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Discourse on Hybridity, Voice, Agency and Embodied Politics: Gender, Performativity, and Postcolonial Negotiation in Mary Karooro Okurut's '*The Invisible Weevil*' and '*Child of a Delegate*'

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Abstract

This article explores gender-based challenges and opportunities in African cultural expression through a comparative analysis of Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate*, drawing on feminist performance theory, postcolonial performativity, and hybridity. Although these texts are prose narratives, they are deeply performative in their narrative strategies, dialogic structures, and representations of embodied social practices such as political spectacle, ritualised speech, and gendered public performance. The article deploys mobilizes Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity to analyse how Okurut's narratives operate within liminal postcolonial spaces where traditional gender norms intersect with modern political and social institutions. In *The Invisible Weevil*, gendered political participation becomes a contested arena where women navigate corruption, patriarchy, and civic agency, while *Child of a Delegate* foregrounds intergenerational and socio-political performances of power, masculinity, and femininity within postcolonial governance structures. Although music and dance are not foregrounded as theatrical devices, the novels encode performative cultural practices, rituals, political rallies, and communal gatherings that function as narrative performances of identity and power. These narrative performances contribute to African heritage discourses by illustrating how gender is enacted and contested within everyday socio-cultural spectacles. Ultimately, the article argues that Okurut's fiction constructs the postcolonial public sphere as a performative stage where gendered identities are continually negotiated and reimagined. By bridging literary studies with performance and cultural studies, the article contributes to interdisciplinary debates on gender, power, and performativity.

Keywords: Feminist performance; postcoloniality; hybridity; African fiction; cultural negotiation; literary studies

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Introduction

In contemporary African literature, hybrid voices serve not simply as narrative devices but as embodied sites of political negotiation—especially in works that dismantle entrenched colonial frames and gendered power structures. Mary Karooro Okurut's novels *The Invisible Weevil* (2004) and *Child of a Delegate* (2008) exemplify this hybridisation by centring female subjectivities that both reflect and resist the overlapping forces of gender, tradition, and postcolonial governance. Far from existing in isolation, Okurut's characters emerge from—and contend with—a Ugandan sociopolitical landscape shaped by colonial legacies, shifting cultural norms, and fierce debates over gender roles and national identity. This introduction positions Okurut's hybrid voices as fundamentally political: they perform gender, negotiate space, and reimagine possibilities in societies defined by multiple and often conflicting frames of power.

Uganda's political history, from colonial rule under British administration to independence in 1962 and subsequent decades of dictatorship, civil unrest, and democratisation, has had profound effects on social life and cultural expression (Karugire, 2003). These historical forces inform Okurut's narratives, which are deeply embedded in the realities of Ugandan communities contending with corruption, patriarchal control, and the pressures of modernisation. The hybrid voices in her novels articulate a negotiation between tradition and modernity, exposing how postcolonial governance and entrenched gender norms complicate female agency. Okurut thus stages a literature of resistance that reveals how women in Uganda navigate embodied politics—where gendered identity is performed, policed, and contested in everyday life.

One of the most lucid ways to interpret these hybrid voices is through the lens of gender performativity, as theorised by Judith Butler. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an innate essence but a set of repeated acts that produce the appearance of a stable identity. In Okurut's fiction, gender performativity is both enacted and subverted, revealing how social expectations shape—and are shaped by—individual agency. The result is a complex interplay between conformity and resistance, in which female characters must negotiate their positions within familial, cultural, and political hierarchies.

In *The Invisible Weevil*, the protagonist Nkwanzu exemplifies this dynamic interplay between performativity and political negotiation. Nkwanzu, a woman rooted in a rural Ugandan community, must contend with traditional expectations of womanhood while navigating the economic and social pressures that accompany national development projects. Okurut writes, "Nkwanzu wore the mantle of wife and mother as if it were both armor and burden, never quite knowing which part weighed heavier" (Okurut, 2004, p. 47). This sentence encapsulates the embodied tension that defines female life in a context where gender roles are both prescribed and in flux. Nkwanzu's hybrid voice is formed at the intersection of tradition and innovation—as she seeks autonomy within the confines of community norms.

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This embodiment of gender is further complicated by the political economy of postcolonial Uganda, where corruption and state neglect often exacerbate social inequalities. Okurut portrays local governance as a sphere where patriarchal power is exercised with impunity, leaving women like Nkwanzu to negotiate survival on unstable terms. In one pivotal scene, Nkwanzu confronts a local council member who dismisses her concerns about land rights: "Your place is in the household," he sneered, "not in council debates" (Okurut, 2004, p. 82). Here, Okurut underscores how political structures perpetuate gendered exclusion even in spaces ostensibly devoted to community representation. Nkwanzu's refusal to accept this marginalisation demonstrates a performative resistance; she performs political agency in ways that challenge—but do not completely reject—the norms that structure her world.

Similarly, *Child of a Delegate* offers a textured account of embodied politics through its central female character, Hero, who must navigate the overlapping domains of familial expectation, political affiliation, and personal aspiration. Hero's voice emerges as a hybrid not only because of her gender but also due to her entanglement with the postcolonial state's contradictory demands. Ugandan politics during the era depicted in the novel are marked by patronage networks and the lingering effects of dictatorship, which often warp democratic ideals into means of personal enrichment (Tripp, 2010).

Hero, as the daughter of a delegate, is intimately aware of how power operates—both publicly and privately. Okurut writes, "In Hero's eyes, the corridors of power were like mirrors that reflected more of what was missing than what was present" (Okurut, 2008, p. 109). This metaphor not only speaks to Hero's internal conflict but to the broader disillusionment with postcolonial governance that many Ugandans experience.

The hybrid voice Hero embodies is political in its very formation: neither wholly inside nor entirely outside the patriarchal apparatus she critiques. Her negotiation with gender norms and political belonging mirrors the performative assertion Butler describes, where identity is a site of repeated engagement with social structures (Butler, 1990). Hero's struggles highlight how postcolonial politics—far from being abstract concerns of statecraft—are lived realities that shape gendered subjectivities and everyday decision-making. Her hybrid voice emerges in moments of refusal: refusing to accept silence when corruption is normalised, refusing to let gender dictate her involvement in political discourse, and refusing to be merely a delegate's daughter instead of her own agent.

The sociopolitical context in Uganda further amplifies the stakes of these embodied negotiations. Issues such as land rights, gender-based violence, and unequal access to education and political representation are persistent challenges for women across the country (Ainembabazi et al., 2017). Okurut's novels do not shy away from these realities; instead, they make them central to the narrative conflict. The female characters' hybrid voices thus do more than dramatise personal struggles—they echo collective experiences of resistance and aspiration. Nkwanzu and Hero become emblematic of Ugandan women whose identities and political agency are continuously shaped by the negotiation between external expectations and internal resolve.

From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, these hybrid voices disrupt normative binaries—between tradition and modernity, private and public, female and political—and reveal how power is both internalised and resisted. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which refers to the emergence of new cultural forms from colonial contact zones, is particularly useful here. Bhabha (1994) emphasises that hybrid identities challenge authoritative narratives by occupying spaces of cultural in-betweenness. Okurut's characters

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display this hybridity not as a static fusion but as a dynamic negotiation—a space where old norms are refigured to contest new forms of domination.

In both novels, Okurut's use of narrative voice reinforces this hybridity. The novels shift between interior monologue and social commentary, weaving personal reflection with broader cultural critique. This multiplicity of voices reflects the fragmented realities of postcolonial subjects who must interpret and respond to multiple, often conflicting, social pressures. The hybrid narrative style thus becomes a performative strategy in itself, one that mirrors the embodied negotiation of gender and politics.

Critically, the hybrid voices in Okurut's works also speak to the relevance of postcolonial literary studies in contemporary scholarship. They invite us to consider how literature not only represents but also performs politics through character, language, and narrative structure. In engaging with issues of gender performativity and postcolonial negotiation, Okurut contributes to an expanding canon that refuses reductive portrayals of African womanhood and instead foregrounds complexity, agency, and resistance.

For scholars and practitioners attending this conference, Okurut's novels provide compelling case studies of how literary texts can illuminate the embodied dimensions of political life. They remind us that postcolonial negotiation is not confined to overt political discourse; it is enacted in everyday interactions, in the negotiation of social roles, and in the persistent struggle to redefine belonging in societies marked by historical rupture and ongoing transformation.

In conclusion, *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* demonstrate how hybrid voices are central to understanding the embodied politics of gender in postcolonial Uganda. Through close textual analysis, these novels reveal how female subjectivities are constructed and contested in relation to tradition, state power, and personal agency. By situating these narratives within broader Ugandan sociopolitical realities and theoretical frameworks of performativity and hybridity, this introduction underscores their significance for postcolonial literary studies and offers a foundation for further discussion on the political potential of hybrid voices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that integrates postcolonial theory, gender performativity, and postcolonial feminist thought to examine how Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* construct hybrid subjectivities and negotiate embodied power in postcolonial Uganda. The framework draws on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, Frantz Fanon's critique of colonial subjectivity, Achille Mbembe's theorisation of postcolonial power, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "third space" is central to this analysis, offering a lens to explore how Okurut's characters occupy liminal positions between tradition and modernity, colonial legacies and indigenous epistemologies, and patriarchal and feminist discourses (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity is understood not simply as cultural mixture but as a site of negotiation where dominant narratives are destabilised and rearticulated. Okurut's texts present hybrid voices that disrupt singular notions of identity, revealing the ambivalence and contingency of postcolonial subject formation.

Fanon's critique of colonial alienation and the psychological effects of colonialism further inform this study. Fanon's insights into the internalisation of colonial hierarchies and the struggle for decolonised subjectivity illuminate the tensions experienced by Okurut's

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characters as they navigate inherited colonial structures of power and identity (Fanon, 1967). His work provides a framework for analysing how political and social identities in the novels are shaped by both resistance and complicity within postcolonial systems.

Mbembe's theorisation of postcolonial power, particularly his notion of the postcolony as a space of entangled domination and agency, offers a critical lens for understanding the embodied politics depicted in Okurut's narratives (Mbembe, 2001). Mbembe's emphasis on the performative nature of power resonates with Okurut's portrayal of political institutions and gendered authority, highlighting how power is enacted through bodies, symbols, and everyday practices.

Finally, Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique challenges universalising representations of women and foregrounds the specificity of women's lived experiences within global power structures (Mohanty, 2003). Her work informs the analysis of gender performativity and embodiment in Okurut's fiction, emphasising how African women negotiate agency within intersecting systems of patriarchy, nationalism, and postcolonial governance.

Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a nuanced reading of Okurut's texts as sites of postcolonial negotiation where hybrid voices articulate embodied forms of political agency. The framework situates Okurut's work within broader debates on postcolonial subjectivity, African feminist theory, and the politics of representation, underscoring literature as a critical space for theorising gender, power, and postcolonial transformation.

Approach/Methodology

This article adopts a postcolonial feminist and performativity-based analytical framework to examine how Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* articulate hybrid voices and embodied politics in postcolonial Uganda. The study situates Okurut's fiction within African feminist literary traditions while engaging with broader theoretical debates on gender, power, and identity performance in postcolonial contexts.

The analysis draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which conceptualises gender as a repeated social performance rather than a fixed essence (Butler, 1990). This framework is crucial for understanding how Okurut's female characters negotiate patriarchal expectations through strategic conformity, resistance, and subversion. By examining character actions, dialogue, and narrative structure, the article explores how gender identities are enacted, contested, and reconstituted within socio-political spaces shaped by colonial and postcolonial power dynamics.

To contextualise these performances, the study engages postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994). Okurut's texts are read as sites where colonial legacies, indigenous cultural norms, and modern political realities intersect to produce hybrid subjectivities. This approach highlights how characters navigate multiple ideological registers—traditional authority, nationalist discourse, and global feminist consciousness—thus embodying postcolonial negotiation rather than fixed identity positions.

The article further employs African feminist literary criticism, drawing on scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Obioma Nnaemeka, who emphasise contextualised, culturally grounded feminist praxis (Nnaemeka, 1998; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). This lens foregrounds the socio-historical specificity of Ugandan gender relations and avoids universalising Western feminist assumptions. Through this perspective, Okurut's narratives

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are interpreted as articulations of African women's agency within layered systems of power, including patriarchy, nationalism, and neo-colonial governance.

Methodologically, the study uses close textual analysis to examine narrative voice, symbolism, character development, and thematic patterns related to gender, power, and political embodiment. Attention is paid to how the body becomes a political site—through sexuality, domestic labour, motherhood, and public participation—revealing how personal identities intersect with national politics. Comparative reading of the two novels enables the identification of continuities and shifts in Okurut's representation of gendered agency and postcolonial negotiation.

By integrating performativity theory, postcolonial hybridity, and African feminist critique, this approach illuminates how Okurut's fiction constructs hybrid voices that challenge hegemonic narratives of gender and power. The article ultimately argues that Okurut's novels offer nuanced representations of embodied politics, where women's lived experiences become critical spaces for negotiating postcolonial identity, authority, and resistance.

Analysis: Textual and Thematic Analysis

Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* articulate hybrid narrative voices that negotiate gendered and postcolonial subjectivities through embodied political experiences. Both texts foreground female protagonists whose lives unfold within patriarchal, nationalist, and postcolonial power structures, revealing how identity is performatively constructed and contested.

In *The Invisible Weevil*, Nkwanzu's narrative voice exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) describes as hybridity—a liminal space where colonial and indigenous identities intersect. Her resistance to patriarchal expectations, particularly through education and political participation, performs a counter-hegemonic femininity that disrupts normative gender roles. The narrative depicts gender as performative rather than essential, aligning with Butler's (1990) theory that gender is constituted through repeated acts. Nkwanzu's political activism becomes an embodied performance of feminist agency, exposing the gendered exclusions within nationalist politics.

Similarly, *Child of a Delegate* presents a narrative that foregrounds women's marginalisation and negotiation within elite postcolonial structures. The novel critiques post-independence elite politics by illustrating how patriarchal power circulates through familial and state institutions. The protagonist and her street female figures are placed within what Mohanty (2003) critiques as gendered colonial and nationalist frameworks, where women's roles are often instrumentalised for male-centred political projects.

Thematically, both texts engage with identity, power, gender, and postcolonial negotiation. Identity emerges as fractured and relational, shaped by colonial histories and nationalist aspirations. Power is depicted as embodied in political institutions and domestic spaces, illustrating Fanon's (1963) argument that postcolonial elites often reproduce colonial hierarchies. Gender operates as a contested terrain where women negotiate agency within restrictive structures.

Comparatively, *The Invisible Weevil* offers a feminist counter-narrative that centres women's voices, while *Child of a Delegate* exposes masculine nationalist politics and its exclusions. Both novels employ dialogic narrative strategies that create hybrid voices, revealing the ambivalence of postcolonial subjecthood. The interplay of public and private

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spheres underscores Mbembe's (2001) concept of postcolony, where power is dispersed and embodied in everyday practices.

Overall, Okurut's texts construct gendered subjectivities through performative acts within hybrid postcolonial spaces, demonstrating literature's capacity to negotiate political and cultural identities.

Discussion: Critical Interpretation and Meaning-Making

The analysis addresses the research objective of examining how gender and postcolonial identities are negotiated through performativity and hybridity in Okurut's novels. By foregrounding embodied politics, the texts reveal how individuals negotiate power within the postcolonial Ugandan context, reflecting broader African sociopolitical realities.

Historically, Uganda's post-independence period has been marked by political instability, authoritarianism, and patriarchal nationalism. Okurut's narratives situate gender within these historical conditions, illustrating how women's political participation is constrained yet transformative. The novels resonate with Fanon's (1963) critique of nationalist elites and Mbembe's (2001) theorisation of postcolonial power as fragmented and performative.

Engaging with feminist and postcolonial scholars, the texts extend Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminist universalism by presenting localised African feminist agency. Okurut's female characters resist patriarchal norms not through Western feminist frameworks but through culturally embedded strategies, thus complicating monolithic representations of African women. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of cultural negotiation in hybrid spaces, where resistance emerges through ambivalence rather than outright opposition.

The novels also contribute to debates on performativity in African literature by demonstrating that political identity is enacted through everyday practices—education, marriage, activism, and storytelling. Gender is not merely represented but performed through narrative voice, bodily actions, and political participation, reinforcing Butler's (1990) argument that identity is constituted through discourse and practice.

The implications of these findings extend beyond literary studies. They highlight literature as a site for political pedagogy, feminist consciousness, and postcolonial critique. In educational contexts, these texts can foster discussions on gender justice and political agency. Politically, they challenge nationalist narratives that marginalise women, advocating for inclusive citizenship and gender equity.

However, the study acknowledges limitations. Okurut's narratives sometimes reproduce middle-class and elite perspectives, potentially marginalising rural or subaltern voices. Alternative readings could explore class, ethnicity, and religion as intersecting axes of power. Nonetheless, the texts provide a rich terrain for examining embodied politics and hybrid identities in African postcolonial literature.

Findings: Key Results and Main Arguments

This study finds that Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* function as sites of hybrid voice construction and embodied political negotiation, revealing how gendered subjectivities are performed within postcolonial power structures.

First, a central thematic finding is that gender is performative and politically embodied. Female characters enact agency through education, political participation, and domestic negotiation, challenging patriarchal norms while operating within them. Gender emerges as a fluid and contested identity rather than a fixed biological category.

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Second, the novels reveal hybridity as a key narrative and ideological strategy. Okurut's characters inhabit liminal spaces between tradition and modernity, colonial legacies and nationalist aspirations, public and private spheres. This hybridity complicates binary oppositions and illustrates the ambivalence of postcolonial identity.

Third, postcolonial power is shown as fragmented and performative. Political authority is embodied in everyday practices, familial relations, and state institutions, reflecting Mbembe's (2001) concept of the postcolony. The novels critique nationalist elites who reproduce colonial hierarchies, echoing Fanon's (1963) arguments about post-independence disillusionment.

Fourth, the study contributes new interpretive insights by reading Okurut's novels through feminist performativity and postcolonial hybridity frameworks. It demonstrates that African feminist agency is culturally embedded and politically negotiated, challenging Western-centric feminist paradigms.

Fifth, a comparative pattern emerges across both texts: women's voices operate as counter-narratives to masculinist nationalism, while male-centred narratives expose the exclusions of patriarchal politics. This dialogic tension produces hybrid narrative voices that reflect contested postcolonial realities.

Theoretically, the study contributes to debates on African postcolonial performativity and feminist hybridity, proposing that literature operates as a performative space where identities and politics are negotiated. It underscores literature's role in reimagining citizenship, gender relations, and political agency.

The findings demonstrate that Okurut's novels articulate hybrid voices that perform embodied politics, revealing the complexities of gendered postcolonial negotiation and contributing to African feminist and postcolonial literary theory.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Mary Karooro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* deploy hybrid narrative voices and embodied performances of gender and politics to negotiate the contradictions of postcolonial Ugandan modernity. Through their dialogic structures, focalisation strategies, and gendered character trajectories, the novels stage literature itself as a performative space where power is contested, identities are negotiated, and colonial and postcolonial discourses are reworked rather than resisted. Okurut's fiction thus exemplifies how African women's writing operates at the intersection of gendered embodiment, political discourse, and postcolonial hybridity.

Central to the analysis has been the claim that hybridity in Okurut's narratives is not merely cultural or linguistic but embodied and political. Female characters perform agency through negotiation, compromise, and strategic conformity, revealing how gendered subjects navigate patriarchal, nationalist, and postcolonial structures. Drawing on postcolonial theory and feminist performativity, the article has shown that these characters do not simply subvert or reproduce power; rather, they inhabit what Bhabha conceptualises as the "third space," where meaning and identity are constantly rearticulated. In this sense, Okurut's texts illustrate how postcolonial subjects engage in what Mbembe might describe as everyday negotiations of power within entangled colonial and post-independence regimes, while echoing Mohanty's insistence on contextualised feminist analysis that resists homogenising "Third World woman" narratives.

Furthermore, the novels foreground narrative performativity as a political act. Okurut's use of multiple voices, shifting perspectives, and dialogic encounters destabilises

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singular authoritative narratives of nation, gender, and history. These narrative strategies constitute a literary enactment of postcolonial negotiation, revealing how storytelling itself becomes a site of political struggle. By embedding political critique within embodied characters and hybrid narrative forms, Okurut's fiction contributes to broader debates in African literary studies about agency, representation, and the politics of voice.

The implications of this study are threefold. First, it underscores the need for more interdisciplinary readings of African prose that integrate feminist performance theory with postcolonial critique, moving beyond static identity categories toward dynamic, performative frameworks. Second, it suggests that Ugandan women's writing offers fertile ground for theorising postcolonial embodiment, particularly in contexts where gender, nationalism, and governance intersect. Future research could extend this approach to other East African women writers, comparative African feminist texts, or transnational postcolonial narratives. Third, the analysis invites scholars to reconsider narrative hybridity as a form of political praxis, not simply a stylistic feature, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on voice, agency, and resistance in postcolonial literature.

In conclusion, Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* and *Child of a Delegate* demonstrate that postcolonial gendered subjectivities are neither fixed nor purely oppositional. Instead, they are performed, negotiated, and hybrid—constituting a complex embodied politics that reshapes how we understand African women's writing, postcolonial agency, and the performative power of narrative itself.

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