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**A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CORRUPTION AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE IN
TEJU COLE'S *EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF***

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Abstract

This study adopted a critical discourse analysis approach to examine the culture of corruption in Nigeria. Specifically, it analysed the discursive representation of systemic corruption in Nigerian society as portrayed in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*. Set in Lagos, the novel illustrates how corruption is embedded in, and perpetuated through the naturalised everyday discourse of members of society. Purposive sampling was employed to select relevant textual data from the novel for analysis. The data were analysed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings revealed that language functions both as a tool for sustaining, and for challenging the normalisation of oppression and social inequality in Nigeria. They further demonstrate the author's deliberate use of lexical choices, transitivity patterns, and metaphor to construct the (de)legitimation of social actors within the discourse of corruption. The critical discourse analysis also shows that the narrative serves as a vehicle through which the author interrogates power relations among citizens, particularly in relation to corrupt practices. The dominant discursive strategies identified include metaphorisation, the normalisation of corruption, the categorisation, and the polarisation of social actors. These linguistic and discursive strategies suggest that public attitudes towards corruption in Nigeria have become increasingly passive rather than confrontational, with corruption being culturally normalised rather than actively resisted. The study therefore argues that the struggle for survival and access to resources within a corrupt society contributes to the (re)production of unequal power relations among citizens.

Key Words: Corruption, Critical discourse analysis, *Every Day Is for the Thief*

Introduction

The notion of corruption refers to the informal or illegal use of formally allocated resources by individuals for private gain. It remains one of the greatest impediments to good governance, economic growth, and sustainable development, particularly in developing countries (Salihi, 2022). Recognising its far-reaching consequences, the United Nations identified the fight against corruption as a key target of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which seeks to promote peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

Existing scholarship (e.g., Enakhimion, 2011) suggests that corruption in Nigeria extends beyond the activities of political elites, public office holders, and other powerful actors. Rather, it has become a pervasive social phenomenon that permeates virtually every sector of society. To underscore its systemic nature, Nigeria's former Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, described corruption in the country as "grand". His characterisation implies that corruption has become deeply institutionalised within Nigeria's political, economic, and socio-cultural structures. This assessment is further reflected in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, which ranks Nigeria 142nd out of 182 countries, indicating persistent concerns about the country's corruption profile.

The pervasive nature of corruption in Nigeria has attracted scholarly attention from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including social semiotics (Adeoti, 2023), sociolinguistics (Oboko, 2023; Patrick & Osondu, 2026), and lexical semantics (Okenmuo & Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2025). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the literary representation of corruption in Nigeria's urban environment through the analytical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Such an investigation is particularly significant because corruption has been closely associated with the reproduction of social and economic inequalities, with an estimated 139 million Nigerians living in abject poverty (Achimugu, 2025). Examining literary representations of corruption can therefore provide valuable insights into how language both reflects and reinforces unequal power relations within the Nigerian society.

Against this background, this study adopts a critical discourse approach to Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* to uncover the author's strategic representation of corruption as a naturalised discursive practice in the city of Lagos. Specifically, the study seeks to: (i) identify the discourse forms employed in portraying systemic corruption in Lagos; (ii) critically examine the discourse strategies through which power relations are constructed and negotiated within a corrupt society; and (iii) investigate the relationship between corruption and the socio-political environment of Lagos, Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

This section is concerned with the review of concepts relevant to the topic under study, theoretical approaches, as well as the empirical review.

Corruption as a Discourse

Discourse is generally understood as "language in use." However, Taylor (2013) argues that the concept extends beyond language itself to encompass language users, institutional contexts, and the broader social practices within which communication occurs. Consequently, scholars

conceptualise discourse from different perspectives, ranging from a linguistic standpoint, discourse (e.g. Stubbs, 1983; Cook, 2001) to discourse as a system of representation (e.g. Gee (1999; van Dijk, 2000). The latter conception of discourse aligns with the social constructionist perspective, which holds that language is not merely a neutral medium for describing reality but a resource through which knowledge, identities, and social realities are constructed (Galbin, 2014).

Like other social phenomena, corruption is discursively constructed. That is, corrupt practices are represented, produced, and reproduced through language, and embedded within broader systems of social practice and power (Paltridge, 2012). Corruption is therefore neither fixed nor value-neutral; rather, its meanings, manifestations, and social acceptance vary across socio-cultural and political contexts. Consequently, Kamalu and Anasiudu (2023) have examined the discursive construction of corruption in Nigerian public and political discourse. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory and cultural linguistics, the study revealed that print media reporters explore metaphorical frames such as enmity, war, disease and conflict when reporting cases of corruption involving powerful social actors in Nigeria. Building on this existing scholarship, the present study investigates how discourse constructs, legitimises, delegitimises, and naturalises corruption in Lagos, Nigeria. Specifically, it examines how citizens discursively articulate, normalise, negotiate, and occasionally challenge corruption in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

Critical Discourse Analysis, Power and Ideology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the relationship between language, power, and ideology. It is founded on the premise that discourse is not a neutral medium of communication but is shaped by social, political, and ideological processes (Fairclough, 2010). Consequently, CDA emphasises the importance of the social context of language use, and conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice through which meanings, identities, and power relations are produced and reproduced. From this perspective, discourse is viewed as dialectical: language both shapes society and is simultaneously shaped by the social structures and institutions within which it operates.

According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001), the primary concern of CDA is the investigation of both opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as they are manifested in language. As an interdisciplinary field, CDA draws on theoretical and methodological insights from linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and political science to explain the relationship between discourse and society. Rather than relying on a single unified theory, CDA integrates conceptual tools from diverse traditions depending on the research problem being investigated. Thus, scholars frequently draw on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as well as the social and critical theories of Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser.

Within CDA, different analytical approaches have emerged to address specific research concerns. Fairclough's (2003) socio-cultural approach, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (2009), and Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) approach. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is relevant to this study because it helps to connect corruption as a micro level social phenomenon to the macro level of mental processing of text. In this way, analysis is able to unveil shared group beliefs, cultural values and perception of corruption in Nigeria.

Socially shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape the ways groups understand and interpret the world are crucial to CDA. CDA proponents posit that ideology functions as a mechanism for legitimising or delegitimising social actors, sustaining unequal power relations, and reproducing structures of dominance. In the present study, these concepts provide the analytical framework for examining how corruption is discursively constructed, normalised, and contested in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

CDA and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Researchers in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) widely acknowledge the significance of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) for the critical analysis of situated language use. SFL is a functional theory of language that explains how linguistic choices are shaped by, and serve, the social contexts in which they occur (Eggins, 2004). Rather than viewing language as an autonomous system of rules, SFL conceptualises it as a social semiotic resource through which speakers and writers construct meaning in specific communicative situations. A central tenet of SFL is that every text simultaneously realises the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language. Within Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), these metafunctions are principally realised through the systems of transitivity, mood, and theme, respectively. Thus, transitivity reveals how experiences, participants, and processes are represented; mood encodes interpersonal relations and speaker attitudes; while theme organises information flow within the text.

Young and Harrison (2004) identify three important points of convergence between SFL and CDA. First, both approaches conceptualise language as a social construct rather than a neutral vehicle for communication. Second, they share a dialectical understanding of language and society, whereby discourse both shapes and is shaped by the social contexts in which it is produced. Third, they recognise that meaning is historically and culturally situated and therefore cannot be adequately understood outside its broader socio-cultural context.

Fairclough (1995) argues that these shared assumptions make SFL particularly valuable for Critical Discourse Analysis because it provides systematic linguistic tools for explaining how ideology and power are embedded in textual choices. Beyond identifying what is explicitly represented in a text, SFL also enables analysts to examine what is omitted, backgrounded, or suppressed, thereby revealing the ideological assumptions that underpin discourse. This study therefore drew on the ideational and interpersonal aspects of SFL an appropriate linguistic framework for investigating how corruption, power, and social inequality are discursively represented in *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

Empirical Review

The pervasive nature of corruption has made it a major subject of scholarly inquiry across disciplines, including linguistics, discourse studies, media studies, and literary criticism. Existing studies (e.g., Ariyo et al., 2017; Ejabena & Akpati, 2021; Nwachukwu & Waheed, 2023) demonstrate sustained scholarly interest in the satirical and discursive representation of corruption in Nigeria.

Within media discourse, Ariyo (2017) conducted a multimodal analysis of selected political cartoons published in *TELL* magazine. Analysing four cartoons, the study demonstrated that the

integration of visual and verbal resources enabled cartoonists to comment on politically sensitive issues of corruption within Nigeria's democratic space. Similarly, Oluremi (2019) examined the pragmeme of humour in six political cartoons produced during the administration of Muhammadu Buhari. Focusing on the alleged 2016 budget-padding scandal involving the House of Representatives, the study found that humour functioned as a satirical device for exposing corruption and critiquing unfulfilled campaign promises. Likewise, Ifechukwu and Nwachukwu (2021) analysed fifty political cartoons produced between 2015 and 2018 using van Leeuwen's (2006) Social Semiotics and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. Their findings showed that multimodal resources effectively represented the pervasive nature of corruption within Nigeria's democratic environment.

The theme of corruption has equally attracted considerable attention in African literary scholarship. Chinaka (2020), for example, compared the representation of corruption in Festus Iyayi's *The Contract* and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's *Corruption Is Dangerous*. The study observed that characters in both fictional and non-fictional narratives exhibited similar patterns of vulnerability to, and participation in, corrupt practices. Consequently, it recommended stronger political commitment towards combating corruption in Nigeria. Das (2022) examined corruption in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* from a postcolonial perspective. The study argued that colonialism and Western influence contributed to the moral decline of the African elite and suggested that Achebe's portrayal of Obi Okonkwo as a corrupt civil servant reinforces postcolonial anxieties surrounding identity and social decline. In contrast, Okeogu et al. (2020), in their analysis of Achebe's *A Man of the People*, argued that the representation of the corrupt politician, Chief Nanga, serves not to reinforce stereotypes but to awaken readers' political consciousness by exposing the contradictions generated by African leaders' relentless pursuit of power and wealth.

Similarly, Ozoh (2020) examined corruption in Ikechukwu Asika's *Pimples on Wrinkles* using the Marxist theoretical framework. The study found that political leaders were portrayed as self-serving and exploitative, with the character of Mr Azubuike, the Commissioner for Works, representing the greed and abuse of public office that characterise Nigeria's political class. It concluded that sustained public resistance to corruption remains essential for restoring social justice and accountability. While these studies present literary authors' preoccupation with the theme of corruption, there remains a need for a critical discourse investigation of citizens' discursive normalisation of corruption, particularly as expressed in literary texts. The present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the linguistic and discursive features of the discourse of corruption in *Every Day Is for the Thief*.

Some scholarship on Teju Cole's fiction has examined his representation of urban modernity and postcolonial identity. Villamarín-Freire (2025) analysed *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief* from a transmodern perspective, arguing that Cole employs an unnamed narrator to explore the complexities of urban existence, corruption, and moral decline in Lagos. The study concludes that *Every Day Is for the Thief* provides important insights into the experiences of individuals negotiating multiple identities within an increasingly globalised world. Likewise, Thacker (2025) interprets *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief* as contemporary reconfigurations of literary modernism. According to the study, Cole successfully adapts the conventions of Anglo-European modernism to the realities of postcolonial African cities by foregrounding alienation, corruption, colonial legacies, and the contradictions of globalisation.

The present study shares similar concern of previous scholarship on the portrayal of corruption in African fiction. However, it departs from existing studies in both theoretical orientation and analytical focus. Whereas studies such as Das (2022), Okeogu et al. (2020), Villamarín-Freire (2025), and Thacker (2025) examine corruption primarily through postcolonial or modernist frameworks, the present study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate corruption as a discursive practice in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*. Rather than treating corruption solely as a thematic concern, the study examines how linguistic choices, discursive strategies, and ideological representations construct, legitimise, and normalise corruption within the novel's depiction of everyday life in Lagos. By integrating Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics with van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA, the study demonstrates how language functions as a medium through which power relations and ideological assumptions underlying everyday corruption are produced, negotiated, and contested.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to critically examine corruption as a discursive practice. *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007) by Teju Cole was purposively selected because of its vivid portrayal of systemic corruption in Lagos, Nigeria. The novel depicts extortion by law enforcement agents, bribery, and other forms of corruption that are discursively enacted and sustained in everyday interactions among Nigerian citizens. This makes the text particularly suitable for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The data comprised seventeen (17) purposively selected excerpts that illustrate how discourse constructs and legitimises dominance and unequal power relations within the context of corruption.

The analysis adopted both macro- and micro-level approaches, drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. Accordingly, the data were analysed at three interrelated levels: textual analysis, cognitive analysis, and social-context analysis. Textual analysis focused on lexical choices, syntactic structures, and rhetorical devices. Cognitive analysis examined the underlying mental representations, including ideologies, stereotypes, beliefs, and shared knowledge that shape the production and interpretation of discourse. Social-context analysis related the discursive representations in the novel to the broader socio-political realities of Nigeria. These interrelated levels of analysis align with van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory which posits that the relationship between discourse and society is mediated by individuals' mental models and socially shared cognitions. For ease of reference, the selected data extracts are labelled Extract 1, Extract 2, Extract 3, and so forth.

Analysis and Discussion

In analysing the text, this study employed insights from Halliday's ideational and interpersonal metafunctions and van Dijk's (2000) ideological square as the analytical framework for examining ingroup and outgroup representations. According to van Dijk, discourse structures at both the lexical and syntactic levels may implicitly reflect underlying ideologies. Guided by this perspective, the analysis focused on lexical choice, transitivity, metaphorisation, and the discursive strategies of normalisation, categorisation, and polarisation as the principal linguistic/discursive resources through which the novel represents and legitimises unequal power relations in the discourse of corruption among Nigerian citizens.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis involves word choices and transitivity analysis.

Word Choices

The lexical choices of the social actors in *Every Day Is for the Thief* reflect their mental models and perceptions of corruption. These choices also reveal the ideological positions and attitudes of the social groups to which they belong with respect to corrupt practices in Nigeria.

Extract 1

Pastor Olakunle owns several **Mercedes-Benz** cars. It is not clear if he is living as victoriously as Pastor Michael, who, as is well known, owns both a **Rolls-Royce** and a **Lear-jet**, praise the Lord.

Extract 2

"Most of the customers are young men with a certain look: close-cropped hair, **lean faces**. They are dressed in short-sleeved shirts, and all of them are over twenty and under forty.

Extract 3

When we get to the car, a **thin** woman in **tattered** *buba* and *iro* approaches us and says she wants some money for transportation to get home. I don't see her approach, actually; she is just suddenly there, in front of me. She is **small** and looks **ill**.

Extracts 1 - 3 illustrate how the author ideationally constructs citizens' access to power and resources through binary oppositions. Specifically, the author employs nouns such as **Mercedes-Benz**, **Rolls-Royce**, and **Learjet** as naming strategies to portray religious leaders as wealthy, influential, and materially privileged. In contrast, adjectives such as **lean**, **thin**, **tattered**, **small**, and **ill**, alongside numerical expressions such as **twenty** and **forty**, are used to depict the deprivation and concealed suffering of ordinary citizens. This deliberate pattern of lexical choice implicitly constructs Nigerian society as both economically and morally dysfunctional, while presenting poverty as a major factor driving the masses' struggle for survival through unethical means. This finding corroborates Oyebanji and Omale's (2025) observation that poverty constitutes a significant driver of corruption in Nigeria.

Extract 4

Aunty Folake explains what is going on. Policemen routinely stop drivers of commercial vehicles at this spot to demand a bribe. The officer being told off has drifted too close to his colleague's **domain**. Such clustering is bad for **business**; drivers get angry if they are charged twice.

Extract 5

His refusal to take bribes was affecting his colleagues' **earnings** and, by extension, their ability to provide for their families; he had to be sent somewhere where he would be less of a **nuisance**.

Furthermore, social actors' lexical choices demonstrate how corrupt practices are both legitimised and delegitimised through euphemistic and discriminatory language. Extracts 4 and 5 illustrate how corruption is discursively normalised through lexicalisation. For instance, bribery is euphemistically represented as **business** and **earnings**, while the noun phrase **a nuisance** is used to delegitimise individuals who resist or challenge corrupt practices. These lexical choices construct bribery as an acceptable means of livelihood and portray opposition to corruption as socially undesirable.

Extract 6

Those people have suffered. All that oil wealth, and they don't see a penny of it. Nigeria has been **rough** on them. Ken Saro-Wiwa **hanged**, all the military **repression**, the ongoing environmental **damage**. *Awon ko l'o m'an je'yan ni?* Aren't they the ones who eat people?

The influence of ethnicity on social justice is demonstrated in Extract 6. The narrator employs the material process verb **hanged**, the adjectives **rough** and the nouns **damage**, **repression** to represent government's exploitation and domination of people from Nigeria's South-South region. These lexical choices evoke mental models of violence, oppression, and the systematic suppression of dissent against state exploitation. In contrast, Uncle Bello's discriminatory discourse backgrounds the victimisation of the South-South people and instead constructs them as a threat to other citizens. His Yoruba interrogative, *Àwọn kọ l'ó maań jẹ ènìyàn ní?* ("Aren't they the ones who eat people?"), shifts responsibility away from the government by attributing negative and dehumanising characteristics to the South-South people. This discursive strategy constructs an ideology of cultural superiority that implicitly legitimizes the exploitation and marginalisation of the region.

Transitivity Analysis

The author's structuring of clauses in *Every Day Is for the Thief* reveals how citizens strategically deploy language to assert power, legitimise actions, or challenge existing relations of dominance. In this context, authority and forcefulness refer to the extent to which social actors explicitly express their positions, justify their actions, or resist corruption through the deliberate encoding of agency and power relations in discourse. This is demonstrated in extracts 7- 9, which present interactions between Nigerian citizens and a government official at the Nigerian Consulate in the United States.

Extract 7

The **website assures** applicants that passport processing takes only a week. It should, normally. But it **doesn't**. Or I should say, it does, but only if you pay the fee for "**expediting**" it. There's nothing about that on the website. Of course not. But that's what I did, **what I had to do**. And I got mine in a week. Of course, the expediting fee is **unofficial**. They are **crooks**, you see, these people.

Extract 8

One man **begs audibly** when he is told to come back at three to pick up his passport: - Abdul, I have a flight at five, **please** now. Abdul **looks** at the ticket with **showy reluctance** and, **exasperated, speaks** in **low tones** into the microphone

Extract 9

I **leave** the building for the second time that morning, to **go** and **buy** another money order. I **walk quickly**, and am **exhausted** by the time I return at a quarter to twelve, fifteen minutes before the closing of the window. This time, I don't take a number. I **barge** my way to the window and **submit** my form with the required fees. Abdul **tells** me to pick my passport up in a week. He **gives** me a receipt only for the original fee. I **take** it **mutely**, fold it up, and put it in my pocket.

In the extracts above, the author's ideological representation of corruption as an entrenched culture among Nigerians is constructed through the roles assigned to social actors within the interactions at the Consulate. In Extract 7, the notion of efficient service provision is restricted to the domain of technology, where the website is assigned the role of Sayer in the clause "The website assures". This representation is contrasted by the adversative conjunction 'but', which introduces a contradiction between the promise of efficient service delivery and the lived reality of citizens seeking to process their Nigerian passports. The contrast suggests that efficiency exists only at the level of technological systems, while government officials fail to provide corresponding institutional support.

Conversely, Abdul's control over Nigerians who visit the Consulate for passport issuance or renewal is constructed in Extract 8 through deliberate linguistic choices. The behavioural process verb **look** represents his physical action of directing attention towards the ticketing system, while the adjective **showy**, the mental process verb **exasperated**, and the noun **reluctance** construct his unwillingness to perform his official duties without financial inducement. His dominance is further realised through the verbal process verbs **speak** and **tell**, the material process verb **give**, and the adjective **low**, which portray him as exercising authority in a calm and commanding manner, seemingly indifferent to the desperate appeals of fellow Nigerians seeking assistance at the Consulate. This representation is sharply contrasted with the linguistic resources used to construct the helplessness of the other citizens. They are represented through the verbal process verb **beg**; material process verbs such as **leave, go, buy, walk, submit, barge**, and **take**; the mental process adjective **exhausted**; and the adverb **mutely**. These linguistic choices construct a clear asymmetry of power between Abdul and the other Nigerians. They further reveal how citizens are compelled to comply with dominant actors within unequal power relations, resulting in their marginalisation, silencing, and diminished capacity to resist oppressive structures.

Every Day Is for the Thief also presents the idea that, within a corrupt society, marginalised groups can reproduce the very forms of oppression that affect them. This form of domination is described as internalised oppression, a psychological condition in which members of a

disadvantaged social group absorb and adopt prevailing prejudices about their class, race, gender, or social identity as a result of prolonged exposure to discrimination. Consequently, they may redirect their frustrations towards members of their own social group and, in doing so, assume the role of oppressors (William, 2012). This manifestation of internalised oppression is demonstrated through the structuring of clauses and the representation of social actors in extracts 10 -11 below.

Extract 10

The three of them **look** in our direction and start **moving** past the men who have gone to meet them. When we are within earshot they stop and one of them **raises** his voice: - *Eyin ti l'owo, awa naa gbodo l'owo*. You have become wealthy and we must become wealthy too. Area boys. Unemployed youth in Lagos neighborhoods, **notorious** for **exacting** fines and **seizing** goods. They **operate** in gangs and **report** to a **godfather**. The city is **full** of them, and no laws of the land or of human decency apply to them. It is also well known that, at intervals, the police **murder** numbers of them and **deposit** their bodies in the lagoon.

Extract 11

The boy is eleven, but he has **eaten poorly** all his life and looks much younger. He is crying. He is trying to explain something. Someone told me to do it, he **says**, that man over there. He points. It's futile. A **wiry** man steps forward and slaps him hard. It's not a bag, it turns out; **it's a baby he's accused of stealing**. The boy's clothes are **torn off**, he is **knocked** down repeatedly. A gaggle of schoolgirls, in green-and-white uniforms, has joined the spectators. And a new twist: in the crowd, there stands a man with a digital camcorder. The single eye of his machine collects the event: this **fragile** body, which, shed of clothes, is now like a dark sapling whipped about in the wind. The tire is flung around the boy.

Pronominal 'we' and 'they' used in Extract 10 polarises the social actors into ingroup and out group. The behavioural process verb 'look' and the material process verb 'moving' present the Area boys as powerful social actors. The verb phrase 'start moving past' suggests that the Area boys considered the drivers as inferior. In the sentence 'one of them **raises** his voice', the material process verb 'raises' also suggests that the Area boys control access to discourse. Other material process verbs 'exacting', 'seizing', 'operate' depict the Area boys as a dominating force who oppress other citizens through aggression. The verbal process verb 'report' signals a hierarchical order in the power structure of illegal activities in Lagos. It further projects the Area Boys as tools in the hands of criminal leaders. The relational process verb 'become' in the Yoruba expression: *Eyin ti l'owo, awa naa gbodo l'owo* (You have become wealthy and we must become wealthy too), reflects the desperation of the marginalised group to resist class stratification, and access state resources through the subjugation of ingroup members. Conversely, the material process verbs 'murder', 'deposit' construct the Area Boys as victims of law enforcement agents' extra judicial killing activities.

In extract 11, dominance is enacted in form of 'individual versus group' oppression, reminiscent of the lynching of Piggy in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The author deployed material, relational, mental and verbal process verbs to activate the mental models of bestiality and victimhood. Material process verb is deliberately used in form of passivation to demonstrate the challenge of assigning responsibility to anyone in a mass action. Therefore, the fragments: 'the

boy's clothes are **torn off**', 'he is **knocked** down repeatedly', 'the tire is **flung** around the boy' background agency. Conversely, the boy is depicted as a victim of a dysfunctional society, a target of societal violence. His emotional distress is portrayed through the behavioural process verbs 'crying', 'trying'. His attempt to shift the blame of stealing to an unidentified person in the crowd is stopped by a man who is also represented as a victim of an asymmetrical societal power relation. The man is described as **wiry** (a sign of malnourishment). The material process verbs 'steps' and 'slaps' however, depict him as an oppressor who silences the voice of a fellow marginalised citizen. Furthermore, the metaphor of nature: 'a dark sapling whipped about in the wind' is deployed to project the negative impact of mob violence on human life. The loss of the sense of humanity in a dysfunctional society is also captured through the text producer's deliberate naming of the onlookers as 'school girls', and 'a man with a digital camcorder'.

Discursive Construction of the Culture of Corruption

This is considered under Metaphorisation, Normalisation of Corruption and Polarisation

Metaphorisation

The use of metaphor in *Every Day Is for the Thief* demonstrates how the text producer employs figurative language not only as a linguistic resource but also as a discursive strategy for constructing social reality and shaping readers' perceptions of power relations between marginalised citizens and powerful social actors. This is evident in extracts 12, where metaphors of light, food, and predation are deployed to represent the vulnerability and powerlessness of citizens within a corrupt Lagos environment.

Extract 12

A wick, nameless, snuffed. And what if he was only eleven? A thief is a thief; his master will find another boy, another one without a name. **The market has seen everything. It must eat.** It does not break its habits.

In Extract 12, metaphors of light and economy are employed to represent the diminished value placed on human life within a corrupt society. The adjective **nameless** suggests the erasure of identity and individuality among marginalised people, portraying them as socially invisible. Similarly, the personification of the marketplace highlights the privileged position accorded to economic interests at the expense of human welfare within a capitalist environment. While the boy's identity is backgrounded through passivisation, the behavioural process verb **seen**, the material process verb **eat**, and the modal verb **must** construct the economy as the dominant agent with overwhelming power. Within this capitalist urban space, the suffering of the masses is normalised, as marginalised individuals are represented as expendable and easily replaceable.

Normalisation of Corruption

The discursive strategy of normalisation of corruption employed by the text producer provides insight into the linguistic, psychological, and behavioural mechanisms through which corrupt practices are constructed, legitimised, and sustained as acceptable social norms within Lagos society. Extracts 13-15 reflect Berger and Luckmann's (1966 cited in Galbin, 2014) social constructionist argument that social realities are created and maintained through recurring

social practices and interactions, with language serving as a central resource through which individuals construct, reproduce, or transform their understanding of the world.

Extract 13

However, enterprising drivers, such as ours, know that they can get through the toll gate if they pay just half of that. The catch is that the hundred naira they pay goes straight into the collector's purse. "Two hundred you get ticket stub," our driver says, "one hundred you get no ticket. What do I need ticket for? I don't need ticket!"

Extract 14

At Tomsed, the soldier in front of me caresses his tommy gun and cracks jokes with the staff, while the men to my left and right are busy with their fraudulent work. I ask Muiyiwa about arrests, and he says it is actually quite common to see an officer hauling off a yahoo yahoo. They drag them outside and, threatening them with incarceration and torture, are able to exact steep fines, fifty thousand naira, say, which is more than three hundred dollars. This goes straight into the pockets of the arresting officers. It is a catch and release program. The yahoo yahoo, naturally, promise themselves to be more careful the next time. They find another Internet cafe, and get right back to work.

Extract 15

You have to come to the station with us. Minutes are wasted. I don't want to let go of my entire afternoon only to later pay a "fine" that will end up in someone's pocket. Finally, he comes around to his demand, or rather, he compels me to make it explicit. – So, what are we to do now, Officer? Maybe one thousand five hundred, so you can get yourself something to eat? His opening bid is five thousand naira. I manage to hide my disgust, and bargain him down to two thousand five. I hand the money over, start the car. You people should know the law, he says. It doesn't matter who you are, the law is not a respecter of persons. I keep my eyes on the road. My face floods with fury.

In Extract 13, the narrator discursively presents societal reconstruction of bribery as a form of resourcefulness rather than an illegal act. The driver is described as **enterprising**, thereby framing corrupt behaviour euphemistically as business ingenuity. Similarly, the rhetorical question, "What do I need ticket for?", demonstrates how citizens rationalise illegality by questioning the necessity of formal regulations. The assertive declaration, "I don't need ticket!", further reflects the belief that institutional rules are unnecessary or irrelevant. In addition, the journey metaphor, "the hundred naira they pay goes straight into the collector's purse," represents the breakdown of societal legal structures by suggesting that illegality operates openly without effective state regulation.

Extract 14 illustrates the routinisation of corruption as an ordinary aspect of everyday social interaction. The verb phrase **cracks jokes**, used to describe the action of a law enforcement agent, transforms what should be a serious encounter involving the enforcement of law into a casual workplace activity. The material process verbs **drag** and **exact**, alongside the verbal process verb **threatening**, construct corruption and exploitation as institutionalised practices.

Furthermore, the wildlife metaphor, **“a catch and release program,”** represents corruption as a systemic process in which arrest does not function as a deterrent but rather as part of a recurring cycle of exploitation. The adverb **naturally** reinforces the normalisation of such practices by suggesting that corruption has become an accepted and culturally embedded behaviour rather than a moral violation.

Extract 15 further demonstrates how law enforcement agents exploit institutional authority to exercise control over citizens within a corrupt system. The declarative statement, “You have to come to the station with us,” functions as a command that reflects the coercive power typically associated with law enforcement institutions. The adjective **wasted** also reveals how agents manipulate time as a resource of domination, pressuring citizens to comply with corrupt demands to avoid further inconvenience. The use of quotation marks around the noun “fine” suggests a semantic shift in which the term no longer exclusively refers to an official state-imposed penalty but may also represent an unofficial payment negotiated between law enforcement agents and citizens.

The interaction between the policeman and the man is structured through the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, which reflects how corruption becomes discursively embedded and normalised in encounters with law enforcement agents. The citizen initiates the exchange through the question, “So, what are we to do now, Officer?” The interrogative structure expresses his frustration and uncertainty in a situation where compliance with bribery appears unavoidable. The initiation continues through the euphemistic offer, “Maybe one thousand five hundred, so you can get yourself something to eat?” This framing mitigates the threatening nature of the bribe by representing it as an act of assistance or welfare provision rather than an illegal transaction.

The exchange subsequently adopts the structure of a market negotiation, as the policeman’s demand for “five thousand naira” is represented as an opening bid, while the citizen’s response is framed as a bargain. This commercial metaphor constructs bribery as a routine economic transaction rather than a criminal act. Ironically, the closing move is performed by the policeman, who returns to official legal discourse through the statement, “It doesn’t matter who you are, the law is not a respecter of persons.” Through the personification of the law, the policeman reclaims moral and institutional authority, while simultaneously using legal discourse to legitimise the demand for payment as a consequence of violating traffic regulations.

Polarisation

Asymmetrical power relations are also expressed through the discursive division of citizens into opposing groups, whereby some social actors are constructed as insiders while others are positioned as outsiders within a corrupt society. Polarisation functions as a discursive strategy for creating binary representations of identity, particularly in relation to citizens’ access to power, privilege, and social resources. Extracts 16 and 17 demonstrate how language is deployed to construct social hierarchies and reproduce unequal relations among members of a corrupt society.

Extract 16

He nods. – Well, in New York, they spend dollars. You know, dollars. A meaningless silence passes between us. Then, sotto voce, and in Yoruba, his demand: – *Ki le mu wa fun wa?* What have you brought for me for Christmas? Because, you know, they spend dollars in New York.

Extract 17

I am the **only guest** in each of the interlinked galleries I enter. The rooms are indeed silent, save for the **chattering** of two museum staff in one room, and the **solitary** singing by another in the next room. The woman sits in a corner and sings from a hymnal as if, for all the world, she were not at a place of work. She **ignores** me until, standing at the end of a long row of cases, I take out my camera and capture an image.

—Is not allowed!

—Excuse me?

—Is not allowed. Forbidden. No photo.

She points at the offending contraption, flaps a hand at it, and fixes me with a **withering stare**. Her tone is **acidic**. But the voice changes back immediately as she picks up the verse where she left off and resumes sweetly singing the glories of her Lord.

In Extract 16, the author employs van Dijk's ideological square of "us" versus "them" to construct unequal access to wealth and privilege among citizens. The law enforcement agent initially frames this distinction through geographical polarisation between New York and the Nigerian local environment, thereby constructing Nigerian returnees as economically advantaged and socially privileged. Having established this perception of material advantage, he strategically shifts the discourse towards traditional Nigerian expectations of communal obligation and reciprocity. This ideological positioning is reinforced through code-switching into Yoruba: *Ki le mu wa fun wa?* ("What have you brought for us?"), which functions as an appeal to shared cultural identity and creates a sense of ingroup affiliation with the addressee. Extract 16 therefore demonstrates how ethnic and cultural affiliations may be strategically mobilised as discursive resources for negotiating access to power and material resources. Such practices reflect broader socio-political dynamics that contribute to the persistence of corruption in Nigeria.

In Extract 17, citizens are similarly polarised as insiders and outsiders through linguistic choices that represent unequal access to institutional resources within a corrupt society. The pronouns 'I' and 'she' function to distinguish between institutional insiders and members of the public, with access to the museum space being determined by employment status. The tourist is represented as the "only guest," while the verbal process verbs 'chattering' and 'singing' depict staff members as having unrestricted freedom within the museum environment. Conversely, the behavioural process verb 'ignores' constructs the staff member's perception of members of the public as insignificant actors within the institutional space.

The staff member's use of directive speech acts, such as 'Is not allowed!', 'Forbidden,' and 'No photo,' functions as face-threatening acts that position her as the authority figure controlling access and activities within the museum. Ideologically, these directives reveal a perception of public institutions as personal territories where employees exercise discretionary power over public engagement. Furthermore, the rejection of the camera through the directive 'No photo'

reflects an outdated institutional orientation that resists contemporary technological practices and limits public interaction with cultural resources.

The noun phrases 'withering look' and 'acidic tone' further construct an atmosphere of institutional hostility, representing the museum as a neglected and declining public space. Similar to Extract 1, the narrator employs satire to expose religious hypocrisy within the urban environment. This is evident in the staff member's abrupt ideological shift from aggressive institutional discourse to an expression of religious devotion, realised through the adverb **sweetly** and the behavioural process verb **singing**. Through this contrast, the narrator constructs a binary opposition between institutional hostility and religious piety, presenting the coexistence of moral performance and institutional dysfunction as characteristic features of a corrupt society.

Conclusion

This paper examined the discursive representation of corruption in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*. The study argued that the discourse of corruption among Nigerian citizens has become naturalised, thereby contributing to the reproduction of corruption as an accepted aspect of everyday social life. The analysis revealed that linguistic resources, including lexical choices, material, behavioural, mental, and verbal process verbs, are employed by the text producer to represent how citizens use language to negotiate, express, and reinforce power relations within corruption-related discourse.

The findings further demonstrated that the author employs discursive strategies of normalisation, metaphorisation, and polarisation to construct citizens as both agents and victims of oppression within a corrupt Nigerian environment. Overall, the study highlights the author's representation of corruption as a pervasive social reality that has been transformed into a self-sustaining system, one which many citizens perceive as necessary for economic survival within Nigerian society.

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