

The Postcolonial Child: Colonial History AND THE SHAPING OF THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN FICTION

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Abstract

This article looks at how writers from West and Central Africa have shown the life of the child in their stories. It argues that the idea of childhood in Africa was first shaped by colonial rule, and that African writers have since worked hard to change this picture. Colonial writers and colonial officers saw the African child as a small, backward person who needed to be trained and civilized by Europeans. African writers reject this view. In their novels, the child is not a quiet, empty person waiting to be filled with European ideas. The child sees, feels, speaks, and acts. The child can suffer war, poverty, and abuse, but the child can also resist, question, and choose a different path. This article uses ideas from postcolonial theory, especially the work of Fanon, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, to explain these stories. It studies a selection of novels and memoirs by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ahmadou Kourouma, Ishmael Beah, Margaret Afuh, John Nkengasong, Onyi Nwabineli and other West and Central African writers. The article shows seven main themes: colonial ideas about the child, language and schooling, war and trauma, child labour, gender, family and community, and religion. It ends by arguing that African literature is building a new, decolonized idea of childhood, one that respects African children as full human beings with their own voice and their own history.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, African childhood, African fiction, child soldier, decolonization, and gender

1. Introduction

Childhood in West and Central Africa cannot be understood without looking at colonial history. Before Europeans arrived, African communities had their own ways of raising children. Children learned through stories, work, and community life. Colonial rule changed this. European governments and missionaries brought new schools, new laws, and new ideas about what a child should be. These new ideas did not come from Africa. They came from Europe, and they were forced onto African communities.

This article studies how African writers have responded to this history. It asks a simple question: how do West and Central African novels show the life of the child, and what do these stories tell us about colonialism and its long-lasting effects? To answer this question, the article uses postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is a way of reading history and literature that pays attention to how colonial power worked, and how colonized people have resisted it. Writers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha built the main ideas of this theory. Their work

helps us see how colonial power shaped even the smallest parts of daily life, including how a society sees its children.

The article argues that African writers have moved away from the old colonial picture of the child. In colonial writing, the African child was shown as either an innocent savage or a dangerous, backward person who needed European control. African writers reject both of these pictures. In their novels, children are shown as real people. They think, they feel pain, they make choices, and sometimes they even change their whole community. The child in African fiction is not just a victim of history. The child is also a witness to history and, at times, an agent who pushes history forward. To support this argument, the article draws on a number of well-known novels and memoirs from the region. These include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* (2000), Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007), Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (1956), Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le Soleil qui m'a Brûlée* (1987), Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* (1982), Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002), Margaret Afuh's *Born Before Her Time* (2003), and John Nkengasong's *Achakasara* (2011). Each of these texts shows a different side of the child's life under colonial and postcolonial conditions, yet together they build a single, connected picture.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Section two explains the method used in this study. Section three looks at how colonial rule first built its picture of the African child. Section four explains the theories that guide this study. Section five looks at language and education. Section six looks at war, violence, and trauma. Section seven looks at child labour and poverty. Section eight looks at gender and the special problems faced by girls. Section nine looks at family, community, and belonging. Section ten looks at religion and spirituality. Section eleven discusses what these stories teach us together, and section twelve brings the article to a close and suggests what a truly decolonized idea of childhood might look like.

2. Methodology

This article uses a qualitative, textual method. It reads a set of well-known West and Central African novels and memoirs closely, and it uses postcolonial theory as a lens to interpret what these texts say about childhood. The texts were chosen because each one places a child, or a young narrator, at the centre of the story, and because together they cover a wide range of experiences, including colonial schooling, war, poverty, and gender. The article does not attempt to cover every novel about African childhood, since the body of writing on this subject is very large. Instead, it selects texts that are widely studied and that clearly illustrate the themes under discussion.

The analysis proceeds with themes that run through all the texts rather than looking at the texts singly. Each section of the article takes one major theme, such as language, violence, labour, or gender, and studies how several different novels treat that theme. This method allows the article to show patterns that repeat across different countries, languages, and historical periods, while also noting the ways individual writers differ from one another. Direct quotations from the novels are used where they help to make a point clear, and each quotation is referenced according to the American Psychological Association (APA) style.

3. Colonial Ideas about the African Child

To understand how African writers changed the way the child was perceived, we must first understand the colonial picture they were reacting against. Edward Said (1978) used the word 'Orientalism' to describe how European writers built a picture of colonized peoples as different from, and lower than, Europeans. This same pattern was used to describe African children. Colonial writing showed the African child as simple and backward, a person who needed European help to become fully human.

Colonial schools played a big part in this process. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the arrival of missionary schools breaks apart the old way that Igbo children learned from their family and community. Children were taken out of their normal way of life and placed inside a European system of classrooms and religious teaching. Michel Foucault (1977) called this kind of control 'disciplinary power'. It works by watching people closely and by training their bodies and minds to obey new rules.

Colonial writers often called Africa the 'Dark Continent' and used this idea to make colonial rule look like a kind, fatherly act. Ashis Nandy (1983) explained that colonizers liked to think of themselves as parents guiding backward children toward maturity. This idea kept African adults in a childlike, dependent position forever, because it suggested that Africans could never fully grow up without European guidance. New colonial laws about children also changed African family life. Sharon Stephens (1995) showed that colonial governments introduced age laws, forced schooling, and child protection rules copied from Europe. These rules often treated normal African practices, such as early marriage or children helping with family work, as crimes or as neglect, even though these practices made sense within African communities.

European novels about Africa added to this false picture. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) showed African children as simple, wild, or corrupted, never as full human beings with their own minds. Achebe (1977) strongly criticized Conrad for this, saying that his Africa was a place 'devoid of all recognizable humanity'. Ann Laura Stoler (1995) also showed how colonial rulers controlled relationships between races, so that children of mixed race were often abandoned and pushed to the edge of both European and African society. Even medicine and science were used to support this false picture. Colonial doctors blamed African mothers for high child death rates, without admitting that colonial rule itself had caused poverty and hunger. Nancy Rose Hunt (1999) showed how, in the Belgian Congo, colonial health workers treated African mothers as ignorant and told them how to raise their own children. In all these ways, colonial rule built a picture of the African child that served colonial interests rather than the real needs of African children and families.

4. Theories that Guide this Study

This article uses postcolonial theory to read African fiction about children. Frantz Fanon's (1952) work is a key starting point. Fanon showed how colonial rule enters the mind of the colonized person from a young age. The colonized child grows up learning that white is good and black is bad. Fanon called this feeling of shame about one's own body and skin an 'epidermalization of inferiority'.

This idea appears clearly in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). In the novel, Father Amadi is criticized by Eugene Achike for preaching in Igbo, because Eugene believes that the Igbo language is not good enough for the church. Eugene also gave his children English names, following a wider pattern in which Africans were made to feel that their own names were not good enough for Christian life. Amaka, a young character in the novel, refuses to take an English name. She argues that names like 'Chiamaka' (God is beautiful) and 'Chima' (God knows best) praise God just as well as 'Paul' or 'Peter'. Through Amaka, Adichie shows a child who has already begun to reject the colonial idea that African things are less valuable than European things. She portrays the beauty of African names, that is why she refuses to take up an English name for her confirmation.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) idea of the 'subaltern' is also useful here. Spivak asked whether people who have been silenced by history can ever really speak for themselves, or whether they are always spoken for by others. The African child is silenced twice over: once because of age, and once because of colonial history. However, the novels studied in this article show a clear change. In these stories, children are not simply spoken about. They speak for themselves. In Afuh's *Born Before Her Time*, the young character Abo refuses an arranged marriage to a much older man, insists on going to school, and later chooses her own husband. Her actions give her a voice, and they also change how her whole community thinks about forced marriage.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) ideas about hybridity and mimicry explain another part of the postcolonial child's life. Bhabha argued that colonized people often live between two worlds, taking some things from their own culture and some things from the colonizer's culture. This creates what Bhabha called a 'third space'. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Amaka and her friends mix traditional and modern styles of dress and behaviour, showing how young people build new identities out of both African and Western influences.

Achille Mbembe's (2001) idea of the 'postcolony' reminds us that independence did not end all forms of unfair power in Africa. After colonial rulers left, some African leaders continued similar patterns of control and violence. Children in postcolonial states, therefore, must deal with both the old wounds of colonialism and new problems created by African governments. V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) adds a further warning: even the very idea of 'childhood' as a fixed stage of life may be a Western idea that does not fit perfectly with African ways of organizing family life, such as age-grade systems and flexible households. Olga Nieuwenhuys (2013) calls for the 'decolonization of childhood', meaning that scholars should stop judging African childhood only by Western standards, and should instead recognize many different, valid ways of growing up.

5. Language, Schooling, and the Postcolonial Child

Language is one of the clearest ways that colonial power reached into the life of the African child. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that language is the most powerful tool of colonial control, because it shapes how people think and what they are able to say. When European languages replaced African languages in schools, children lost an important link to their own history and culture. Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (1956) shows this problem through the character Toundi, a boy who is educated in a Catholic mission school and learns French. His schooling promises him a better future, but instead it leads him into new forms of humiliation, because educated Africans still remained below even the least important Europeans. In Achebe's *Things Fall*

Apart (1958), the young character Nwoye becomes a Christian and attends the mission school, learning to read and write English, but this same schooling separates him from his father and from Igbo tradition. Not every writer agrees on how African literature should treat this colonial language problem. Ngũgĩ (1986) chose to write in Gikuyu rather than English, as a direct challenge to the power of colonial languages. Achebe (1975), on the other hand, believed that African writers could take the English language and reshape it to carry African meaning and African experience. This disagreement matters for our study, because the language used to tell a child's story shapes what readers can understand about that child's life. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) also shows the pain that colonial schooling can cause inside a single family. Eugene Achike, educated in London, comes to see his own father, Papa Nnukwu, as a 'pagan' because of his traditional beliefs. Papa Nnukwu says with sadness, 'I should not have let him follow those missionaries,' showing his regret at allowing his son a colonial education that turned him against his own family. Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* (1982) tells a similar story from a woman's own life. French schooling taught the young Ken to look down on her own African culture and to want everything European, a feeling that later causes her deep pain and confusion when she moves to Belgium as an adult.

At the same time, African writers also show children finding creative ways to survive between languages. In Beyala's *C'est le Soleil qui m'a Brûlée* (1987), the young character Ateba uses her French schooling to move around the city, while still holding on to African languages and oral traditions. Many African children in these stories move easily between languages depending on who they are speaking to, showing a flexible, multilingual way of thinking that Western, single-language models of child development often fail to notice.

6. War, Violence, and the Child Witness

Many children in West and Central African fiction grow up surrounded by war and violence. These stories raise a hard question: how should literature show a child's pain without using that pain simply to shock or entertain the reader? Two of the clearest examples of this theme are Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* (2000) and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007).

In Kourouma's novel, the child narrator Birahima tells the story of his life as a child soldier in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He describes terrible violence in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, often stopping to look up the meaning of hard words in a dictionary he carries with him. This strange mixture of horror and simple word-searching shows how normal violence has become for a child raised inside war. Birahima is shown as both a victim of the war and, at times, someone who commits violence himself. Kourouma refuses to make him purely innocent or purely evil, which challenges simple stories that show child soldiers only as helpless victims.

Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) is a true memoir, not a novel, and it tells Beah's own experience of the civil war in Sierra Leone. He describes seeing dead and wounded soldiers and feeling deep shock and fear: 'I turned away, and my eyes caught the smashed head of another man... I felt nauseated.' He also describes the lasting pain that stays with him even after such events: 'I cried quietly as my head beat like the clapper of a bell.' These passages show clearly that child soldiers are not simply given drugs and made to forget. The pain returns, again and again, long after the fighting has stopped.

Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002) shows the same period of conflict from two different sides, a girl fleeing violence and a boy who becomes a soldier. This double view helps readers see that both victims and fighters often come from the same background of poverty and instability, and that becoming a 'child soldier' is not a sign of a bad character but a result of terrible circumstances. Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956) shows an earlier kind of violence, the abuse that took place inside a colonial Catholic mission, told through the eyes of a young narrator named Denis, whose faith in the mission is destroyed once he learns what has really happened there.

These works also show something important about survival. Kourouma's Birahima survives the war and lives to tell his own story in his own voice. This kind of survival is important, because it resists a purely Western idea that trauma can only be healed through professional therapy. African literature often values community support and the strength found within the child. However, writers are also careful not to make this survival look too easy or too complete, because doing so risks hiding the real and lasting damage that war causes to children's minds and bodies.

7. Child Labour and Poverty

Poverty and work are also central to the postcolonial child's life in West and Central African fiction. Colonial economies used children as cheap labour in farms, mines, and homes, and many of these patterns did not disappear after independence. Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (1956) shows how a French family in colonial Cameroon uses the young Toundi as a house servant, paying him almost nothing and punishing him harshly, while he slowly comes to understand how unfair his situation really is. In more recent, postcolonial settings, children continue to work under difficult conditions, especially in fast-growing cities. Beyala's novels (1987) show young girls working as house servants or in informal jobs, often facing sexual abuse and unstable, unsafe conditions. Many of these child domestic workers are girls who work extremely long hours for very little pay, and who are especially vulnerable because they have no family nearby to protect them.

John Nkengasong's novel *Achakasara* looks closely at the life of the street child. The main character, Acha, becomes a street child mainly because his family breaks apart. After his parents separate, his father cannot properly care for him, and the boy is denied even basic food and schooling. He is eventually forced out onto the street, which becomes both his home and his teacher. Nkengasong shows that street children come from many different situations: some are sent out by their own parents to beg for money because of poverty, others run away from mistreatment at home, and others travel from villages to towns simply looking for work. The novel suggests that this is not only a personal family problem but also a wider social and economic problem that requires government attention. Kourouma's *Allah is Obliged* (2000) also briefly shows how orphaned children are sometimes given to relatives who treat them more like unpaid workers than like family members. This shows how older systems of caring for orphaned children within the extended family have weakened under economic pressure, leaving many children exposed to exploitation instead of protection.

Even schooling itself is affected by poverty. In many of these stories, children combine schoolwork with jobs such as selling goods in the street or market, and children often leave school not because they want to, but because their families cannot afford the fees. This shows that the promise of

education as a path to a better life does not always come true for poor children, even when governments and families value education highly.

8. Gender, Sexuality, and Childhood

Gender shapes the life of the African child in powerful ways, and many of the novels in this study pay special attention to the experience of girls. Practices such as early marriage, forced marriage, and female genital cutting appear often in West and Central African fiction, and writers do not always agree on how to present these practices. Kourouma's *Allah is not Obligated* (2000) briefly describes a woman known as a specialist in female circumcision, showing the practice as an accepted part of some communities' traditions, even though outside observers, including many Western human rights groups, view it as a harmful violation of girls' bodies. Sembène Ousmane's *Moolaadé* (2004) presents a stronger criticism of the practice, telling the story of a woman who protects young girls from being cut, even though this decision puts her in direct conflict with her whole village.

Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* (1979) looks at how girls are raised to accept limited roles inside marriage and family life. Its narrator, Ramatoulaye, reflects on her own childhood education and watches how her own daughters face new, though still unequal, expectations in postcolonial Senegal. The novel suggests that formal schooling opened new doors for girls, but strong patriarchal traditions still held women back from full independence. Margaret Afuh's *Born Before Her Time* (2003) tells one of the clearest stories of resistance to forced marriage in this study. The young character Abo is promised in marriage to an older man even before she is born. She dreams instead of becoming a teacher, but her education is cut short when she is forced into the marriage and raped by this man. Abo refuses to accept this future. She runs away, determined to complete her education and to choose her own path in life. Afuh uses Abo's story to expose the pain caused by forced marriage while also showing a girl's strength and determination to build a different kind of future for herself.

Orphanhood also affects girls and boys differently, and many children in these novels lose their parents through war, disease, or family breakdown. In earlier times, African extended families could usually absorb orphaned children, but modern crises have placed far too much strain on this old system. Kourouma's *Birahima* becomes an orphan after his mother's death and is left without protection, a situation that eventually leads him into armed conflict. Writers show that both boys and girls face serious danger when family protection fails, though the specific dangers, such as forced marriage or sexual abuse for girls and forced recruitment for boys, often follow clear gender patterns.

9. Family, Community, and Belonging

Family and community life sit at the very centre of how West and Central African fiction imagines childhood. In precolonial African societies, a child rarely belonged to a single household alone. Children were raised within a wide network of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbours, and this extended family system provided protection even when a child's own parents could not care for them. Colonial rule, and later the pressures of postcolonial life, placed heavy strain on this

system, and many of the novels studied in this article show what happens when family and community protection breaks down.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) shows two very different pictures of family life existing side by side. Eugene Achike's household is strict, silent, and built around fear, while his sister Auntie Ifeoma's household in Nsukka is noisy, open, and full of laughter and honest argument. The novel suggests that a healthy family is not one that simply enforces obedience, but one that allows children space to speak, to disagree, and to be themselves. Kambili's transformation happens only after she is allowed to spend time inside Auntie Ifeoma's warmer, more open home, showing how much a child's growth depends on the family environment surrounding them.

Nkengasong's *Achakasara* shows the opposite process, the slow collapse of a family under economic and social pressure. Once Acha's mother is no longer present and his father remarries, the boy is pushed to the edge of his own household, treated as a burden rather than a beloved child. The novel is careful to show that family breakdown of this kind rarely comes from a single cause. Divorce, poverty, the death of a parent, and the failure of a new stepparent to accept a child all combine together, until the street becomes the only place left for the child to turn to. In this way, Nkengasong's novel connects the theme of family breakdown directly to the theme of child labour and street life discussed earlier in this article. Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* (2000) shows yet another kind of family collapse, caused this time by war rather than divorce. Birahima loses his mother and is passed between relatives who do not want the burden of raising him, until war itself becomes, in a terrible way, the only structure left in his life. Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) shows a similar pattern, as war separates children from their parents and destroys the community networks that would once have protected them. Taken together, these novels argue that when family and community protection fails, whether because of divorce, poverty, or war, children are left dangerously exposed, and the wider society, not just the individual family, bears responsibility for what happens next.

Yet these novels do not only show loss. They also show new, improvised forms of belonging that children build for themselves when their original families fail them. Street children in Nkengasong's novel form their own communities, with their own rules and their own forms of support, on the streets themselves. Child-soldiers in Kourouma's and Dongala's novels sometimes describe the armed group itself as a kind of substitute family, however dangerous and violent that substitute may be. This shows that the need for belonging does not disappear when formal family structures collapse. Children actively search for new forms of community, even in the most difficult circumstances, which is itself a sign of resilience and agency rather than simple helplessness.

10. Religion, Spirituality, and the Postcolonial Child

Religion is another major force shaping the postcolonial African child, and it appears throughout the novels studied in this article, often in complicated and even contradictory ways. Christian missionary religion arrived in West and Central Africa alongside colonial rule, and it frequently taught African children to see their own indigenous beliefs as primitive, sinful, or even evil. At the same time, many African children and families found genuine meaning, community, and comfort within Christian practice, so that religion cannot simply be reduced to a tool of colonial control.

Adichie's Catholic who treats his own father, Papa Nnukwu, as an unclean pagan because Papa Nnukwu continues to practice traditional Igbo religion. Eugene asks his children directly whether they have 'eaten food sacrificed to idols' or 'desecrated their Christian tongue' after visiting their grandfather, treating ordinary family contact as a religious danger. Papa Nnukwu, in turn, feels the pain of being rejected by his own son because of his faith, telling his granddaughter Kambili with sorrow that he should never have allowed his son to attend the missionary school in the first place. Through this family conflict, Adichie shows how colonial Christianity could turn children against their own grandparents and their own cultural roots, even while claiming to offer them moral guidance.

At the same time, the novel refuses to present religion as purely harmful. Father Amadi, a young priest in the novel, preaches in Igbo and sings Igbo hymns, showing that Christian faith and African culture can exist together rather than in constant conflict. Amaka's insistence on keeping her Igbo name, discussed earlier in this article, is itself framed as a deeply Christian act, since she argues that Igbo names such as 'Chiamaka' praise God just as fully as English names such as 'Paul' or 'Peter'. Adichie therefore suggests that the real problem is not Christianity itself, but a rigid, colonially shaped version of Christianity that refuses to recognize African language, culture, and identity as equally worthy of respect.

Other novels in this study show how indigenous, non-Christian belief systems continue to shape children's understanding of the world, even under colonial and postcolonial pressure. Traditional beliefs about ancestors, spirits, and moral order appear, often quietly, in the background of stories that are officially about war, poverty, or schooling, reminding readers that African children rarely experience religion as a single, simple system. Instead, they often grow up navigating multiple religious' worlds at once, Christian, Islamic, and indigenous African, depending on their family, region, and personal experience. This religious complexity is part of the wider hybridity that Bhabha's (1994) theory helps us understand, and it further challenges any simple, single story of what African childhood is supposed to look like.

11. Discussion: What These Stories Teach Us

Bringing these themes together allows us to see a wider pattern across West and Central African fiction. Although the novels studied here come from different countries, different colonial languages, and different historical moments, they share a common project. Each one takes the child, a figure that colonial writing treated as small and unimportant, and places that child at the very centre of history. This is a deliberate literary choice, and it carries real political weight, because it insists that African children's lives, thoughts, and voices matter just as much as the lives of adults or of colonial officials.

The discussion also shows that African writers refuse simple, single stories about childhood. A child in these novels can be a victim of war and, in the same story, someone who shows great courage. A child can suffer under a strict, colonially minded father, like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, and still slowly find her own voice. A child can be forced into an unwanted marriage, like Abo in *Born Before Her Time*, and still find a way to escape and build a different future. This refusal of

simple stories is itself a form of resistance against colonial writing, which preferred flat, simple pictures of African life.

This pattern has implications beyond literary studies. Readers working in education, child welfare, and human rights can learn from these novels that African childhood cannot be judged only against Western standards of what a 'normal' or 'healthy' childhood looks like. Policies that ignore local realities, such as extended family systems, community-based care, and diverse economic pressures on families, risk repeating the same mistake that colonial rulers made: assuming that a Western model is the only correct model. At the same time, these novels do not defend every traditional practice. They show real, serious harm caused by forced marriage, child labour, and violence, and they call for change, but change that comes from within African communities rather than change imposed entirely from outside.

Finally, the discussion points to an important direction for future research. Most of the novels studied in this article were written by well-established, internationally known authors. Newer and less well-known writers, especially women writers and writers working in African languages rather than English or French, may offer further important perspectives on childhood that this article has not been able to fully cover. Future studies could usefully expand the current focus to include these additional voices, as well as more recent fiction that addresses newer challenges such as digital technology, migration, and climate change, all of which are now shaping the lives of African children in new ways.

12. Conclusion: Toward a Decolonized Idea of Childhood

This article has shown how West and Central African fiction has challenged and rebuilt the picture of the African child first created by colonial rule. Colonial writing showed African children as backward, empty, or dangerous, needing European control to become fully human. African writers reject this picture entirely. In their novels, children think, feel, resist, and sometimes even change history around them.

The article has looked at five connected themes. First, colonial rule built a false and damaging picture of the African child, supported by schools, laws, medicine, and literature. Second, postcolonial theory, especially the work of Fanon, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, gives us the tools to understand and question this false picture. Third, language and schooling remain a major battlefield in the story of the African child, shaping how children see their own culture and their own worth. Fourth, war and violence have deeply marked the lives of many African children, yet literature also shows their strength and their ability to keep telling their own stories. Fifth, poverty, child labour, and unequal treatment of girls continue to limit many children's chances, even though literature also shows children resisting these limits in creative and courageous ways. Taken together, these five themes point toward what a truly decolonized idea of African childhood might look like. Such an idea would reject Western models that judge African children only against European standards. It would take seriously the many different ways that African communities raise and understand children. It would listen closely to children's own voices, rather than always speaking on their behalf. And it would work honestly to change the real conditions, such as poverty, war, and gender inequality, that continue to limit so many African children's lives.

Literature alone cannot solve these problems. However, the novels studied in this article show that literature can do something important: it can make readers see African children clearly, as full human beings with their own histories, their own pain, and their own hope. This is the lasting achievement of West and Central African fiction on childhood, and it remains an important, unfinished project for readers, writers, and scholars to continue.

This article has offered one reading of a rich and still-growing body of literature. It does not claim to be the final word on the subject. Instead, it hopes to encourage further research, further teaching, and further conversation about how Africa's writers understand its children, and about how that understanding can, in turn, help build a fairer world for the children of West and Central Africa today and in the future.

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