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# From Subalternity to Subjectivity: Rethinking the Child's Postcolonial Identity in Okri's *The Famished Road*

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## Abstract

Okri's fiction is celebrated for its moral insights and didactic purpose. However, the way this perspective elevates and emphasises children's subjectivity in a postcolonial context has not received sufficient critical attention. This study revisits this aspect by analysing the child's postcolonial identity in The Famished Road. Drawing on the postcolonial concept of subalternity and Derrida's deconstructive approach, the paper shows that, within the novel's narrative society, children are viewed and treated as subalterns because adult-centred systems restrict their self-assertion. It also highlights that some child characters make heroic efforts to challenge these systems, acting as social and moral agents with the capacity for self-determination and self-realisation. The study proposes that the postcolonial notion of subalternity in Okri's work does not symbolise "the silent centre" as Spivak (1988) suggests, but rather a "space of transition" (de Jong & Mascat, 2016), which allows for the reclamation and recognition of child subjectivity. Ultimately, the paper contends that Okri's novel serves as "a literature of recognition" (Bhabha, 1994), advocating the dismantling of ideological and traditional barriers that deny children their right to exist and live in an inclusive society.

**Keywords:** *Subalternity; Subjectivity; Postcolonial; Identity Construction; Deconstruction.*

## INTRODUCTION

In pre-colonial Africa, one of the most valued traditional virtues was the gift of children. Africans assessed their blessings by the number of children they had, regardless of whether those children were healthy or ill. Among women, the child was the primary measure of a woman's worth. As Roscoe (1911) explains, "Every married woman was anxious to become a mother…A woman who had no children was despised and soon became a slave and drudge of the household" (cited in Grecaga, 2007, pp. 142-159). In this context, the hardships associated with childbearing held little significance, as they were overshadowed by the symbolic importance of being a mother. Furthermore, during naming ceremonies, especially among the Igbo of Nigeria, names such as "Nwakego" (the child is more precious than money), "Nwakaku" (the child is more precious than wealth), and "Nwakamma" (the child is more precious than beauty) served not only as symbolic expressions of the child's supreme value but also as means to preserve and pass on this value to future generations. Consequently, the child was central to both family and community bonds.

However, in postcolonial Africa, the sense of pride linked to the child's values has diminished. The traditional status of the child, once symbolising the beloved, the treasured, or the sacred, now signifies the violated, the dehumanised, the abandoned, and the subaltern. This is evident in African postcolonial literature, where, according to Desai (1981), the concept of the child is described as "what one might say, modern… he is a raw soul, a bundle of impulses… facing life, struggling to understand it, he is… subjected to an unpredictable

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process of growth" (p.45). Clearly, from Laye's *African Child* (1953), Oyono's *Houseboy* (1956), Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child* (1964) to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), what the reader perceives are "muffled voices of dissatisfied and disillusioned" African children who have been "led out by their sires into darkness" and are being asked to find their way (Moh, 2001, p.14). Spivak (1988) has stated that "the clearest example of epistemic violence is [not only] the remotely orchestrated… heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other, [but] also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-tivity" (p.76). The fact that the child is facing this "obliteration" within the postcolonial space was reiterated by a thirteen-year-old Gabriela Azurdy Arrietaire, during an extraordinary session dedicated to children by the United Nations General Assembly in New York, in May 2002, when she declared:

> We are victims of all kinds of exploitation and abuse, we are street children, we are children of war, we are AIDS orphans, we are victims, and our voices have not been heard. It all has to stop; we want a world that is worthy of us…. We are not the source of your problems, we are your resources: we are not expenses, we are investments; we are not just children, we are also citizens of this planet. You say that we are the future, but we are also the present (Borgomano, 2002).

Here, Arrietaire's declaration not only presents the fundamental and often forgotten facts about the condition of children in the world today, but also the need, as Spivak (1988) puts it, to "articulate …ideological formation by measuring silences … into object of investigation" (p.92). In postcolonial discourse, one of the ways to go about this investigation, Spivak further maintains, is to be involved in the "negotiation" of the " postcolonial subject "in terms of reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" (1990, pp. 225-228). For Bhabha (1994), it is to "rethink the profound limitations set by 'the politics of binary opposition" (pp. 175-179) and erase it. This paper aims to initiate this erasure by examining the belief structures in the novel under study that assign the child a subaltern identity. The goal is to encourage thinking "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1) and to focus on how strategies for the child's selfhood are developed in the postcolonial setting.

The paper discusses "subalternity' as an operational concept within Subaltern Studies. In Spivak (1988), the concept is gendered, referring to Indian women silenced by patriarchal structures, rendering them voiceless. However, in her 2000 article "The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview," Spivak includes those at "the bottom layer of society" (p. 324) among the subalterns. This aligns with the original use of the concept in Gramsci (1891-1937), where it describes "any group of 'inferior' rank based on ethnic, class, gender or identity extraction" (as cited in Zaib 2015, p. 213). However, Zaib notes that in disciplines such as history, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and literary criticism, "subalternity has become a euphemism for all browbeaten people suffering under the oppression of elite groups" (p. 219). In this context of oppression, the paper, on the one hand, considers children as subalterns in Okri's novel. On the other hand, it follows de Jong and Mascat's (2016) to see subalternity as "a space of transition where competing processes of subjectivation may take place" either by the non-linear and non-univocal paths of (de)subalternisation", or by "paying attention to the inner frontiers occurring within these spaces" (pp. 717-729). In other words, the paper supports Azad's (2014) critical stance that subaltern studies should aim to "redeem suppressed voices" by challenging authoritative ones (as cited in Zaib, 2015, p. 14). Thus, although Spivak (1988; 1990) claimed that the subaltern cannot speak or transcend their position, this study adopts a

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more optimistic view that subalterns can be "relocated" (de Jong & Mascat, 2016) from silence to subjective agency. Therefore, in analysing Okri's novel, the study deconstructs adult hegemonies that suppress the child's identity and explores the internal frontiers where the child's subjectivity emerges. Ultimately, it emphasises that postcolonial discourse must understand the nature and identity of the postcolonial subject and avoid totalising agency.

The word "subject" is used in the study in its philosophical sense to refer to a being that possesses a unique consciousness and experience, or to an entity that has a relationship with another that exists outside itself (Solomon, 1983). Thus, in the phrase "child subjectivity" or "subjectivation," the study sees children as agents of discernment who have established for themselves "a particular mode of being that will count as moral self-fulfilment" (Foucault, 1984, as cited in Dorrestijn, 2023, pp. 100-113). It interprets childhood in Okri's artistic vision as a state of being rather than a state of becoming.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since its publication in 1991, Okri's *The Famished Road* has received extensive critical attention. However, most studies have portrayed Okri's child characters as figures whose fictional roles serve as "symbolic meditations' (Jameson, 1981) on the social, cultural, and political issues of postcolonial Nigerian or African society. For example, Gopal (2023) interprets the novel as a political allegory in which the protagonist, a spirit-child, represents the resilience of the African spirit amid cycles of colonial and neocolonial violence. He also argues that Okri's use of magic realism offers a lens for exploring the complex relations between coloniser and colonised in postcolonial contexts. Raval (2019) describes this society as the "corrupt, deranged, and fragmented neocolonial Nigeria" (p.40), highlighting that the inclusion of mythic children, legends, and fables enriches Okri's storytelling. Similarly, Sharma (2023) states that by centring on the life of the spirit child, the novel investigates "the African people's belief system in endless suffering between death and rebirth" and rewrites Nigeria's history in opposition to colonial narratives (p.156). Again, he stresses that, as "an African narrative with indigenous consciousness," the novel holds significant socio-cultural and political importance (p.159). Other critics, including Obumselu (2011), Degirmenci (2015), and Oko (2020), also argue that Okri's reinterpretation of the abiku myth enables him to depict Nigeria's struggles under neo-colonialism and Africa's broader political and economic uncertainties. In other words, the lives of children in the novel are mere symbolic representations that offer no real clues to the children's subject positions within the postcolonial context.

Thus, while the above critical perspectives offer valuable insights, they seem to portray Okri's novel as primarily a historical or sociological text that provides ethnographic information on Nigeria's or Africa's postcolonial disillusionment. However, this paper examines Okri's novel as a genuine work of art, which Akwanya (2017) asserts "creates its reality that subsists in the work and pertains to the time and logic of the work" (p. 43). Therefore, it centres on the dynamics of the child's postcolonial identity construction within the narrative society. Joseph-Villain (2013) also analyses the child's identity through psychoanalytic literary theory, emphasising how breaking the abiku circle helps the protagonist find his place within his family lineage and transforms him into a storyteller. Nonetheless, the paper contends that the protagonist's postcolonial "narrative identity" (Ricoeur, 1991, p.195) does not revolve solely around his storytelling ability but around his resilience in asserting himself as "a basic particular," an ontological being within the "spacio-temporal framework" of the novel (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, pp. 32-34). Moreover, Hawley (1995) highlights the

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protagonist's "difficult choice, an interior struggle that adult onlookers recognise as beyond their ken" (p.30), yet he does not elaborate on how this struggle enables the protagonist to gain "the voice of an interrogative calculative agency" (Lacan, 1977, as cited in Bhabha, 1994, p.184) that challenges the adulcentric "politics of binary opposition" (Bhabha, 1994, p.179). Additionally, Orhoro (2022) acknowledges, as this study does, that Azaro is a "minority figure" who, in his interactions with others in the novel, is consistently dominated far beyond what is typical for a child. He further states that "Azaro's deliberate decision to remain in his liminal position is an allegory of his minority identity" (p.6), serving as an avenue through which Okri reflects on his minority status as a member of the minority community of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. While Orhoro locates Azaro's narrative identity in his liminal position, this paper positions it within his subjectivity. Again, the paper argues that Okri's aim in creating his protagonist may not be to allegorise his minority as a Niger Deltan, but, as he states, to raise awareness about "the narrow limitations imposed upon [the lives of children] ... to give voice to the extraordinary nature of [their] deeper possibilities and reveal the strength of their resilience" (Okri, 2003). As the study demonstrates, he achieves this by endowing his child protagonist with subjective agency, thereby advocating for cultural narratives that are inclusive of all ages.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Derrida's deconstructive approach, which treats the literary text as a discourse that "signifies in more than one way and to varying degrees of explicitness" (Derrida, 1969/1972, p. 1). Despite centuries of reading, Derrida (1992/1995) maintains that every literary work "remains untouched, withdrawn into reserve still to come" (p. 82). This is not only because it rests on a shifting network of difference and traces, but also because the meanings assigned to the text often appear as unstable as the language in which they are constructed. Therefore, a deconstructive analysis aims "to transgress [the text as a discursive circuit] by setting down and demonstrating various contradictory or untenable propositions within it, attempting thereby to insinuate a kind of insecurity and to open to the outside" (Derrida, 1973, as cited in Akwanya 2002, pp. 238-239). The goal is not to establish a higher position of knowledge or authority but to explore what Derrida (1981) calls "the warring forces of signification" (p. xiv), or, as Bradley (2008) describes it, "the-often hidden or repressed-conditions according to which any structure can be constituted in the first place" (p. 43). The study identifies child subjectivity as "the—often hidden and repressed—condition" in Okri's novel. Thus, on the one hand, our deconstructive reading reveals this narrative situation and the tension it creates within the textual society. On the other hand, it uncovers the multiple embedded subject positions of the child, showing that the child is not ontologically a "subaltern' (Spivak, 1988) nor an "innocent bystander" (Gray, 2011, p. 2), but a moral and social subject who operates as an "authentic self" (Nastic, 2012).

### The Child and the Cloak of Subalternity in *The Famished Road*

Okri's novel presents an adult world steeped in what Derrida calls "a violent hierarchy" (1981, p. 41). For the child, survival becomes a matter of chance. This is evident as we learn about the "spirit world" of abikus, or spirit-children, through Azaro, the child-protagonist, who is also a spirit child: "In that land of beginnings, spirits mingled with the unborn. We knew no boundaries … We were happy most of the time because we floated on the aquamarine air of love. We played with the fauns, the farriers, and beautiful beings … and the serene presences of our ancestors were always with us, bathing us in the radiance of their diverse rainbow" (Okri,

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1991, pp. 3-4). The depiction of the spirit world here is paradisiacal. As Mathuray (2015) states, it captures "a space of happy hybridity, of transformative liminality, [and] of ludic celebration" (p. 1100). In other words, it is a place where the spirit-children feel loved and their unique sense of identity is well protected. Because of this, "not one amongst [them] looked forward to being born" (Okri, 1991, p. 1).

But the apathy towards birth is not because the spirit-children take pride in their scenic abode. Instead, it stems from their deep understanding of another world, which Azaro describes as the "world of the Living" (p.1). Unlike the spirit world, this human world is filled with "the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices … the labyrinth of love… the heartlessness of human beings… and the amazing indifference of the Living" (p.3). By implication, it is the opposite of the spirit world. The many encounters that some spirit-children have with it reinforce this opposition. As Azaro states: "Those of us who lingered in [this] world… went through life with … fated eyes… carrying within us tragic mythology. We were often recognised and our flesh marked with razor incisions… Then the world spins a web of fate around our lives" (p.4). To "spin a web of fate around" the spirit-children is to see them as products of a poisoned history and bearers of "tragic fates" (Walsh, 2009). Therefore, within the socio-cultural framing of the human world, they are the unwanted "Other" (Spivak, 1988, p.79). As shown, this act of demonisation not only creates fear among them but also fosters exclusion. Hence, despite what Akwanya describes as "a vertical relationship of co-existence and integration" (1997, p. 113) between the spirit and human worlds in the novel, a strong tension persists that draws in all kinds of "presences" (Derrida, 2001, p.369). Azaro captures this: "Each new birth was an agony for us …. To be born is to be born with enigmas, an inextinguishable sense of exile. [As a result], there is a cyclical rebellion that affected all kinds of balances" (Okri,1991, p. 5). Azaro's decision to break his pact with the spirit world and remain permanently in the human realm represents an effort to break this "cyclical rebellion," and it passes as a "balancing act" (Derrida, 1976, as cited in Bradley, 2008, p. 110). However, this "act" only gains significance within the context of his quest to rewrite the history of the spirit-children. Throughout the narrative, it fails to alleviate the tension between the two realms of existence. This is evident as he navigates the "labyrinth" of the human world. He recounts: "As a child, I felt I weighed my mother down. In turn, I felt weighed down by the inscrutability of life. Being born was a shock from which I never recovered" (Okri, 1991, p.7). This lingering "shock" of "being born" not only stems from the child protagonist's near-death experiences but also from the "grim reality of cruelty, harshness" emanating from adult figures (Jones, 1998), who appear to extinguish the lives of children in the novel. We witness a hint of this "grim reality" at the police officer's house. Here, the realisation that the police officer's son is dead triggers in the child protagonist a foreboding sense of emptiness. As he recounts, "I was frightened to have a whole room to myself … There were pictures of the police officer, his wife, and a handsome boy with sad eyes. The boy looked at me… After a while, I began to see with the boy's eyes and the house revolves about me and I knew he was dead" (Okri,1991, p.19). The description of the officer's son as a 'handsome' boy who 'still had sad eyes" indicates a child who never truly enjoyed his childhood, despite suggestions that his parents are well-to-do. This idea is further reinforced by the appearance of his ghost "sitting forlorn and abandoned" while his parents eat "with such innocent relish" (p.25). According to Azaro, "He was the saddest ghost in the house" (p.25). In essence, we see a boy who appears to have been brutally murdered by those who should have protected his life. Azaro's later revelation that the police officer is responsible for the boy's death intensifies this sense of brutality. Importantly, it depicts the officer as a predatory parent who is part of a "child–sacrificing

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culture" (Holway, 2011) that views children as 'cerned' entities — that is, individuals whose human identity has been "abstracted from the real condition of existence" (Smith, 1988, p. xxx). Okri further portrays Madame Koto as an embodiment of the adult culture that is "tragically ill-equipped" (Sambell, 2004, p. 253) to secure the child's subject position. The first time she appears in the novel, her kind and generous disposition towards Azaro and his family suggests a woman true to the act of mothering. But from the women of the community, we learn that "She had buried … seven children and that she was a witch who ate her babies when they are still in her womb … she was the reason why the children in the area didn't grow, why they were always ill …. She is a poisoner of children" (Okri, pp. 100-101). This information not only projects Madame Koto as a child predator but also as a woman who possesses "narcissistic and sadistic" inclinations (Zilboorg, 1944, p. 288). Everything about her bar, which is reminiscent of the House of Pride in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1590), exudes this inclination. For example, it is a chilling experience for the child protagonist to discover that many customers who come to the bar are "disguised spirits" (Okri, 1991, pp. 136-37) who seek to subvert his human subjectivity. Hence, he sees Madame Koto's bar as a "theatre of cruelty" (Derrida, 1967/2001, 292-293): a place that makes life as he would want to lead it "unrepresentable." Madame Koto's listlessness in the face of Azaro's struggles sustains this "unrepresentable" life. This idea is reinforced when she orders her prostitutes to whip the beggar girl, Helen, whom she labels a nuisance to her fun-seeking customers. On this occasion, Azaro observes: "Helen bore the whipping and did not move or cry. She stared at Madame Koto with gentle eyes as they whipped her" (Okri, 1991, p. 466). Helen's inability to "move or cry" is symbolic of a child subaltern who is helpless in the face of adult monstrosity. Her "gentle eyes" imprint the image of her innocence and, by so doing, implicate Madame Koto as an unjust aggressor. For Maier (2011), the "eyes" also implicate Madame Koto's bar as "a forced-field of harsh, callous and oppressive sensations" (pp. 191-199). Given Azaro's experiences at the police officer's house, these "sensations" lead him to find Madame Koto both physically repellent and heartless.

The reader observes the physical and psychological trauma caused by this adult heartlessness in Ade, Azaro's friend. Okri depicts his parents as having "subvert[ed] positive caretaking parental roles into abuse" (Nabutanyi, 2013). Specifically, the description of his father as a man who "beats his children a lot" (Okri, 1991, pp. 369-370) reminds the reader of Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Serenity in *Isegawa's Abyssinian Chronicles* (1998). Like these characters, he regards physical and psychological brutality as necessary to discipline an errant child. Thus, he functions in the novel as an adult figure who does not believe that children are "beings in their own right" (Dupeyron-Lafay, 2011) or that they deserve a subjective space to exercise their freedom and happiness. For Azaro, this mindset is bewildering. His suggestion to Ade to "run away" with him (Okri, 1991, p. 370) is an attempt to shield his friend from this harsh reality. However, as a spirit child, Ade's eventual decision to leave the human world (unlike Azaro) is not surprising. He tells Azaro: "Trouble is always coming... I want to go to my other home. Your mother is right; there is too much unnecessary suffering on this earth... I have seen the future" (p. 477). The "future" Ade envisions offers no reconciliation of the adult-child binary. Instead, it remains marred by "a father who replaces "judicious fatherhood' with brutal firmness" (Shelton, as cited in Inyama, 1998). Therefore, his decision to go to his "other home" is Okri's subtle critique of an adult world that "relishes conscious hostility against [its] own children" (Zilboorg, 1944). As Nabutanyi (2013) notes, it is a world where the safety of the home space is compromised and the cost of violence is tragically borne by children.

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The safety of the socio-political space in this world is also compromised by the Party of the Rich's deceptive and repressive activities. In one of its electioneering campaigns, we read: "The inhabitants of the street crowded round the van, hunger on their faces. Their children were in tattered clothes, had big stomachs and were barefoot" (Okri, 1991, p.122). Here, the imagery of hunger, disease, and poverty portrays a society in which the well-being of children is not part of the social contract. This is vividly highlighted when some party members distribute "free milk" (p. 123), which, according to them, is proof that they will keep their campaign promises. Arguably, the idea of distributing "free milk" to a crowd comprising both adults and children reflects the politicians' belief in the Hobbesian principle of the survival of the fittest. As society's vulnerable members, children are not normally expected to succeed in adult struggles. That these politicians expect this highlights an adult world that not only violates the traditionally sanctified space of childhood but also sees and treats children as the scum of the earth. Thus, within the adult setting of the narrative, Okri portrays children as an endangered species, whose sense of identity has been eroded and replaced with "subaltern consciousness" (Spivak 1988).

**Child Subjectivity in the Famished Road**

According to Benneth (1998), one of the key points in Okri's oeuvre is that "the survival and development of the human spirit require a continual openness to new possibilities" (p.364). This is evident in the life of the child hero, Azaro, who shows that bearing the weight of "a unique destiny" (Okri, 1991, p.494) requires "the discarding of absolute certainties," the stirring of the "will," and the "steeling" of the self (Teimouri, 2017, pp. 91-103). His decision to break the "cyclical rebellion" for which spirit-children are known is noteworthy. He states, "I had grown tired of coming and going … I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it... to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me" (Okri, p.5). Here, the repetition of the personal pronoun "I," reinforced by the syntagmatic stringing of transitive and stative verbs, shows that Azaro's decision is a product of a unique consciousness. As such, it places him early in the text as a child who desires to be the master of his destiny. True, the earlier warning of the great king of Abiku hints at the bleakness of this venture. But in the expression "I had grown tired of coming and going," Azaro is portrayed as a spirit child who has already steeled himself to face "the labyrinthine world" (Douglas, 2005, p. 3), despite the odds. This is made more concrete when he assigns himself a specific responsibility: "to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become [his] mother" (Okri, 1991, p.5). Teimouri (2017) has noted that the terms 'face' and 'responsibility' enjoy a privileged position in Levinas's writing. Citing Lingis (1991), he states: "For Levinas, responsibility is the response to the imperative addressed in the concrete act of facing. Responsibility is a relationship with the other, in his very alterity. A relationship with the alterity as such is constitutive of subjectivity" (91-103). Accordingly, he asserts that Azaro's subjectivity is confirmed the moment he is confronted by the "face" of his mother; for by being burdened with the responsibility of making her happy before he arrives in the human world, responsibility becomes a condition for his being and thus "constitutive of [his] subjectivity." However, this study sees Azaro's subjectivity more clearly in his resoluteness to discharge this responsibility towards his earthly mother. Early in the text, this resoluteness is evident in his act of burying his "Iyi uwa" (pact with the spirit world) in a secret place, which, as he states, "I promptly forgot" (Okri, 1991, p. 9). Again, this is well demonstrated in his "titanic strivings" (Nietzsche, 1970, p. 72) in the human world, where he faces the battle of existence in both the spiritual and physical realms.

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In the spiritual realm, Azaro's battle is not only with his spirit companions but also with the "disguised spirits" (Okri, pp. 136-137), who perceive his decision to stay in the human world as a threat to their collective identity. For both groups, he has strayed from the spirit community and must be brought back to the fold. Azaro's spirit companions are the first to make this intention clear. He recounts: "Often, by night or day, voices spoke to me. I came to realise that they were the voices of my spirit companions … they showed me images which I couldn't understand… 'Come back to us,' they said … If you don't come back, we will make your life unbearable.' (p.7). Here, the plea, "come back to us," evokes the inextricable bond among spirit-children, and for Azaro, this makes the threat, "if you don't come back, we will make your life unbearable," very frightening. But this does not deter him or force him into submission. He narrates: "I would start shouting, daring them to do their worst" (p.7). By "daring them," Azaro shows his willingness to uphold what he had already accepted as his earthly responsibility towards his mother. Nonetheless, his spirit companions' efforts to make their threat real are evident at various points in the novel. Yet each time, Azaro's determination to move from being a child subaltern "as a processual category to becoming" a child subject "as a static category" (Teimuori 2017) affirms Bhabha's assertion that "The individuation of the agent occurs in the moment of displacement" (1994, p.187). For example, on the day he is kidnapped at Madame Koto's bar by two disguised spirits who want to take him back to his spirit companions, we read:

> The albinos sprang at me and covered me with the sack. I struggled and fought…. My spirit companions began singing in my ears, rejoicing in my captivity… I' m not sure which one was worse: being bundled away by unknown people… or hearing my spirit companions orchestrate my passage through torment with their… excruciating voice. When I fought and my energy was exhausted…I called to our great king, and I said: 'I do not want to die (Okri, 1991, p.112).

Here, Azaro's torment is both physical and mental. However, in the phrase "I struggled and fought," we see his resolve to remain firm amid the hostile pressures from his spirit companions. His desperate plea to their great king, "I do not want to die," presents him as a spirit-child with an "inviolate consciousness" (Degirmenchi, 2015, pp. 223-237) regarding his earthly existence. Yet, it could be argued that this "consciousness" would not have been possible without the great king's willingness to intervene whenever Azaro calls upon him. However, the fact that the great king failed to help him during another struggle he had with a four-headed spirit (Okri, 1991, p.461) is noteworthy, for his "absence" only serves to affirm Azaro's "presence" (Derrida, 1967/2001) and, by extension, his subjectivity. This is reflected in his ability to call on his mother for help, a call that not only demonstrates his "resilience of spirit" (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 87) but also repositions him as the master of his destiny. Besides, his mother's swift response "out of the stillness of a strange love" (Okri., 1991, p.461) suggests that Azaro's "inviolate consciousness" is not solely dependent on the great king's interventions, but also on his own "willpower and determined optimism" (Wright, 1995, p.19) to make his mother's "bruised face" happy. That the "four-headed spirit… evaporated" after this incident, and that Azaro "couldn't see the giants any more" (Okri,1991, p.461), implies that at this point in the novel, the spirit world has lost the battle to undermine his subject position.

In the physical realm, we see Azaro fighting to protect and preserve this position. Here, the idea that he is a "strange child" (Okri, p.222), with "dual consciousness" (Okri, cited in Guinery, 2013, p. 19), triggers acts of aggression against him. In some cases, these acts aim to subdue his "will power" (Wright, 1995), so that, like every other child, he will function as an

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"innocent bystander" (Gray, 2011); in others, they are tailored to eliminate him, since his precocity is seen as a threat to adult presence. The latter is evident on the day a group of women forcibly took him into the "bristling night" (Okri, 1991, p. 11). The way the women roughly handle him as he tries to resist is telling of their perception of him as a subaltern. In his words, "They pressed me down with their rough feet and smothered me with their capacious smocks" (p.12). From every indication, the women's intention is not only to subdue Azaro physically but also to break his spirit, which they probably see as a challenging force. An attempt to destroy this spirit is evident when they lead him to their shrine house and lay him out on a mat, ready to sacrifice him to their goddess (p. 13). To sacrifice Azaro would not only objectify his existence as a child but also truncate his quest to function as a child subject. Hence, he "crept out of the shrine house, towards the canoe…, rowed with great desperation over the turbulent waters… [and] didn't stop till I had completely escaped from that cult of silent women" (p.14). What is interesting here is not that the child protagonist escapes but the manner of his escape. For one, it shows his unflagging zeal to detach himself from the cloak of subalternity. Again, given his knowledge of the child-sacrificing culture of the human world, it demonstrates his resolve not to allow the predatory adults to undercut his subject position. Okri makes this clearer through the incidents at the police officer's house. Here, the attempt on Azaro's life is not carried out through physical violence but through dissimulating acts of love and care, aimed at subduing his spirit. But his reaction when he is served poisoned food is telling: "I brought the plate and was about to eat when a bad smell wafted up from the food. I found a newspaper poured the food between its pages, hid the wrapping, and left the empty plate outside the door" (p.24). No doubt, discarding the food and leaving "the empty plate outside the door" is an act of dissimulation. But the situation Azaro finds himself in makes it expedient. Unlike his host, who deploys dissimulation to destroy, he deploys it to survive, thereby demonstrating that he is capable of choosing life amid death. He also demonstrates this capability when the police officer instructs his wife to keep him indoors at all times (p. 24). But on this occasion, summoning up the image of his mother not only reinvigorates Azaro's mental strength but also his belief that his subjectivity still depends on the inner conditions of existence, which he had set for himself.

Within the political space, Azaro also reasserts and reinscribes his subjectivity. Again, his ordeal stems from the politicians' perception of him as a "strange child", whose audacity threatens their adulcentric ideologies. This perception is made manifest when the Party of the Rich unleashes a reprisal attack on the ghetto community. According to Azaro: "Wild men were wreaking devastation on windows… and human bodies…. From mouth to mouth, from one side of the street to the other, I listened with horror as the wind blew the name. AZARO! AZARO! … The name surrounded me, … as if God were calling me with the mouth of violent people. Even the dead played with my name that night' (Okri, 1991, pp. 178-80). Here, the depiction of the "wind," "God," and the "dead" calling Azaro's name creates an ominous impression that his subjectivity is in great peril. This feeling is reinforced when the political "antagonists," in their final desperate push, begin to shout, "Burn it down! … Burn out Azaro!" (p.181). Supposedly, to "Burn out Azaro" means to destroy a life that defies and, as it were, mocks their repressive actions. In other words, it is to silence a child whose subjective agency has "exposed that 'boundaries' created between binary identities" are places from which a redefined identity can "begin its presencing" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 4-5). Therefore, as much as their "rhetoric of violence" (Kline, 1995) presents Azaro as "a figure of victimisation and pain" (Gerend, 2012), it also positions him as "a subject" in Fairclough's sense of "agent and affected" (1995, p. 39). His subjectivity in this instance is not rooted in his outward resistance,

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as Orhero (2022) argues, but rather in his capacity to hide "in the driver's seat" (Okri, 1991, pp. 178-180) and communicate to the reader the savage tendencies of the adult world and the brutal reality faced by its children.

At Madam Koto's bar, Azaro's subjectivity is shown to embody the "quality of soul that can conquer death" (Murray, 1962, p. 15). His ability to confront aggression is evident when one of the "mutant customers" (Okri, 1991, p. 133) leans over him and opens his mouth as if to swallow him. According to him:

> I spat at the eye and struggled away from him, … one of them took off his glasses[and] asked…. 'Why did you spit into that man's mouth?' The boy is insane.' Said another of the three.
>
> 'Unbalanced,' said the first
>
> 'Drunk,' said the second.
>
> 'Hold him!' said the third.
>
> 'Yes, grab him before he spits at us'(pp.134-135).

Here, the paradigmatic placement of the words – "insane," "unbalanced," "drunk" – shows how the "mutant customers" perceive him as unwanted and expendable. However, by spitting "at the eye" of his first attacker, Azaro not only undermines this subversive stance but also demonstrates that, unlike Homeric and Chaucerian children, he is neither weak nor a subaltern. His reaction as they attempt to seize him reinforces this subjective stance: "I edged away slowly, and found another corner and stared intently at everyone" (p.135). Madame Koto's reaction to Azaro's treatment of the customers warrants attention: "You are too much trouble. You don't respect the customers. You create trouble for me… you are useless" (p.250). To call Azaro "useless" echoes the mutant customers' perception of him as a social pariah. It also reveals that Azaro's subjectivity remains an unsettling force that disrupts the "violent hierarchy" (Derrida, 1981) created by the adult-child binary. This supports Prakash's (1994) assertion that "a child subaltern possesses counter hegemonic possibilities", which challenge "contradictions in the dominant discourse and serve as a source for immanent critique" (p.288). For Bhabha, this critique "allows the articulation of subaltern agency to emerge as relocation and inscription" (1994, p.193).

Azaro's ongoing efforts to relocate and reinscribe this agency are evident when Madame Koto calls him an ugly child, grabs him by the scruff of the neck, and throws him out. He recounts, "Furious and confused, I picked up a length of firewood… ready to use it… She got close, and I lashed out, missing… She paused. A new expression appeared on her face" (Okri, 1991, p.221). Having witnessed Madame Koto treating other children similarly, Azaro's response here is not only an attempt to "turn the table on the power dynamics between adult and children" (Gerend, 2012, p.50) but also an assertion that children are not "beloved pawns" (Inyama, 1998) but "beings in their own right" (Dapeyron-Lafay, 2011). In other words, he aims to dislodge the predator-prey binary, thereby reaffirming his true self. The new expression on Madame Koto's face indicates that his efforts have had the desired effect. Consequently, shortly after, he states: "Madame Koto came looking for me… Then she pleaded with me to go back in… She promised me some money and a generous soup" (Okri, p.222). Though Madame Koto's friendliness in this moment temporarily boosts Azaro's self-esteem, his response during her subsequent life-threatening attack — "One night she appeared to me in my sleep and begged me to give her some of my youth. 'Why?' I asked. And she replied: 'I am

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two hundred years old and unless I get your young blood I will die soon'" (p.496) — underscores her sinister reputation as a witch and reveals that she has always regarded Azaro as a "convertible currency" (Kline, 1995), to be used to sustain her existence. Thus, in her, we see the image of the Rough Beast that, as Yeats (1920) would say, is "to drown all ceremony of innocence" (cited in Akwanya and Anohu, 2001, p. 153). Of course, Azaro's "young blood" symbolises not only his life but also his distinct identity as a child subject. To part with it would be to foreclose the destiny he has chosen for himself. Accordingly, we read: "Her spirit was about to swallow me up completely when a great Lion roared from above, quaking the house and driving her spirit away" (Okri, 1991, p.496). Portrayed as "a great Lion," Azaro's spirit signifies a transition from a resisting force to an overpowering one. This implies that his process of "self-fashioning," from "near infantile helplessness" to a fully realised child-subject, has reached completion (O'Malley, as cited in Gerend, 2012, p.51). The expulsion of Madame Koto's spirit demonstrates this transformation. The absence of her or any other opposition after this suggests that Azaro has finally won what Okri elsewhere describes as "a game of destiny" (2007, p.9). Yet Azaro reminds the reader: "I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one" (Okri, 1991, p. 487). Here, Azaro aims not only to recall his childhood struggles but also to emphasise that he has succeeded where others, like Ade, have failed—achieving "the liberty of Limitations." For him, it is less about heroism in battles and more about the "new road" or subjective space he creates, which enables him to fulfil his promise to bring happiness to his mother's "bruised face." This aligns with Okri's stated purpose for writing The Famished Road: "I wrote because I wanted to alter the inner way we saw our realities, I wanted to open up the narrow limitations imposed on our lives… to change our destiny and traps of history" (2023).

## CONCLUSION

This paper shows that childhood is a contested space in African postcolonial discourse. This contestation is evident not only in challenges to traditional values that support children's rights but also in the reinforcement of adult-centred stereotypes that deny these rights. The depiction of children in African adult literature as subalterns or the silenced 'Other' reveals that their position is subjected to 'epistemic violence" and "asymmetrical obliteration" (Spivak). Consequently, it is essential to re-evaluate, reimagine, and reposition the child's ontological identity as a vital aspect of human progress. Okri (2011) describes true literature as "the encounter of possibilities" that deconstructs our ideas of humanity.

Analysing *The Famished Road*, we see that the child's true identity emerges not from the ideologically constructed spaces of subalternity but from renegotiated spaces of subjectivity. Okri's portrayal of resilient, resistant child characters demonstrates their capacity to challenge life's constraints, revealing a self-defining drive that can benefit the wider human community. Moreover, the protagonist's choice to break the spirit-child's cycle of rebellion and to contribute positively to the world by comforting her mother's bruised face highlights the child's ontological agency in shaping what might be perceived as an adult's presence.

In this way, Okri's novel emphasises and empowers childhood as an authentic self and advocates postcolonial narratives that recognise and situate child subjectivity as a realistic domain of social and psychic identity.

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