behavioral regulation. Commands issued without justification or explanation reflect unquestioned authority and social hierarchy. These imperatives position women as subjects who must constantly regulate themselves to meet societal expectations. Feminist discourse analysis highlights that such linguistic forms contribute to the construction of femininity as disciplined, controlled, and subordinate within patriarchal culture.

In relation to the third research question, the study finds that the mother-daughter relationship is a crucial site for the internalization of patriarchal principles. The mother functions as an agent of socialization who transmits dominant gender norms through everyday language. Rather than resisting patriarchal structures, the mother reproduces them through linguistic authority. This finding supports feminist theories that argue patriarchy is sustained not only through male dominance but also through women's participation in reinforcing gender ideology within domestic spaces. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the daughter's voice is largely absent from the discourse. Her limited responses do not disrupt the flow of instruction, emphasizing her marginal position within the linguistic interaction. This absence of female voice reflects what feminist scholars describe as symbolic silencing, where women's agency is constrained through restricted opportunities for speech. Language, therefore, controls not only behavior but also the ability to articulate identity and resistance.

Finally, in addressing the fourth research question, this study demonstrates how feminist linguistic and discourse analysis contributes to literary studies by uncovering ideological dimensions embedded in language use. The findings show that close linguistic analysis reveals power relations that may be overlooked in thematic interpretations alone. By examining sentence structure, repetition, and discourse patterns, the study highlights the role of language in constructing gendered power relations in *Girl*. This reinforces the importance of linguistic approaches in understanding the intersection of language, gender, and power in literary texts.

Discussion

The findings of this study both support and extend existing theories of flirting. Traditional frameworks such as Sexual Script Theory and Gender Role Theory remain highly relevant in explaining why men and women approach flirtation differently, particularly in terms of initiation patterns, relational expectations, and the interpretation of flirtatious cues. These theories highlight how socially learned norms and gendered scripts shape individuals' communicative behavior, influencing who is expected to initiate flirtation, how interest should be expressed, and how such expressions are understood within interaction. However, within these traditional frameworks, misinterpretation in flirting is often conceptualized as a communicative failure or as a mismatch between intention and reception. Misunderstanding is typically framed as a problem to be avoided or corrected, implying that clearer or more direct communication would reduce ambiguity. Such perspectives tend to overlook the possibility that ambiguity itself may serve an important social function within flirtatious exchanges.

The present study challenges this assumption by demonstrating that misinterpretation in flirting is not accidental, but rather an expected and functional outcome of flirtatious interaction. Ambiguity allows participants to manage interpersonal risk, maintain deniability, and negotiate

relational boundaries without overt commitment. By reframing misinterpretation as a strategic and productive element of flirtation, this study extends existing theories and suggests the need to reconceptualize flirting not as a site of communicative breakdown, but as a dynamic and socially strategic form of interaction.

This research proposes that flirting operates as a strategy of managed ambiguity, in which linguistic indeterminacy is not incidental but deliberately sustained. Through ambiguous wording, indirect expressions, and context-dependent cues, speakers are able to navigate multiple interactional goals at once, including the expression of desire, the maintenance of politeness, and the management of potential social risk. In this way, ambiguity becomes a communicative resource that allows flirtation to remain open-ended and adaptable to varying responses.

Rather than seeking clarity or explicitness, flirtatious speakers intentionally maintain vagueness in order to preserve social flexibility and minimize communicative accountability. By avoiding direct statements of intent, speakers can retract, reinterpret, or reframe their utterances if the interaction does not unfold as anticipated. This strategic indeterminacy enables participants to test relational boundaries while protecting themselves from rejection, embarrassment, or social sanction.

This finding extends notion of designed ambiguity by grounding it explicitly in discourse-level linguistic analysis. The study demonstrates that ambiguity is not merely a conversational tactic employed opportunistically, but is structurally embedded within flirtatious speech acts themselves. At the level of discourse, flirtation is shown to rely on systematic patterns of indirectness and interpretive openness, reinforcing the view of flirting as a socially organized and linguistically patterned form of interaction.

Unlike prior research that primarily focuses on behavioral patterns or communicative Rather than locating meaning solely in individual intentions, this study demonstrates that language itself constitutes the primary site of meaning-making in flirtatious interaction. Flirting operates through linguistic forms that are inherently open-ended, allowing speakers and hearers to collaboratively construct meaning within the interaction. In this sense, meaning does not precede communication, but emerges through the interpretive possibilities that language makes available.

Flirtatious interaction succeeds precisely because it allows multiple interpretations to coexist simultaneously. Utterances function effectively not by conveying fixed or determinate meanings, but by remaining strategically open to interpretation. This interpretive openness enables participants to explore and negotiate intimacy, interest, and relational alignment without requiring explicit commitment, thereby sustaining the social and interactional flexibility that characterizes flirtatious communication

Furthermore, the findings reveal a persistent gendered asymmetry in the interpretation of flirtatious language. Women's utterances are more likely to be sexualized or read as indicators of sexual availability, even when they are linguistically comparable to expressions of politeness or friendliness. In contrast, men's similar utterances are more often normalized and positively framed as signs of confidence, assertiveness, or charm. This unequal pattern of interpretation demonstrates that meaning in flirtation is not produced symmetrically, but is filtered through gendered expectations that assign different social values to men's and women's speech.

This asymmetry reflects broader power relations and dominant gender ideologies embedded in everyday language use, where women's communicative actions are subject to heightened

scrutiny and sexualization. Such interpretive norms shape the outcomes of flirtatious interaction by constraining how women's intentions are understood and by granting men greater interpretive latitude. Existing theories of flirting have not sufficiently accounted for how these unequal interpretive frameworks operate at the level of discourse, nor how they systematically influence communicative outcomes. By foregrounding gendered interpretation as a central analytical concern, this study highlights the need to reconsider flirting as a site where linguistic practice, power, and gender ideology intersect.

By positioning flirting as a speech act shaped by gender performativity, this study offers a linguistically oriented framework that complements existing behavioral and psychological approaches to the study of flirtation. Rather than focusing solely on individual traits, intentions, or outcomes, this perspective foregrounds language as the primary medium through which flirtation is enacted and gendered identities are performed. In doing so, the study demonstrates how flirtatious meaning emerges through interactional practices that are socially regulated and discursively patterned.

Furthermore, this framework suggests that future research should place greater emphasis on discourse-level analysis in order to capture the dynamic processes through which flirtation is constructed, negotiated, and contested in real-life interaction. Rather than treating flirtation merely as an outcome of individual intention or psychological motivation, discourse-oriented approaches enable researchers to examine how meaning is co-constructed turn by turn, through specific linguistic choices such as teasing, compliments, humor, indirectness, mitigation, and prosodic cues. Such micro-analytic attention reveals how participants collaboratively signal romantic or playful intent while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability.

A discourse-level perspective also allows for closer examination of how ambiguity functions as a strategic resource. Flirtation often relies on layered meanings, double entendres, and implicit suggestions that can be interpreted differently depending on the interlocutors' relationship, shared knowledge, and sociocultural background. By analyzing sequential organization how one utterance responds to and reshapes the previous one researchers can uncover how flirtatious intent is ratified, resisted, escalated, or deflected in interaction. This moment-by-moment analysis is particularly important for understanding how power relations and gender norms subtly shape communicative possibilities, influencing who initiates, who reciprocates, and whose interpretations are legitimized.

In addition, extending discourse analysis to digital environments such as text messaging, social media, and dating applications would provide insight into how multimodal elements (e.g., emojis, gifs, timing of responses, punctuation, and visual cues) contribute to the construction of flirtation. Digital interaction often intensifies ambiguity while simultaneously creating new conventions for signaling interest, irony, or playfulness. Comparing offline and online contexts would therefore illuminate how technological affordances reshape the strategies and risks involved in flirtatious communication.

By moving beyond broad categorizations of motives and outcomes to the linguistic organization of interaction itself, future studies can develop a more comprehensive understanding of flirtation as a situated, strategic, and socially embedded communicative practice. Such research would not only deepen theoretical models of interpersonal communication but also contribute to discussions about consent, relational negotiation, and the ethical dimensions of romantic interaction in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Jamaica Kincaid's short story *Girl* (1978) vividly illustrates how gendered language operates as a powerful ideological mechanism in shaping and controlling female identity. Through the dominance of imperative sentences, repetition, and normative diction, language in the text functions not only to communicate instructions but also to regulate behavior and internalize patriarchal values within everyday domestic discourse. The findings demonstrate that linguistic structures actively construct expectations of obedience, discipline, and moral responsibility for women, positioning them within narrowly defined social roles. By applying feminist linguistic and discourse analysis, this study underscores the importance of examining language at the micro-linguistic level to uncover hidden power relations in literary texts. Ultimately, this research contributes to feminist linguistic and literary studies by demonstrating that language is not neutral but deeply embedded in social structures of power, and it encourages further critical investigations of gender representation through linguistic analysis in literary works. The findings of this study highlight how gendered language perpetuates patriarchal control in *Girl* (1978), offering significant implications for literary studies and discourse analysis. For literary studies, it provides a lens to interpret character development, narrative voice, and power relations through the framework of feminist critique. For discourse analysis, it demonstrates how linguistic choices encode social hierarchies, guiding scholars to critically examine gendered communication patterns in other literary texts and social contexts.

This study implies that literary language functions as a subtle mechanism of patriarchal control, shaping female identity through prescriptive discourse and internalized norms. However, the research is limited to a single short story and relies on textual analysis without comparative or empirical data. Future research should examine multiple Caribbean texts or incorporate reader-response perspectives to explore how gendered discourse is interpreted across contexts, thereby broadening understanding of language, ideology, and resistance in diverse sociocultural settings.

Acknowledgment

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