Chapter Two

'A Spirit-Child Nation': The Child in the English Novel in Africa

A child is like a rare bird.
A child is precious like coral.
A child is precious like brass.
You cannot buy a child in the market.
Not for all the money in the world.
The child you can buy for money is a slave.
We may have twenty slaves,
We may have thirty labourers,
Only a child brings us joy,
Ones child is ones child.

(Yoruba oriki or praise song in honour of all children.)

The frequency with which the child appears in the fiction of postcolonial Africa is an indicator of the pride of place that he enjoys in African society. Despite Kwame Appiah's reminder that 'at each level, Africa is various', the centrality of the child in African society is

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1Quoted in Adrian Roscoe, ed., Mother is Gold: A Study of West African Literature. Cambridge University Press, 1971, ed. 1981, p. 142. Originally included in Ulli Beier and B. Gbadamosi, eds. and trans., The Moon Cannot Fight. The latter text is undated and the pages unnumbered and is an anthology of Yoruba children's poems. This oriki or praise song was composed in honour of all children. There are lines here often heard in the Yoruba Folk Operas--lines that emphasise the immense value which the Yoruba attach to their children.

an idea that more or less spans the continent. Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* (1986) from Somalia, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) from Zimbabwe and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) from Nigeria, are three important novels which deploy the first person narrative perspective of children with immense effect. Apart from these, novels like Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *Matigari* (1987) and *Weep Not Child* (1964) Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) and *Gwendolen* (1989), Francis Selormey’s *The Narrow Path* (1966), Kayira Legson’s *Jingala* (1969), Bode Sowande’s *Without a Home* (1982) feature the child and childhood as a major component. The use of the child as a vehicle for narration in the novels of serious novelists, addresses various problems that beset postcolonial Africa, including the hangover from colonialism. ‘Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny’³ declares Achebe and the novelist who focuses on the child does just that by adopting the mode of the *bildungsroman*. Concentrating on the experiences of growth and the promise of the future that he represents, the child becomes intrinsic to his critique. The writer then, concentrates on the nature and problems of his people, and the consciousness of the child becomes a touchstone for the analysis of the situation, and a means of seeking a redressal and recovery from any ills that may assail the land.

Today, in the postcolonial era, this growth of awareness can be discerned to quite an extent in the fiction revolving around the motif of the child, revealing the underlying change in perceptions and approach. This is made clear in Adrian Roscoe’s hint at one important

reason for using the child. While talking of children's literature in Nigeria, he says, 'It is as though Nigeria's literary men are accepting responsibility for the rehabilitation of a whole society and not merely for the adult segment of it.' This same recognition and approach tinges much of child-centred postcolonial fiction.

'A Curse not to have Children': Sociological background

The writers who make use of the child as the protagonist or as the narrating consciousness, hail from many countries: Ngugi, Okri, Nwapa, Munonye, Ike and Sowande from Nigeria, Selormey and Konadu from Ghana, Farah from Somalia and Kayira from Malawi. Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966) and Idu (1970) and One is Enough (1982), Asare Konadu's A Woman in her Prime (1967), and John Munonye's Obi (1969) give evidence of the centrality of the child in society by paradoxically emphasising the pre-occupation with the lack of one.

It was a curse not to have children... It was regarded as a failure.
(Efuru, 165)

A childless marriage cannot last in the Nigeria of today.
(One is Enough, 37)

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What is important is not marriage as such, but children... A marriage is no marriage without children.

(One is Enough, 10)

Believing that children are the mainstay of a healthy social set-up, a respectable identity of a woman is established only in her capacity to give birth to children. Barrenness is the worst curse that can befall her. In such an event, husbands, and following him, society reject her, often wilfully victimising her as if she is guilty of a crime that must be punished. In fact, children occupy an important position in society as indicated by the fact that among the Yoruba, the children have their own special Egbe society, a junior branch of the adult Egungun society, which is responsible for contact with the dead.7 The Yoruba praise song quoted above clearly shows that children are special.

Even the government handout of the Department of Information of Nigeria places an emphasis on the child by beginning the entry on 'Lifestyles and Customs' with the accent on the child.

Beginning with the elaborate ceremonies that follow childbirth, nearly all Nigerians become involved in a lifelong cycle of traditional ceremonies that mark important events in their life, culminating in the final funeral rituals that signal the end of their passage on earth. In most

7 Kwame Appiah, In My Father's House, op.cit., p. 142.
Nigerian communities, the birth of a child, especially of the male sex is an occasion for great rejoicing. Of greatest importance however, is the actual ceremony of naming the child, which marks its formal introduction to society. This event generally occurs a few days after birth, three, seven or nine days in most communities, at which time the child publicly receives the names it is to bear through life., in the presence of friends and relatives of its parents. In the course of the ceremony, it is usual for some significant foods and liquids to be touched to the child's lips and body, as a symbolic foundation for its journey through life.  

This is the general prefatory paragraph to the entire essay, and the reason for quoting it at length is to emphasise the pivotal position of the child in society. Though the handout documents different aspects of life in Nigeria under several heads thereafter, no other point seems important enough to be mentioned in this first introductory paragraph.  

In Africa the oral tradition has always been the dominant mode of transmitting and preserving culture. In African folk-lore, the most esteemed listener has traditionally been the child, and he has been a recognisable representative of the future health of the society. It is

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8 Perspectives of Nigerian Culture, External Publicity Series 3, published by the External Publicity Division, Department of Information, Nigeria, p. 11.
through stories that children are socialised. Njoroge, in *Weep Not Child*, emphasises this. ‘The tribal stories told him by his mother had strengthened this belief in the virtue of toil and perseverance’ (*WNC*, 55. My emphasis.) Hence, these stories have a purpose beyond mere entertainment. A strong impulse of socialisation underlay every oral narrative. This purpose was neatly served by the use of a child persona because this bound the child listener’s interest by enabling easy identification. The preponderance of the child hero is emphasised by Aminata Sow Fall in her study of African folk-tales:

The child-hero is ... a symbol and for this reason the same character can be given different names according to the geographic region concerned and the adaptations which the child undergoes to suit ethnic particularities. The name is less important than the symbolism; often, in fact, the hero is simply called “the child”.

Masizi Kunene also comments on the importance of the child

First and foremost, it must be understood that most creation myths in Africa are composed for children. Secondly, the dual levels of meaning in African literature demand that, though the story is for children, it must, at another level, apply to

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adults as well. Thus its assumptions should be serious, embracing in different gradations all aspects of human life. 11

This reference clearly brings the child into the inclusive ambit of storytelling and listening. The child becomes another site where the oral tradition merges with the more recent tradition of printed narratives. Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* highlights this function of the oral narrative admirably. The children pester the adults for these stories drinking in the underlying messages while enjoying the narration immensely. Story-telling keeps families and indeed, the society together as is proved by the congregation of nearly the whole village around Ngotho, when he relates a story. The old man uses this talent to weave an African creation myth with the current Mau Mau struggle and thus reaches out to his young audience. The death of stories is associated with the crumbling edifice of society: 'Ngotho's home now was a place where stories were no longer told, a place where no young men and women from the village gathered.' (WNC, 92)

Written literature in Africa is a comparatively recent phenomenon unlike in India, where written texts existed centuries before the English came to India. It is but natural, then, to witness a symbiotic relationship between the novel and the rich oral tradition which preceded it. Amos Tutuola's much discussed pioneering effort,

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953) paves the way for Okri's use of this tradition in *The Famished Road* (1991). One of the early reviews singled out for praise these elements found commonly in oral narration, specifically referring to the child narrator in this context:

Okri is a patient artist, patient enough to proceed on two levels, for what is manifest to the *child* is news to us. The trick of the novel, *unprecedented in written African literature*, is to sustain this brio movement, this impetus of change, through a cycle of foreseen occurrences, whose transmutations and metamorphoses nonetheless maintain a constant edge of surprise.¹²

The repetitions, the story within a story, the digressions, the fantastic are all ingredients of the oral tale. The story of the king of the road in *The Famished Road*, the stories that Tambu hears about the white man from her grandmother in *Nervous Conditions*, all hark back to the tradition of orality.

Another salient feature of African society is the set of widespread traditional religious beliefs that give currency to a particular world-view which is pervasive across the continent. In most communities of East and West Africa it is believed that the lives of the

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¹² One of the blurbs on the cover of Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, London: Vintage, 1991. All the references are to this edition of the text and they are included within the body of the chapter. Hereafter FR. My emphasis.

soul and the body coexist, that is, the soul has a life independent of the body and lives on beyond physical death. Talbot's assertion that 'No man can hope to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of the black man who does not realise that to him the dead are not dead but living...' thus pinpoints an essential fact of African life. The fact that the dead are dressed up for burial within the family compound in Nigeria indicates the belief that they are still living and that their spirits are still on call. 'It is believed that the living dead have greater power than they have while on earth. Thus communion and communication continue between those who have gone to the life beyond and those on earth.' The account of childhood in *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1983) by Wole Soyinka too shows how this mingling of other-worldly elements with this life is a fact in traditional Nigerian society. The ghost of the former Principal of the school, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, seems to appear off and on to the imaginative little boy.

That Bishop Ajayi Crowther frightened me out of the compound by his strange transformations only confirmed that the Bishops, once they were dead, joined the world of spirits and ghosts.

*(Ake, 5)*

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16 Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, New York: Aventura, 1983. All references included within the text as *Ake*. 53
This close relationship between the two worlds of the living and the dead is reaffirmed by none other than his Christian mother:

J.J. Ransome-Kuti had actually ordered back several ghommids in his life-time; my mother confirmed it. She was his grand niece and, before she came to live at our house, she had lived in the Rev, J.J.'s household. Her brother Sanya also lived there and he was acknowledged by all to be an Òrå, which made him at home in the woods, even at night.

(Ake, 5)

Another widely accepted consensus amongst the writers from Africa is that literature has a decided socialising function that can neither be forgotten nor sidelined. This is clear from Ngugi's postulate that willy-nilly, a writer is an active participant in the battlefield of postcoloniality. Gordimer too insists that literature must teach; that the writer is answerable; that writing is his 'essential gesture' as a social being. Achebe dwells at great length on the role of the novelist as teacher. The use of the child is directly linked with this basic postulate of literature having this socialising purpose. After going through this socialisation, and as representative of the future of the country, the child becomes the symbol of empowerment in the face of the insistent, strategic effort of the colonisers to deny and ultimately erase the identity of the subject. As a result, the child
emerges as the chosen redeemer of a situation that otherwise seems hopeless.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o believes that

Whether or not he is aware of it, the writer’s works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.17

In such a scenario, it becomes incumbent on the writer to locate critiquing tools, and to isolate his particular strategy for enunciating his political comment. In the context of this engagement, Ngugi, Okri, Dangarembga and Farah allot a key position to the child. The textual evidence of the extensive use of this element, is obvious enough to warrant scrutiny. In the fulfilment of their role as watchdogs of society, these novelists often deploy the figure of the child to voice their critique of postcolonial African society.

The deployment of the potentially exploitable child ensures that the enormity and the magnitude of the issues involved is unveiled in all its starkness. The postcolonial writer of fiction is trying to do exactly what Ngugi counsels:

...In our time man must decide whether he can afford to continue the exploitation of childhood as an arsenal of irrational fears, or whether the relationship of adult and child, like other inequalities, can be raised to a position of partnership in a more reasonable order of things.18

The aim may be diagnostic, prescriptive, therapeutic or even curative. It is in this capacity that the postcolonial writer fulfils his duty as an enlightened leader and commentator on his society and its ills. As Ngugi says, 'literature and writers cannot be exempted from the battlefield.'19

Sometimes, there seems to be a merging of the child's and the adult's world because the concerns of the postcolonial world are so great that the difference in age seems to be redundant. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, in his essay on 'The African Writer and his Public' attests

When the majority of African states became independent, the problem took on a new aspect.

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18Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Writers and Politics, ibid., p. 73.
19ibid., p. 12.
The recovery of freedom and dignity that the Negro writer had given himself as an aim, meant that new perspectives were needed and a solution to take into account the change of circumstances. The struggle against colonialism had to give place to taking part in building the future.  

It is in this perspective that the child is ultimately handed the torch for leading the country through to a clear, independent, blameless future.

'The vision of childhood': Education

It is no wonder then, that one of the novelists' compulsive concerns is with the culturisation of the child. He will focus his attention on the education of the child and thus try and identify how childhood becomes the site of the consolidation of colonialist control which is carried forward into neo-colonial times. In these novels therefore, it seems that the African writer has discovered a retaliatory location in the same field where he finds his weapons. A basic preoccupation in Ngugi's Decolonising the Mind (1986) is the warping of the child's mind through colonial education, the kind that he himself

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21 James Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, A Child's mind, 2.
received. He castigates it roundly because

Children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.\textsuperscript{22}

With straightforward simplicity he asks 'what was the colonial education doing to us Kenyan children?'\textsuperscript{23} Through alien modes and medium of education, the coloniser established a stranglehold over young impressionable minds impinging upon their value-systems and eroding their 'sense of particularity of the human race'\textsuperscript{24} ultimately resulting in a 'spiritual subjugation'.\textsuperscript{25}

Obviously, then, the use of the child in fiction would serve in part, to highlight the problematic of colonial identity and the overpowering sense of alienation which are an offshoot of this system of education. Legson Kayira's \textit{jingala} reveals the distancing, alienating effects of colonial education in all its naked impact when Jingala, the father of the boy Gregory confronts the principal of his son's school:

...his stupid education has already made him

\textsuperscript{23}ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{24}ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{25}ibid., p. 9.
unhappy to some extent by taking him away from his own people.

(Jingala, 34)²⁶

When a face to face argument is precipitated, Jingala impresses upon his son how he, Jingala is so happy because he has not been subjected to such an alienating education. ‘You think that because you are educated,’ he says, ‘because you can read and write, because you move in the company of Europeans and speak their language... just because of that you think you are better than the people who brought you into this world...’ (Jingala, 42) . This education is at the root of a growing materialism and serves as an impetus for migration to towns leaving his ‘own people’ and his own country desolate.

This distancing aspect of education is physically played out by the Adah Obi’s migration to England in Second Class Citizen (1974) by Buchi Emecheta. It is her western missionary education which gave her this dream of escape to and success in a distant alien, white land. In Bode Sowande’s Without a Home Bafemi Sotomi’s father Tunji Sotomi too goes to England for further education. This sought after migration is responsible for creating a rift between Tunji and his wife, Mary. Mary’s father comments astutely on the situation

‘... I know it is the bug that bites our sons when they go abroad. They are separated from their

loved ones. They are lonely. They meet sympathisers and they become infatuated...’

(Without a Home, 9)27

The education the father receives which widens the gulf between the couple and causes them to separate. The fall-out is an unhappy child growing up in a broken home, eventually running away from home, trying out drugs. The neo-colonial urbanisation overtakes Bafemi and threatens a snuff-out of a promising future for the intelligent boy.

Tambu, the female narrator of Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions is a spirited little girl who realises that she is ‘different.’ ‘I wanted to find out the truth,’ (NC, 5) she says, and this she tries to do through education. This novel addresses problems of English education as offered by missionary and convent schools, generally distancing the African from his roots, his people and their lifestyle, and his language. The missionary Uncle’s children have forgotten all their Shona. They converse only in English. Chido and Nhamo are so alienated from their African roots that they do not want to return to the homestead. They are ashamed of their African past and look for excuses to remain away. The female children, Nyasha and Tambu, it would seem, are closer to their origins. Though Nyasha has been forced away from her African past, she still feels sympathy. Both the girls are acutely conscious of their loss and make active efforts to establish links and maintain contact with their roots.

Keeping this effect of alienation in mind, writers agree that the 'right' education is absolutely essential for individuals to remain anchored in their culture. Soyinka in his autobiography *Ake: The Years of Childhood* pays extended attention to his education both at home and at school. The precocious child Wole witnesses the changes in society introduced by colonialist controls. Black schoolboys cannot wear shoes or underwear. They are to receive a severely tailored and monitored education. These tactics of subjugation do not escape the author. Neither does the revolt of the women. Though the complete implications must have hit Soyinka only after he grew up, the feeling that something important is happening does not entirely escape the little child. The growing knowledge of the child elevates him from the level of a mere witness to that of an effective and self-aware participant. The memories of an eventful childhood transform the mindscape of the writer.

The formative education that the child characters receive in the novels of Selormey, Okri, Daramani, Emecheta, Ike and Kayira is presented centrally, highlighting its importance. The two novels, Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* and Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* describe the early education of the child protagonists in considerable detail, making us aware of the common practices related to education prevalent in Africa. The practice of sending children to the house of a teacher as servants, was apparently a popular method of getting him educated. This was a viable option for those who either

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could not afford to send their child to school, or those who wanted their child disciplined, or even for those who lived in areas where there was no good school. Francis Selormey’s The Narrow Path is a first person narrative of the early life and education of the child, Kofi from the beginning to the end. He is sent to Keta because there is no school for his level in the village where they live. Obu, in The Potter’s Wheel is an only son born after six daughters, and hence, spoilt by pampering, needs to be severely disciplined. In Ake, Wole Soyinka notes how his family also had boys and girls coming to live with them for education because his father was the principal of a school.

‘Nigeria was then and is still now a capitalist state, where you have to work at anything you do to survive. No dole, no unemployment benefit, and education is highly rewarded,’ says Buchi Emecheta, acknowledging the importance of education. 30 Just as it has emancipated her and given her a voice, the novels which revolve around child protagonists throw light on the promise of education for a better future. The exchange between mother and son in The Famished Road stresses the necessity of going to school:

‘How was school?’
‘I don’t like school.’
‘You must like school. If your father had gone to school we wouldn’t be suffering so much. Learn


all you can learn. This is a new age. Independence is coming. Only those who go to school can eat good food. Otherwise, you will end up carrying loads like your father.'

(FL, 93)

In The Potter's Wheel, Obu finally agrees to go back to Teacher Kanu's house even though his discipline is rigid only because his father tells him the story of the man who met with worldly success because he was educated and of the man who had to be content pushing trucks in the Onitsha market because he had no schooling. The father hopes 'his son would climb the educational tree to its tip and pluck from it all it had to offer.' (PW, 59) When Njoroge in Weep Not Child is asked whether he would like to go to school, he cannot utter a word because he is so happy. To him education will allow his 'unspoken wish, his undivulged dream ...the vision of his childhood' to be realised as a 'bright future'. (WNC, 3-4) The redemptive promise of education is clearly foregrounded.

'Education is the light of Kenya,'(WNC, 43) is the message of postcolonial leaders like Jomo Kenyatta, voicing the African's preoccupation with education. Njoroge's father Ngotho, the old leader of the people, knows that it is only education that can 'lead to the recovery of the lost lands.'(WNC, 43) and in the midst of the trials and tribulations of the freedom struggle in Kenya, the Mau Mau rebellion, the people 'still retained an interest in education' seeing their 'deliverance' embodied in it. (WNC, 119) Njoroge therefore only
mirrors the concerns of the people in his continued faith in education.

Through all this, Njoroge was still sustained by his love for and belief in education and his own role when the time came. And the difficulties of home seemed to have sharpened this appetite. Only education could make something out of this wreckage. He became more faithful to his studies. He would one day use all his learning to fight the white man, for he would continue the work his father had started.

(WNC, 93)

The role of education in nations struggling for freedom and identity is the central concern of Weep Not Child. That the political scenario is inimical to the realisation of these dreams is also clear in the suicidal despair of the adult Njoroge after his hopes have been thwarted. It is the child who keeps the fire of hope burning and gives strength to the apparently bleak present, to continue to believe it holds the 'key to the future'. (WNC, 55)

Ultimately, it is growing up in a school of pain that arms the child to face the future and to lay the foundations of a better one. Ngugi’s Weep not Child and Matigari, Okri’s The Famished Road, and Maps by Farah bear this out specially. An education of the loss, suffering, physical pain of life must be gone through before any comprehensive identity can be carved out. Askar’s painful education in a Koranic school is replete with the pain of floggings and a
vindictive lack of understanding at the hands of his teacher who also happens to be his mother's lover. But this experience does not entirely go waste for it sharpens the understanding of the intelligent little boy. Moreover, his later education gently imparted by his uncle and foster-father, Hilaal and the tutor appointed by them, finally moulds the sensibility of Askar. It is here that he learns to 'map'. It is here that he learns the geographies of identity. This education becomes the basis of evolving an identifying cartography. Askar will also learn about the history of the Somali people in this effort at mapping Somaliland, the boundaries of which are different from the political boundaries of Somalia.

'Abiku-child': Trope for Africa

A vital Yoruba belief is that of the abiku-child, a child which is born, dies, is born again and dies in a repetitive cycle. This is parallel to the Ibo belief in the ogbanje mentioned at some length in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* where the child hero, Obu is suspected to be one. This basic belief finds expansive creative treatment in *The Famished Road* where Azaro, the child protagonist and narrator spends his life playing hide and seek with the spirit world. He becomes representative of the African for whom there was a close link between the real world and the world of spirits. Inherent in this trope is the possibility of rejuvenation. By extension it applies to the fledgling nation as well. Nigeria, since its independence in 1960, has been through numerous coups, political upheavals, destruction and restoration of democratic governments. Okri's use of the spirit-child in his book in 1991 thus fuses magic,
metaphor and traditional beliefs in one protean text that is political as well as mythical.

Thus, the concept of the *abiku* enables Okri to choose magic realism as the narrative mode of *The Famished Road* allowing him to play with ambivalences and obliqueness. The form of the novel is itself *abiku*-like, seeming to move to an end many times and then rearing up to continue afresh. Azaro draws attention to its effects directly, as for example in 'After a while I thought that my eyes were playing elaborate tricks on me in strange ways' (*FR*, 135) As an *abiku*-child, he can, without any compunctions feature strangeness as the normal occurrence of the day. In a world where the spirit and the real world intermingle freely, Azaro keeps 'expecting to recognise something...[he] realised with a shock that it was the strangeness which was so familiar.' (*FR*, 18) He hears voices, communes with spirits, witches, and monsters in bars, marketplaces, in dreams, on the road. The voices of his 'spirit companions' beckon him, 'luring [him] to the world of dreams, away from this world where no one cared about [him], enticing [him] to a world where I would never be lost... The moonlight of their voices became too multiple and sweet for [him] to bear.' (*FR*, 18) His father wrestles against a spirit boxer and he is convinced, beyond any doubt that Madam Koto is a witch. He also has the licence to use the traditional superstitious fear of 'the child's curse' (*FR*, 243) and 'swearing a terrible spirit child's vengeance' (*FR*, 121) can proceed to lay bare the ills of the society.

The narrative perspective of the child gains weight in the multifaceted presentation of several points of view as he reports and
overhears. 'When you can see everything from every imaginable point of view you might begin to understand.' (FR, 327) says Azaro. The incessant questions tumbling from his quick, inquisitive child’s brain justify the choice of the child as narrator. Wandering on the road which is ‘their soul, the soul of their history’ (FR, 329) the abiku-child’s ‘experiences [are] more wealthy and more varied.’ (FR, 60). The peripatetic roving of Azaro reveals the painful reality of the postcolonial present, as is manifest in the discovery of his father’s misery. He realises that there is ‘too much unnecessary suffering on this earth’ (FR, 477) and he can understand the desire of the abiku to escape from such a life.

The trope of the abiku child is also pertinent for the alienation that characterises postcolonial life in Nigeria because of the constant sense of mis-location that he suffers from. ‘The exile has begun’ (FR, 6) feels Azaro, the child protagonist and narrating consciousness of Okri’s The Famished Road when he talks of birth and this life. As already stated, the idea of the abiku is a part and parcel of Yoruba tradition with similar ideas flourishing in other tribal cultures. The abiku is a spirit child who does not want to be born. When he is born, he does not want to stay and therefore opts for an early death. These children are the nemesis of their parents because of this predilection towards death, and thus bring much suffering to them. In the pursuit of identity, the child is lost a number of times and is found an equal number of times. He will almost die to live again many times. This repetitive cycle of events holds a mirror to the events at the macro, national level and is symptomatic of the process of weaving an identity.
Thus it becomes impossible to overlook the issue of national identity in these novels. The personal narrative in all three novels seems to have a metonymic relationship with the national saga, and the child's perspective becomes crucial in understanding the author's position on the historical and geographical determination of national destiny. It is Okri who supplies the allegorical motif for the nation by calling it 'an abiku-nation'. According to him, in his innocence, the child is 'an ideal filter, a prism'. 'Isn't it possible that we are all abikus?' he asks, thereby making the abiku-child the representative of the people, of the nation. Sharing this abiku nature, Azaro's father too goes through three deaths and three miraculous re-births.

As in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1980), the trope is clear: the child is a metaphor for the nation in many of the novels that deploy the perspective of the child. Ade, another abiku child in *The Famished Road* makes this tropological construction clear. 'Our country is an abiku country,' he says, 'Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong...'(FR, 478) Azaro's father too soon learns to partake of the abiku nature of things as his awareness of the political reality of his nation grows.

In his journeys Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an

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32 Ibid., p. 84.
"abiku"-nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny.

(FR, 494)

Finally, it is the understanding of this tropological construction that allows the protagonist to re-scribe his identity in the context of a history which has persistently threatened to demolish it. 'History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the conditions of the spirit-child.' (FR, 487). The total erasure of this identity that colonisation had sought, coupled with the neo-colonial augmentation of the onslaught, is roundly critiqued by this postcolonial posture. In the "abiku"'s possible re-birth is enshrined the hope for a life when all will be fine and the urge to die will be no longer necessary.

A similar tropological stature is patently attributed to the beleaguered child Askar in Nuruddin Farah's Maps. His representative nature is clear right at the beginning of the novel when,

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displaying almost magically self-conscious sensibility, he comments on his own birth:

It appears as though you were a creature given birth to by nations formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas, as though you were not a child born with a fortune or misfortune of its stars, a child whose activities were justifiably part of a people's past and present experience.

(Maps, 3)

Just as the child is in the throes of identity formulation, so too the nation. Both seem to be hankering for a wholeness. Just as Askar is split between his love for his foster-mother Misra, and his allegiance to his mother-nation, his nation too has a split identity, the result of in-fighting between the Ethiopians and the Somalis for the Ogaden, the specific birthplace of Askar. The very fact that Askar is by birth a Somali and is adopted by an Amharic Ethiopian woman named Misra, betokens this split identity. When the land is being torn in a violent battle for political identity, Askar is wracked by a pervasive sense of confusion:

Like a bewildered African nation posing questions to its inefficient leadership, I kept asking, 'Where are we going?'

(Maps, 80)
The identification of a ‘national truth’ is a dominant preoccupation of the growing Askar. It is almost as if, because of his representative nature, he is forced to engage on a cartographical project by which he can ‘identify’ both himself and his nation.

'Sometimes,' I began to say, 'I identify a truth in the maps which I draw. When I identify this truth, I label it as such, pickle it as though I were to share it with you and Salaado. I hope, as dreamers do, that the dreamt dream will match the dreamt reality—that is, the invented truth of one's imagination. My maps invent nothing. They copy a given reality, they map out the roads a dreamer has walked, they identify a national truth.'

(Maps, 216)

As with the abiku child of The Famished Road, his individual destiny is inextricably entwined with that of the nation. The repeated accent on the word ‘identity’ is a pointer to the enormous implications of this quest.

In Ake, Soyinka makes several references to Bukola, the ‘wilful abiku’ (Ake, 21) and to the ‘tyranny of this child.’ (Ake, 19) These spirits are unhappy because they remain unfulfilled, and are upset by the experience on earth. This becomes a cutting comment on the situation of the nation and the world. 'We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom learn to see.' (FR, 3) It
is the function of the *abiku*-child to see and feel for this fault-ridden humanity. They are unwilling to come to terms with life as they see it in all its despicable nature. The implication is that were things fine, they would stay. The injunction is that things should be remedied. The hope is that they will be. In the context of a postcolonial present, plagued by so many ills and guilty of so many flaws and crimes, the *abiku* child, by his very nature wraps up both a critique, and the hope for a solution.

Hence, it is as a result of a carefully considered choice that the writers decide to make children the central narrating consciousness of their novels. Azaro and Askar are picked as the narrating consciousness because they are specially endowed with extraordinary powers. A question that is reiterated is 'What sort of a child are you?' *(FR, 195)* This functions as a constant reminder to the reader that he should also keep asking it. The vision of these children has a greater reach than that of normal, ordinary children. Azaro, the *abiku*, has a special magical ability by which he can peek into people's minds and read what goes on there. Like Grass's Tin Drummer and Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, he is also clairvoyant and can foretell their futures. The 'powered stare' (*Maps*, 59) of Askar allows him to see beyond appearances and to understand even as a new-born infant. This is also a protective stare, part of his armour, something like an epic attribute.

Alone with you, Misra noticed that your eyes were full of mistrust. They focused on her, they stared at her hands suspiciously! Your eyes, she would say years later, journeyed beyond through
her, they journeyed beyond her, they travelled to a past of unfulfilled dreams: in short, your stare made her feel inadequate. There was an element of self-consciousness in the small thing I had found, she said.

(Maps, 6)

He can enter into the secret recesses of other minds. He is fully aware of his birth and can even pass comments on it. 'It feels like yesterday, the day I was born, as though I were my own midwife.' (Maps, 24) Because of this self-consciousness, both Askar and Azaro become the conscience keepers of the adults, and ultimately of the nation. 'You, the blind man, and I, the stick. And together we pierce the sore— that's their conscience.' (Maps, 15) says Askar.

Yet the children are still childlike in many impulses. Azaro wonders about the nature of his thoughts trying to arrive at their origins:

I had no idea whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come, or even if they were merely the host of images that invades the minds of all children.

(FR, 7)

Very clearly, he also sees himself as part of the category of normal children, thinking the thoughts of children. So too does Askar when he
says that 'it is hard to accept or reject yourself as a child. You haven’t the authority to refute them, nor are you easily convinced.' (Maps, 24) The limitations of his viewpoint as a child are thus pointed out and the result is an authentication of the perspective. That these children are, after all, children is proved by the childish desires that overtake them sometime. In spite of so many responsibilities like having to take care of a drunk father and at times, an ailing mother, Azaro experiences the child’s ‘desire to throw off [his] clothes and run naked into the first rain of the year.’ (FR, 306) He will also display childish peeves against his parents and refuse to talk to them.

Therefore, the vulnerability and the smallness of the child narrators is stressed. Azaro will be called ‘a small boy’ more than once. (FR, 251 and 261) The mother will try and shield her son from the terrifying reality of contemporary politics which has just ignited a riot. ‘Come in’, Mum said. ‘This is not a night for a child to see’. (FR, 424) It certainly is not and it is not until this is so plainly stated that the enormity of the visitations come through. Hence, the important function of the child in highlighting the extent of the degradation is clear. ‘It is hard to admit it, but I suppose I was a vulnerable child, much more vulnerable than anyone suspected. (Maps, 28) As a child he is allowed access to adult conversations and as overhearer and eavesdropper of grown-up conversation he lays bare many thoughts and impulses that would normally have escaped or have been presented in a second hand manner. So, he is witness to many political and historical changes including the coming of electricity to his village which he documents with childlike wonder.
'Old Palm Trees': The importance of the Mother

As has already been highlighted, in Africa historically and sociologically, the child is seen as the representative of the health of the society. In this context, the significance of the family as a cohering, enabling unit has to be recognised. Interestingly, Matigari uses the 'house', the home that Matigari has built with his own hands as the metaphor for the country.

After all, the struggle was for the house, wasn't it?
A home...a shelter...with children playing on the veranda.

(Matigari, 10)

As evident, children are integral to the wholesomeness of the picture of the home which is the symbol for the country. In keeping with this idea, parents, both mother and father, have an important function to perform in the history of the child.

The lack of these protective and supportive fathers and mothers brings up the question of orphans in the postcolonial world. Orphans, like bastards, figure in postcolonial fiction as cheated children and again symbolise the loss and dislocation that they suffer both as individuals, and as representative of the child nations. As orphans, they become an ideological commentary on the burning problem of the

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instability of postcolonial identity and the consequent need for the formulation of one. The loss of parents is to be equated with statelessness and lack of identity. This child becomes a trope for this impermanence of identity and represents the crisis of the evolution of identity amidst the floundering postcolonial scenario.

Orphans are rarer in the fiction from Africa than in the novels written in the Caribbean or India. In African novels when an orphan does appear, specific reasons are offered to explain the condition. The culpable orphaning effect of colonisation leaves the child, Muruiki and his cohabitants of the car-village at the mercy of the adult 'sell-outs' who fleece the children of their meagre livelihood and terrorise them. Though this may have the effect of making them hardy in the battle of life, a father-figure is necessary to give this strife a direction and an aim. The concept of a home/land to fight for, comes into the reckoning only when Matigari, the old patriarch makes his appearance. Taking their cue from him, the children become so fierce in their zeal to do something for the cause, that they willingly put up with the tremendous danger of sheltering the most wanted man in the land. Askar is orphaned at birth, yet he needs a mother and finds one in Misra. Azaro has parents to worry about his well-being and to want him to live.

It is significant that the orphaning effect of colonialist strategies finds an effective rejoinder in the social set-up on the continent. Therein lies an apparent solution. Even if Askar and Muruiki are orphans there is someone or the other always ready to assume the role of the parent. Bafemi in Sowande’s *Without a Home* is more an orphan
than these two children without parents. He is emotionally orphaned by the break-up of his parents' marriage and, as a result, goes astray. Bafemi's situation is an off-shoot, as mentioned earlier, of the alienating effect of Western education. In effect, the orphan figures as a metaphor for the insubstantiality of identity that people as a nation suffer, his appearance in an African novel becoming a critical comment on the prevailing social unrest and political change.

Another fact is that the bastard child, sometimes found in the novels of the Caribbean or the Indian subcontinent, does not figure at all here. Though the society has moved from traditional polygamy to monogamy as a result of exposure to western culture, 'there is no stigma attached to children born out of wedlock'35 Askar's parents may not have been married, but it never matters. Neither is the parentage of Muruiki ever questioned. Finally it is the 'warm presences and the tender energies of ...parents' (FR, 33) which maintain the basic health of the society. Correspondingly, the adult too takes his role as parent seriously. Manhood is placed in the judgmental balance with a heavily loaded verdict implied against the betrayers who obviously do not fit into any parental role. 'Of what use is a man if he cannot protect his children,' (Matigari, 30) asks Matigari repeatedly.

The child is generally illustrative of an innate indestructible goodness which not only makes him the ideal protagonist and central consciousness, but also legitimises his tropological weight. The worth of a woman can be gauged by the kind of children she begets. Azaro's

35 Perspectives on Nigerian Culture, op.cit., p. 12.
father makes a most damaging remark about Madam Koto when he declares 'She is a witch, a wicked woman. That's why she has no children.' (FR, 306) As already stated, women in Africa and therefore in African literature, constantly hanker for children. Barrenness renders them outside the pale of society and excites this ultimate denunciatory appellation of a witch. 'Witchcraft was by far the most important crime,' asserts Elechi Amadi in his discussion about the ethics and morals of Nigerian society. In fact, 'in pre-colonial Nigeria witchcraft was regarded as the most heinous crime anyone could commit.'

36 That the witchcraft was closely linked with children is also stressed because witches could cause abortions and could

...delay a pregnancy beyond the usual nine months or even indefinitely. They could enter the womb and devour the unborn child, so that a full-blown pregnancy would gradually wither away until it disappeared. A witch with a humorous disposition might cause monstrous births. The child could turn into a tortoise, a chimpanzee or a snail, or it might have two heads, and so on.

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How closely Madam Koto in *The Famished Road* fits the bill is clear from the evidence of the text.

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37 Ibid., p. 23.
Clearly then, the woman’s identity and her womanhood, are closely linked with the birth of children as seen in *Efuru, Idu,* and *A Woman in her Prime.* Even Chinua Achebe’s Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart* experiences total dejection when

... she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman’s crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise.38

In Isidore Okpewho’s *The Victims* (1970)39, the first wife has a very bad marriage because of her tardiness in giving birth to her only son. Her inability to get pregnant again forces her husband to take a second wife under social and family pressure when he can ill-afford one. Even in Selormey’s *The Narrow Path* Teacher Zaccheus Kanu’s wife is labelled an unfeeling witch or a man in a woman’s body because of her barrenness. Mama Obu, the child protagonist’s mother’s biggest qualm about sending her darling son to the teacher’s house is the fact that the latter have no children. It is to be noted that the mother is known by the son, Obu’s name. She is referred to as ‘Mama Obu’ all through the text.

The ‘idea’ of the mother is very important in most African societies where in the absence of a real mother, there are many willing

to take on the mantle of mothering. Even a man could assume such a responsibility. Consequently, Madam Koto, the unnatural mother who nurses fiendish foetuses in her womb, is damned because she supposedly ate children. When she repeatedly calls Azaro 'ugly' it does not say much about the child but rather, it reveals the sterility and the corruption of the ranting adult. It is significant that she never actually gives birth to a child.

Therefore the mother figure is very meaningful in these novels. As the Cameroon proverb 'young palm trees grow on old palm trees' shows, the mother cannot be forgotten if one has to arrive at an assessment of the child's position in African fiction. Azaro's mother's total concern in life is with her family especially with Azaro. She is the primary reason that the abiku child decides to 'stay'. It is she who will wrest him from the mouth of death so many times. In Maps too, to Askar, Misra is 'just like the cosmos, giving and giving.'(Maps, 6) On the other hand, he is 'the centre of her focus' (Maps, 24) and he recognises that

She sought her childhood in [him] and she hid her most treasured secret which she was willing to impart to [him] and [him] alone.

(Maps, 7)

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40 Quoted in Adrian Roscoe, Mother is Gold, op.cit., p. 10.
In fact, this relationship is taken to the extreme where he shares an almost incestuous relationship with her. 'It seemed to her that [he] could discover [him]self only in her. ' (Maps, 6)

The conflation between mother, nation, motherland is expressly established. As Elleke Boehmer says, in 'nationalist mythologies... mother figures cradle their children in comforting and capacious laps'. The mother becomes the signifier of something basic to the identity of the children and hence, of the nation. Just as the identity of the nation is disputed, so is Misra's. Askar's torn loyalties between those for Misra and those for a Somali Ogaden are witness to this equation. The relationship between mother and child may become problematic when there is a clash and a choice has to be made. Askar is forced to make a painful assertion with reference to Misra that 'To live I will have to kill you.' (Maps, 57) The talk amongst the people after the riots in The Famished Road also points to the connection between the two:

'They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.'
'They say he is looking for himself.'
'For his own spirit.'
'Which he lost when the white man came.'
'They say he is looking for his mother.'

(FR, 167)

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This quest of the child shows the coming together of key ideas. Firstly, it explicitly emphasises the idea of the quest itself which gives direction to the search for identity. The second quest is for political, and therefore psychological independence. That this quest is synonymous with the search for individual and national identity is transparently clear. Ultimately, the whole search is subsumed in the quest for the mother.

**Critiquing Strategy: Change and Formulation of Identity**

As has been emphasised, an overriding concern of the postcolonial novelist is to rework a geographical and historical identity. These two signifiers of postcolonial identity, territory and history, find an apt location in the metaphor of ‘maps’ in Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps*. Through the protagonist-narrator’s urgent pursuit of this task, the importance is stressed. In *The Famished Road* the metaphor of the magical road, enjoins an effort to traverse and demarcate identity-building territory. Azaro travels back and forth on this road of experience in his effort to garner some semblance of meaning. It is this meaning which is the ‘end’ of the road and the end for which he is striving. Historical events like the war between the Ethiopians and the Somalis, the civil war in Nigeria, the introduction of an electoral system and the recent freedom of the states, all come to us through the sensibility of the child.

As a witness to the ‘delirium of history’(*FR*, 20) drawing the curtain from the undercurrents in postcolonial politics, and as a critic
of the contemporary scene, the abiku, Azaro does not evade any responsibility. Though he has the choice of escaping from this unfeeling, uncomfortable, disreputable world of strangulating poverty, corruption and hypocrisy, he chooses to stay. This is what is required of the artist and in deploying the child he too avows to this responsibility. Azaro is especially alert to what people are saying. He hears 'talk of independence, about how the white men treated us, about political parties and tribal divisions.' (FR, 76) He will unveil the increasing criminalisation of politics; the rat-race for money and power, the rigging of elections, thuggery and general corruption are glaring flaws in the world as he sees it.

Askar also sees the horror and violence of war and the duplicitous ways in which men conduct themselves. Hilaal, in Maps is engaged in researching the psychological disturbances that war caused in children and women. Askar becomes thus a self-aware historical witness while experiencing much of the brutality of war because 'for [him] life has been a war of sorts.' (Maps, 142). His tutor will talk about the results when 'children were rounded up, lectured to and then machine-gunned.' (Maps, 176) When Alex La Guma talking of South Africa says 'we are faced with the reality that half the non-white people who died last year were below the age of five years,'42 he is divulging the reality of all, once-colonised Africa. This is borne out in

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Matigari with a discussion of the plight of freedom fighters in the country:

'...as the saying goes, gaols were built for men,'
says one man.
'And for women too!' another added.
'And the children.'

(Matigari, 65)

The worst knowledge that comes to him is the pain of not being able to identify his enemies. 'In the wound of our cries we did not know who our enemies were.' (FR, 178) This is a comment on the postcolonial political scene where the comprador is born. Now, the battle is not against a white man but against one of one's own kind. This infighting is a ruthless battle for power. In Maps the war is a separatist one between the Ethiopians and the Somalis. Black will incite black and engage in riots against his own kind, as does Azaro's landlord against the poor tenants; Madam Koto will reject her poor, powerless erstwhile friends. Child is ultimately pitted against child. The final perversion of the norm takes place when he turns against the father, as in Matigari, and against the mother, as in Maps.

And so with this discerning and informing 'seeing' power in his armoury, the child becomes an actor in the process of decolonisation which is an essential part of postcolonial awakening. Agreeing with the Fanonian premise that of necessity, decolonisation, has to be a violent process, Ngugi in Matigari establishes the importance of armed revolt in Kenya, and by implication, in Africa. It is not possible to
effect a genuine freedom because of the new, more dangerous breed of compradors, collaborators with the erstwhile white masters. The revolutionary initiation that is physically pictured in the event of circumcision, is violent in keeping with the destiny that the child has to fulfil in the growth from boy to man. The pain of the knife cutting into the children’s flesh is eased by the recognition that ‘before this moment, they were mere boys, but by the time they unclenched their fists, they were men. Their blood mingled with the soil, and they became patriots, ready for the armed struggle to come.’(Matigari, 4) A great deal of blood is also let in both The Famished Road and Maps. Rioting, war, fights, flogging, constantly assault the pages of the two novels.

In the hands of the collaborator the trope undergoes a massive perversion. In Matigari, the only child recognised by this comprador, and the only one that he can handle is the disabled one. This incapacity of the child also functions as a convenient cover for his corrupt practices. Soliciting funds, the governmental agency announces, ‘This is the voice of truth...The donation is for the providential fund for disabled children.’(Matigari, 70) This is their only claim to humanity, the only white mask for the blackness in their hearts. The effect on the child is menacing and the result is the crippling of the already beleaguered nation. Moreover, if the handicapped child is the only type of child that these enemies of the people can deal with, it becomes a timely revelation of an inherent loophole and hollowness in the character of the latter. All that remains for the patriot is to identify this weakness and to realise that it is a mere cover for making money, and a base tapping of the sentiments of the people for their own
mercenary ends. Finally, this recognition needs to be communicated to the restive populace so that it can begin the task of waking up and righting the situation.

Once the ‘patriot’ has discovered his goal, the child appeals as the one ready and immediate inspiration for patriotic action. Thus, it is no wonder that Matigari is on the lookout for his children when he reappears after his struggle for independence. Very precisely, he states that it was for them that he had fought. Now, he wants to reinstate them in his house as a natural culmination of his massive long-drawn effort. It is because he discovers the sorry state of affairs in which his children are situated that he decides to re-engage in an armed struggle. It is significant that he is accompanied on the quest for his weapons by the child, Muruiki who will carry the mantle of the struggle after him.

The ultimate degradation of the land is imaged in the degradation in the lot of the children. As already highlighted, the advent of colonialism robbed them of homes and parents. Neocolonialism finds its children scavenging for a living, struggling to survive in Matigari. The black man with the white mask gives a ticket to the children which reduces them to the level of vermin, scavengers, having to fight it out with vultures and dogs, and rats. Similarly, Askar and Azaro are buffeted by the unkind winds of poverty and of political violence.

To clarify the special function assigned to the child, Ngugi presents the perversion of the ideal of an innocent, trouble-free
childhood in the postcolonial scenario. The child is pitted against a corrupt adult world which harasses, represses, and seeks to break him. The repressive regime makes its presence felt in a mean, limited, 'childish' response to the threat of more 'Matigaris' being born, more children being conceived to carry forward the task of the patriots who survive. The ordinary citizen is taught that

having too many children is dangerous. People should have children according to the size of their pockets. Those who have no money shouldn't bother to have any children...No more children for the poor. Let us give that responsibility to the wealthy... Pregnancies are the result of evil and wild desires... (and therefore) the government (should) ban dreams and desires for a period of two years. Fucking among the poor should be stopped by a presidential decree.

(Matigari, 120)

This active containment of the promise of children by an inimical self-seeking regime, underlies two ways of looking at the child: one, from the point of view of the patriots who have to secure them a good life, and the other from the point of view of the oppressor who must stop them from being born. It is significant that the child is sited as the contestatory space by both perspectives. There is no ambivalence or contradiction in the writers' belief in the centrality of the child.
It is because of this political warfare that the children learn to fend for themselves.

‘Do people steal from you, then?’...[asks Matigari]
‘Who are these people?’
‘Adults, people like you or others,’ the boy replied. Then he giggled a bit and added, ‘Not so much now, though.’
‘Why?’
‘Oh, we have learned how to deal with them. We pelt them with stones, or wait until we get one of them on their own, and beat them up.’

(Matigari, 13)

They also learn to recognise who and what they are fighting. The African Anglophiles, aligning themselves with ‘observers from the ruling political parties of the Western countries’ (Matigari, 100), represent the neo-colonial forces against which they have to engage in battle.

The child is now moved to meaningful, decisive action. He becomes an actor in the freedom struggle. The boy Muruki not only gives Matigari shelter but actively helps Guthera to free Matigari from jail. They spoil for a fight and finally it is the children who initiate the climactic events the novel. At this point, it becomes necessary to admit the potency of the child’s energy, and the need to channelise it for utilisation by society for its own purpose. In the same way, Askar becomes earnestly engaged in the task of the formulation of identity

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through remapping, and Azaro decides to ‘stay’, to negotiate the issues squarely.

The child then emerges as one of the most alert members of society, and practically the first to openly voice a reaction. He is seen as the agent for disseminating the message for the struggle for freedom and thus for firing the common man with the urge to revolt. The children are the first to see Matigari after his resurrection, and they spread the news immediately. The children offer an answer to an innate demand of the people because they ‘were in any case thirsty for such a story’. *(Matigari, 71)* Like the innocent child in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale, ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’, the child is the first to put a finger on the malady by questioning the neo-colonial presence of the Americans. In *The Famished Road*, the Matigari-figure of the photographer, though not of the same stature as the veritable father of nation, still represents a small but promising raising of voice against the flaws of postcolonial society. He takes photographs which reveal the dastardly underlying truth of the present and significantly, even here, ‘it was the children who first showed interest in his photographs.’ *(FR, 142)*

One of the ways in which the oppressed are kept in place is by subjecting them to religious coercion. Rejecting the code of humility that the church enjoins, the subject uses them for his own purpose by inverting the injunctions. In *Matigari*, the recurrent Biblical echoes spell the importance of the whole crusade and the crucial location of the child at the centre of the strife. The phraseology used in the text adds seriousness and a religiosity to the effort. In an ironical
subversion of the language and religion of the coloniser, the writer turns two of the rulers' most effective weapons of colonising the mind for his purpose. Periodic subversive references to Christian terminology—the second coming, the resurrection—emphasise the intent of the author. The role of Matigari as a 'father' with a major preoccupation and concern with his children, ties up the whole perspective. 'For how long shall my children continue wandering, naked and hungry, over this earth?' wonders the old stalwart. (Matigari, 88) Matigari's repeated 'Let the children come to me.' (Matigari, 75) is an obvious echo of Mark 10:14 and 15. The recurrence of Matigari's iteration assumes some of the solemnity of Biblical resonance.

In this light, children come to image the future of the country. They stand for the hope and optimism for a good, clean socio-political environment.

'Stop...just stop there!' Matigari said, trembling with new excitement. 'Are you the boy we sent abroad? The boy the cost of whose education we all contributed to, singing with pride: Here is one of our own and not a foreigner's child over whom I was once insulted? The boy for whom we sang: He shall come back and clean up our

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43 The New International Version of the Bible says, 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'

44 This idea is repeated in Matthew 19:14 and in Luke 18:16.
cities, our country, and deliver us from slavery?
The boy we sent off to study, saying that a child belongs to all, that a nation’s beauty was borne in a child, a future patriot?

(Matigari, 48. Emphasis mine)

This shows the initial innocent hope of the subjects that education would open the doors of the future. But by perverting the mind of the child thus nurtured, as in the case of Boy Junior, the colonisers scotch and nullify this hope by the creation of a new slave class. Their desire to use education as a counter-weapon, finally seems to lose out.

If Boy Junior can be thus perverted, if child can turn against child in Matigari, if foetuses can be jinxed as in the inhuman denizens of Madam Koto’s womb, it only reveals another side to the picture of the child which requires attention. If there are evil mothers like Madam Koto, there are evil children like Boy Junior. An early appearance of the child in African fiction was the monster-child in Amos Tutuola’s The Palm-Wine Drinkard. 45 This child who has a monstrous appetite which the parents cannot appease, is apparently indestructible. The parents’ efforts to get rid of the pressure of the child come to nought. Finally, they realise that the problem cannot be side-stepped. It must be accepted and transcended. Analysis reveals, as John Coates asserts, that ‘in a sense the child repeats, in more

emphatic form, the unthinking egotism of his father 'before the fall'.

The father, the palm-wine drinkard, himself had been guilty of leading a self-indulgent life of excess with no sense of responsibility, no recognition of imperatives. So, even this monstrous fictional child in retrospect continues to perform the function of critiquing the endemic ills of society.

Very clearly, the child is isolated as the fittest to carry on the task of the matigaris, patriots. They are the patriots who ultimately survive. The children are finally identified with the original patriots with a final, vital question being iterated '...who really was Matigari ma Njiruungi?...Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult?' (Matigari, 18. My emphasis) Muruiki will proudly assert his own identity and that of the other children: "Yes. We are the children of Matigari ma Njiruungi", Muruiki said. "We are the children of patriots who survived the war." (Matigari, 139. My emphasis.)

Thus, as in both the Caribbean and in the Indian subcontinent, the use of the child in the novel in the African novel in English, while continuing to deal with the after-effects of colonisation, now encompasses those problems which are typical of the postcolonial situation. Quite often now, the novelists display a more current and more positive outlook. Significantly, when 'a new idealism had eaten into his brain with the freshness of recuperation.' (FR, 408) and stirs the bosom of Azaro's father, 'he conjured an image of a country in which

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... children would be teachers and adults pupils...' (FR, 409) The idea of founding a meaningful future fires the mind of an idealistic patriot like Dad who realises, after going through a series of abiku-like experiences of life and death, that 'survival is one prerogative. Only then can one fight and found a meaningful future.' (FR, 412) Even in his dreams, he sees children as the repository of hope. 'In my dream I met a child sitting on a cloud and his spirit covered half the earth.' (FR, 498) In fact, in this new awakened state, the father himself comes to incorporate child-like qualities. He is seen as 'an adult trapped in the consciousness of a child.' (FR, 360) Even Azaro talks optimistically of 'a new dawn', a world which is fresh and new. There is talk of 'a wise man' who will be born to 'transform the future agonies of the land.' (FR, 345) No matter how often their hopes are thwarted, their dreams resurge with the promise of wholesome future.

'Listening in the Childhood Hour'\textsuperscript{47}: The Use of Autobiography

The parallel, symbiotic evolution of individual and national identity makes the genre of autobiography very important in the face of the momentous historical and political changes taking place on the continent. The personal experience of the responsible writer becomes an invaluable source for his work in postcolonial Africa. He sees and feels the ill effects of political and social uncertainties and chronicles them in a narrative where the personal fuses into the political. The historical location of the individual in a continent in its formative stages, beset with these uncertainties, makes the integration of national identity an important part of the agenda. In this context,

\textsuperscript{47} From Ben Okri, \textit{The Famished Road}, op.cit., p. 177.
autobiographies become meaningful for they are an important component in the exercise of understanding oneself and in building an identity. Very often, the writers of autobiographies have been children at a critical period of their countries' transition and growth. They find that the portrayal and understanding of the time is best achieved in the context of this early, impressionable phase of life when the vision is unbiased and when the foundation of adult life and values are laid.

Paul Brass talks about the significance of childhood experience and gives a well-argued reason for its re-appearance later in life:

Even in modern industrial society, let alone in pre-modern or modernising societies, most people develop attachments in childhood and youth that have deeply emotive significance, that remain with them through life either consciously, in the actual persistence of such attachments in the routines of daily life, or embedded in the unconscious realms of the adult personality. Such attachments also often provide a basis for the formation of social and political groupings in adult life for those for whom they have a continuing conscious meaning in their daily lives.48

This is also one reason for its appearance in postcolonial fiction. The autobiographical impulse is basic to the craving to name experience and to create identity. This desire is keener in the tremulous uncertainty of the postcolonial era. Nonetheless, the novels which use autobiographical material are not regular autobiographies because of the impress of the fictional stamp. Only those experiences find their way into the novels which are intrinsic to the postcolonial concern. As closely autobiographical novels like Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child* show, this is accomplished without sinking to the kind of sentimentality that marked the child-centred Victorian novel.

It is thus that a number of autobiographies in Africa are mainly accounts of childhood. Three well-known examples of autobiographies of childhood from Africa are Camara Laye’s *An African Child* (1959), *A Dakar Childhood* (1975) by Nafissatou Diallo, and *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1983) by Wole Soyinka. The stress is on growing up as a child in colonial lands lately awakening to political reality, and forcibly engaged in struggles for freedom and dogged by postcolonial uncertainties. It is in the context of this historical location, that the individual is to forge and discover a self. Autobiographies help in achieving this. These autobiographies have won much acclaim as literature. *Ake* was hailed by the *New York Times Book Review* as ‘a classic of African autobiography, indeed a classic of childhood memoirs wherever and whenever produced.’ It recounts the young Wole’s life up to the age of eleven, a period during which the drama of the Second World War was enacted, a time when Nigerian women got

together in a revolt. Significantly, it is, as John Leonard of the *New York Times* declares ‘a company of children who grow up without forgetting anything, children who grow up in a garden of too many cultures.’\(^{50}\) With Soyinka, the reader learns to ‘inhabit the memory span of the years’ covered in the book.

Moreover, autobiography supplies the material for many of the novels written in English. Novels like *Maps*, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Famished Road* owe much to the lives of the authors and become evidence of the negotiation of difficult ontological issues. Okri asserts that ‘the writer’s childhood is an important part of anything he writes...It’s the only reservoir [he has] got.’\(^{51}\) The socio-political disparities that he critiques in *The Famished Road* are definitely linked with autobiographical facts of his life. His first article about social inequalities as discernible in the rent-structure in ghettos, was an experience that he himself had gone through. This wends its way imaginatively into the novel *The Famished Road*, confirming his statement that the ‘details of [his] life’ are ‘the best place to start from for a writer.’\(^{52}\)

This leads to another overlapping feature between autobiography and some of these novels: the use of the first-person narrative. When autobiographical material is used, this narrative mode seems to be the instinctive choice of the novelist. The three novels, *Maps*, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Famished Road*, all deploy a first

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\(^{50}\) Wole Soyinka, *Ake*, ibid., back cover.


\(^{52}\) ibid., p. 80.
person narrative voice, making the act of telling highly self-conscious. The text draws attention to the scheme again and again. It even demolishes the credibility of the self to buy authenticity for the recreation of childhood memories.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of my memory here. Possibly I've invented one or two things, perhaps I have intentionally deviated from the true course of events. Although I tend to think that I am remembering in precise detail how things happened and what was said.

(Maps, 80)

Even Azaro is highly aware of the fact that he is ‘inscribing [his] barely decipherable history.’(FR, 335) Tambudzai too is unusually self-conscious about setting down her story. She declares that a great deal of questioning of and resistance to the brainwashing agenda of the coloniser and the patriarch is essential for the construction of an independent identity.

‘Is there anything wrong in being a girl?’53

As in the Caribbean and in the Indian subcontinent, the advent of women writers writing novels with the theme of childhood or with the trope of the child, opens up other avenues of negotiation. ‘The

bane of feminism in Africa is its equation with acculturation.'\textsuperscript{54} says Helen Chukwuma who points out that being an African woman, meant toeing the patriarchal line and any self-assertion implied meant that she was deviant, un-African and Western. This is the delimiting ideology from which these writers seek emancipation through their writings and personal example. Emecheta and Dangarembga thus try to break away from this stereotype and to aim for an independent African identity as women.

Emecheta's \textit{Gwendolen} and \textit{Second-Class Citizen} focus on the girl-child. \textit{Gwendolen}, the central consciousness of the eponymous novel, is a five year-old when the novel opens. By the time the novel moves to a close she is just fifteen and violently forced into an adult sensibility. It is significant that Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian who constructs a West Indian identity for her child-protagonist. This immediately recalls Jamaica Kincaid's \textit{Annie John} because both have the West Indies as the setting and both address the problem of diasporic movement from the island to the 'moder kontry', England. \textit{Gwendolen} goes beyond the West Indian novel to concentrate on life in England whereas Annie John is just setting sail for England at the end of the novel.

Emecheta uses the occasion to recapitulate the history of slavery which turned brother against brother. This is proved by the emotional, intellectual and social chasm between the Nigerian and the West

Indian in England. The author questions this in the context of the composite African past of tribal culture when Igbo, Yoruba and Ashanti were part of the black mind. She insistently and imaginatively makes the connections and sees the common African heritage which ordinarily, a person fails to see. The central character, Gwendolen learns this identity finally, and comes to share the author’s vision. Signalling this awareness, she names her daughter Iyamide, which is a typical African name with inescapable African associations.

Even the exploitation of the girl-child by an adult can be traced back to the history of slavery. The poverty and the relegation to a low class rung imposed by the background of slave history, compel the father, Winston Brillianton, to move away from his family and from his daughter in search of livelihood. The text highlights the falling away of filial feeling which results from the distance created by the diasporic movement endemic to the West Indian situation. So, it is possible to link the sexual transgression by the father directly to the socio-historical background. The prolonged absence of Sonia, the mother, again enjoined by this dislocation, allows the initial sexual violation of her person by Uncle Johnny. The absence of caring parents, especially the mother, and the economic and emotional dependence of old Granny Naomi on Uncle Johnny lead her into trouble. Moreover, the violation persists over a length of time because misguided patriarchal notions which lace the society, dictate silence.

This novel shares certain features with West Indian novels, for example, regarding of education as a redeeming factor when, in fact it
is a means of subjugation by the masters. The consciousness of the history of slavery; the consciousness of the difference of race; the emigration which meant a movement away from the land of one's birth; the divorce between the self and the land to which they move and the betrayal of children by the absence of parents, are issues which run through the writing of George Lamming, Cecil Foster and Olive Senior. In talking of these common issues, Emecheta seems to stress the shared roots of all black people in ancient Africa. The deployment of a girl-child's consciousness by a woman writer adds another dimension to the novel.

The first chapter of Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* entitled 'Childhood' shows the exploitation of the child Adah Obi in postcolonial Nigeria, after the death of her father. Adah receives education in colonial times through the medium of English in a missionary school. She nurtures a dream to escape and to make it good in England. Life in independent Nigeria is counterpointed with life in England. But even in England, the focus is on children, childbearing, conception, and bringing them up. Adah, the intelligent, self-aware woman, the only earning member of large growing family, is saddled with a good-for-nothing failure of a husband. As a twenty-one year old with five children, Adah reveals the reasons for her enslavement. Yet, it is important to note that the child is not looked at with hate or distrust, but is rather, loved by the mother in spite of the financial strain caused by him. In this novel too, the final movement is towards the upsurge of nationalist feeling when the protagonist stakes her claim to a specific Nigerian identity.
Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* is a remarkable novel squarely engaged in two major areas of negotiation, colonisation and patriarchy. Written by a woman writer from Zimbabwe, the novel makes significant use of the first-person narrative. The central consciousness is that of a young girl growing from the age of seven to the time when she is fifteen. What is striking about the novel is the concurrent and ultimately, confluent handling of the dual sites of colonisation: by white coloniser and by the oppressive male. The narration highlights the curbed consciousness of females and their awareness of these restraints, and the desire to break free of them. Sometimes they are able to strike out. Often they meet with defeat. Nyasha, the narrator’s cousin; Maiguru, Nyasha’s mother; Tambudzai’s mother and aunt Lucia and Tambu, herself, will revolt at different times against the wilful subjugation of an unfeeling and unseeing patriarchal order. Most of them are forced into a compromise. Nyasha’s refusal to give in, ends disastrously in a mental breakdown, the ‘nervous conditions’ the title and the epigraph from Fanon refer to.

It is through Nyasha that Tambu’s instinctive analyses of the dual colonisation are reinforced. The ‘antiseptic sterility’ (*NC*, 71) of the white man’s way of life is recognised and rejected. Even the seeming ‘self-denial and brotherly love’ of the missionaries which made unthinking Africans treat them like ‘minor deities’(*NC*, 103), has a message far from positive: ‘the suffering was not minimised but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. (*NC*, 19)
Tambu can see that the colonisers stereotypically thought of Africans as inferior ‘...it was generally believed that good Africans bred good African children who also thought about nothing except serving their communities.’ (NC, 107) When Babamukuru is offered the chance to go to England he is ‘appreciative of the opportunity that had been offered, and further, to decline would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude.’ (NC, 14) They have driven home the idea of the delayed development of the black man and have repeatedly ingrained the idea that they ‘were a retarded lot’. (NC, 13) Finally, at the convent, the Africans are segregated from their white classmates and lodged in cramped quarters. Tambu sensitively recognises all these derogatory implications in her dealings with the ruler.

The role that Christianity plays in this colonising strategy, is amply highlighted. Nyasha points out the subjugating purpose that this missionary activity serves. She cries out “It's bad enough when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end really, that's the end.’ (NC, 147) It is Christianity which denies legitimacy to African social codes. Since Tambu’s parents have never been married in a church they are seen as ‘still living in sin.’ (NC, 147) Tambu realises that the planned ‘wedding’ of her parents, nineteen years after they started ‘living together’ denies her ‘legitimacy’ and also attacks her African roots.

Most importantly, the white man’s authority teams up with the traditional patriarchal system of Africa to make the woman’s lot worse. But ironically, it is Western education which gives Nyasha and
thereafter, Tambu, the means to understand and to voice the awareness of female rights. Buchi Emecheta too establishes this paradox by her own experience. It is through education that girls 'learn to value their own importance' and in her particular case, she has 'learnt to use a new tool for the same art'. Her writing is an assertion of herself as a woman; the ability to do so has come through her education and the enunciation of which has been made possible by the mastery of a 'new language,' the language of the erstwhile colonisers. The awareness also makes the battle more difficult because feminism in both its garbs, Western and African, makes its appearance. Both types of feminism find their way into the novel, *Nervous Conditions*. The author's standpoint on Western feminism can be inferred from the text. Blind acceptance of this imported brand of feminism is astutely seen as another means of colonisation. The imperative is to locate an African mode, as Tambu ultimately learns from the combined experiences of her mother, Maiguru, and Lucia. While recognising the possibility of freedom through education, it is essential to be alert to the dangers of Western education. Displaying immense confidence, Tambu mentally warns herself against being distracted from her goal of emancipation.

Early in the novel, Tambu's spirit rebels against the unjust favouritism displayed towards her brother, whom she begins to hate. Nhamo, the brother is conscious of 'a man's duty' (*NC, 9*) and 'wanted to demonstrate to us and himself, that he had power, the

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56 ibid., p. 44.
authority to make us do things for him’ (NC, 10) But Tambu is perceptive enough to realise that ‘he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate.’ (NC, 12) As a girl she feels ‘the injustice of it’, and needs ‘validation’. Her education is stopped so that her brother’s can continue. In fact, there is an active campaign to deny this course of betterment to the girl. Nhamo steals her maize mealies with which she plans to fund her education, maliciously seeking to foil her efforts. Typically her father ‘thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living.’ (NC, 34) Similarly, in The Potter’s Wheel, Ogechukwu’s chafes against the discrimination between the sexes. Obu’s mother does not allow him to work but she expects his sisters to do not only household chores but also to pander to his smallest demand. Ogechukwu wails:

There’s never anything I do, which pleases Mama,...There’s no truth in anything I say. It’s Obu who does the right things. It’s Obu who speaks the truth. Every day Ogechukwu is either a wild beast, or a mad woman, or a serpent, anything bad. All because that thing with a head like a man and tiny legs like an idol is called a boy. Did I create myself? Did I beg you to bring me into this world?

(PW, 74)
In this society, the lopsided patriarchal mores almost equate the birth of only daughters with barrenness. If a barren woman’s husband can be pressurised into taking another wife, so can one whose wife has only given birth to girls. After the birth of five daughters, Obu’s father’s family ‘intensified their pressure on him to marry another wife who could give him male issues.’ (PW, 9) Consequently, the birth of a son, Obu, secures her place firmly and ‘raises the pitch of her voice in her husband’s family.’ (PW, 67) As earlier mentioned, she takes her name from the male child, Mama Obu, and not from her daughter’s who are older than him.

In an unformulated feminist desire to locate herself, Tambu seeks identity through education:

‘But I want to go to school.’
‘Wanting won’t help.’
‘Why not?’
He hesitated, then shrugged. ‘It’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl.’

(NC, 21)

She is sympathetically tutored by her mother about this difficult business of womanhood which is

...a heavy burden...When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these are things that are not easy; you have
to start learning them early, from a very early age.
The earlier the better so that it is easy later on.
Easy! As if it is ever easy.. And these days it is
worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side
and the weight of womanhood on the other.
Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to
carry your burdens with strength.

(NC, 16 )

She learns that the problems have to be understood and negotiated.
She is conscious of the need of a 'thinking strategy' (she is 'very proud
of [her] thinking strategy'); of the necessity of not being
'distracted'.(NC, 69)

She is simultaneously made conscious of her status as a girl, as a
member of the inferior sex, and as a subject. She realises that they are
'victims of their femaleness' (NC, 116) that the 'victimisation was
universal' (NC, 115) She can assess the fact that what patriarchy
enjoined was something that 'stunted the growth of [her] faculty of
criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood [she] had used to define
[her] position. ' (NC, 165) This standard feminist parlance finds
strength and sure moorings in the burgeoning consciousness of her
African identity. She recognises that her real history is the history of
slavery and colonisation which her grandmother narrates. She can
therefore understand why Nyasha tears her history book "their
history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies." (NC, 201) She ends the novel
with the assertion that the writing of the novel is the narrator's

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positive act of recognising her position and combating it. She says,

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story.

(NC, 204)

In true abiku fashion then, these novelists turn time and again, to the confrontation of the traditional closures imposed by colonisation and patriarchy. These novels reveal the multi-pronged effort to traverse the arduous road to individual and national identity. As part of the strategy, the novelist finds a convenient and fecund focus on the child and childhood. Wending his way through the topos of childhood, the novelist finds a significant location for the child within the larger political and historical framework. It becomes integral to the writer's creative and political commitment and intent, and central to his 'postcolonial' response to colonialism and neo-colonialism. 'The fact that people write at all becomes an act of national rejuvenation,' 57 asserts Ali A. Mazru, and the trope of the child becomes symptomatic of this revitalisation. If African critics are working 'toward the

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decolonisation of African literature', the metaphor of the child becomes one of the means of decolonisation, of breaking free.

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