

Possibilities of representation and subjectivity in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*: Pushing the boundaries of interpretive frameworks and research in African children's literature

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This paper considers an emerging body of books by contemporary writers, many from Nigerian and Ghana, who experiment with constantly shifting and fluid notions of selfhood and identity. It is a literature that demands a reinvigorated reading of itself. African literary critics have increasingly commented on the child figure that has featured prominently in the works of contemporary Nigerian writers, predominantly in those of women writers. African literary critical circles have categorized these works within a larger corpus of novels as being written by a “third-generation” of African writers, distinguishing them as writers who have “come of age” in a period “temporally severed” from the colonial experience, and thus, whose works invoke the need for rejuvenated critical paradigms. These authors write with what Dr. Christopher Ouma (2011) calls a “diasporic consciousness,” that “grapples with the increasing senses of identities that transcend geographical boundaries” (p.2). As Professor Chielozona Eza writes, “they focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational, and hybridized space with the goal of enhancing human flourishing there” (2005, p.110).

One of the overriding concerns in African children's research, on the other hand, has been the issue of appropriate representation and the call for a distinct African identity to characterize African children's literature (Khorana, 1998; Maddy & MacCann, 2009; Yenika-

Agbaw, 2008). So is there a place for these books to be considered as “African children’s literature” or “Literature for African young adults”? This is an open question.

Childhood in these contemporary novels are discussed as salient spaces of possibility, resistance, and negotiation. However, in the predominant frameworks of African children’s literature research, the child and the child’s experience is often considered as a symbolic means of cultural retrieval or preservation or moral example. These frameworks function especially well when the research is situated within the traditions of oral storytelling and cultural and moral education. It’s also useful for pointing out and criticizing negative stereotypes, especially in the historical course of children’s books. However, these frameworks may not be adequate for considering the complexity of how African childhoods and child characters are depicted in some African coming-of-age books today. Hence, in this paper, I ask whether there should also be a conversation about expanding interpretive frameworks and even the purposes of African children’s literature. Is there room for stories that do not necessarily privilege particular kinds of identities and symbolization but rather open up the text to pluralities of meaning and interpretation?

The text I examine is *Imagine This*, a coming-of-age novel written by Nigerian author, Sade Adeniran. It was first self-published in 2007 then gained attention when it won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book in Africa. Now it is also published by Cassava Republic in Nigeria and has found an audience with older secondary school readers and university students. The novel is written in diary form from Lola’s perspective starting from the age of nine when her father uproots her and her brother Adebola’s lives in London and moves them to Idogun, a rural village in Nigeria. The diary narrates ten years of Lola’s life as she struggles to adjust and survive in Idogun and later, urban Lagos. *Imagine This* is an example of a

contemporary Nigerian coming-of-age novel that speaks to the growing psychological focus on African child characters' and their exploration of identity, belonging, and agency, that is worked out in the primary habitat of the family.

At the core of *Imagine This*, then, is the power hierarchy between the child and adult, which is a significant conceptual framework in children's literature theory. The framework draws attention to the authority of adults over children in terms of social conditions, real or fictional. Conversations about children's literature tend to happen among adults. There are of course exceptions and I think the conversations these days are more intentional about bringing in the child's perspective. But in general, children's books are written, selected, purchased and taught by adults. It also points to the inevitable imbalance of power of the adult writer, the omniscient, adult narrative voice that brings the child character into being.

Paradoxically, however, the fictional child written by an adult can still be empowered to negotiate, problematize and even resist boundaries of authority and social norms. That is after all, usually what drives a story. Still, this resistance is still under "certain conditions and for a limited time" (Nikolajeva, 2010, p.10). Many times, in the end, the child character still has to conform to the adult order of things, sometimes through the act of the child character becoming an adult herself. The child may not succeed in completely overthrowing established power structures, the conflict nevertheless has a subversive effect in revealing that "the rules imposed on the child by the adults are in fact arbitrary" (Nikolajeva, 2010, p.10). This is how Lola's character develops an empowered sense of identity that is all at once tangled in her cultural and genealogical heritage but also uniquely distinct as the result of her resistance to it.

So childhood in a story like *Imagine This* comes to represent what Madeleine Hron (2008) describes as "a particularly resistant space, of complex, on-going negotiation and

articulation of difference” (p.30). The child in *Imagine This* calls into question certainties of identity and borders within the arenas of culture, family, and the wider community.

This corresponds to a nuanced conceptualization of the child as inhabiting a hybrid space (Rudd, 2005). This child has the potential to disturb established norms of adult authority. As adults attempt to initiate children into adult practices, the child is in a constant process of negotiating, questioning, and even undermining these social constructions. It is this resistant space of childhood that enables a character like Lola to navigate her cultural hybridity and even disrupt religious and cultural frameworks of identity. This disruption is often done unknowingly, as she attempts to find her place as a child, and eventually, a young woman in her community and Nigerian society at large.

So if we turn now to the novel, the diary starts with Lola and her brother arriving in Nigeria after spending their whole lives in England. Lola is positioned as a displaced figure who inhabits the “in-between spaces” of culture and tradition. Although her aunt, Iya Rotimi and her household immediately take Lola into their home, Lola, herself, feels like an outsider because her move away from England was against her wishes. Her entry into the family community at Idogun was arranged completely by adults. Additionally, the family members don’t make particular efforts to help ease Lola’s difficult transition to life in Idogun and she is not treated warmly as soon as she arrives—She is teased and punished for wetting her bed and she is left to cry when she can’t communicate with anyone. Lola, then, is situated uniquely as a figure who at once belongs and also does not belong to the community. Despite their lack of care, the adults accept Lola as an insider to the rites and routines of life in Idogun. Yet, in her unfamiliarity with the culture, she also narrates her observations and experiences as an outsider in a constant “articulation of difference” that destabilizes notions of innate cultural stability.

Lola's hybrid status as a child is the crucial element in terms of her narrating voice. Lola's main concern is being a child with no control over her life. The issues of Lola's outsiderness are secondary. So although Lola finds it difficult to adjust to life in Idogun, her struggles reach beyond issues of cultural identity, alienation, and displacement. Lola's journey is a fight for a sense of agency. This focus on agency and selfhood has two significant effects on the narrative. First, Lola's perspective is uncompromisingly foregrounded in whatever situation she encounters. In a literal sense, when we remember the diary form, *she* is the writer and narrator of her story. Therefore, the narrative voice never strays from depicting Lola's point of view in order to comment didactically on a cultural issue or to answer to a reader who does not know about Nigeria. Lola's position as an outsider to many of the daily rituals allows for a certain measure of explanation of Nigerian customs, but it's always in accordance to what Lola is learning and experiencing for herself for the first time. Even then, Lola's opinions always colour her observations in child-like language that is often oblivious to what is appropriate.

Hron (2008) writes that "as children attempt to emulate adult behaviour, speech or cultural practices, they inadvertently render them comic, excessive, or even dangerous, revealing how redundant, stereotypical or even pernicious they may be" (p.29). Lola's candid observations ingenuously disrupt limitations of identification. Moreover, her subjectivity—and by subjectivity I mean personhood, agency, and consciousness—is negotiated through intertextuality as she freely draws from references from her past in England to comment on what she experiences in Idogun. For example, soon after Lola arrives in Idogun, she is made to fetch water with her cousin before sunrise and she becomes scared of walking in the dark. "I made sure I was in the middle," she says, "just in case a lion or tiger attacked from the back" (p.9). Lola complains about carrying a bucket of water on top of her head that continuously spills water over herself

and afterward she writes about how she is bored after the “exciting trip to the jungle to fetch water”. In an even stronger, seemingly problematic example, Lola insists on wearing her Sunday shoes to work in the fields, explaining that “I can’t walk around barefoot like the savages in *Tarzan*. That would make me one of them and I don’t want to be a savage who doesn’t have the sense to hide in a tree when chased by a lion” (p.16). Here, Lola combines the taboos that would be considered quite offensive in any other Western book about Africa: savages, the extensively criticized Tarzan figure, mapping Africa as one big jungle.

When interpreted within the current discourses of African children’s literature research, Lola may epitomizes the kind of flawed character that comments on Nigerian culture—on her home culture—with stereotypical observations, Eurocentric opinions, and general confusion. However, interpreting Lola this way also grossly simplifies her very characterization and overlooks the validity of her narrating voice.

The story itself makes room for the simultaneity of Lola’s outsider and insider status. Even as Lola’s relatives show little patience for her fumbling attempts to adjust to her new life, they accept the efforts she demonstrates. They include her in traditional rites that make her fully part of the community even as she, herself, continuously wavers between boundaries of cultural belonging by nature of her inability to fully understand the rituals. When Lola comes back from her first trip to the water pump, the family members gather to inspect her bucket and in a symbolic gesture of acceptance into the family, Mama, Lola’s grandmother, drinks the first cup of water from Lola’s bucket. Mama approves by pronouncing the water as “sweet”—at least that’s what Lola imagines she understands from her cousin’s translation. “Sometimes I don’t understand what he means,” explains Lola, already sidetracked from the water drinking ritual. “Most of the time I have to guess from hand waving and watching his eyes” (p.10). Lola’s

distraction fragments her symbolic moment of entry into a stable framework of cultural identification.

Lola's position as a hybrid child becomes all the more foregrounded as she begins to take part more significantly in cultural rituals and spiritual practices in a complex matrix of encounters that simultaneously highlight difference but also inclusion. They interrupt cultural frameworks of identity but also affirm traditional heritage. Lola is a child who is more concerned about her agency rather than cultural coherence. So she moves easily in and out of different cultural practices and religious beliefs as befits the constantly changing challenges she encounters. For example, at one point, Lola abruptly decides to become a Muslim, but only on Fridays so that she can miss a double labour period at school by going to the mosque. Lola writes that she feels some guilt while attending church on Sunday because she had "gone to the mosque to worship another God," but it does not trouble her exceedingly (p.127). The circumstances of Lola's childhood enable a period of experimentation with culture, tradition, and religion, and hence new subjectivities. It is a process that allows Lola to transition from one identity to another, or to embody several at once. And yet, Lola is not denied personal assimilation into the traditional practices just because she breaks some rules or does not have native knowledge about the rituals.

In fact, Lola is at times able to reach farther than others into the spiritual realm because she has intentionally interfered with traditional rites. Once again these instances destabilize cultural boundaries but also affirm the potency of these spiritual practices to shape Lola's selfhood and validate her place in the community. When Lola's grandfather, Baba Dayo, passes away, the religious masquerade dancers come to perform the funeral rites. Lola is forbidden to watch and she is reprimanded at one point for trying to see Baba's ghost by holding a mirror to

reflect his spirit. Lola understands that if she captures his ghost in the mirror, her grandfather would not be able to complete his journey to the spirit world, but Lola's curiosity gets the better of her and she successfully spies on the funeral rites in the mirror. Her actions cause an uproar in the community as the dancers sense that Baba's spirit does not move into the next world. Yet, it is to Lola that Baba's ghost appears in a dream later that night, peaceful and his health restored: "I saw him," says Lola. "He smiled at me then he just disappeared" (p.48). Instead of the adults who strictly enforce the tradition's rules, it is odd, curious Lola who ultimately sees Baba Dayo off into the spirit world. Lola's engagement with traditional spheres of spirituality disrupts adult modes of identity formation and closure. This enables her to forge and ultimately claim ownership over her own subjectivity.

To do so, she also draws often from traditional Nigerian proverbs spoken to her by harsh patriarchal authority figures in a reclamation of her oral heritage, which signifies the consolidation of Lola's conflicted identity. Lola's personal growth through the process of turning to proverbs and writing in her diary most importantly enables her to forgive her family members, especially her father. It is only after moving toward forgiveness for her father that Lola is truly able to claim agency over her life. As Lola decides to move forward in her life, she ends her diary with one last proverb: "I don't know what the future holds; all I do know is that when it is the turn of a man to become the head of a village, he does not need a diviner to tell him he is destined to rule. The time has come for me to start my life" (p.331). In claiming usage over the proverbs, Lola creates a "proverbial space" for herself and she pushes beyond patriarchal discourse to empower herself.

This kind of reading of *Imagine This* recognizes the possibilities for child characters to boldly occupy a multiplicity of subject positions that draw from divergent or even paradoxical

strands of identity. Within this recognition, the child character claims a new kind of legitimacy to a complexity of subject positions. More importantly, recognizing the complexity of fictional characters creates space for the multiple ways that actual children and young adult readers interpret and interact with books. I wonder if this kind of complexity should be or may be granted by the critical discourse of African children's and young adult literature.

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