

# **National Consciousness in Postcolonial Nigerian Children's Literature**

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## **COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

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### Abstract

This project highlights the role of locally produced children's written literature for ages six to fourteen<sup>1</sup> in postcolonial Nigeria as a catalyst for national transformation in the wake of colonial rule. My objective is to reveal the perceived possibilities and pitfalls contained in Nigerian children's literature (specifically books published between 1960 and 1990), for the promotion of a new national consciousness through the reintegration of traditional values into a contemporary context. To do this, I draw together children's literature written by Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Mabel Segun in order to illustrate the emphasis Nigerian children's book authors writing within the postcolonial moment placed on the concepts of nation and national identity in the aim to 'refashion'<sup>2</sup> the nation. Following from this, I examine the role of the child reader in relation to the adult authors' intentions and pose the question of what the role of the *female* is in the authors' imagining of a 'new nation'. The study concludes by reflecting on the persistent under-scrutiny of children's literature in Africa by academics and critics, a preconception that still exists today. I move to suggest further research on the genre not only to stimulate an increased production of children's literature more conscious in content and aware of the needs of its young, (male *and* female) African readership, but also to incite a change in attitude toward the genre as one that is as deserving of interest as its adult counterpart.

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<sup>1</sup> The classification for terms such as 'youth' and 'children' are notoriously ambiguous and vary according to country and institution. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (which Nigeria signed and ratified in 1991) defines 'children' as under the age of 18 years ([unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)). However, for the purposes of this project I use the words 'child' or 'children' primarily to signify those persons who are between the ages of six and fourteen. Occasionally I use the word 'youth' interchangeably with 'child' as the United Nations defines 'youth' as those between the ages of one and fourteen ("Provisional Guidelines on Standard International Classifications" 3).

<sup>2</sup> As described by Emenyonu (*Goatskin Bags* 241).

## Introduction

### The Importance of Children's Literature

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This project looks at how three Nigerian authors writing in a postcolonial moment imagined a necessary shift in national consciousness, beginning with the youngest generation. It takes into account issues surrounding the authors' perceptions of their intended readership, perceptions that appear to subordinate children and overlook the female. This gendered outlook leads to a troubling, and as yet unasked question of what the role of the female was in the writers' imagining of the nation's future. The authors, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Mabel Segun, are among the most influential writers of English-language Nigerian children's (and adult's) books.<sup>3</sup> All three were educated in British-style schools in colonial Nigeria and were exposed to Western literature as children. Their similarities extended to their expectations of the role of literature in postcolonial Nigeria. However, they each held differing viewpoints on their responsibilities as writers and how to go about achieving a change in national consciousness through children's books.

Cyprian Ekwensi's works for children deal with issues adults may classify as uncomfortable or unsuitable for a child readership, such as physical handicaps (*Drummer Boy* - 1960), death (*Passport of Mallam Ilia* - 1960) and vengeance (*An African Night's Entertainment* - 1962). His books are experimental and realistic, aiming to capture the attention and imagination of the young male and female readers by fostering identification with characters, settings and situations, thereby further encouraging a thirst for reading. Segun's children's literature is in stark contrast to the provocative nature of Ekwensi's works. She believes books for children should act as a 'third parent', educating, nurturing, guiding and protecting the youth. Traditional values and multiculturalism are key themes in Segun's *Youth Day Parade* (1984) and *Olu and the Broken Statue* (1985), which emphasise unity. Yet whereas these works are targeted mainly at male readers, her autobiographical *My Father's Daughter* (1965) lends a vital female perspective. The lack of a female viewpoint is a major pitfall in Chinua Achebe's nationally conscious children's works. Like Segun,

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<sup>3</sup> The authors write for both adults and children in separate literary works, a phenomenon described as 'crosswriting' (Beckett 59).

Achebe was concerned with the promotion of national unity and cultural diversity. His animistic works, *The Drum* (1977) and *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1973), reveal the importance Achebe placed on traditional values and the mode of storytelling as an educational tool. His *Chike and the River* (1966) is more realistic in content, illustrating his interest in portraying the cultural hybridity of postcolonial Nigeria. Read together, I hope that this collection of texts will speak to one another as to how their authors believed this (adult-dominated) project of reimagining a new perception of the nation could be conceived and re-imagined through children's literature. In turn, I'd like also to recognise the problematic gaps contained in the texts, specifically illuminating their representation (or lack thereof) of women and the consequent implications for their readership.

To begin, I turn to what the key terms 'postcolonial' 'national identity', 'national consciousness' and 'imagined communities' mean in the context of this project. By 'postcolonial', I employ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's understanding of the term as a phrase describing cultures affected by the "European imperial and hegemonic expansion from the moment of colonisation till date" (as described in Eze 8). In other words, it refers to a history of colonial rule<sup>4</sup> and the Eurocentric (whereby European culture and history is viewed as preeminent) legacy it left behind. Postcolonial African literature, according to Khorana (1998), attempts to incorporate both traditional African and contemporary Western elements in new fiction and traditional tales (Khorana, *Critical Perspectives* 8-9). Where postcolonial theorists have extensively examined the field of African literature for *adults*, the genre of postcolonial *children's* literature remains largely overlooked (Bradford 6). Yet it is a particularly fruitful platform from which to examine children's literature in Africa as it, like its adult counterpart, grapples with the effects of colonialism on the nation and national identity. I therefore use the term 'postcolonial' as a discursive practice<sup>5</sup> that enables the investigation of the way children's literature reflects the experience of colonialism, historically (primarily as a means of instruction) and contemporarily. I further situate it in relation to the genre's function in individual and national identity construction.

'National identity', as utilised in my project, is aligned with Margaret Meek's conception of the notion, which she defines by separating the words 'national', a term that anchors us to a

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<sup>4</sup> For Nigeria, direct colonial rule began in 1914 when it became a British colony (although Britain had influence over Nigeria via the slave trade for almost a century before this) and ended with independence in 1960.

<sup>5</sup> As put forth by Bradford in her 2007 book *Unsettling Narratives* (9).

geographical place and the particular history to which it is tied, and 'identity' as a construct that distinguishes 'us' from 'others' (x). Thus in the context of my paper, Nigerian national identity refers to a group of people who are linked together by a specific geographical area (Nigeria) and share a common history. Furthermore, I locate it in a 'postcolonial' sense, whereby the effects of colonial history impact the way national identity is formulated in the present.

Inextricably connected to national identity (particularly in the postcolonial context) is the concept of 'national consciousness', which refers to the shared view of how people in a given nation view themselves in relation to others. Both national consciousness and national identity are linked to the idea of the 'imagined community', a term popularised by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983). An imagined (necessarily political) community is, Anderson proposes, at the root of the definition of 'nation', which he views as a sociocultural construct similar to that of the nation state (Anderson 49). It is *imagined* because it links all members of a nation in such a way that, even though they don't know one another and may never encounter most of the other members, in the mind of each they are all linked by common understanding that facilitates shared practices and a common sense of legitimacy (Anderson 49). The concept of the imagined community plays a role in my study as the ideas that sustain it are perpetuated by literature<sup>6</sup> (particularly children's literature due to its socialising aspect) and are eventually internalised by a given society. The idea of the imagined community is vital then in understanding the way in which Nigerian national identity was affected by colonial rule and how, in order to rebuild a unified sense of national identity post-independence, it became necessary to induce a shift in national consciousness away from a predominantly Eurocentric perspective and toward a more local, identifiable standpoint.

In an essay entitled "African Literatures as Restoration of Celebration", Achebe identifies a fundamental issue with how Nigerian children were being socialised and formulating their identities through literature. The problem, he indicated, is that English books by Europeans for European children made up the bulk of the books available to the country's children. Achebe saw the primarily Eurocentric literature in Nigeria as a problematic obstacle in the construction of a healthy national identity. The 'othering' of non-Europeans through the

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<sup>6</sup> Through, for example, inter-textual indications specific to a particular community such as traditional sayings, proverbs, stories or songs.

proliferation of Western ideals imbued in the literature and disseminated to Nigerians alienated its African readers, who could not fully identify with the landscapes, values, dialogues and perspectives presented to them. This led to an estrangement from a national identity rooted in a history predating colonialism and a consciousness that gradually became subject to Western ideals.

The issue of how to overcome these problems formed a central point of debate in symposiums, conferences, newspaper articles and essays on the state of African literature at the time of Nigeria's independence. There was a consensus amongst Nigerian officials and writers: the first step toward healing and moving forward lay in the uncovering, recovering and rebuilding of the nation's identity. They agreed that one way toward this goal could be through literature. African literary critics such as Ernest Emenyonu and Simon Gikandi and writers like Achebe, Ekwensi and Segun took the idea further. They suggested the most fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of a new national consciousness is through literature for *children*, a genre that was then, and is still now, severely neglected in Africa (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 252).

However underestimated, children's literature contains socially and politically transformative potential. It provides a rich and fertile space for writers to 'imagine' new voices, ideas and ways of thinking about entrenched social and cultural norms. It also creates a space for children to ask questions about and situate themselves within society and the world, aiding in the formulation of their individual and collective, national identities. Contemporary children's literature becomes especially vital, then, in times of seismic national change (such as a move to independence), when the future of the nation is being re-imagined.

Nevertheless, the genre is not free from obstacles. Global debates surrounding the role of the adult in children's literature, led by the likes of Peter Hunt, Jill May, David Rudd, and Kimberley Reynolds,<sup>7</sup> beg complicated questions of who children's literature is written for and whether the adult writer's responsibility is more restrictive than protective. Interesting debates by Jacqueline Rose, Perry Nodelman, Lissa Paul and Stephen Slemon and Jo-Ann

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<sup>7</sup> Here I refer primarily to Peter Hunt's *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996) and his *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999), May's *Reading and Writing for Understanding: Children's Literature and Critical Theory* (1995), Rudd's "Theorising and Theories: How Does Children's Literature Exist?" (1999), and Reynolds' *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007).

Wallace,<sup>8</sup> around children's literature as an imperialistic tool used by the adult to 'colonise' the child, illuminate the complex layers of the medium.

African children's literature experiences these challenges, but also contends with the issue of subverting a Eurocentric view of Africa, writing against the West<sup>9</sup> in order to recover its own place in the world. Yet despite the rich field of study African children's literature provides, few have taken critical interest in it. Conversations (published mainly overseas) dominated by Ernest Emenyonu, Chielozona Eze, Simon Gikandi, Meena Khorana, Raoul Granqvist and Jürgen Martini<sup>10</sup> paint a similar picture to one another, implying that new research on African children's literature is flailing. Even less can be found on *Nigerian* children's literature, which is peculiar given the important role it assumed in the independent nation. The voices of Osayimwense Osa,<sup>11</sup> Abiola Odejide<sup>12</sup> and Osazee Fayose,<sup>13</sup> demanding that more attention be paid to local literature for children, are barely heard. Even fainter are the voices of *female* critics, academics, authors and characters.

The predominance of the struggle against the aftereffects of colonial rule appears to overshadow the role of women in the independent nation. In Africa in general and Nigeria specifically, concerns around literacy rates, language, production and distribution impeded writers' goals of rebuilding national consciousness and cultural pride. Yet, where the aims of the writers at the forefront of postcolonial children's literature may not have been entirely attained, they did contain key information about common pitfalls, pressing problems and possible solutions in the postcolonial moment.

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<sup>8</sup> Here I employ Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Literature* (1984), Nodelman's "Decoding the Images: How Picture Books Work" (1999), Paul's "Feminism Revisited" (1999) and Slemon and Wallace's "Into the Heart of Darkness? Teaching Children's Literature as a Problem in Theory" (1991).

<sup>9</sup> As put forth by Ashcroft et al, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> I refer specifically to Emenyonu's *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature* (2000), Eze's *Postcolonial Imagination and Moral Representations in African Literature and Culture* (2011), Gikandi's *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (1991), Khorana's *Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial African Children's and Young Adult Literature* (1998) and Granqvist and Martini's *Preserving the Landscape of Imagination: Children's Literature in Africa* (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Specifically Osa's "Contemporary Nigerian Children's Literature" (1984), "African Children's and Youth Literature – Then and Now" (2007) and "The Expanding Universe of African Children's Literature" (2010).

<sup>12</sup> See Odejide's "Visions of Contemporary Society in Nigerian Children's Realistic Fiction" (1979) and "The Nigerian Children's Literary Scene: A View From Inside" (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Particularly his keynote address at the 2004 IBBY Congress, "Not Only Books for Africa but a Reading Culture Too."

### 1.1. A Global Perspective

In order to understand *why* authors such as Achebe, Segun and Ekwensi saw children's literature as a transformative tool, one must first look at the inner workings of children's books. A cross-section of the literature by leading theorists and critics of children's literature provides the basis for an insight into the global study of the genre. To solidify an understanding of how children's literature functions, I turn to Peter Hunt<sup>14</sup> and Jacqueline Rose.<sup>15</sup> Providing a scaffolding of the critical theory of children's literature are Jill May<sup>16</sup> and Kimberley Reynolds,<sup>17</sup> and delving into the socialising nature of children's books is Jack Zipes.<sup>18</sup> I draw on David Rudd to deepen an understanding of the role children's literature plays in identity formation<sup>19</sup> and Lissa Paul to identify the shifting power dynamics in children's literature facilitated by postcolonial theory.<sup>20</sup> Where these academics differ on the pitfalls and solutions surrounding the genre, they unanimously seem to suggest that children's literature is a highly complex, underestimated and potentially productive tool for formation and transformation.

The essential common characteristic of all children's books, as Hunt (1999) points out, is that they serve a *purpose* (*Understanding Children's Literature* 10). Some educate and improve literacy, some entertain, some are better at expanding the imagination, some instruct on coping with specific problems and some expressly inculcate social, cultural and moral values. Most, however, do more than just one of these things (Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* 10). Whichever purpose a child's book aims to address, the two overarching links between them are that, firstly, they attempt to *socialise* children into the world and secondly, they are *written by adults*. On the topic of socialisation, books play a major role in the formation of a child's identity. They help to situate the reader individually as well as in relation to society and are essential for one's cultural and intellectual development as they educate, set boundaries, explain moral rights and wrongs and

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<sup>14</sup> *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996) and *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Of particular interest to this project is Rose's 1984 work on the adult/child power relations in her *Impossibility of Children's Literature*.

<sup>16</sup> *Reading and Writing for Understanding: Children's Literature and Critical Theory* (1995).

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds also offers an insight into the benefits of a critically unsupervised space in her *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007).

<sup>18</sup> Particularly in his "Second Thoughts on Socialization through Literature for Children" (1981).

<sup>19</sup> See Rudd's "Theorising and Theories: How Does Children's Literature Exist?" (1999).

<sup>20</sup> As drawn from her essay, "Feminism Revisited" (1999).

encourage what Jill May terms a “civilising process” within the child so that he or she can eventually grow up to function as a productive citizen (18).

The adult writer of children's books plays a prominent role in this “civilising process”. He or she usually has particular ideas about how a child is to be socialised, educated, entertained and raised either to continue existing social values or to challenge and transform them. This potentially transformative nature of the genre is linked to the role of children's books in the construction of (national and individual) identity, highlighting the function of the adult author in children's literature. All three of these aspects of children's literature (the transformative potential, its part in identity formulation, and the role of adults) are vital to my study and hinge on the perception of children as more easily influenced by literature than adults.

Aside from the perceived impressionableness children offer as an audience, Reynolds (2007) suggests, another appealing aspect of the genre for authors is that it flies under the radar of ‘serious’ academic critics. The ambivalence academics show toward children's books (often seen as a ‘less sophisticated’ form than adult literature) tends paradoxically to work in the favour of the author. By evading the critical spotlight, the author is able to explore ideas he or she believes may not “sit comfortably within the literary establishment” (Reynolds 16). In this way, Reynolds suggests, children's literature is not merely “capable of preserving and rejuvenating out-dated or exhausted genres”, but it also contributes to the creation of new kinds of writing, essentially becoming a “breeding ground and incubator for innovation” (19).<sup>21</sup> Consequently, when considering the transformative potential of children's literature and the advantages afforded by hindsight and historical distance, it can often be easier to identify new discourses, ideas and influences occurring in literature at a specific moment when looking at texts for children (Reynolds 5).

Having said this, one fundamental issue persists: the role of the adult in children's literature. In her book, *The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1994), Jacqueline Rose confronts a central question: to whom is children's literature really addressed? Providing *Peter Pan* as an overarching (though limiting) case study, Rose describes children's literature as “impossible” when one looks at the fundamental and inherent relationship between adult and child in the genre. Rose identifies a “rupture”

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<sup>21</sup> This potential in children's literature has gone generally unacknowledged mostly due to the widespread belief that children's literature simply imitates adult literature (Reynolds 19).

between adult author and child reader, whereby the author attempts to impose on the reader what he or she “knows” about children, hoping his or her readers will believe him or her and identify with his or her characters (2). In this way, children's literature can be seen to contribute to what Nodelman (1999) and Rose (1984) identified as a “process of colonisation”, whereby adults write books for children in order to “persuade them of conceptions of themselves as children that suit adult needs and purposes” (Nodelman, “Decoding the Images” 135).

Rudd acknowledges this problem, but suggests that far from being solely a construct of adult discourse, a child is able to formulate an individual identity through the literature created by adults. He explains that when the fantastical child is imagined, a space is opened up in which a child can construct their own identity, picking out what is relevant to their reality (Rudd 16-17). In this way, Rudd asserts, “the ‘constructed child, as *tabula rasa* – an ‘empty’ being on which society attempts to inscribe a particular identity – becomes the *constructive child*” (Rudd 19 and 22).

Where Rose would argue that the distinctly separate relationship between adult author and child reader is imperative and unavoidable, Hunt and Rudd see it as a problematic power relation. The adult author controls what children are and are not exposed to and is able to censor or monitor what children read. This, Hunt suggests, results in the entrenchment of ideas that children are simple-minded and highly impressionable, leading to the question of whether this control is a form of protection or restriction – a question that will become particularly important when I turn to my chapter on Segun (Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* 5-6).

Nodelman implies that children's literature is primarily disempowering due to this power dynamic. In his 1992 essay, “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature”, the scholar takes a strong critical stance on the power relation between the adult author and the child reader, likening it to that of the West and the Orient, as put forth by Said in his canonical work, *Orientalism* (1979). Nodelman asserts that just as Europeans believed it necessary to describe and analyse the Orient (due to the perception that Orientals were unable to do so themselves), so too do adults feel the need to describe, analyse and speak for children.<sup>22</sup> Yet by speaking for the other, Nodelman and Said suggest, we are not

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<sup>22</sup> However, as Bradford points out, one main difference problematizing Nodelman's comparison is that children are seen to eventually become adults, whereas Orientals will never transform into

only ultimately silencing it, but also confirming and solidifying their difference from and subordination to ourselves (Nodelman, "The Other" 2). The key to dismantling this power structure inherent in children's literature, says Nodelman, is twofold. Firstly, authors should stop thinking about children as one homogenous 'other' group that has the potential to be 'known' and secondly, critics of children's literature can acknowledge and be conscious of the imperialistic attitude adults have toward children (Nodelman, "The Other" 7).

Lissa Paul builds on the adult author as coloniser / child reader as colonised dialectic, but suggests the genre of children's literature is already moving away from this power structure. She draws on Slemon and Wallace's article, "Teaching Children's Literature as a Problem in Theory" (1991). Slemon and Wallace, like Nodelman (1992) and Rose (1984), describe the adult writer/ child reader relationship as one of coloniser/colonised subject, suggesting that the adult author of children's books writes about children as if they are "primitives" and "subjects-in-formation" (20). Paul asserts that postcolonial discourse is a useful way to illuminate how authority over the 'other' is "innocently" attained, stating "the ideological assumption is that primitives and children are too naïve (or stupid) to look after themselves, so need protecting" (124). Yet, Paul claims, the shifts allowed by postcolonial theory (which moves away from the notion of the 'blank' or 'naïve' child in need of protection and instruction) anticipate similar shifts in children's literature, where appropriateness and distinct adult/child boundaries begin to fade (124).

We see this shift in boundaries in Segun's *My Father's Daughter* as well as Ekwensi's books for children, works that can be classified as 'crossover literature'. Crossover literature, as Beckett describes it, is a term used to describe literature (and other forms of media) that appeals to both adult and child readerships (Beckett 58). I argue that these books are potentially extremely effective in their intent to fuel the construction of individual and national identity. This is mainly due to how these texts speak *to* and not *for* the child reader. The texts move away from the adult as coloniser, child as colonised trope and toward a more egalitarian way of addressing the reader, simultaneously creating a less regulated space in which child readers can imagine and create their individual identities.

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Orientalists; their subordinate status is solidified. Even more problematic for Bradford is Nodelman's evasion of race, which she indicates is central to the Orientalists' distinction between "civilised" and "primitive" (7).

## 1.2. Children's Literature in Africa

It is perhaps due to the under-regulated space children's literature occupies that the medium is such an effective instrument for imagining a new way of thinking. As I revealed in the previous section, Reynolds suggests the lack of critical interest in the genre could contribute to authors' autonomy to experiment with innovative, transformative ideas, especially at times of political change. However, the lack of criticism has adverse consequences extending beyond Reynolds' optimistic hypothesis. The critical silence on the genre implies it is beneath the academic gaze, leading to the misconception that children's literature is unimportant, subsequently affecting what is published.<sup>23</sup> This is an even greater problem in Africa than in Europe as the former has fewer financial resources and publishing houses. The result is a circular problem highlighted by Jay Heale: "if so few people buy books, there is no profit in either writing them or printing them" (947).

The deficiency in research and criticism on African children's literature is unfortunate to say the least and it is Emenyonu who voices his disappointment most distinctly. In his recent edition of *African Literature Today* (ALT, 2015) dedicated to children's literature and storytelling in Africa, Emenyonu is vexed by the critical and academic disinterest in African children's literature, describing the response to his call for papers as "abysmally poor" (303). The research, books and papers that *do* pertain to African children's literature are dominated by the likes of Emenyonu (particularly his *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom*, 2000), Gikandi<sup>24</sup>, Osa,<sup>25</sup> Eze and Khorana.<sup>26</sup> These books and articles are mainly published in Europe and the US. They also largely echo one another in their content and concerns, centring on the effects of Eurocentric children's literature on African children and the need to create local, relevant literature that fosters a healthier, more realistic perception of Africa.

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<sup>23</sup> In a recent interview (June 2016) with Ernest Emenyonu, the author reveals that, after contacting numerous publishing houses, he discovered the genre of children's literature is "at the bottom of their budget list". This is due, says Emenyonu, to the persistent misconception that children's literature is the least lucrative genre. Emenyonu refutes this, claiming that, of **all** of his published works (including his major critical works), his second children's book, *Uzo and His Father*, is currently his highest selling work (Santana and Moellenberg, "Interview: Ernest Emenyonu on African Children's Literature." Available at [www.africanwords.com](http://www.africanwords.com)).

<sup>24</sup> Primarily his *Reading Chinua Achebe* (1991).

<sup>25</sup> Osa has perhaps conducted the most extensive research into changing perspectives on African and Nigerian children's literature, particularly in his journal articles "Contemporary Nigerian Children's Literature" (1984), "African Children's and Youth Literature – Then and Now" (2007) and "The Expanding Universe of African Children's Literature" (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Specifically the insights on the postcolonial aspect of African children's literature provided by Eze's *Postcolonial Imagination* (2011) and Khorana's *Critical Perspectives* (1998).

However, what is *not* commonly mentioned is that the struggle to rebuild the African consciousness through literature has problematized the role of women in the projected image of a new consciousness. It is here where I intervene with Obioma Nnaemeka's account of the female in African oral history, tracking the gradual exclusion of women from oral storytelling through the increase in a primarily patriarchal literary medium.<sup>27</sup> Nnaemeka also takes a necessary, in-depth look at the role of women in Achebe's works,<sup>28</sup> which I extend to his children's literature. I include the voices of Flora Nwapa<sup>29</sup> and Segun,<sup>30</sup> who each give a personal account of the experience of being a female writer in Africa and the problems and pitfalls associated with publishing and distributing in Africa in general and Nigeria specifically.

The most revealing information I have gathered concerning the history and current state of children's literature in Africa has been through interviews (many of which are conducted by Granqvist and Martini)<sup>31</sup> and personal accounts of the older generation of authors, such as Nwapa, Segun (refer to footnote 29) Achebe<sup>32</sup> and Ekwensi.<sup>33</sup> In these interviews, the authors describe their own encounters with the pitfalls of writing, publishing and distributing their children's books and their aspirations and suggestions for the future of the genre. But before we move on to the possible solutions proposed by the authors and critics, we must first turn to what is seen as the process whereby the African consciousness became problematically altered.

In his essay "English-Speaking Africa" in Hunt's *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996), Heale broadly divides much of Africa's history into three phases: "original identity", "dominant colonisation", and "independence" (945). This framework, according to Heale, can also be applied to African children's literature, which he breaks down as "an original oral tradition of storytelling"; the "arrival of literacy and literature from abroad"; and "the growth (or not) of a new indigenous youth literature"

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<sup>27</sup> Drawn from Nnaemeka "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood" (1994).

<sup>28</sup> This refers to Nnaemeka's "Chinua Achebe: Women, Language and Border (Lines) Lands" (1996).

<sup>29</sup> See Nwapa's "Writing and Publishing for African Children" (1997).

<sup>30</sup> See Segun's "Challenges of Being a Female Writer in a Male-Dominated Developing Society" (2001).

<sup>31</sup> Mainly published in their co-edited *Preserving the Landscape of Imagination: Children's Literature in Africa* (1997).

<sup>32</sup> See Appiah, Athony K. et al. "Interview with Chinua Achebe" (1982) and Cott interview, "Chinua Achebe: At the Crossroads" (1997).

<sup>33</sup> See Ekwensi's interview in *Kunapipi* (1982), and his essay, "Random Thoughts on Clocking Sixty-five" in *The Essential Ekwensi* (1987).

(945). Heale traces the history of children's literature in Africa, from its pre-colonial oral form (such as folktales, which passed down traditions, culture and the morals and values of the society) to the indoctrination of Christian values with the arrival of the missionaries.<sup>34</sup> The subsequent introduction of European children's literature to African children altered the way Africans perceived themselves; the available literature featured landscapes and concepts foreign to the African child and, explains Gikandi, when this child did encounter their culture in literary texts; "it did so either as the European idea of Africa or as a sign of lack" ("Invention of African Culture" 3). Gikandi recognises this as a major catalyst for destructive consequences for the cultural integrity of those colonised by Western literature, as it excluded, marginalised and alienated African children. The major concern faced by African children's book writers, then, was to produce literature that was *relevant* to African children's lived reality.

As I have established, children's literature acts as an important tool in socialisation and national identity construction, so it can be seen that the Eurocentricity of the literature available to children in Africa at the time essentially undermined the construction of healthy national identities. Carol Fox (2001) reasserts the important process of children's national identity formation in her essay on national identity in children's literature, stating "when children have sorted themselves out according to name, address, age, and sex, they identify themselves tribally as belonging to a group with another name" (for example 'British' or 'African') (31). This identification accounts for other similarities and differences, including language and skin colour and, according to Fox, the stereotyping of these differences (often imbued in literature) "penetrate deeply into children's self-awareness and linger long" (31).

Stereotyping and subordination are still major obstacles in African literature today, both for adults *and* children. Bearing in mind what I have mentioned about the formative and transformative potential children's literature holds, it seems Gikandi's description of the modern African novel as a "borrowed instrument" with which to subvert the dominant colonial structures and reaffirm and reimagine an African identity falls short when we

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that Heale is not the only literary critic to focus on the history of orality and literacy in Africa, which is a well-studied field. Notable contributions to the field are (amongst others) Walter Ong (1982), who shed light on the effects the shift from orality to literacy had on human consciousness, Abiola Irele (1993) and the connection he draws between oral literature and the African imagination, Eileen Julien (1992), who exposes the problematic, polarised view of Africa as primarily oral in contrast to Europe, which is associated with literacy, and Neil Ten Kortenaar (2011) who points to the problematic association of 'literate' with 'civilised'.

consider that he is speaking primarily of novels for adults and not works explicitly for children (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 22). His description of the African writer is that of a “defender of culture” and “custodian of national consciousness”, whose role it is to imagine “alternative configurations of our ‘real histories’ to either affirm or transcend them” and to “revise and revert” colonial discourses (Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 7 and 3). The writer, he emphasises, has the responsibility, to facilitate the “space” created by literature in which the reader is able to imagine “utopian worlds” that are alternative to the dominant ideology (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 22). This space, suggests Sunday O. Anozie, can be continually recreated, *especially* in children's literature, to suit the reality of African experience (3). It is a space in which the invention and reinvention of African cultures can occur (Anozie 3).

But children's literature does not only open up an imaginative or (*re*-imaginative) space for the adult writer. As I have illustrated with arguments from Peter Hunt and David Rudd, it also creates a space in which children are able to imagine their own *individual* identities, a space where the “constructed” child can become the “constructive” child (Rudd 16-22 and Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature*, 5-6). With this in mind, I argue that the potentially constructive and transformative spaces opened up by children's literature make this specific genre *the* most fruitful place in which to begin to wholly re-conceptualise the African subject.

As I have shown, the general consensus of critics of African literature is that colonial literature for children fundamentally undermined the African consciousness. In order to overcome the damaging effects of Eurocentric books and work toward building a firmer sense of African identity, writers needed to produce literature for children that was more relevant in content, local in setting and which reintroduced history and tradition from a less Eurocentric perspective. Repurposing and reintroducing traditional oral stories and folktales as a socialising tool was one way in which African writers of children's books sought to promote within children a positive sense of national identity, cultural pride and the reinstallation of traditional values.

Emenyonu and Anozie stress the important role traditional oral literature (the practice of which has rapidly declined) has played in the formation and situation of a child's national identity (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 241 and Anozie 7). Oral storytelling has historically been a means of entertainment, instruction, and preservation of culture as well as an instiller

of morals and values and a space in which a child could achieve self-actualisation. Additionally, because these tales are passed down through generations by family members or members of the community, they are made into common knowledge, becoming an integral part of a 'cultural memory', all of which are important aspects of an 'imagined community' (Sundmark and Kelen 233). But the traditional stories and folktales don't only work on a *collective* level; they also have an inextricable connection to the formation of *individual* identity. Storytelling has a similar purpose to literature in that it is a medium for socialisation, education and entertainment. It helps to situate the listener in relation to others, to form an opinion, take a side, identify with characters and internalise moral messages and cultural values. The individual aspect combined with the communal, cultural quality of folktales and storytelling can therefore be seen to work simultaneously on multiple levels, indivisibly linking the cultural, the national and the individual.

In his essay on Achebe, Emenyonu applauds Achebe's consciousness of the malleable nature of traditional Nigerian folktales, which can be reconstructed, adapted or expanded to incorporate immediate issues, ideas and concerns. Not only does a 'good' children's book then, according to Emenyonu, have the potential to instil moral values such as discipline, loyalty, humility, obedience and social responsibility, it also has the power to stimulate the imagination, entertain, educate, satiate curiosity and provoke natural creative talents – all of which are the attributes of a more conscientious, educated, culturally stable and socially aware citizen (*Goatskin Bags* 241). However, even though Anozie describes folktales as "a highly commendable and culturally desirable thing to do", he cautions against dwelling solely on the past (7). He insists that whilst "backward integrating", folktales for children should also be "forward anticipating", never ignoring the need for "innovation and change" (Anozie 7).

It is not just the past and the future that writers need to bear in mind when repurposing traditional oral stories. Nwapa suggests writers also need an awareness of the *current moment* – particularly when considering the changing role of *women* in African society. Nwapa argues that the roles traditionally assumed by women are increasingly less applicable and there is a call for children's literature to reflect the spectrum of functions women currently embody (for example the single mothers, the female doctors and career women who decide not to have children). Slight alterations to customary tales could teach similar values whilst putting them into a more contemporary context, giving female child readers an

important point of identification and reducing the proliferation of gender stereotypes (Nwapa 274-5).

Yet one imperative issue with reviving traditional folktales is the propagation of the inherently patriarchal world from which they stem. In her essay on "Writing and Publishing for African Children" (1997), Nwapa acknowledges the importance of continuing oral traditions in literature, but believes that some of them should be reconsidered given their patriarchal roots: "one must be very careful in the use of oral tradition. Some African folktales are sexist in nature", a point that is particularly relevant when turning to Ekwensi's repurposed Hausa folktales (274).

Traditional oral literature was not always primarily patriarchal, argues Obioma Nnaemeka. In her essay, "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood" (1994), Nnaemeka traces the transition of oral to written literature in Africa from a feminist perspective. She describes traditional oral literature as a medium that prominently featured women in visible, important roles. Women had a central role not only in the creation and preservation of folklore (often transformed or crafted to incorporate women-centred perspectives) and the reinforcement of value systems, but also often as lead characters in the stories.

With the introduction of Western literature and literacy (with its typically Eurocentric and patriarchal viewpoints), the emphasis shifted from competent and creative storytelling to the importance of literacy and understanding of the language of the coloniser, which contained specific ideologies and thoughts on the roles of women. The education of men was therefore prioritised, positioning men in "the world" and women "in the home" (Andrade 13-14). As a result, Nnaemeka asserts, "women, as speaking subjects, have been transformed into written objects through the collusion of the imperialistic subject and the patriarchal subject" ("Orality to Writing" 138). Nnaemeka cites this as a primary cause of the late arrival of women onto the scene of creative writing in Africa.

After the publication of Nwapa's *Efuru*, the number of books written by African women featuring female main characters steadily grew. Yet even in this literature, asserts Nnaemeka, the role of the woman is greatly undermined and the strong, radical female characters are largely marginalised. Most female protagonists end up reaffirming widely accepted notions of African women's 'reality' by adopting roles that Nnaemeka refers to as "characters of reaffirmation" ("Orality to Writing" 140). There is a persistent reiteration by

African authors, including Nwapa, Achebe and Segun that mothers need to put their children first, and those women who are unable to have children are bound to be unhappy and unfulfilled (Nnaemeka, "Orality to Writing" 140 and 144). Nnaemeka suggests that perhaps the reason for the marginalisation of less conformist female characters lies in the self-consciousness with which African women tend to write. The unease or "nervous condition" possessed by African women writers reflects an awareness of the primarily male gaze of the reader or critic (something Reynolds, 2007, might suggest can be circumnavigated by the lack of critical gaze afforded to children's literature) (Nnaemeka, "Orality to Writing" 144). It also highlights the importance of the struggle against imperialism, which overshadows the inequalities and injustices manifested by the patriarchal structures of their African world (Nnaemeka, "Orality to Writing" 151). The result is that women writers (and characters) are overlooked.

Indeed, even children's books written by African women seem to be less readily available than those penned by their male counterparts. It is for this reason I initially felt compelled to address the issue of women in Nigerian literature for children. Whilst searching for my primary texts, I found it relatively easy to source the literature written by Nigerian male authors, yet female-written texts were far more difficult to come by, causing me to wonder how difficult it would have been for the intended readership to obtain texts written by women. Where were the voices of Nigerian women in children's literature? What were they saying? I began to question not only the role of women *writers*, but also the role of women *characters* in Nigerian children's literature (written by men and women) and the resultant impact on its (both male and female) readers' identity formation.

The fact is, it was primarily *male* authors who penned the books written for Nigerian children after independence and, even those written by women writers seemed to favour battling political issues over patriarchal ones. By focusing chiefly on reshaping Africa outside the shadows of colonialism, neglecting the role of females in a postcolonial society and reiterating roles of reaffirmation, African writers are seen to 'refashion' a consciousness in literature that continues to neglect, oppress and stereotype African women. Children's books that aim to celebrate a new and culturally rooted consciousness do so in a manner that reiterates the subordinate status of women, often depicting scenes that are not even relevant to the reader's reality (Eze 58). As Daniels (2015) suggests, if gender roles are inculcated by social structures, which are taught through children's books, then it is through children's

literature that one can begin to introduce gender role sensitisation in the hopes that it has a knock-on effect on society in the future (158).

This is even more crucial when one considers that Africa's education and literacy rates are lowest amongst the female population.<sup>35</sup> Following from this, I would argue that, when considering the role of the writer in society, it is *especially* important for writers to focus on the restoration of the consciousness of the postcolonial African female *simultaneously* with that of the African consciousness in general, something neither Achebe nor Segun appeared to prioritise in their literature for children.

### 1.3. Children's Literature in Nigeria

With this in mind, I turn specifically to *Nigerian* children's literature, a genre that has been paid lamentably insufficient attention. So little can be found on the topic that the majority of my findings have been sourced from transcripts of conferences and symposiums, from interviews with authors (who are mainly asked about their adult works), newspaper articles and fleetingly from journals that are dedicated to wider scopes of study. Osayimwense Osa<sup>36</sup>, Odejide<sup>37</sup>, Fayose<sup>38</sup>, Segun<sup>39</sup> and Nwapa<sup>40</sup> dominate the sparse scene of Nigerian children's literature criticism in a postcolonial context, primarily reiterating the problems faced by African children's literature pre- and post-colonial rule and its effects on a collective national consciousness. The consensus surrounding the function of the author of children's books at the time of independence was that of the rehabilitation of national consciousness and the recreation of a national identity. The reaffirmation of traditional morals and values and the 're-teaching' of a history that had been distorted by the lens of Western imperialism played a major role in this goal. Yet fundamental roadblocks presented writers with seemingly insurmountable problems, the three most major of which were (and still are) those of language, literacy and publishing/distribution.

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<sup>35</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics "Adult and Youth Literacy: Global Trends on Gender Parity" 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Osa's "Adolescent Literature in Contemporary Nigeria" (1984), and his "Contemporary Nigerian Children's Literature." (1984).

<sup>37</sup> Odejide's "Visions of Contemporary Society in Nigerian Children's Realistic Fiction" (1979), and "The Nigerian Children's Literary Scene: A View From Inside" (1996).

<sup>38</sup> Fayose's "Not Only Books for Africa but a Reading Culture Too" (2004).

<sup>39</sup> Segun's "Challenges of Being a Female Writer in a Male-Dominated Developing Society" (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Nwapa's "Writing and Publishing for African Children" (1997).

Following independence, Nigerian scholars and political leaders prioritised the issue of literacy, putting into place numerous educational structures and programmes<sup>41</sup> with the belief that literacy is an important tool with which to combat poverty, ignorance and disease and promote national unity. A notable example of the prioritising of literature for the younger population was Nigerian authors' involvement in the popular Pacesetters series.<sup>42</sup> In a special issue on the Concept of National Literature (1987) Virginia Coulon describes Nigerian authors writing for the Pacesetters series as being primarily "concerned with Nigeria as a nation", tackling contemporary issues in a way that captures the interest and imagination of the young adult reader (304-5). Coulon suggests that the intention of the series for Nigerian authors has been not only to moralise, socialise and encourage an interest in reading, but also the more "subtle and elevated task" of fostering a "Nigerian national spirit, a sense of Nigerian patriotism", contributing to the edification of a national identity (310-11).<sup>43</sup>

With such an emphasis placed on producing nation-affirming, local, easily accessible, low-cost literature for children, it is unsurprising that literacy rates climbed steadily post-independence, growing from an alarming 15.6% prior to independence, to an estimated<sup>44</sup> 40-45% twenty years later. Perhaps the biggest indicator of the importance of children's literature in Nigeria at the time can be seen in the largest population of literate Nigerians by the year 1991 (33%), which was that of the 6-14 year olds, an age group that made up 40% of the total population (Murtala Akanbi et al 36; CIA, "Nigeria" 2-4). It is therefore understandable that the issue of igniting within children the desire to read was a central point of discussion at the 1973 Ife conference on publishing. The general consensus was that books that were accessible, attractive, relatable and relevant to the lives of children in Nigeria were of paramount importance in raising literacy rates and strengthening national identity (Osa, "Adolescent Literature" 289).

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<sup>41</sup> Yet, despite these initiatives, lack of funding has proven to be a major obstacle in successfully implementing them.

<sup>42</sup> An inexpensive and popular paperback series first published by Macmillan in 1977 featuring African authors and targeted at a teenage African readership (Coulon 304).

<sup>43</sup> Coulon does not ignore the irony associated with the promotion of national literature and nationalism by a multinational publisher (Macmillan) with vested commercial interests. Yet she indicates that it is precisely because of the commercial drive of the publisher that the series is so widely read, a key component in what she terms as "true national literature" (Coulon 317-18).

<sup>44</sup> Given that Nigeria still has not conducted a nation-wide literacy survey, the literacy rates are an estimate.

In a keynote address presented at the 2004 IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Congress, Osazee Fayose argued that in order to raise literacy rates, what African children needed was not only the production of more relevant books, but also the promotion of a 'reading culture'. He asserted that, for children in particular, reading is a crucial instrument for individual identity development, which is aided by the inclusion of identifiable characters through which children could experience situations vicariously (Fayose, "Reading Culture" 10). Also important, stressed Fayose, is the potential children's books have to alter the way in which children perceive their nation and formulate their national identity ("Reading Culture" 12).

This way of thinking led to a sub-genre described by Odejide (1996) as a "rash of 'issues books'" written with the express aim of promoting national unity. This sub-genre (which can be correlated to the rise of the country's literacy rates), rose up after the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, at a time that has come to be seen as the "golden age" of children's book publishing in Africa (Odejide, "Literary Scene" 72).<sup>45</sup> Yet this "rash" of which Segun, Achebe and Ekwensi were a part, began to subside somewhere in the 1990's mainly due to the lack of adequate funding.<sup>46</sup> Imported books once again took centre stage, being more attractive and generally cheaper than locally produced literature.

In her essay "Writing and Publishing for African Children", Nwapa highlights her personal experience as a children's book author writing at the time just following independence: "The reaction of goods Made-in-Nigeria is negative, even with books. Many nursery schools in Enugu, where I live and work, for instance, prefer imported books. Perhaps because imported ones are better produced and cheaper" (271). Nwapa recounts her personal struggles with the Nigerian Publisher's Services, which was unable to sell her children's books and so preferred to focus on distributing her more popular novels and short stories. The only way the author was able to disseminate her books was to do the work herself, "I had to go to Ibadan to physically carry our children's books back to Enugu" (Nwapa, "Writing and Publishing" 271).

This underlines a fundamental problem for Nigerian authors of children's books who cite imported literature as a contributing factor to the deterioration of the Nigerian consciousness

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<sup>45</sup> The "golden age" of book publishing for children in Africa is seen to be between the years of 1970 and 1990, when many local African publishing houses were established (Odejide, "Literary Scene" 72).

<sup>46</sup> Literacy rates remain a central concern in Nigeria. They currently stand at around 60% (CIA, "Nigeria" 4).

and extol the need for locally produced literature through which to rehabilitate the consciousness. If locally produced and published literature costs more than international literature, the problems highlighted by Nigerian authors persist. Additionally, of the books that *are* being produced locally, it is generally those that are written in English that are printed and reprinted, as they are more likely to reach a wider audience. Indeed, most of the books published and distributed to children in postcolonial Nigeria are written in English. After the collapse of colonialism, education and book production in Nigeria remained largely in the medium of English. In a country that speaks over 300 indigenous languages, English remains the predominantly second language (Nwapa, "Writing and Publishing" 273). Thus for reasons of wider readership (both within and outside of the country) and economics of publishing and distribution, English-language books dominated the market. The national identity so carefully being recreated was primarily being formed in English.

Yet, if, as theory teaches us, there can be no discourse without ideology, if we cannot separate language from the ideologies imbued in that language, then we could also say, as wa Thiong'o does in *Decolonising the Mind*, that the 'new' Nigerian nation was being built on the Euro-centric, male-centric values that are inseparable from the English language (16). By writing in the English language, argues wa Thiong'o, writers are essentially perpetuating colonial rule. However, Bill Ashcroft would counter that, although language does set certain restrictions and limitations, those who read or write in a colonial second language don't necessarily have to fall victim to the inherent ideologies; "while ideology, discourse or language constrain subjects, they do not imprison them, nor are subjects immobilised by power" (*Post-Colonial* 47). Indeed, as Achebe demonstrated in his novels, language can be subverted and stretched to reveal an entirely new meaning. He illustrated this in his works by 'oralizing' his written words (a frequently criticised technique); moulding and repurposing the English language into a pliable, textured material, able to stretch to accommodate the Igbo proverbs, symbols and metaphors contained within oral traditions. The result, he hoped, would be "a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Achebe, "English" 30).

It is with this in mind that I turn to chapter one, focusing on children's works by Achebe. The conscious purpose of Achebe's children's literature was to build a framework of traditional morality and contemporary hybridity in order to help guide Nigerian children through the transitional period of instability following independence (Dow 164). The author set out to create literature for the nation's children that celebrated tolerance, acceptance and

unity. He aimed to accurately reflect the country's history in the hopes that the new generation of Nigerian citizens would have a firmer cultural and moral base, rooted in tradition. His animistic stories, *How the Leopard got His Claws* (1973) and *The Drum* (1977), are a lesson in history and politics, inherently criticising attributes such as violence and obsessions with total power while elevating qualities of gratitude, hard work and resourcefulness. His more widely read *Chike and the River* (1966), on the other hand, provides a point of identification for the child reader and addresses issues of traditional morality in an increasingly globalised Nigeria.

I shift my focus in chapter two from the 'guiding hand' present in Achebe's works toward Mabel Segun's more forcefully pervasive presence. Segun, like Achebe and Ekwensi, acknowledges the 'rehabilitative' potential that children's books hold. Her view on the role of the writer, however, diverges. Segun likens the responsibility of the children's book author to that of a "third parent", whose obligation toward children is to socialise them and inculcate moral values with the aim of aiding in the creation of 'good' and responsible citizens (what May refers to as a "civilising process") (Segun, "Problems and Prospects" 32). Both *Youth Day Parade* (1984) and *Olu and the Broken Statue* (1985) teach similar values of responsibility, hard work and good citizenship whilst also encouraging unity in a multicultural society. But, where Segun takes a very conscious approach that fosters *collective* identity formation, I suggest the restrictive nature of her books means there is less space for the child readers to formulate and imagine their *individual* identities. The exception, however, is seen in her autobiographical children's book *My Father's Daughter* (1965), which fosters a fruitful space for individual identity construction and, most notably, provides a rare and necessary *female* perspective.

The role of the female in Nigerian children's literature is a theme I carry through to my third chapter, which focuses on Cyprian Ekwensi's literature for children. Ekwensi, like Segun and Achebe, saw the development of the nation and the celebration of its cultural heritage as something that could be encouraged through literature. This can be seen in his attempt to reintroduce traditional oral tales, as seen in his *Passport of Mallam Iliya* (1960) and *An African Night's Entertainment* (1962). However, Ekwensi's primary concern was to produce *popular* literature that reflected reality, with the aim of increasing the nation's literacy rate by providing more interesting, relevant and attractive literature for the younger generations. Ekwensi's determination to create well-liked literature for children extended to his inclusion of what might be seen as 'inappropriate' themes for young readers such as death, vengeance

and violence. His portrayal of violence against women as well as female objectification and dehumanisation is particularly troubling when one considers the influence children's literature has on the inculcation and proliferation of negative stereotypes. However, it is precisely the unconventional and honest nature of Ekwensi's works that enable them to open up a highly imaginative and individually constructive space provided by crossover literature (as defined by Beckett, 2011). This is particularly true of *The Drummer Boy* (1960), which provides an entirely new perspective on children with physical handicaps and confronts real issues faced by Nigerian children at the time. Important also is the book's emphasis on the pressure adults placed on children at the time to become the generation that would guide and reform the nation.

"Literature for children" asserts Zipes, "is the adult author's symbolically social act intended to influence and perhaps control the future destiny of culture" (19). It is this view that informs my process of thought throughout this project, which works to demonstrate the ways in which Nigeria's children's book authors Chinua Achebe, Mabel Segun and Cyprian Ekwensi sought to influence the national consciousness in the postcolonial moment. I question how the authors viewed their readership in their aim to fashion children into citizens and, more specifically, how (if at all) they envisaged their *female* readership and the role of women in the newly independent nation. I consider the problems and pitfalls surrounding the adult/child dynamics of power, the persistent issues of stereotypes, Eurocentricity and the seemingly disregarded role of the female in what is an otherwise conscious effort on the part of the authors to encourage the refashioning of the nation in the wake of colonial rule. I go on to suggest children's literature that appeals to a cross-generational, gender-inclusive readership could have the potential to be most effective in its intention to facilitate the simultaneous construction of both individual and collective national identity in male and female readers.

## Chapter 1

### Writer as Teacher in Chinua Achebe's Books for Children

*"My work in children's literature... has not been given the attention it deserves"*  
 –Achebe.<sup>47</sup>

*"Children's literature can bring about change, but will also often be a carrier of stereotypical and conservative ideas"*

- Sundmark and Kelen.<sup>48</sup>

This chapter looks at Chinua Achebe's works for children. More specifically, it focuses on his conceptualization of how local Nigerian children's literature could work to rebuild a healthy national consciousness in the wake of colonial rule. Crucial to this aim is Achebe's view of the role of the writer as a "teacher"<sup>49</sup> which, I maintain, he extended to his children's literature.<sup>50</sup> Achebe used the genre partly as a means to educate his readers on a shared history predating colonial rule and partly to re-instil traditional morals and values through reintroducing and repurposing traditional oral folktales. In doing so, he attempted to create a point of identification for the contemporary Nigerian child, whilst also fostering a common sense of national responsibility, unity and cultural pride. Achebe was aware of the socialising, identity formulating, educative functions of children's literature. Yet in his conscious quest to affect change in the nation he homogenised his readership, falling short of providing them with the relatable characters necessary for the healthy construction of individual identity. Achebe further crucially undermined his intentions by neglecting the role of the *female* in his books, in his readership and in his blueprint for a 'refashioned' nation.

According to Gikandi, Achebe was one of the first African writers to identify the potential of the novel not merely to represent reality, but also to "[invent] a new national community" (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 3). The role of the novelist, according to Achebe, went beyond "defender of a culture and the custodian of a national consciousness", encouraging also "the

<sup>47</sup> Raghavacharyulu et al, "Achebe Interviewed" (92).

<sup>48</sup> Sundmark and Kelen, "The Nation in Children's Literature: Nations of Childhood" (4).

<sup>49</sup> See Achebe, "Novelist as Teacher" (55-60).

<sup>50</sup> A notion also put forth by Miller in "The Novelist as Teacher: Chinua Achebe's Literature for Children" (1981).

creation of an African identity” (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 7; Appiah et al, emphasis mine). Thus, Achebe implied, these writers hold the responsibility of not only *preservation* (of culture and tradition), but also imaginative *invention* (of a new national identity).<sup>51</sup>

As Gikandi suggests, African fiction is able to function as “a formal instrument in the invention and reinvention of African cultures” primarily because it is a medium that seeks to conjure into being worlds beyond the realm of reality, “utopian worlds beyond colonial and neo-colonial reification” (Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 3). While the context of Gikandi's argument was centred on Achebe's works for *adults*, I suggest his claims have an even greater impact when applied to the author's children's literature, particularly if we take into account Rudd's assertion that children's literature opens up a space through which alternative ideas and identities can be imagined and constructed (16-17). This is especially the case when we recall Reynolds' description of children's literature as an “incubator for innovation”, surpassing its capabilities of merely the preservation and rejuvenation of dated genres (19). Compounded with Reynolds' view that writers of children's literature enjoy a less criticised space in which to explore and experiment, we can see Achebe's children's books provided a fertile breeding ground for the germination of new ideas about the reinvention of a national identity.

It is clear from Achebe's essays and interviews on children's literature that he believed that the onus is on the genre's authors to teach, guide, preserve, invent and restore.<sup>52</sup> The role of the child in children's literature, then, is a passive one: to be taught and guided, shaped and moulded. The implicit suggestion here is that writers of African children's books carry the transcendent duty of inventing an ideal nation and their readership bears the burden of internalising and putting into practice the author's imaginings. But despite the restrictive stance Achebe took in his books, he notably endeavoured to connect with the young reader by locating his stories in recognizable settings and using familiar language. He strove to revive (and encourage the preservation of) traditional folktales and the morals they advocate by making them more applicable to the contemporary Nigerian child. He did this by blending oral and written literature, the (pre-colonial and colonial) past and the postcolonial

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<sup>51</sup> As Achebe said in an interview with Jonathan Cott (1997), African children “must now be brought up on a common vocabulary for the heroic and the cowardly, the just and the unjust. Which means preserving and refurbishing the landscape of the imagination and the domain of stories” (192).

<sup>52</sup> Especially emphasized in “My Daughters”, an essay featured in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (62-66) and his interviews found in *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, particularly his interview with Jonathan Cott: “Chinua Achebe: At the Crossroads” (76-88).

present, the rural and urban to connect with a range of Nigerian children. Through this, he hoped to reveal the possibility of a multidimensional society that is not only firmly grounded in traditional values, but also a globally independent contender.

From Sundmark and Kelen (2013), we are aware of the link between how a subject perceives his or her belonging to a particular nation and the formation of his or her individual identity. Therefore by using national markers particular to Nigeria, such as traditional folklore and physical setting, Achebe's children's books were attempting to contribute to the simultaneous construction of the readers' national and individual identities. Yet, where the nation is threaded throughout Achebe's works, the individual aspect is impeded by too few characters with whom the readers could identify. As I have established, one role of children's books is to create a space in which the reader can construct his or her own identity and position him or herself within a society. However, by failing in his traditional folktales to incorporate enough identifiable child-figures, marginalising the female (character and reader) and focusing perhaps too intently on the political messages in his works for children, Achebe may have neglected the individual, widened the gap between adult author and child reader and amplified gender stereotypes.

### **Imagining Identities in Storytelling**

As described in my introductory chapter, traditional oral tales can play an important role in identity formation not only on a collective, national level, but also individually. Their purpose has been to entertain, educate, socialise and inculcate values and morals, providing an imaginative space bounded by social and cultural norms whereby a community is linked through shared knowledge. In this way, the individual is able to situate themselves within and in relation to their community. Achebe was aware of this connection between the collective and the individual in traditional oral stories and made extensive use of folktales in his books for children, utilising them as an effective way of binding together national and individual identity. By taking traditional folktales and storytelling techniques, applying them to his literature and adapting them to suit a contemporary reader, Achebe not only encouraged the reader to form an individual identity, but an identity rooted in a nation united by a common history and shared traditions.

In the aforementioned Cott interview, Achebe lamented the "enormous loss" of traditional storytelling and advocated for the revival of the characteristic atmosphere that surrounds the tradition. The stories once told to Nigerian children by their mothers "night after night" are

now read in books because, as he suggests, the “pace of life has altered” (81). He recognised that perhaps a revival of the old way of traditional storytelling is unrealistic, but he stood firm on the need to “make sure that the kind of stories that our children read carry something of the aura of the tales our mothers and sisters told us” (Cott 81). The author therefore saw it as essential to demonstrate the possibility of communal unification brought about by oral storytelling, believing the employment of storytelling techniques in his books was an effective way of preserving tradition and encouraging a positive sense of national identity.

It is with this in mind that Achebe set about writing *How the Leopard Got His Claws* and *The Drum*, both of which are written in the form of a traditional folktale. Although the tales take on the shape of traditional folklore, they are adapted slightly to suit a more contemporary audience, assuming a hybrid structure fluctuating between traditional and contemporary. Zakes Mda believes this hybridity is a positive step forward in modifying old tales and reinforcing their relevance, stating that folktales “need not be a reinvention of a buried pre-colonial national identity, or a mere preservation of folkways and wisdom” (144). Instead, they can function as a mediator of hybridity due to their capability of being both a portal into history and a vehicle for looking at current issues (Mda 144). This echoes Anozie's claim that folktales teaching children about the past should also be “forward anticipating”, taking into account current (and potential future) situations (7). This makes the stories more relevant and interesting to the child reader and maximises their impact on the readers' imagining of the future.

Both *How the Leopard got His Claws* and *The Drum* are adapted Igbo folktales, narrating the gradual breakdown of harmonious, communal living and a shift toward cultural separation and personal isolation. Both stories are set in a world without time and in a place where animals can talk. Although all of the characters symbolise globally recognisable attributes and characteristics, they are species specifically native to Africa (leopards, tortoises and elephants). Additionally the scenery described is of “scorched landscapes, famine and drought” particular to Africa (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 251). *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, published just three years after the end of the Nigerian Civil War, is grounded in relevance geographically and temporally. The tale can be seen as a commentary on the political and societal upheaval caused by the War. It reflects the injustices, treachery, fratricide and hypocrisy in the crisis period leading up to the separation of the Eastern region of Nigeria (later declared the Republic of Biafra) from the rest of the country (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 246). The story revolves around a village of animals, peaceful and happy

under the rule of their king, Leopard. Leopard has no need for sharp teeth or claws; such is the sense of unity and peace in the kingdom. Only one member of the village, Dog, is discontented. One day Dog violently overtakes the kingdom, usurping Leopard. Dog rules the other animals with brute force, misappropriating their resources and fracturing their sense of political and cultural unity (characteristics Emenyonu believes to be references to events surrounding the Nigerian Civil War) (*Goatskin Bags* 247). Leopard visits the blacksmith to receive gifts of sharp teeth and claws and goes to "Thunder" to obtain a voice of thunder. He returns to his village where he attacks Dog, banishing him from the village. He then orders the animals to dismantle the town hall (a place of gathering and community) they had worked so hard to build together, effectively disuniting them.

It is disunity, treachery and worship of a false king who ruled with terror that ultimately leads to the loss of all that the animals had built. The dog is punished for his disloyalty by being shunned by the animal kingdom and forced to live in servitude to his cruel human master in return for his protection (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 253). Traditional values of cooperation and unity, trust and loyalty are the main moral lessons one takes away from this book. Also presented is the lesson that treachery can turn friends into enemies and lead to discord, punishment and loss of freedom. These themes of disunity and false deification carry through into another of Achebe's children's books, *The Drum*.

*The Drum* was Achebe's final children's story. It tells the tale of a tortoise with an inflated sense of importance, who one day stumbles into the spirit world after hungrily chasing a palm fruit that has fallen into a hole. He is generously given a magical drum that produces food and drink when beaten. When Tortoise returns to his famine and drought-stricken village, he uses the drum to feed his village at mealtimes. Tortoise becomes so popular and the villagers' debt of food to him so great, that he is to be crowned king. But when Elephant breaks the drum, Tortoise forces his way back into the spirit world, threatening the spirits and demanding another, larger drum. This instrument does not produce food, but a swarm of Spirits armed with whips, punishment for tortoise's impertinent behaviour. This curse causes the animals to scatter themselves across the world and, since then, they have "never stopped running" (Achebe, *Drum* 59). Through disrespect for the spirit world, arrogance, dishonesty, greed and false worship, the animals lose their unity, security and freedom.

Both *How the Leopard got His Claws* and *The Drum* laud traditional qualities of gratitude, hard work and resourcefulness, values that lie at the base of tales told in the oral tradition.

As Achebe acknowledged in his interview with Cott: "A tale may be fascinating, amusing-creating laughter and delight... but at its base is a sustaining morality, and I think this is very important" (82). This is revealed in Achebe's works for children, whereby he does not just entertain his readers whilst teaching them about their history, but also iterates the value of unity, morality, honesty, hard work and community. He demonstrates to the reader the corrupting influence of power and greed and encourages them to grow into the kinds of individuals (and citizens) who have a strong moral foundation rooted in tradition and supported by the community.

However, if one believes that a major component of a successful story is that it draws the reader in and encourages identification with the characters, one could wonder just how 'relatable' Achebe's animal characters are. If the emphasis at the time was on writers producing children's literature relevant to the experiences of the contemporary Nigerian child,<sup>53</sup> one could argue that the choice of adult, animal characters in a story may prove to alienate the intended reader. In fact, there are *no* child characters in *How the Leopard Got His Claws* and only one in *The Drum*, a little boy who lives in the spirit world and is treated with patronising contempt by Tortoise. Additionally, the boy's name is never mentioned, but he is rather referred to as "my boy", "the boy", "your boy", and "stupid boy" (Achebe, *Drum* 35, 51 and 52). In this way Achebe, perhaps unintentionally, demonstrates the powerlessness of children in an adult society. By providing no other character with which a child-reader can identify, Achebe effectively excludes his readers from the narrative and further alienates them by giving the impression that a child's voice is non-consequential.

Not all of Achebe's books are excluding in this particular way. In his book, *Chike and the River*, the main character is a young Nigerian boy, indicating an attempt by the author to relate to the child-reader. Contemporary in setting and realistic in content, *Chike and the River* centres around the main character, eleven year-old Chike, and his quest to cross the River Niger. Chike is sent by his single, working mother from his rural village to live with his uncle in Onitsha and attend school there. Chike's mother warns Chike that the city is an unsafe place, "Onitsha is a big city, full of dangerous people and kidnappers. Therefore do not wander about the city. In particular do not go near the River Niger" (Achebe, *Chike* 9). Chike does not heed his mother's advice. He becomes obsessed by the notion of crossing the river and, once he does, he finds himself in a terrifying situation involving a group of

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<sup>53</sup> As put forth by Osa (1984).

criminals. Chike makes up for disobeying his mother by identifying and reporting the thieves to the authorities, who reward him for his honesty with a full scholarship. From this book, one takes away the lessons that education, truthfulness, obedience and respect for elders are of paramount importance.

Achebe's emphasis on re-instilling traditional values stemmed from his anxiety to address what he described in an interview with Ogbaa (1980) as the "disturbance" of African culture due to moral fissures caused by both internal (African) and external (Western) influences (67). Published in the same year as his adult novel, *A Man of the People*, and the year before the start of the Nigerian Civil ("Biafran") War, *Chike and the River* was born at a time when, as Emenyonu describes, "the Nigerian society and its esteemed values were steadily tottering towards disorder and disintegration" (*Goatskin Bags* 241). Unlike his adult novels *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, which take a somewhat despairing view of the decline of Nigerian tradition and morality, *Chike and the River* presents to its young readers "an almost idyllic portrayal of independent Nigeria" (Miller 11). In this book, Achebe addresses the (then) current situation in Nigeria and his perceived need to re-stabilise "disturbed" traditional values and place them into a modern context (Ogbaa 67).

Achebe was careful to address this nationwide "disturbance" of culture and morals by incorporating the traditional historical and the contemporary in such a way as not to provoke anxiety in his child readers. He envisioned stability yet flexibility in the future generations and threaded these hopes and hybridities into the character of Chike, as Miller explains:

Chike is neither burdened by the conflict between "traditional" and "modern" values, as are many of Achebe's adult characters, nor degraded by the colonial legacy. Rather he seems to represent the best qualities of a new society poised on the edge of its own destiny. (Miller 14)

Chike therefore represents the collective postcolonial Nigerian child. He is encountering similar issues and standing at the same crossroads, which is a powerful identifying, almost stabilising feature for the readers, who were forced to construct their individual identities whilst their national identity was still in the process of intense transformation. Yet Chike's situation is "utopianised" in the way that he is, in the end, unencumbered by familial and economic pressures (Dow 165). He is on the brink of his future and free to be able to fully construct himself with the solid moral foundations based in traditional values as well as a 'good' (European model of) education that he has undertaken, and will continue to

undertake, in order to be a productive member of a more global society. Yet also revealed in *Chike* is Achebe's perception of children as a homogenous group of knowable subjects who, Achebe implies, if they abide by the traditional values set out for them and focus on their education, can grow into 'ideal' citizens, successful in a global sense, but also sensitive to their cultural roots.

Achebe iterates this sensitivity and respect for village life. While acknowledging the benefits of 'modern life', the author cautions young readers not to disregard their heritage. For example, Chike is impatient to leave village life to live in Onitsha where water runs from taps and he can sleep under a roof made of iron and not his mother's "poor hut of mud and thatch" (Achebe, *Chike* 8). But soon after arriving in Onitsha he begins to long "for the bamboo bed in his mother's hut" (Achebe, *Chike* 14). He also dislikes the "crowds" of "strangers" living in the same house as him, coming to realise that "a big town [is] not always better than a village" (Achebe, *Chike* 14).

Achebe also encouraged readers to embrace traditional Igbo values, seeing them as a vital and stable foundation on which to "refashion" the "New Nigerian" (Emenyonu, *Goatskin Bags* 241). This is why we see in his children's books, a resounding stress on traditional values such as honesty, discipline, humility, obedience, respect, loyalty and social responsibility, all attributes that would historically have been conveyed through modes of storytelling. Hard work (a recurrent theme in Achebe's children's books) is another traditional value woven into the book. The narrative is preoccupied with Chike's determination to come into possession of the ferry fare, which he eventually obtains through honest, hard work. In contrast, Achebe presents Ezekiel, who makes money by deceiving his English pen pals. Ezekiel's friends imitate him, but are soon discovered by the headmaster and consequently punished. The boys are beaten with a cane and publicly humiliated by the headmaster, who emphasises the connectedness between the individual and the nation by saying, "Think of the bad name you have given this school... Think of the bad name you have given Nigeria, your motherland" (Achebe, *Chike* 19).

The stress on honesty and respect, for oneself, others and the nation is clear throughout the book, and it is the headmaster who most clearly draws the connection between being a 'good' person and a 'productive' citizen. However, one notices the headmaster's views remain primarily Eurocentric in the way that he most highly values European standards of intellect and pedigree, inferring European ideals and an education from England are 'better'

than African alternatives. This is further compounded by the headmaster's use of English when he is attempting to appear more important or 'sophisticated'. Chike imitates this behaviour, employing "good English" to convince a driver to let him wash his car (50). Chike's polite request, "May I wash your car, sir? It is very dirty and you are going to Lagos" is directly contrasted with his fellow car washer's use of pidgin: "Oga, your car dory plenty. I fit wash am fine" (49-50). Aside from the car washer, the only other characters in the book who are shown speaking pidgin are criminals; implying pidgin is an undesirable form of communication. Also inferred here is the notion that 'good' English is tantamount to success, as an individual and as a citizen, negating Pidgin and African languages.

These insinuations of English and England as more valuable than their African alternatives fundamentally destabilise Achebe's goal of reaffirming the national consciousness. One could potentially argue that Achebe is underlining the destructive view of Africa as inferior to Europe but, as I indicated in my introductory chapter, the boundary between highlighting the negative impact of stereotypes and (re)enforcing them is often blurred (Fox 43). Thus, by drawing attention to these Eurocentric ideals, Achebe may have been reiterating these views in the minds of his readers, further compelling stereotypes that may impede the national progress he was attempting to encourage.

### **Females on the Periphery**

This same train of thought can be carried through to Achebe's attitude toward his female characters (and, consequently, his female readers). The positioning of his fictional women in stereotypical, restricted roles leads one to a most concerning question: what was the implied role of the *female* in Achebe's imagined, refashioned nation? And what effect might this inference have had on the female child reader?

In an essay on women in Achebe's (adult) works, Bicknell (1990) points to the discrepancies between Achebe's novels and reality when it comes to gender roles and gender equality. She asserts that even given the restrictive role women occupied in traditional Nigerian society, it seems in Achebe's novels that "women have even less power than they did in reality" (Bicknell 225). In contrast, posits Bicknell, he does appear to depict the significant role of men in a realistic fashion (225). This observation can be carried through to Achebe's children's literature, where the powerlessness and subordination of women in comparison to men is most clearly seen in *The Drum*. *The Drum* is similar to

*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in that it features communities built around heroism and patriarchy, where ('voiceless') women are relegated to the background, occupying a narrow, firmly defined role (Nwagbara 344). Written a decade before the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah*,<sup>54</sup> *The Drum* features a minimum of female characters, none of which have speaking roles.

Where female characters *are* mentioned in the book, they are described in relation to their husbands. When introducing the main character, Mbe, the narrator claims the story is set in the past, at a time when there was "only one tortoise, Mbe. The ancestor of all of the tortoises and his wife, Anum" (Achebe, *The Drum* 29). Mbe is given the title of "the ancestor of all the tortoises" where Anum, the bearer of their children (and therefore also an ancestor), is mentioned as an afterthought, presented as an appendage to her husband. Anum has no speaking role in the book, and neither does the only other female in the book, the mother of the boy in the spirit world. When these characters are represented, their husbands speak for them. In the two instances we encounter the parents of the Spirit boy in *The Drum*, the father speaks on behalf of his wife and himself, although both are present. And when Mbe tells the fabricated story of how he decided to risk his life to save his fellow animals, he indicates his wife had no say in the decision. Indeed, Mbe did not even tell Anum where he was going because, he reasons, "I knew she would have tried to stop me" (Achebe, *Drum* 43). In his next version of the story, Anum "burst into tears" at the news that he was going to the land of the spirits, reiterating her powerlessness and reinforcing gender stereotypes by painting her as 'emotional' (Achebe, *Drum* 46). So subordinate is Anum that she does not even have a say in her permanent departure from their compound. She has no option but to obey her husband, who forcefully drags her out of their home without explanation: "he took his wife hurriedly out of the compound through a back exit deep into the bush behind his compound wall. His wife was so surprised but Tortoise dragged her along" (Achebe, *Drum* 59).

One could reason that the rationale for representing women thus is due to *The Drum* being a traditional folktale set a "long long time ago", and therefore perhaps these female characters are being portrayed realistically, given the medium and time period (Achebe, *Drum* 29). Alternatively, one might assert that Achebe was attempting to highlight gender inequality by

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<sup>54</sup> *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) was lauded as Achebe's first novel in which he recognises the need for African societies to include women in the nation-building process (Nwagbara 347-8).

deliberately silencing his female characters. However, Fox's observation on the blurring of boundaries between highlighting and reinforcing negative stereotypes would negate these suggestions, as would the observation that Achebe insisted children's book authors should be clear and unambiguous in their works (Fox 43; Cott 83).<sup>55</sup> Additionally, not only are these folktales adapted and repurposed to suit a *contemporary* (male and female) readership, but they also provide, as a medium, the experimental space so fruitful for the "construction" and "imagining" of identity (Rudd 16-17). In light of this, one might suggest that Achebe's female characters could have occupied more central roles, if not to ground the tale in a more realistic, current context then at least as a suggestion of a more equitable future.

The common consensus amongst critics such as Bicknell and Nnaemeka (1996) seems to be that Achebe has not portrayed a realistic vision of the true (and diverse) roles of women in Nigeria, instead depicting them "symbolically" (Bicknell 226). Bicknell asserts that there are three major categories defining the role of women in Achebe's adult novels, categories I propose can also be applied to his children's works. These are: women as "peacemakers" (who are "moderators of the aggressive impulses of men"), "Mother as Supreme" (respected because they are mothers, especially if they bear sons),<sup>56</sup> and "Woman as Mother" (a pervasive category, depicting women as protective, nurturing and full of restraint) (Bicknell 266-7; Nwagbara 344).

The last two classifications are particularly prevalent in Achebe's *Chike*, though it is difficult to separate them from the assertion that the figure of the mother is significant in a child's life. However it is evident from reading the book that Achebe does at least attempt to reflect the changing economic empowerment of women (something he does only a decade later in his adult works). *Chike* is peppered with strong female characters that (out of necessity) have taken on the role of breadwinner. Ezekiel's mother is a successful trader who sells cloth at the Onitsha market and Chike's mother is the sole provider for the family, working "very hard to feed and clothe her three children and send them to school" (Achebe, *Chike* 9).

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<sup>55</sup> In an interview with Cott, Achebe discusses the need to resist subtlety and abstruse messages in children's literature: "You can't fool around with children – you have to be honest with language: cleverness won't do" (83).

<sup>56</sup> This is drawn from the philosophy of "nneka"; the idea that women, when all other options have been exhausted, are a source of comfort, providers of nourishment and protection (Bicknell 266-7).

Particularly interesting to note here is the discrepancy between *Chike* and *A Man of the People*, both published in the same year. Where the latter has been criticised for featuring female characters whose actions “always seem to be tied to their relationships with their men rather than the result of independent thinking”, the two most prominent women in *Chike* appear entirely self-sufficient (Bicknell 268). Yet, even though their independence is praised, they are still evaluated by their role as *mothers*. Where Ezekiel's mother is a good businesswoman, she is “not a wise mother” (Achebe, *Chike* 20). She is indulgent with Ezekiel because he is her only son, repeatedly taking his side over his sisters' (and reiterating the perceived importance of boys over girls that Nnaemeka, 1994, speaks of). As a result of his mother's permissiveness, Ezekiel becomes a “spoilt child” (Achebe, *Chike* 19). But not only is Ezekiel's mother a seemingly neglectful parent, she is also obliquely portrayed as extravagant and lazy when it comes to fulfilling the traditional role of woman as ‘housekeeper’, employing three servants “who did all the housework” (Achebe, *Chike* 20). Ezekiel is exempt from these responsibilities (though his sisters are not) as his mother claims that housework is “only for servants and for girls” (Achebe, *Chike* 20).

Although Achebe is insinuating that the stereotyped domesticity of women is an out-dated line of thinking, he stops short of showing support for gender equality. Why Chike is sent away to a ‘good’ school while his sisters remain at home is not even questioned and, even though he is sent to a co-educational school, stereotypical gender roles are still enforced: “the boys cut the grass in the playing fields and the girls washed the classrooms” (Achebe, *Chike* 25). The book is peppered with gender stereotypes, which are particularly apparent when it comes to displaying emotion. Chike's mother discourages him from crying when it comes time for him to leave home, propagating the convention that crying is for babies and girls when she says to him, “big boys don't cry”. The idea that displaying sadness or fear is a feminine attribute is furthered later in the story when Chike is witness to a crime. After expressing their anxiety about being apprehended by the police, two of the criminals are accused by their accomplice of possessing a ‘feminine’ quality of fear; “‘You people too fear,’ said the first man, ‘small thing you begin de shake like a woman’” (Achebe, *Chike* 69).

The fact that the above example is only one of *three times* the word ‘woman’ is even mentioned in the book (the plural, ‘women’ is used twice and ‘girl’ or ‘girls’ also only twice) speaks volumes about Achebe's gendered message to his intended readership. In contrast to the sparse use of ‘woman’, the word ‘mother’ is used thirty one times. We must

certainly bear in mind that the main character is a child, and the mother is a central figure in a child's life, yet we must also take note that the only roles occupied by female characters in the book are either mothers or 'market women'. This is not a very encouraging message for girl readers who aspired to be anything other than a mother or a trader in a market.

But perhaps the most obvious sign of exclusion of female readers is that there are no female lead characters in any of Achebe's children's books. Indeed, as in his earlier adult works, his female characters are relegated to the periphery and are given hardly any speaking roles. The female child reader has no characters to identify with. She is not 'taken into' the book,<sup>57</sup> but remains, like the female characters, on the periphery; a spectator of an adventure targeted at their male peers. This perpetuates a sense of female subordination and raises major questions about Achebe's implicit message on the future of the nation. If Achebe's intended readership was to be the first generation of independent Nigerian citizens, the generation ideally raised with a firmer sense of cultural identity and national pride, why was the author primarily targeting male children? And what did this mean in relation to the role of women in the development of the newly independent nation?

### **Conclusion: Picturing New (Cultural) Memories**

The issue of the role of women in Achebe's blueprint for independent Nigeria is one of the core problems of his literature for children. The silencing, pigeonholing and marginalisation of his female characters permeates his books and the consciousness of his readers, not only reinforcing disempowering gender stereotypes, but also undermining the construction of his female readers' individual identities and their role as citizens. But it is not just gender stereotypes that weaken Achebe's texts in their aim to reimagine a firmer national consciousness. The author's implication that European education is superior to its African counterpart, particularly in *Chike and the River*, fundamentally undermines his goal of encouraging a more positive, less Eurocentric national identity in Nigeria.

Achebe did succeed, however, in addressing the 'moral decline' and alienation he witnessed in the Nigerian nation at the time. He attributed these factors firstly to the lack of remembrance of a uniquely African history that predated and was partially buried by colonialism, and secondly to the Eurocentric literature that alienated and negated Nigerian

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<sup>57</sup> See Rose's *Impossibility of Children's Literature* in which she states: "children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*" (2).

culture. His answer to these issues was to reteach history and re-inscribe traditional morals and values through traditional oral stories, repurposing them to make them relevant to the contemporary Nigerian child reader. Storytelling and its narrative devices, such as oral traditions and folklore, play a prominent role in Achebe's children's books, working to anchor the individual to the nation through the kind of common cultural knowledge that sustains an imagined community (as put forth by Sundmark and Kelen). It is through books like *The Drum* and *How the Leopard got His Claws* that traditional folktales meet a real, lived history. And it is through *Chike and the River* that we see Achebe's hand, attempting to guide his readers toward a path that is complicated, multidimensional and contemporary.

Therefore, when looked at as a collection, Achebe's children's books quite clearly demonstrate his purpose. He incorporated modern and traditional, past and present, rural and urban, English and Igbo, resulting in a hybridity that reflects the postcolonial political and societal situation *and* the lived experiences of the contemporary Nigerian child. The purpose, then, of Achebe's children's literature was to build a framework of traditional morality and contemporary hybridity in order to help guide children through the transitional period of instability that followed independence and toward a future populated with educated, ethical and culturally grounded citizens. We also see the spaces opened up by Achebe's works in which the child readers are able to construct their individual identities. Yet this space is male-shaped; a place for the "constructed" *male* child to become the "constructive" *male* child,<sup>58</sup> opening up a transformative area in which the African *male* subject can be re-conceptualised. The female subject, however, seems to be staying constant. She remains the pillar of strength; the peacekeeper and the mother and, most notably, she remains silent.

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<sup>58</sup> See Rudd (19-22).

## Chapter Two

### Writer as “Third Parent” in Mabel Segun’s Children’s Literature

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For such a prominent figure in the development of Nigeria’s literary scene,<sup>59</sup> surprising little can be found on Mabel Segun’s works for children. And yet these texts are exemplary of the post-independent campaign for re-building Nigerian national consciousness. Her books are postcolonial not just temporally, but also in the way they engage with the history of colonial rule and its impact on contemporary Nigeria. They encourage in readers an understanding of this impact and how to move forward with a firmer sense of cultural pride and national identity. However, in her conscious bid to mould children into citizens, Segun overlooks her readership as intellectual beings, regarding them as subjects-in-information. Additionally, although she notably includes female characters in some of her works, she fails to deconstruct gender stereotypes, instead proliferating them. The conclusion drawn from this is that Segun not only stereotypes women in these texts, but she also homogenises children, pitfalls likewise seen in Achebe’s works.

Both Achebe and Segun take an authoritative position in their construction of children’s literature. Where Achebe saw the role of authors as “teachers”, Segun contends that the central task of children’s literature should be to act as a “third parent”: educating, socialising and helping to “mould” the mind of the reader and “develop his character” (Segun, “Problems and Prospects” 32). The role then of the author, according to Segun, is one of responsibility and restriction, a view that can be likened to Hunt’s (1999) notion of the adult author as a controlling, censoring, monitoring, and protective force.

But for Segun, as for Achebe, children’s literature does not only act as an aid for the formation of an individual, but the *citizen* too. As we know from Sundmark and Kelen (2013), national and individual identity are implicitly linked and the emphasis Segun places on becoming a productive member of the nation is evident throughout the three children’s works of hers I have chosen, namely *Olu and the Broken Statue* (1985), *Youth Day Parade*

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<sup>59</sup> In addition to her adult works, Segun has written, co-authored and edited eleven children’s books. She is also the founder of the Children’s Literature Association of Nigeria (CLAN) (established in 1978) and the instigator for Ibadan’s Children’s Documentation and Research Centre (set up in 1990).

(1984), and *My Father's Daughter* (1965). In a talk given at the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in 2009, Segun firmly outlined the categories children's books fall into, providing suggestions as to how their contents can develop the nation. The author pinpointed the promotion of diversity (a consistent theme reflected in her works) as a significant way to foster unity in a postcolonial nation.

Segun further suggested in this address that books should teach children the benefits of morality, hard work and self-sacrifice in the name of their country: "children must learn... people who rise up to challenges are the ones who contribute most to nation building" (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 3). Similarly to Achebe's viewpoints on how children's literature can work as a catalyst for 'refashioning' an independent Nigeria, Segun believes the genre should impart knowledge about the nation's history, culture, and traditions. Furthermore, it should encourage unity through difference and ground the readers' developing individual identities in their national and cultural identities.

Fundamental to instilling these qualities into a child's mind, Segun advocates, is the creation of realistic characters and role models to whom the readers can relate (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 3-7). Yet in her determination to educate and guide the reader toward national cohesiveness, Segun could have been isolating them through the distinct boundaries she draws between the adult (author and character) and the child (reader and character). Moreover although, unlike Achebe, Segun *does* include identifiable and prominent female characters in her works, she (like Achebe) tends to stereotype gender roles, problematically carrying them forward in her attempt to shape the nation's future.

### **(Re)Building Blocks of History, Tradition and Morality**

Segun is aware of the prejudices books can pass on to their readers. Conversely, she is also conscious of the power books have to dispel out-dated or false notions, acknowledging the nationally "unifying role" that books can possess (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 12-13). Just as stories are passed down and circulated orally in a community, books have the potential to be widely read and their stories absorbed into cultural 'common knowledge'. In this way they become a binding agent for the imagined community (Sundmark and Kelen 233). The passing down of history and traditions through children's literature is a vital part of the "unifying role" the genre can play in restructuring the nation. Segun makes it clear in her ANA address that encouraging children to rediscover their cultural heritage and establish their cultural identity is one of the most important tasks an author of children's books should

undertake, especially in countries that have been subject to cultural imperialism (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 12-13).

Like Sundmark and Kelen, Segun draws the connection between cultural and historical identity formation and the construction of individual identity, asserting that an individual's identity is rooted in their history. She emphasises that every individual "needs to have a personal identity, a point of reference from which he can operate" and this point of reference, she asserts, stems from their "roots" which "lie in the past and the past is history" (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 4). Children's books, Segun claims, are highly effective tools with which to "lead a child back to his roots", educating him about his nation's history and helping him to situate himself in relation to his shared past ("Importance of Literature" 12-13). Part of this shared past, Segun emphasises, is colonialism.

The author frequently demonstrates the destructive effects of colonial rule in her works. Nowhere is it clearer, though, than in *Olu and the Broken Statue*.<sup>60</sup> By using historically accurate examples, she educates readers on the destructive effect colonial rule had on the integrity of Nigerian history and its obstruction of continuing traditions. For instance, in the book, it is announced during a news radio broadcast that the government had passed a law prohibiting the exportation of antiquities.<sup>61</sup> The newscaster goes on to explain that the law was made because "many of the country's ancient and valuable Benin bronze carvings had been looted by the British during the Benin Expedition of 1897" and the attempts by the government to retrieve these artworks from museums all over the world had been unsuccessful (Segun, *Olu* 51). This kind of factual example teaches the Nigerian reader about the importance of their heritage and the damaging effect colonialism had, and still has, on the nation. Additionally, it implies an interconnectedness of the individual and their shared national history.

This interconnectedness is reiterated when the main character, Olu, and his friends are made aware of how their individual interests in music intertwine with their shared ancestry after being shown around the museum's instrument collection. The guide assumes correctly that

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<sup>60</sup> *Olu and the Broken Statue* (1985) is the story of three friends, Olu, Aigbe and Ikem who are trying to raise money to buy instruments for their school's band. When they stumble across an ancient artefact (a bronze statue) worth a fortune, the boys choose to turn the statue over to the museum instead of illegally profiting from it.

<sup>61</sup> This refers to the Nigerian Prohibition Law on the non-exportation of antiquities in the government decrees of 1974 and 1979 (as according to the International Council of Museums).

when the boys call to mind musical instruments they are thinking of “European musical instruments” (Segun, *Olu* 60). He makes a point of educating the children on the diverse array of traditional Nigerian instruments; the Yoruba *sekere* (rattle), *gangan*, *bata* and *dundun* drums, the Igbo *Ubo* and split drums, Hausa fiddles and flutes, xylophones from Plateau State, and “gongs from the Cross River State” (Segun, *Olu* 61-2).

The cultural diversity of the instruments hints at the author's determination to educate children on the multiplicity of cultures and traditions in their nation. The guide's suggestion that the boys form a traditional Nigerian orchestra implies the possibility that unity and harmony can be achieved through diversity and the celebration of customs. In fact it is imperative, infers the guide, that the youth continue the nation's traditions: “Do you know what would happen if young people refused to play these ancient instruments? ...When the old people die, Nigerian traditional music would die too. Unless boys like you decide to make it live” (Segun, *Olu* 62). The headmaster re-emphasises this point by declaring: “While we have to move with the times, we must not forget our cultural heritage. We must not forget the music of our forefathers” (Segun, *Olu* 68). The headmaster's sentiment is directly shared by Segun in her ANA address, where she stresses that children “must learn about (the nation's) traditional musical instruments... for these are important aspects of their cultural heritage” (Segun, “Importance of Literature” 3).

But the role of the ‘third parent’ is not limited to educating children on their collective history. Segun also acknowledges the responsibility of children's literature to aid in socialising readers, creating in the youth “an awareness of the expectations of a decent society and acceptable behaviour patterns” (“Importance of Literature” 13). The moralising influence children's books have on their readers is intrinsically linked to the betterment of society, so one might see the knock-on effect of a book on a child and a child on society. As Segun suggests, “books can influence young people for their own good and for the good of society” (“Importance of Literature” 13-14). These ‘good’ qualities children's literature is able to reproduce in the reader are considered by Segun to be traits such as “acceptance of responsibility, good leadership, honesty, selflessness and patriotism”, all of which contribute to the moulding of a ‘good’ citizen, an idea that is also apparent throughout Achebe's books for children (“Importance of Literature” 13-14).

These themes of responsibility, persistence and above all patriotism are particularly evident in Segun's *Youth Day Parade*. The main character, Tunde, is assigned to organise his

school's parade for Youth Day. He overcomes his anxiety about his responsibility by learning to organise and delegate tasks, going on to achieve his goal through enthusiasm and collaboration, leading his school with near-patriotic pride. Taking Tunde's school as a metaphor for the nation, one can see the school is of primary concern. Any pupil's individual achievement is a triumph for the school, as evidenced at the end of the song when the headmaster shouts "Up Boys!" the boys reply "Up School!" (Segun, *Youth Day* 49).

The headmaster's aspiration to train learners "to be responsible citizens" in *Youth Day* is mirrored by the headmaster in Achebe's *Chike and the River* (Segun, *Youth Day* 4). Yet, although both principals have a similar overall objective, the headmaster in *Youth Day* appears less contradictory. The effectiveness of the headmaster in *Chike* as an aid in the production of 'good' citizens is undermined by his selective use of English as a signifier of power and intelligence (as it is his ambition to send his students to study in Europe). The headmaster in *Youth Day*, on the other hand, is not unwaveringly patriotic. He emphasises the pitfalls of the Nigerian government, highlighting the lack of funding provided to them by the Ministry of Education (Segun, *Youth Day* 8). He also does not position himself as unapproachable or dictatorial, as evidenced by his delegation of a task usually reserved for the games master to his students (both male *and* female). As he explains to Tunde, "this would be a good opportunity for you boys and girls to make the arrangements yourselves. We are training you to be responsible citizens" (Segun, *Youth Day* 4).

In *Olu and the Broken Statue*, it is Olu's father who most encourages him to be an upstanding citizen. When Olu confides in his father that he is in possession of what he believes to be an ancient artefact, his father acknowledges Olu's autonomy as well as his greater role in the nation. Instead of telling him what to do, Olu's father poses a question to him: "How would you feel if you won first prize in the School Band fund Competition and you knew you had won it by letting your country down?" (Segun, *Olu* 52). This question makes Olu (and the reader) think about his actions as a member of the nation. When Olu makes up his mind to do the 'right thing', reporting the artefact to the museum, the Director praises him and his friends for putting the needs of their country above their own personal gain: "...you could have sold it to get money for your School Band Fund but instead you chose to bring it here. You are very good boys. You will make good citizens" (Segun, *Olu* 56). The museum makes a sizeable donation to the School Band Fund as a reward, ensuring them first place. Therefore Olu and his friends, through their honesty, integrity and respect

for and continuance of their nation's traditions (in the form of traditional instruments) are the very models of 'good' citizenship Segun is attempting to inculcate within the reader.

Examples of virtuous qualities abound in Segun's works. We see them most clearly distilled in the school song written by Ekpo in *Youth Day Parade*, which encourages respect, honesty, hard work, responsibility, bravery, equality, consideration for others and, above all, teamwork and unity for a greater cause: the betterment of their school (or if we are to extend the metaphor, the betterment of their nation).<sup>62</sup> One way of achieving this unification, Segun suggests, is through cultural differences. The author places great emphasis on the benefit of multi-ethnic and multicultural books for children, suggesting they can play a major role in national unification and tolerance of differences (Segun, "Importance of Literature" 2). An example of this can be most definitively seen in the cultural diversity of the characters in *Youth Day*: Tunde (Yoruba), Audu (Hausa), Ekpo (Efik), and Chike Wachukwu (Igbo). The multiple cultures represented by these characters mirror the ethnic plurality of Nigeria and their ultimate collaboration suggests that overcoming ethnic differences in a multi-ethnic nation will harvest positive, unifying results.

Problematically, however, Segun frequently hints that one major force of unification is through Christianity, favouring it above other dominant religions in Nigeria, such as Islam. It is not surprising that Christianity is a major feature of Segun's books considering her father was a pastor and her early life centred around the church, which is chronicled in her autobiographical book, *My Father's Daughter*. In the book, the church and the Christian compound are central binding forces for her community, even for the "Moslem" and "pagan" members (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 32). Segun goes on to insinuate that Christianity is more refined and 'civilised', as evidenced when she states that to the "Christian and pagan inhabitants... the outside world was Ife and Ide and civilisation meant Father and the Mission Compound" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 8).

In fact, throughout *My Father's Daughter*, Segun seems to indicate the 'backwardness' of traditional pagan religions when compared with Christianity, often associating illiteracy with those who hold traditional beliefs. This is epitomised when a distant relation, a middle-

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<sup>62</sup> **The school song:**

"We have the finest school of all, And its name is Zuma School, Respected in all the land For Truth and Honesty, Bravery and Unity. Boys and girls of Zuma School, This good name we all must keep; Serious in work we'll be, And fair at play as well; Let us think of others, In everything we do. Chorus: Up Boys! Up Girls! Work hard and play fair, In the name of Zuma School"

(Segun, *Youth Day* 12).

aged woman, comes to stay with the main character's family in the hope of enhancing her fertility. The narrator describes her as "plagued with 'abiku' children", going on to say that "like most illiterate women she believed that it was her first born who was being reincarnated in the other children."<sup>63</sup> She had tried many of the traditional remedies and all had failed" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 70). It is only after the woman converts to Christianity and her name is changed to Ruth, that she eventually gives birth to a healthy baby boy. It is thus impressed upon the reader that not only is a woman's ability to have (specifically *male*) children the key to fulfilment, but that traditional beliefs are 'uncivilised' and the only way to be 'saved' is through Christianity (a religion intimately linked to colonialism and patriarchy).

This aspect of Segun's works is entirely contradictory to her goal of inculcating unification through cultural (and religious) diversity and respect for tradition and history. Where in *Olu*, Segun takes pains to highlight the negative influence of colonialism on the nation and its ancient traditions *My Father's Daughter* seems to highlight the virtues of colonialism, her narrative bordering on nostalgia for her colonial childhood. Indeed, the main character quite clearly sees herself and her family as 'above' the other characters in the book, describing herself as a "privileged person" to whom "normal rules did not apply" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 34). She has a multitude of servants, whom she frequently degrades and she positions both her father and mother as 'above' the other members of the community. Segun's sees her mother as more 'cultured' and 'dignified' than her counterparts; she "always wore a frock", in contrast to the other women in her community who dressed in traditional wear, and her "beautiful voice... rose above the uncultured contralto of the illiterate women" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 10). Indeed, the main character makes a point of equating literacy with pedigree and civilisation (a persistent belief that Ten Kortenaar, 2011, points out as problematic). The main character is proud of her mother's literacy and her position as President of the Egbe Aya Bishop women's society. Yet despite her

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<sup>63</sup> There has been much critical focus on a metaphorical representation of 'abiku' in African literature for adults. The figure is often used to contrast tradition and modernity, spirituality and scientific logic. Traditionally, in Nigerian cultures, it is believed an 'abiku' is a child who dies and is reborn into the same family multiple times. Conversely, it is thought that the concept of 'abiku' is a way of explaining a high infant mortality rate. The 'abiku', then, can be seen to straddle both the spirit world and the physical world; the past, the present and the future – frequently becoming a metaphor for a transitional state at a time of political, cultural or social change (i.e. independence) (Hawley 30-39). Segun can be seen to adopt a somewhat convenient position on the 'abiku', negating tradition and associating a belief in the phenomenon with 'backwardness' and 'illiteracy'.

education and position of power in the community, Mother remains an unthreatening, 'reaffirming' character, conforming to her role of "the typical clergyman's wife" and assuming a "self effacing" role with her "sweet nature" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 10). Her mother's compliance with typical gender roles impacts on the formation of her daughter's female identity, problematically proliferating these roles.

The fact that the reader is witness to the process of the main character's identity formation is in large part what makes *My Father's Daughter* so different from the other books in my sample. Although Segun did not originally intend the book for a child readership, it was well received by the younger population and is subsequently listed on her website as one of her children's books.<sup>64</sup> Martini (1997) categorises the book as belonging to the genre of "Family Stories," a sub-genre of "Children's realistic stories" as it contains adult subject matter, but is appropriate for children too (221). Following this description, the book can also be seen as belonging to the medium of crosswriting, as defined by Beckett (58). As demonstrated in my introductory chapter, crossover literature opens up a less restricted space in which to help formulate individual identity. The medium is a particularly fruitful arena for identity construction as the autobiographical aspect of the book, with its natural bildungsroman, draws the readers in, helping them to firmly identify with the main character, affecting their own identity formation. In her book *Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial African Children's and Young Adult Literature* (1998), Khorana suggests that autobiographies and biographies aid in individual identity creation by including role models, encouraging self-esteem and building on a sense of national unity, features Segun believes are central to the role of children's literature as the 'third parent' (7).

And yet what makes the medium such an effective one for connecting with the child reader and aiding in identity development is precisely the reason why it is underutilised for the younger population. As Martini (1997) suggests, the reason for the lack of autobiographies directed toward a child-readership is largely due to the fact that, in juxtaposition with novels, autobiographies "form the genre of 'having become,' whereas novels, in Bakhtin's words, are a 'genre of becoming'" (qtd. in Martini 219). Authors write autobiographies in the present about themselves in the past. They have the knowledge of hindsight, their present selves having been shaped by their past experiences. Children, on the other hand, are

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<sup>64</sup> Online resource available at: [www.mabelsegun.com](http://www.mabelsegun.com) [Accessed 3 April 2015].

still “becoming” and are therefore believed not to have the same perception of the link between past and present nor the benefit of reflection (Martini 219).

Therefore, on the one hand, we have a story that is more complex, more identifiable with and less patronising of its readership (mostly because its child readership is unintended), which can be seen as an effective way of portraying ‘reality’ for a child. It avoids the “impossibility” (as put forth by Rose, 1984) of inventing a fictional child character, drawing him or her in by providing a ‘real’ child character.<sup>65</sup> But on the other hand, because it is set in the past, many of the situations or beliefs held by the main character could seem outdated, alienating, confusing or even detrimental to the goal of nation re-formation.

### **Constructing the Female**

An example of this is noticeably seen in the way the main character constructs her identity as a *female*. *My Father's Daughter* is the only text from my sample of Nigerian children's books that features a female main character, a factor that offers insight into the female perspective and provides female readers with a point of identification. However, the role of women in *My Father's Daughter* remains relegated to that of domesticity; they are regularly featured preparing meals, minding children and “talking and gossiping” (31). Where the female characters *do* occupy positions of leadership, the roles are for female-only committees that have no impact on men. Arguably, Segun could be highlighting the restrictive roles women occupied during colonialism, yet when one turns to *Olu*, set after independence, one finds the muted female once more in these domestic roles. As with Achebe's *Chike*, the main characters are male and the peripheral females are mothers, housewives and market women. *Olu's* mother, who Nnaemeka (1996) would refer to as a “character of reaffirmation”, peruses magazines where her husband reads newspapers, implying she is less concerned or informed about the political realm than her husband. Additionally she has a defined domestic role; we frequently see her busy with household chores and, when Professor Ipefan visits, she is more anxious about feeding him than engaging him in conversation, reinforcing the gender stereotype of woman as nurturer (see Segun, *Olu* 38-9).

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<sup>65</sup> Although one may still argue that because it is written with an adult's hindsight, it can still be seen as not having bridged this gap.

This is problematic given Segun's statement in her essay, "Challenges of Being a Female Writer in a Male-Dominated Developing Society" (2001), that female writers in a developing society should be preoccupied with attempting to "correct the injustice of male domination in their society" by encouraging women to "unlearn the lessons of the past" (300). In this way a new way of seeing themselves will be instilled, a way that incorporates an "awareness of their inherent strengths and potentialities for effecting social change in their society as equal partners with men" (Segun, "Challenges" 300). Where these traits do not reveal themselves in *Olu* and are obscured in *My Father's Daughter*, Segun's *Youth Day* does at least address the issue of gender equality. Although the main character, Tunde, is male and is appointed as organiser of the parade, he shares a majority of his duties with his female classmate, Okanima, who also leads the parade with Tunde. In fact, the book ends with: "Tunde looked at Okanima and they both smiled... Surely they must win the prize" (Segun, *Youth Day* 22). The final lines indicate what Segun believes is the potential of the new generation of Nigerian children to march forward in equality and unity, both boys and girls achieving their goals through collaboration, hard work, bravery, ingenuity, fairness and friendship.

Okanima can therefore be seen as a possible role model for the girl-child reader, making *Youth Day* more relatable to both sexes than the story of *Olu*. Yet the female reader cannot fully be drawn into the book as she might be with the young Segun in *My Father's Daughter* because Okanima remains a one-dimensional, secondary character. In contrast, Segun's main character in her autobiography is fully developed and can be identified with. The female child reader might find it easy to imagine herself in the place of young Segun. The first person narrative draws the reader in at knee-level; we see a train resembling a "centipede" and an evening market turned into a "fairylane" with clay lanterns that look like "glow-worms" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 54 and 58). We are privy to the character's age-restricted thoughts and disproportionate fears as she constructs the world around her and herself in relation to it.

Problematically, however, we are also aware of the main character's complex construction of beauty as relative to whiteness. She admires Miss Grant, a "pretty", young, white deaconess (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 10). Her close friend, Tinuade has a "beautiful light complexion" and is described by the main character as "the prettiest girl I had ever known" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 48). Yet her notion of beauty is complicated by tradition; it is because of Tinuade's light complexion that her tribal markings appear "dainty on her

cheeks" (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 48). The simultaneous European and African ideals of beauty held by the main character can be seen as a signal of her displacement in a society that is a mixture of colonial and traditional. This could be a powerful identifying feature for a young female reader who may be constructing similar mixed notions of beauty in a postcolonial society. However, the character's preoccupation with the appearances of other female characters may inculcate in the female reader a sense that her looks are more important than her personal achievements or character. This obscures the author's intent of "raising the consciousness of women, motivating them to seek leadership roles in society and encouraging them to take their rightful place in the civil society" (Segun, "Challenges" 301).

*My Father's Daughter* may not be entirely successful in this regard, but when placed alongside the sample of texts by Achebe, it is evident that Segun does attempt to display a realistic awareness of her female readers. Additionally, unlike Achebe, Segun does not lean so heavily on traditional stories, but where she does exemplify with folktale, she notably includes heroic women. For instance, one of the stories she relays is of Moremi, an Ife woman who used her wit and bravery to save her village from tormenting marauders (Segun, *Father's Daughter* 38).<sup>66</sup> This is an exceptionally vital element in Segun's book as it indicates her awareness of the problematic loss of important heroic female characters in traditional oral folklore, suggested by Nnaemeka to be a product of colonial patriarchy and the resultant "masculinist literary tradition" that followed (Nnaemeka, "Orality to Writing" 140). It also potentially signals her knowledge of oral literature's importance as a socialising tool through which a (in this case primarily female) child's individual and national identities can be informed, developed and affirmed.

Yet all three books focus mainly on passing down unisex moral messages, concentrating on virtues of unity, hard work, compassion and respect. Where *Olu* marginalises the role of women in society, featuring 'reaffirmative' female characters, *Youth Day* suggests the need for gender equality through the unthreatening character of Okanima. The latter book can thus be seen as a nod to what Nnaemeka (2004) describes as "nego-feminism", where

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<sup>66</sup> Flora Nwapa's children's book *Mammywater* (1979) is another example of writers using strong, female mythical characters. A "Mammywater", venerated in certain parts of Africa, including West Africa, is a water goddess linked to fertility. But more than divinity, implies Jell-Bahlsen (1995), Mammywater also embodies "aspects of womanhood in pre-colonial Igbo culture and society", before western forms of patriarchy became so firmly rooted through colonial rule (30).

patriarchal norms are challenged through negotiation and compromise rather than dealt with directly. One could attribute this reticence about directly addressing the inequalities associated with the gender gap stemming from a self-consciousness about the primarily “male gaze” of the reader and critic, as suggested by Nnaemeka (“Orality to Writing” 151). Certainly, by composing both *Olu* and *Youth Day* from the perspective of male main characters, Segun places the male reader at the forefront, marginalising the female reader. This fundamentally undermines Segun’s message of gender equality (as proposed in Segun’s “Challenges”) and the need for both boys and girls to unite in the task of developing a nation grounded in honesty, compassion, diversity, hard work and dedication. It can therefore be seen that in both *Olu* and *Youth Day*, Segun falls short of her mission to “deconstruct gender stereotypes” as a female writer of children’s literature (“Challenges” 301). Rather she reaffirms them, perhaps even further widening the gender gap.

This is particularly antithetical to her belief that children should be taught gender equality from an early age, so that they grow into citizens who advocate for equal rights (Segun, “Challenges” 301). Her statement that “it is easier for the right lessons to be learned from childhood than for the wrong lessons to be unlearned in adulthood” echoes Juliana Daniels’ (2015) assertion that rather than waiting until children are old enough to understand and unlearn the gender stereotypes they have been taught, writers should rather be teaching them the importance of gender equality as early as possible (Segun “Challenges” 301; Daniels 157). Children’s books can therefore, according to Segun, “act as a preventative” to dispel prejudices (“Importance of Literature” 13). And yet it is evident there is a discrepancy in what Segun indicates children’s books can accomplish and what she actually ends up inscribing into her works.

### **Children as Subjects**

This desire to control through literature what children are exposed to in order to shape them in a specific way speaks directly to what Hunt and Rudd see as the problematic power relation of the adult author and the “simple-minded”, “highly impressionable” child reader (Hunt, *Understanding Children’s Literature* 5-6). Segun takes the stance that a child’s thoughts and beliefs can and should be created by the author, restricting the space Rudd suggests is imperative for individual imaginative identity construction (16-17). Instead, Segun’s problematically delimited view is of the child as a *tabula rasa*,<sup>67</sup> likening their mind

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<sup>67</sup> As first put forth by John Locke in his “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”.

to an “open book in which a writer may write whatever she likes” (Segun, “Challenges” 301).

Segun's view of children as a homogenous and dependent group is apparent in the way in which she speaks of them (and for them) as ‘knowable subjects’. In almost exactly the same words that Achebe uses to describe his process of writing children's books,<sup>68</sup> Segun asserts, “to succeed as a children's writer you must become a child yourself” (Okediran 234). As discussed in the introductory chapter, it is, of course, *impossible* (as put forth by Rose, 1984) for an adult to “become a child” or “get into the mind of a child”. Yet, it appears Segun believes herself to know precisely what children want: “children want real characters they can identify with. It is in their interest and that of society in general that they be shown the real world with its imperfections, cruelties, injustice... they need books about growing up” (“Importance of Literature” 6). She also generalises (“young people pass through stages of hero-worship”) and lays out what she believes Nigerian children ‘need’ in order to be conditioned into productive (indeed transformative) members of Nigerian society: “in present-day Nigeria, young people need new models of greatness which they can emulate - honest people who through their industry and integrity have made positive contributions to the progress of the Nigerian society” (Segun, “Importance of Literature” 6).

Indeed, the progress of the nation is Segun's primary reason for writing children's literature in the first place. In an interview with Wale Okediran (1997), Segun reveals these intentions directly: “I am trying to mould the lives of children in the right direction so that Nigeria can be a better place to live in when they grow up” (238). Her assumption that children are easily mouldable and can be guided in (what she considers to be) the ‘right’ direction reiterates her stance on children as not fully formed beings, echoing Nodelman's assertions on children being seen as needing to be ‘civilised’ by an adult through literature.

However, Segun does appear to be aware of the injustice of the adult/child power dynamic. In *Olu*, the boys lament being mistreated by adults. They are taken advantage of by gamblers, fishermen and art dealers; they are dismissed by the police and shooed away by tourists and neighbours, who see them as a nuisance. In *My Father's Daughter*, the main character is excluded from many ‘grown up’ activities and the headmaster takes advantage

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<sup>68</sup> In an interview conducted by Jonathan Cott in 1980, Achebe says of the process of writing children's literature: “It's a challenge... because it requires a different kind of mind from me when I'm doing it – I have to get into the mind of a child totally, and I find that very rewarding” (Cott 85).

of her youthful “ignorance” by taunting her for his entertainment. But Segun’s most lucid depiction of the unfair, subordinate status of children is her account of a standard five schoolboy who is publicly disrobed and beaten as punishment for dressing up as an “egungun” and thrashing a teacher with sticks (*Father’s Daughter* 42). Instead of providing the story as a straightforward example of ‘bad’ behaviour, Segun complicates it by revealing the boy’s motive. The boy “was already married and had a child” and therefore resented the conventional power dynamic between himself and his teacher, “since he now considered himself a... ‘master of the house’” (Segun, *Father’s Daughter* 42). This example illustrates a real situation faced by some of the readers. It delves into the individual, psychological and societal impact of the dualistic role imposed on these children, who have the responsibility of adults, but are still subordinate to their elders. This technique draws readers in, providing them with a point of identification, creating the necessary space in which to formulate their own opinions and identities (as opposed to the more two-dimensional *Olu* and *Youth Day*, which are rigid, restrictive and single-minded in their intentions to direct readers toward a pre-planned goal).

Yet the potential Segun sees in children’s literature to dispel negative stereotypes is the same potential it holds to introduce and proliferate new and existing stereotypes. The restrictive nature of Segun’s *Olu* and *Youth Day* means that the child reader is compelled toward a specific viewpoint created by the adult author and has little room in which to imagine or develop his or her own individual identity. Conversely, the space opened up by the autobiographical nature of *My Father’s Daughter* can be interpreted as one that encourages the imaginative construction of individual identity, particularly for the female child reader. Yet precisely *because* of the powerful impact the narrative has on the imagination of the reader, any ideas that may portray a damaging image of self, gender or nation could be internalised and circulated by the reader, carrying these potentially destructive ideas forward into the new nation, the positive construction of which Segun so carefully attempted to influence.

### **Conclusion: Reaffirming Gender Roles**

The extent of Segun’s aspirations to influence might have been disproportionate to her abilities, but the inclusion of strong female characters in her children’s works speaks volumes to the vital role female writers play in the development of the nation. Where Achebe does not provide a dominant point of female identification, Segun makes the literary

space accessible to the girl reader, providing her with a much-required platform for individual and national identity construction and offering for the male reader a much-needed perspective on Nigerian femininity. In this way Segun can be seen to attempt to pave the way toward a nation that moves forward in unity and equality.

However, including “characters of reaffirmation” in her works can be seen to be detrimental to this goal, as is the prioritising of patriotism over the needs and rights of women. In fact, according to Daniels, the gender gap is one of the biggest concerns working against national development (156). If books are central to the passing down of societal norms and cultural traditions, they are also vehicles for the inheritance of gender inequalities, I suggest Segun could have gone further, emphasising the importance of gender equality *alongside* her idea of how the nation could be refashioned through children's literature (Daniels 156).

It is apparent that Segun's goal of aiding in the development of constructive citizens who are responsible, honest, determined, hardworking and above all self-sacrificing in the name of their nation is of paramount importance to her. Yet in her determination to prioritise the needs of the nation and her assumption that children are a homogenous mass whose identity can be written into being by the adult author, Segun neglects the needs of the individual child and, like Achebe, fails to fully integrate the female into her blueprint for nation-building.

### Chapter Three

#### Popularity and Social Realism in Cyprian Ekwensi's Children's Literature

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A large part of Ekwensi's success as an author was his mass appeal. Ekwensi made no secret of the fact that he intentionally wrote books aimed at a broad readership in order to increase the popularity of his works (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 1).<sup>69</sup> But it was about more than being well liked; for the author producing popular novels was a key factor for transformation in Nigeria. In the 1982 International Conference on African Literature and the English Language, Ekwensi stated the focus of African writers and publishers should be enthusiastic and creative promotion of literature for the masses. He argued it was through the popularisation of Nigerian novels (both locally and globally) that reading could become a more likely and attractive pastime to the nation's population, especially amongst the younger demographic (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* xv).

Tied to the author's need to entertain the reader is his belief that stories need to be firmly grounded in *reality*. Where Achebe saw the role of the novelist as "teacher" and Segun sees (primarily children's) literature as a parental figure, Ekwensi claimed that the responsibility of the writer is to "hold a mirror up to nature and describe the reflection truthfully regardless of the over-sensitiveness or otherwise of his public truth" (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 3). In this way, Ekwensi can be seen to be more interested in the individual than the likes of Achebe or Segun (who focused their attention primarily on the nation as a whole), choosing to highlight not the cause of the change but the effect of change on the human being (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 18).

Ekwensi's mirroring of reality extended to his books for children, which rank as some of his most successful works (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 46). Within the first six years of independence, Ekwensi published six books for children, revealing the importance he placed on providing relevant literature to Nigerian youth at the time. His children's books were, according to Emenyonu, "an attempt to bring contemporary African writing to Nigerian

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<sup>69</sup> In an essay entitled "Random Thoughts on Clocking Sixty-Five" written for Emenyonu's *The Essential Ekwensi* (1987), Ekwensi claimed to have "always wanted to be a populist writer, a compulsively-read writer" (88).

children" (*Modern African Writers* 48). Emenyonu points to a disjuncture prior to independence between Nigerian children's lived reality and the (largely British) educational material with which they were taught at school. Ekwensi attempted to "bridge these gaps" by grounding his children's literature in themes stemming from actual events in Nigerian history, or which grapple with real social issues encountered by Nigerian children at the time (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 48). The author offered young readers an entirely new kind of literature, local in background, history and content and written in a style resembling the traditional African folktale (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 47-8).

Like Achebe, his works for children attempted to bring contemporary African writing to Nigerian children and merge it with traditional values through storytelling. Yet unlike Achebe, Ekwensi's works tackle head-on contemporary, real-life issues of physical handicaps, abuse, discrimination and death – themes that were likely to be familiar to the nation's children. *The Drummer Boy*, for example, is set in and nearby Lagos and centres on a blind boy of twelve, named Akin. Despite his physical disability, Akin has a positive outlook and brings perspective, joy and beautiful music to those he comes into contact with. Yet Akin is repeatedly taken advantage of and controlled by both adults and peers. The third person omniscient narrative technique offers multiple points of identification for the reader. The poverty-stricken, handicapped Akin, the financially independent and powerful Madam Bisi and the successful but suffering modern woman, Ayike provide voices for marginalised groups.

In contrast to *The Drummer Boy*, *The Passport of Mallam Ilia* is set primarily in the past, evoking life as it was in Northern Nigeria, with its "emirs, horsemen, pilgrims and mosques" (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 52). The story follows the pattern of oral storytelling, beginning in the present, journeying into the past and ending back in the present. The story is of Mallam Alhaji Ibrahim Ilia who is on a mission to avenge the death of his wife, Zarah. It is an entertaining, suspense-filled story that keeps the reader interested throughout and inculcates the moral lesson that evil cannot overcome evil. The reader is also educated on culture, history and geography, as the story travels through time and place; to a pre-colonised, predominantly Islamic Hausaland, the Hausa Wars, French Equatorial Africa, Mecca and to East Africa during the Second World War (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 53). But where the reader is educated and entertained, he or she may also absorb a potentially damaging view of women as objects.

This view is perpetuated in *An African Night's Entertainment* (1962), which, like *Passport*, is a story of revenge and struggle over the ownership of a woman. Also similar to *Passport* is its evocation of the oral tradition of storytelling. The story recounts a popular Hausa tale of a wealthy man, Mallam Shehu, who has three barren wives. His obsession to produce a son leads him to bewitch Zainobe, who is already betrothed to another man, Abu Bakir. When Shehu succeeds in 'winning' Zainobe and producing a male heir, Bakir vows vengeance, destroying everyone involved (here, as in *Passport*, Ekwensi is highlighting the futility of vengeance).

Looking at these three works together, one can see similar patterns and pitfalls. *African Night's* and *Passport* emphasise the importance of tradition and history and demonstrate the senselessness of revenge and *Drummer Boy* teaches the reader the importance of forgiveness, citizenship and sensitivity toward the needs of others. These lessons become particularly important when one considers that they were published for Nigerian children in the first few years of independence, when a way forward from colonialism was being paved. Although all three books flounder on the issue of the place of women in the 'new nation', Ekwensi does attempt to provide for his young reader 'real' situations and identifiable characters in his adventure-packed books, promoting an interest in reading, an awareness of Nigerian history and geography and an acceptance of the country's cultural pluralism.<sup>70</sup>

### **National Identity Construction: Unity and Cultural Pluralism**

Like Segun, Ekwensi believed the celebration of cultural diversity in Nigeria was one key way to move toward a more unified, peaceful nation. In an interview with Granqvist, Ekwensi explains that in order to progress toward unity, it is important that Nigerians aren't coerced into unification, stating, "the various groups in this country value their independence, their culture, their own ethnicity, while regarding themselves as Nigerians" ("Interview" 124). Ekwensi implies Nigerians should be allowed to celebrate their own cultures whilst being aware of others'; in this way they can be united in their overarching nationality (promoting a sense of an "imagined community") whilst still continuing to practice their individual beliefs.

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<sup>70</sup> I use Nwamuo's definition of "cultural pluralism" which is "the right of individuals to maintain their ethnic identity while sharing a common culture with people from different ethnic groups" (41).

It was especially vital for Ekwensi that local children's literature should internalise the theme of cultural diversity. He saw the gap between what children were being taught at school and the cultural values expounded by their community as problematic in the greater scheme of national peace and unity. Ekwensi therefore promoted multicultural education with the aim of aiding cultural literacy, tolerance and understanding. He emphasised the importance of reflecting in local children's literature the pluralistic society Nigeria had evolved into, welding together various existing cultures, religions and languages into one cohesive nation, grounding them through the medium of oral storytelling (Nwamuo 39).

Where Achebe utilises modes of storytelling in his works for children for the primary purpose of meshing together national and individual identities, Ekwensi seems to use the medium as an instrument to promote cultural consciousness, encouraging national unity through awareness of diversity. In this way, the publishing of Ekwensi's books in English is vital to the spread of traditional stories that would otherwise have only circulated in a single language, inaccessible to a wider audience. In *African Night's*, the author uses the technique of storytelling in a very literal way. The reader is drawn into the story as if he or she is a part of the audience, gathered around the storyteller under the light of the moon, demonstrating Ekwensi's attempt to "recapture in the story the mood and setting of the traditional African folk tale" (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 62). The book begins with a group of "young men, old men, children, women" congregated on the sheepskin next to a storyteller. The varying ages of the audience, Osa suggests, "serves the special purpose of creating a picture of a true traditional African community - neither exclusively for adults nor exclusively for children" ("Then and Now" 4). The book, too, can be seen to be equally entertaining to both adults and children – lending itself the characteristics of what Martini would describe as "Family Stories" (as with Segun's *My Father's Daughter*) (221). It can thus also be seen to function as a work of 'crossover literature' as it traverses the border between adult and children's literature, oscillating in a space that fuels the construction of an individual identity (Beckett 58; Rudd 16).

The unifying aspect of storytelling provides the reader with a solid point of group identification and the multiple cultures portrayed in the story widens the space in which to formulate the individual identity, expanding the reader's awareness of other cultures existing in their single nation. The differences in cultural traits are, at times, subtle to a reader who has a limited knowledge of the various traditions practiced in Nigeria. Nwamuo points out an instance within *African Night's* demonstrating the Muslim trait of holding hands and

smiting the chest to express sincere feelings of friendship, acceptance and appreciation. He then contrasts this with how the Yoruba or Igbo would convey the same sentiment in that particular scene. Where the Yoruba would place a hand on Abu's head as he kneels down, the Igbo would vigorously shake hands and pray for Abu to go in peace (Nwamuo 43). Children who were exposed to the different cultural practices would pick up on these variances and gain a better understanding of how members of other cultures can express similar sentiments, enhancing a sense of similarity through differences.

Likewise, *Passport* weaves together Islamic culture, history and contemporary Nigerian society for the same purpose (Iloeje 29). The narrative switches in time and place, as mentioned previously, illuminating the history not only of Nigeria at the time, but also situating it in a wider context of Africa (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 53). Although the book was criticised for being a "queer mixture of influences with nothing Nigerian in it", the counter argument is that contemporary Nigeria *is* a queer mixture of influences, both culturally and physically (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 2).

Problematically, however, Ekwensi's books seem to indicate that colonisation by the British played a positive role in the eradication of certain African traditions. An example of this can be seen in *Passport*, where Mallam Iliia describes how he played the game *Shanchi*, (fight to the death) for the hand of Zarah, after which he declares that he is "glad the British came to Kano so soon after and stamped out such dreadful customs" (Ekwensi, *Passport* 19). The idea that Europe is more advanced and Africa is "backward" or somehow "behind" is, however, most apparent in *Drummer Boy*, where Europe and Africa are frequently directly compared. Indeed, it is made clear by Nurse Joe that Akin's sight could have been saved by the (English) eye specialist, Doctor Simpson, if only Akin's "silly", "ignorant" parents hadn't tried to treat the boy themselves with "crude drugs" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 14). It is not only Europeans' medicine that is implied to be as more 'advanced' in the book, but also their attitude toward the handicapped. It is again Nurse Joe who casts England in a more favourable light when he tells Akin, "in England, blind people do not *have* to beg as we do here in Africa. They have special literature of their own" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 54). Mr Fletcher (the English founder of the Boy's Forest Home) then sets out on what he calls a "propaganda tour" in order to "educate" Africans on the handicapped in the attempt to change their view of the disabled as redundant and prove that they can become "useful citizens" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 20).

Mr Fletcher's idea of being "useful citizen" is central to his founding of the Boy's Forest Home, where, as he explains to Bisi, troubled boys "learn to be useful citizens here, instead of crooked ones" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 20). Mr Fletcher and his Boy's Forest Home take on a troubling likening to a 'civilising mission', whereby the school takes in and 'reforms' young African boys to become (his British idea of) beneficial members of society.

This is especially apparent in Mr Marshall's explanation to Madam Bisi of how Fletcher came to establish the Boys' Forest Home:

He had just come out from England to do welfare work, and we were having a lot of trouble with little boys in Lagos. You know the sort I mean: thieves and the like... Fletcher hit upon the idea that it would be worth his while to try and reform these African boys... So off he went into the bush with a handful of the worst of them, and they cleared a wooded area on the River Ogun (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 17-18).

In this cleared area and under Mr Fletcher's guidance, these "African boys" built the Home, proving (according to Mr Marshall, Welfare Officer from England) that Fletcher had "made men out of them" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 18). The above passage speaks volumes about the adult/child and civilised/uncivilised power relations within the book; implying delinquent "African boys" are made into 'men' by becoming 'civilised' through a European education. This inference of Africans as 'primitive', 'undeveloped' beings is precisely what Achebe and Segun attempted to avoid in their children's literature, as they believed it fundamentally undermines the integrity of the Nigerian consciousness.

Another way Ekwensi can be seen to undermine his African readers' perception of their nation is through belittling, homogenising and stereotyping 'African ways'. In *Passport*, Iliia mentions he was a doctor in the army, elaborating with the statement, "a doctor of the mind, as well as of the body; in our own little African way, of course", implying he was a medicine man and not a doctor in the Western sense (9). His belittlement of African medicine men infers his internalised belief that western medicine and qualifications are superior to traditional African medicine (a view already echoed in *Drummer Boy*). This could lead to the young reader's internalisation of the belief that Africans and their traditions are 'uncivilised' and should be disparaged, a way of thinking that undercuts the goal of fostering a less Eurocentric national consciousness.

### **Exposing the Civilised Adult and the Uncivilised Child**

The civilised/uncivilised dynamic extends to Ekwensi's view on the role of authors of children's books. The author is reported to have likened the role of the children's book writer to that of a "civilising mission",<sup>71</sup> where there is a need to project through their texts "high standards of honesty, courage, truth, honour and all those things that lift a man from the level of the savage and make him a finer being" (Unoh 4). Ekwensi's statement distinctly exemplifies Slemon and Wallace's suggestion that the adult author of children's literature perceives the child reader as a "primitive" "subject-in-information" (20). Yet when one turns to his books for children, particularly *The Drummer Boy*, one cannot help but notice Ekwensi is highly self-reflexive about the unequal power relations between adults and children. Through commenting directly and indirectly on this disparity, Ekwensi opens up the space of awareness and identification in the adult and child readers; a space that Nodelman (1992) suggests might pave the way toward greater understanding and equality between the two groups ("The Other" 7).

A contributing factor to the effectiveness of this space could have something to do with Ekwensi's primary reason for writing literature for young people: his enjoyment of entertaining children (Granqvist, "Interview" 126). Where Achebe set out to 'teach' and Segun to 'parent' in their respective works for children, seeing their readers as a homogenous mass that could easily be understood and 'written into' literature, Ekwensi emphasised the humanness of both his adult and child characters and their realistic situations, making them more identifiable for his readers. The story of *Drummer Boy*, for instance, is told from the perspective of both the adult (Madam Bisi, Ayike and Nurse Joe) and the child (Akin), revealing important insights into what it could be like to live as a child in an adult-dominated world.

This narrative technique of alternating perspectives opens up a fascinatingly constructive space that neither Achebe's nor Segun's books contain. By revealing the distorted image the adult characters have of the child characters, Ekwensi is able to address both an adult and a child readership. The child reader can identify with Akin's feelings of restriction and injustice whilst also gaining a deeper insight into the perspective adults might have on children. Alternatively, the adult reader is made aware of the effects that the unequal power

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<sup>71</sup> Echoing Jill May's thoughts on children's literature as an instigator for the "civilising process" that aids in the production of responsible citizens (18).

dynamic between adult and child could have on children. Additionally, Ekwensi highlights for his entire readership the power relations between the able-bodied and the disabled. Akin is further dehumanised in the view of both the adult and child characters because of his blindness, for which he is mocked, taken advantage of and manipulated. Since the readers are able to view parts of the story from Akin's perspective, they gain an awareness of the shared sense of humanity connecting the able-bodied to the disabled and the adult to the child.

Yet for Akin, it seems his primary handicap is not blindness, but youth. The entire book revolves around the struggle between Akin, who craves freedom and independence, and the adult characters that believe they know what's best for him. Bisi, dismissing Akin's musical talents as a hobby and overlooking his usefulness as a provider of joy, takes the boy's future into her own hands. Without her intervention, Bisi believes Akin will be doomed to "remain a beggar all his life", and that "he would never be able to do any good for himself and his friends, or even become a useful citizen of Africa" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 14). So she sets about trying to find a place in Nigeria that caters for blind boys so she can "send that boy there, and let him be taught to read and write" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 15). Madam Bisi settles on the Boy's Forest Home, where Akin "would be taught to use his hands: weaving baskets, sewing, making chairs, weighing things, telling the value of money... and a lot of other useful little things" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 31). It is therefore apparent that, to Bisi, the only way for a boy to be a "useful citizen of Africa" is for him to become literate or to learn "useful little things" such as arts, crafts and basic accounting.

Akin's opinion is of little consequence to Bisi, as evidenced in her neglecting to inform him of her plans until after she has organised a place for Akin at the Boys' Forest Home. Bisi is able to assert this power over Akin because not only is she an adult (and therefore 'knows better' what is needed for Akin and for the country), but she also has the financial means to pay for Akin's education. The fact that Bisi is willing to sponsor Akin is something Mr Marshall urges him to be grateful for. Akin is thus doubly disabled in the narrative, by his physical disability *and* by the money-driven, adult-dominated world he inhabits. It is because Akin is a child that his desires are overlooked, everywhere he turns he is encountered by adults who belittle him, claiming to have superior knowledge of what is best

for him.<sup>72</sup>

Akin sees no choice but to run away in order to maintain his independence. But the reason for avoiding school goes beyond his need for freedom and agency; Akin confesses to Ayike that he is afraid to attend a school populated by able-bodied peers who might remind him he is different. Nurse Joe correctly guesses this: "It must be, he reasoned, that... his little friends would keep reminding him of his sufferings by making little innocent references to his sight. What the boy needed was someone who could understand him and, quite informally, teach him all he needed to learn in intimate companionship" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 54). Although Nurse Joe believes he has Akin's best interests at heart, it is clear from the wording of his thoughts that he views Akin and his peers as 'beneath' him. His belittlement of Akin's "little friends" who might make "little innocent references" to his blindness distances him from Akin and his dilemma. This mental distance is further compounded by his use of "the boy" in place of Akin's name. Nurse Joe de-personalises his thoughts of Akin, making him not only a part of a homogenous group, but also implicitly positioning himself as a 'man' in relation to Akin as a 'boy' (the implication is that he is not yet a 'fully formed' person). Thus in the mind of Nurse Joe, Akin is a "subject-information", a way of thinking that makes it more acceptable for the adult to mistreat or control the child.<sup>73</sup>

It is therefore fitting that one of the overarching messages of the book is that one must not underestimate others due to stereotypes or prejudiced thinking. In a surprise twist, it is revealed that twelve year-old Herbert is the "brains" of the gang that assaulted Ayike, burned down her eating hut and murdered a teacher at Ilean College (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 76). Ekwensi implies that children's capabilities should not be underestimated - whether evil, as is the case with Herbert, or good, as with Akin, who does not give in to frustration or self-pity despite his age and disability and who turns out to have a "nobler concept of philanthropy than most well-to-do men in his society" (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 51-2).

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<sup>72</sup> 1. Nurse Joe to Akin: "Poor boy, it's a pity you're too young to understand..." (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 54).

2. When Akin confronts Ayike about not paying the musicians and chasing them out, she snaps, "Perhaps some day when you grow up, you'll understand" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 43).

3. Akin offers to help Ayike and she replies: "You? A little boy like you - but how?" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 39).

<sup>73</sup> This refers back to Slemon and Wallace and Paul's assertion that children are treated as "subjects-in-information" due to the ideological assumption that "children are too naïve (or stupid) to look after themselves" and thus need to be protected and guided by adults (Slemon and Wallace 20; Paul 124).

### Questioning Morality: Reflecting Human Complexity

Akin's philanthropic nature is demonstrated throughout the book. He brings joy to the patients in hospital, he helps Ayike rebuild her business and, even though he is impoverished and avoids being sent to the Boy's Forest Home, he collects money to donate to the school. Akin can thus be seen as the epitome of 'good', which is why, when he finally agrees to attend the Boy's Forest Home, he becomes such an important part of the reformation of the boys in the school, who exemplify that which is 'bad' in society.

At the end of the book the adults look on as the boys, "delinquents, the dangerous criminals, the thieves, the liars, the run-aways-from-home", all gather around Akin "like rats around the Pied Piper" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 80). This is a problematic analogy.<sup>74</sup> That the boys are likened to rats is a fine example of Nodelman's suggestion that children in literature are frequently implicitly equated with animals (Nodelman "Decoding the Images" 135). But instead of leading these "rats" to their death, as the story of the Pied Piper goes, Akin radiates happiness "in a manner to make everyone think only of doing good, of being good, and of living a clean life" (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 80). His music incites the boys to "dance" and "sweat" (conjuring up images of rehabilitation and purification), and leads them to think only "good" thoughts (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 80). It is through music and dance that the boys are purged of their wrong-doings and, following Unoh's suggestions, they are elevated from "savages" into "finer beings", from "boys" into "men" (4).

Importantly, the tune is called by Akin, and not by the adult Englishmen who run the Boy's Forest Home. This could indicate that the best chance at 'rehabilitation' of the children at the school (and in the nation) is through inspirational peers who can lead them in the 'right' direction - and not through the coercion of adults. In fact, the grownups seem to take a step back from control toward the end of the book, assuming the role of observers. They pray for Akin's success in reforming the other boys into 'good citizens', hinting at a metaphor for the greater task of refashioning the nation in the wake of colonial rule. As the sun sets on the

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<sup>74</sup> The Pied Piper is a European story (believed to have originated from Germany) about a rat catcher who is credited with saving townspeople from a rat over-population problem by attracting the vermin with his music, leading them away and eventually drowning them (Wilkening 178). One might then question whether the use of a European folktale instead of an African one would be as useful or relevant to the Nigerian child reader, especially considering that one of Ekwensi's priorities was to integrate aspects of African folklore into his stories as well as to encourage the connection between what is taught at school and the lived experiences of African children.

final scene in the book, literally and figuratively, the Union Jack colours of red, white and blue emerge, “the entire sky (is) transformed into a dazzling arc of red so that the white clouds were tinged and they stood out against a red-blue sky” (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 80). One can see in the last few lines of the book the metaphor of the sun setting as the end of the colonial period. The mood is one of hope and anticipation as the adults look to Akin to lead the way in ‘goodness’ once the new day (independence) has dawned.

The burden of transformation that is placed on Akin's shoulders is characteristic of the responsibility foisted onto Nigerian children at the time. This generation was believed to harbour the potential for attaining “great lofty heights” by building a nation “where peace and justice reign”.<sup>75</sup> Ekwensi indicates the role of children as citizens of the nation is inevitable; that Akin eventually ends up at the Boy's Forest Home despite his constant evasion of the school is bittersweet. On the one hand, Akin will be able to overcome his disability to a certain extent by becoming educated and ‘useful’ to his nation but, on the other hand, he must forego his valuable freedom as a ‘wanderer’. The implication is that the good of the nation should outweigh the good of the individual.

Becoming a ‘good citizen’ is something that Segun, too, prioritised over individual success in her children's books. Where her ideals of which characteristics make up a productive member of a newly independent nation are straightforward, the morals in Ekwensi's books are somewhat more complicated. The author was conscious of his characters' human flaws, both in his adult and children's works. Where it might seem clear-cut that characters like Akin are ‘good’, it does not mean they are faultless. His acts of selflessness, like helping Ayike rebuild her business, are complicated by acts of impulsiveness and presumption, as when he calls Ayike a “miser” and hastily abandons her (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 53).

Abu Bakir (*African Night's*) and Mallam Ilia (*Passport*) are two more examples of characters that are not simply ‘good’. Although both men's ultimate intentions are ‘bad’ (vengeance and murder), both Abu and Ilia are portrayed as ‘decent’ people. When Abu is asked by a band of thieves to join them, he replies, “I cannot steal”, and when he is wrongly imprisoned, he does not complain, but upon his release only works harder and with more honesty – indicating a solid moral compass (Ekwensi, *African Night's* 31). Mallam Ilia, too, attempts to “always live according to the Prophet” and to do all he can “to be good, to

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<sup>75</sup> These are lines from the Nigerian national anthem, composed in 1978.

propagate the faith” (Ekwensi, *Passport* 55). He cares for his enemy's abandoned child, and clearly knows 'right' from 'wrong'- as evidenced in his regret about leaving his pregnant wife.

Despite their numerous acts of 'goodness', both Abu and Ilia are undone by their thirst for vengeance. Through the message of the futility of vengeance, Ekwensi delivers to his young readers the moral that it is possible for a 'good' person to be corrupted by 'bad' influences and that evil cannot overcome evil (Emenyonu, *Modern African Writers* 54). This message is particularly vital for the period in which the books were published, both politically and historically. At a time when the nation was figuring out how to move on from colonialism, Ekwensi's message was not to dwell on the past or concentrate on exacting revenge, but rather to move productively forward through “doing good... being good, and... living a clean life” (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 80).

### **The Role for the Female in the 'New Nation'**

Having said this, there is a female-shaped gap in Ekwensi's drive to move the nation forward that is disturbingly similar to the one Achebe created in his children's literature (as demonstrated in chapter one). It is seen in the disregard for the opinions and lives of the female characters in both *African Night's* and *Passport*, but is most clearly apparent in the final few pages of *Drummer Boy*. In the last scene of the book, the boys of the Forest Home gather around Akin in a symbolic scene of unity and reformation, the sun setting on colonialism to rise on independence. The female characters, Ayike and Bisi, stand to the side as spectators, praying for the boys' success, indicating a potentially passive role for women in the dawn of a 'new' Nigeria. Moreover, the fact that the Boy's Forest Home is meant solely for male juveniles paints the picture that there is no clear space for women (as leaders or citizens) in the project of refashioning the 'new' nation.

However, unlike the works for children by Segun or Achebe (whose female characters appear to have even less power than they would if they weren't fictional), Ekwensi's *Drummer Boy* features financially independent females; characters that reflect the roles and predicaments faced by women in society at the time. Added to the identifiableness of the female characters for the readers (particularly the female readers), the alternating perspective between male and female characters adds to the book's accessibility to and familiarity with a wide range of readers, promoting the construction of identities alongside an awareness of gender biases.

This channel of identification is, however, inaccessible in Ekwensi's *African Night's* and *Passport* where women's perspectives remain unseen and women themselves are regarded as unimportant. The objectification and dehumanisation of the female characters in these stories further distances the reader, leading to potentially damaging perspectives on women. Ekwensi objectifies women from the very beginning of Mallam Ilia's story, where the old man tells Hassan that he was "born sixty-five years ago, at a time when a man was a man and women were won by those who deserved them" (Ekwensi, *Passport* 13). He implies that only a man who displays 'masculine' attributes of bravery and valour deserves the 'prize' that is a woman, equating the loss of this tradition with the loss of a traditional sense of masculinity. He romanticises gallantry by stating he "prided" himself on "being a man, and did not consider it gallant merely to 'buy' or 'take on' a wife" (Ekwensi, *Passport* 13). Ilia's objection to the changing traditions of courtship is not due to the objectification of women, but the generational difference in what it means to be a 'man'.

Ilia goes on to tell Hassan the story of how he comes to 'win' a beautiful woman named Zarah, who's future is casually tossed up by her father as a means of punishment for refusing to marry his choice of suitor. Zarah's father organises a fight to the death, the winner of which would take home his daughter as a prize. Throughout the narrative, Zarah's state of mind remains unrevealed. Rather, she is portrayed on a purely physical plane; she is "beautiful", "truly lovely", and has a "delicate body" (Ekwensi, *Passport* 23 and 27). The other woman in the story, the mother of Usuman's child, remains unnamed and is merely referred to by him as "the Indian woman" (56). Her humanness is negated by the description of her as a "beautiful *creature*" and the fact that she "did not look Nigerian" eroticises her foreignness, heightening the desirability for a beauty that is not 'typically Nigerian' (an ideal also echoed by Segun in *My Father's Daughter*) (46. Emphasis mine).

Zainobe from *African Night's* is also described in terms of her appearance. Her mother evaluates her marital (and, because of the 'bride price', financial) worth by her beauty (10). Aside from her looks, Mallam Shehu values Zainobe for her ability to provide him with a male heir. Despite already having a number of wives, Shehu is childless and, when he is told by a medicine man that Zainobe is the only woman who would be able to bear him a son, Shehu is determined to "win" her away from her betrothed, Abu Bakir (8).

Shehu's desperation to produce a *male* heir reinforces Nwapa's argument that some traditional tales promote the notion that boys are more valuable than girls (274). However, if

one follows the tale to completion, one can see Ekwensi is commenting on the futility of this way of thinking. Mallam Shehu uses underhanded means to control his destiny and, as a result, his child brings him great unhappiness and eventually causes his death. Ekwensi might be implying the lives of children should be valued equally regardless of their sex, but the apparent disregard for women in the story cannot be ignored.

The indifference to Zainobe as a woman is evident throughout the narrative. She is constantly referred to by Mallam Shehu as “the girl”, even after he learns her name (examples on pages 8, 11, 13 and 15 of *African Night's*), and is likened on two separate occasions to a horse and once to a donkey (*African Night's* 7, 13 and 26). So ingrained is the notion of women as ‘inhuman’ that Zainobe even objectifies herself, likening herself to a cloth at a market place.<sup>76</sup>

By objectifying and dehumanising his female characters, Ekwensi alienates the reader from them. Ekwensi's homogenising and mystifying of women as ‘creatures’ that cannot be comprehended compound this distancing. Ilia is confounded by Zarah's moods, which he regarded as “part of that complex nature of a woman which makes her difficult to understand” (Ekwensi, *Passport* 23). His other love interest, Dije, is also described as possessing an “air of mystery about her” that “excited (Ilia's) imagination” (Ekwensi, *Passport* 58).

As mysterious as Dije is, she still falls into the ‘role of reaffirmation’; she is sweet natured, nurturing and “kind and gentle” and “did everything” to make her husband happy (Ekwensi, *Passport* 61). Zainobe, too, follows rigid gendered roles of domesticity; helping her mother around the house (26) and performing her duty as a wife by providing her husband with a child, whom she protects unconditionally even after he commits patricide, falling into the category Bicknell terms “Woman as Mother” (267)<sup>77</sup>.

Even Madam Bisi is defined by her marital success. The narrator implies that the confidence she possesses is due in part to her “happy marriage”, “she walked slowly, and with that dignity which befits a woman who is happily married” (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 5). Yet Bisi

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<sup>76</sup> “A girl who has not been married is like a cloth in the market-place” (Ekwensi, *African Night's* 24).

<sup>77</sup> As I expanded on in my first chapter, on Achebe, Bicknell (1990) puts forth three major categories that define the role of women in Achebe's novels. “Woman as Mother”, which portrays women as putting the needs of her family above her own, is one of these categories.

is a prosperous businesswoman and, even though Ekwensi ties her self-assuredness to her role as a wife, her husband does not feature whatsoever in the narrative. Similarly, Ayike is the owner of a popular eating-house. She is a single, childless woman who is repeatedly victimised and is eventually whipped within an inch of her life for refusing to marry a man whom she does not love.

Although the stories were written primarily for children, Ekwensi does not water-down the scenes of violence against women. In *Passport*, Zarah is shunted back and forth between Usuman and Mallam Ilia until she is fatally stabbed and “the Indian woman” is viciously attacked and kidnapped by Usuman. In *African Night's*, Zainobe's father thrashes her with a cane and Abu Bakir threatens to flog her, stopping short only because he was “was afraid to annoy the father of the girl by flogging her” (Ekwensi, *African Night's* 24).

Unlike *African Night's* and *Passport*, *The Drummer Boy* notably features women from a first-person perspective. The narrative switches from the perspective of Madam Bisi to Akin to Ayike and to Nurse Joe, providing a rich tapestry of viewpoints bound to capture the interest of both the male and female reader. As I have established, the aspect of providing a female perspective is an important point of identification for the female child-reader, but it also provides the young male reader with an insight into a perspective he would not ordinarily be privy to.

Ayike's gender as a liability is brought to the forefront for a second time when she comes across another of her attackers being tormented by a large crowd. She wants to take him to the police, but feels helpless as “what was she to do? She was twenty miles out of Lagos; a woman, unarmed, and not strong enough to knock him out and take him by sheer force” (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 75). She seeks out a policeman, but is frustrated to find the constable on duty “did not take her word seriously” at first because he thought her attractive and had “often made eyes at her” (Ekwensi, *Drummer Boy* 75). Problematically, even though Ekwensi highlights these realities, he still delivers the underlying message that women need men in order to be ‘happy’ and ‘safe’. He does this by implying that Ayike could have avoided the assault if she were married and did not own a business that kept her working until late, a message that could also discourage young girls from wanting to be financially independent.

Although the objectification of women in *African Night's* and *Passport* are put into an historical context by the storytelling narrative technique, one cannot ignore that the book portrays women as 'sub-human' objects to be desired and discarded. The female characters in these two books do not occupy any major roles and their perspectives remain unheard, giving young female readers no point of identification and young male readers no insight into the female viewpoint. By objectifying, dehumanising and distancing his female characters, Ekwensi effectively alienates his female readership, affecting the way they see themselves and each other as women and undermining their view of their place in society. Through this he also potentially propagates a dangerously chauvinistic outlook in the imaginations of his male readers, especially detrimental in light of imagining the new nation.

### **Conclusion: Crosswriting and Constructive Spaces**

It can therefore be seen that, although Ekwensi creates in *Drummer Boy* a more realistic model of women in contemporary Nigerian society than either Segun or Achebe, providing a stronger point of identification for the young female reader, he ultimately undermines both his female characters and readership. Through implying that a woman's happiness and security is tied to marriage as well as by overlooking the role of women in the independent nation, Ekwensi subordinates the female reader. Further psychological subordination of the girl child-reader is propagated by the objectification, dehumanisation and distancing (through lack of female perspective) of the women characters in *African Night's* and *Passport*. The potential ill effects extend to the male reader, who may internalise this treatment of women and perpetuate it.

Yet where the narratives may sideline female readers, both sexes are allowed the space in which to identify with what it is to be a child in an adult-dominated world. By 'crosswriting' his children's books, making them appealing to both child and adult readers, Ekwensi can be seen to open up a fertile space in which the reader can construct his or her individual identity. Added to this is the space Ekwensi unlocks through the employment of various perspectives in *Drummer Boy*, a technique that promotes greater understanding and awareness of the points of view of the male, female, adult, child, able-bodied and disabled.

Also contributing to a sense of awareness is the emphasis Ekwensi places on different cultures within Nigeria. The author highlights a real, shared history through the mode of storytelling and emphasises that the many different cultures that populate Nigeria should be

respected and even celebrated. However, Ekwensi does problematically seem to imply that European modes of thinking and education are more 'civilised' and 'advanced' than African ones and at times he can be seen to stereotype Africans, belittling their traditions; a feature that could detrimentally add to the already undermined national consciousness of the reader.

Having said this, Ekwensi's main goal in his children's literature was to provide literature that was more relevant to the lived experiences of the Nigerian child reader at the time. In his books, Ekwensi confronted difficult issues (not addressed by the likes of Segun or Achebe) such as disabilities, death, violence, gender discrimination as well highlighting the inequalities of the adult/child power relation and the complexity of human psychology. In this way, the author made his books not only more intricate and exciting (thereby increasing children's' interest in reading and promoting national literacy), but he also provided his audience with more identifiable characters and a productive space in which readers could construct their individual identities.

## Conclusion

### Changing Perspectives on Children's Literature in Africa

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The current state of children's literature in Africa is still critically overlooked. Despite the fundamental role the genre plays in socialisation and the development of individual and national identity formation, the misconceptions and negative or indifferent attitudes surrounding children's literature remain. This is evidenced by the "abysmally poor" response to the call for papers for the latest edition of *African Literature Today* dedicated to children's literature and storytelling in Africa (303). Surprised by the persistent lack of interest in the topic, Emenyonu, the journal's editor, asserts that it is time for academics and literary critics to reconsider the "unhealthy attitudes and ludicrous misconceptions" they hold regarding children's literature (*ALT* 303). Emenyonu argues that what is lacking in Africa is not the supply of thoughtfully crafted literature for children, but rather the attention of academics and critics (*ALT* 318).

It is no secret that the production of local literature for children in Nigeria has declined since the collapse of the publishing sector in the 1980s (Weate). However, that is not to say new and exciting Nigerian children's books are not currently being written. Nigerian authors, such as Ifeoma Onyefulu and Nnedi Okorafor are providing fascinating platforms for children living in contemporary Nigeria and the diaspora.<sup>78</sup> These writers are relocating the epicentre from Europe or America to Africa, providing specific historical and cultural context. They ground their works in a Nigerian setting, whilst grappling with contemporary issues such as migration, diaspora and "the politics of 'home'" (Egbunike 145). Additionally, they are encouraging their child readership to "rethink notions of normativity with regards to race, gender, culture and characterization" (Egbunike 154). In this way, there are some contemporary Nigerian authors who seem to be shifting the focus in children's world

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<sup>78</sup> Where Onyefulu attempts to carry forth Achebe's torch, re-inscribing and reviving modes of oral storytelling that might otherwise not continue, Okorafor produces works of science fiction and fantasy, opening up what Egbunike describes as a "new frontier", writing Nigerian children into spaces they have previously been excluded from (Uko 17; Egbunike 142). Additionally, genres like science fiction and fantasy can provide an extremely productive space for readers to imagine and construct their identities and for writers to imagine alternate ways of being, helping to dispel stereotypes. It is a space, Egbunike asserts, where "normative racial, gendered or cultural constructs can be dismantled" (150).

literature toward Africa, encouraging young African readers to re-conceptualize their world and their place in it, thus promoting a shift in national consciousness and providing a flexible base for individual identity construction. Furthermore, for their non-African readership, these writers are promoting an awareness of culture and history and attempting to dispel harmful stereotypes (Egbunike 154).

Yet, as Emenyonu indicates, these important shifts are going relatively unnoticed by critics and academics. This gap in attention is especially regrettable if we take into account Reynolds' suggestion that children's literature not only preserves and rejuvenates existing genres, but becomes an "incubator for innovation", creating entirely new kinds of writing and producing a knock-on effect within society (19). It was with this in mind that I initially undertook this project, which sought to shed a much-needed critical light on the role of locally produced children's literature in Nigeria at the time of (and up to three decades after) independence as a prime catalyst for the rehabilitation of national consciousness in the wake of colonial rule. By drawing together the works of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Mabel Segun, I have illustrated the importance the authors placed on reconstructing a rooted national identity in post-independent Nigeria. Where all three authors have a similar overall goal of contributing to the 'refashioning' of the nation through their children's literature, each one has a unique way of approaching their aim.

My first chapter looked at how Achebe's *The Drum*, *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, and *Chike and the River* work to build a framework of traditional morality and contemporary hybridity in order to help guide children through a transitional period ripe with potential and rife with instability. I regarded the way in which the author pinpointed problems of "moral decline" and alienation in Nigeria at the time, attributing them to an amnesia of an African history predating colonialism, a history obscured and negated by the Eurocentric literature that dominated the Nigerian readership at the time. Through the revival of traditional modes of storytelling in his children's literature, Achebe displayed his intention that post-independent Nigerian children should construct their individual identities alongside a national identity that is firmly rooted in culture and tradition. And it is in this theme of re-educating African children on their shared, pre-colonial history that Achebe's view of the role of the writer as 'teacher' is made apparent.

Segun's interpretation of the responsibility that children's book authors undertake, that of the 'third parent', is more obviously present in her children's works than Achebe's. Segun's

direct, 'parental' involvement with her child readership formed the basis of my second chapter. Segun positions the concept of 'nation' at the forefront of her books, encouraging her readers to become 'good' citizens by emphasising the importance of unity, equality and morality. Where her *Youth Day Parade* and *Olu and the Broken Statue* are more formulaic attempts to imprint specific messages of national unity and the preservation of cultures and traditions, it is her autobiographical book, *My Father's Daughter*, that perhaps holds the most potential for her messages to be successfully implanted in the minds of her young readers. The book, not originally intended for such a young readership, offered not only a point of identification for the child reader in the form of a realistic child protagonist, but also an essential *feminine* perspective, one that could aid in the construction of the female reader's identity at the same time as illuminating the male child on the (frequently overlooked) feminine point of view.

Where Segun's perception of the role of the children's book author is akin to a tertiary parental figure and Achebe's view of the writer is that of a 'teacher', Ekwensi takes an entirely different stance. In my third chapter I investigated Ekwensi's belief that writers must, above all, provide for their readers a 'mirror' that accurately reflects reality. This commitment to authenticity provides a firm point of identification with the child reader, enabling the author to overcome the 'impossible' boundaries that Rose (1984) asserted plague most books for children. The taboo subjects raised in Ekwensi's *Passport of Mallam Iliya*, *An African Night's Entertainment*, and *Drummer Boy*, not only made the books more relevant to Nigerian children's lived experiences, but also encouraged in them a much-needed interest in reading. By integrating fast-paced entertainment with current, hard-hitting issues together with incorporating the traditional oral narrative form (seen most clearly in *An African Night's Entertainment*), Ekwensi was perhaps the most successful of the three authors in simultaneously engaging his readers' attention and imagination whilst educating them on the importance of tradition and the necessity of tolerating difference, opening up a space in which the child reader could concurrently construct both their individual and collective national identity.

However, all three authors' works are problematized by their neglect to address the role of the *female* in the 'refashioned' nation. Achebe overlooks women, both fictional (characters) and actual (readers), placing them on the periphery while he creates a space in which the male child can construct his individual and national identity. Segun brings forth a feminine presence in *My Father's Daughter* and *Youth Day Parade*, potentially aiding in the identity

construction of the female reader. However, she falls short of reflecting a realistic or inspiring image of women in contemporary Nigerian society by pigeonholing her female characters into traditional, 'reaffirmative' roles. Conversely, Ekwensi portrays a more realistic image of women at the time in *The Drummer Boy*, revealing their perspectives through the gender-neutral third person, omniscient narrator. His *African Night's Entertainment* and *Passport of Mallam Iliya*, on the other hand, detrimentally undermine women by objectifying and dehumanising them, potentially transmitting this disregard for women to his child readership.

But perhaps most worrying obstruction in the way of national refashioning plaguing all three authors' works is the overall implication that the West is more 'advanced' than Africa. This theme fundamentally undermines the authors' intent to inspire within Nigerian children a healthier national consciousness. Added to this is the problematic power relation between the adult writer and the child reader, whereby the adult is in control of how and what the child reader is exposed to, potentially limiting the space in which the child is free to construct their individual identities, something that the authors seem to overlook in favour of a collective *national* identity construction. The texts that seem to best address both individual and national identity construction simultaneously are Segun's *My Father's Daughter* and Ekwensi's 'crossover' books that entertain a dual readership.

As I have established in the introductory chapter, children's literature plays a fundamental role in socialisation and increasing literacy rates. Additionally it functions as a tool in aiding individual identity building and is inextricably linked to national identity formation. Authors therefore need to take into account not only the educational, transformative function of children's literature, but also the primary role of children's books as catalysts for identity construction. In order to kindle the simultaneous construction of both individual and national identity whilst also attempting to alter preconceived notions of what it is to belong to a certain nation, it seems authors of children's books might do well to conceptualise their works as appealing to both adult *and* child readerships and experiment with alternative, boundary-crossing genres.

Still, the issues and power relations surrounding children's literature run deep and there seems to be no simple solution to the complex concerns posed by the genre. Nodelman's (1992) proposal that perhaps it is enough for now to be conscious and spread awareness of the pitfalls and problems embodied in children's literature extends to my position on the

state of African children's literature criticism today. With this contribution, I hope to stimulate further critical attention and academic research into the field of African children's literature.<sup>79</sup> The acute inattention to this essential genre needs to be made apparent in order to not only grasp the important role children's literature plays in individual, social and national identity formulation, but also to further encourage the production of more consciously constructed children's books. In order to do this, the problem of critical and academic dismissal of children's literature needs to be overcome and this, according to Sindiwe Magona, can only be done through "recognition of the problem" (173).

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<sup>79</sup> Particularly in need of notice are children's books written in indigenous African languages, which Magona claims are "never reviewed" at all (168).

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