

Narrative Resistance and Identity Reconstruction: African Children's Literature as Decolonial Praxis

Hisham Muhamad Ismail¹

¹ Assistant Professor of English Literature, Faculty of Arts and Science, Applied Science University, Bahrain

Correspondence: Hisham Muhamad Ismail, Faculty of Arts and Science, Applied Science University, Bahrain.

Received: June 22, 2025

Accepted: September 29, 2025

Online Published: February 19, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n3p285

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n3p285>

Abstract

This paper discusses how African children's literature plays a significant role as a crucial site of decolonial praxis. It addresses a persistent research gap in scholarship that privileges adult postcolonial texts. The paper argues that African-authored children's books reclaim narrative agency, contest Eurocentric stereotypes, and foster identity formation and empowerment. To concretize the discussion, the paper focuses on two Anglophone examples - Chinua Achebe's *The Flute* (1977) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Upright Revolution* (2019). The study offers close readings of linguistic choices, cultural motifs, and representations of child agency. Methodologically, the study employs a thematic analysis grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theory and augmented by linguistic analysis of discourse patterns, lexical semantics, and syntactic agency that show how language itself serves as an effective tool of resistance through several textual and paratextual signals. It also seeks to examine the roots of African-authored books for young readers and the comparative context to show how communal ethics operate as decolonial strategies. Findings indicate that these narratives function as mirrors and safe spaces for African children, linking their oral traditions with present-day concerns while affirming indigenous languages, values, and epistemologies. The paper contributes to current debates about the significance of decolonial pedagogy and the systematic inclusion of African children's books in school curricula.

Keywords: Eurocentrism; Decolonialization; Identity Formation; Narrative Agency; African Children's Books

1. Introduction

African children's literature has experienced significant growth in recent years, especially in the years following independence. Nevertheless, it has not been an easy road. New books coming out of the continent still face steep uphill battles, from getting shut out of the international publishing game to facing active attempts to discredit what they have to say (National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies [NACCS], 2010). Even with those barriers, people are increasingly valuing this genre. It brings a perspective on culture, society, and politics that the reader just cannot get anywhere else. That richness has led to these stories being published in English, French, and other languages, written by both locals and outsiders. Even though, when non-African authors step in, the reader often feels obvious biases creep into the work. Sometimes it is accidental, sometimes it is not, but it usually stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the traditions they are writing about. When the reader really looks at these texts, he finds a tug-of-war happening between resisting old narratives and rebuilding identity. This feeling makes African children's literature a crucial piece of the decolonization puzzle. It is doing more than just adding to the global library; it is acting as a megaphone for authentic African voices, finally giving these stories the visibility and respect they deserve.

African writers have really stepped up to tell their own stories. It is about challenging external narratives and preserving their authentic identities. They have written in African languages, English, and other tongues to ensure their stories travel farther and spark honest conversations about the challenges they face. As a genre, African children's literature encompasses novels, short stories, and poems, often illustrated. Historically, these texts have always had two main jobs: to teach and to entertain. Research shows just how vital this is for young readers, shaping their personal growth across cultures (Ismail, 2023a). Moreover, these stories function as social guides. They teach moral lessons and cultural values like courage, honesty, and respect (Ogunyemi, 2013). This helps shake off the passive image that was forced on them during colonial times. Prominently, these stories invite young readers in with familiar values and traditions. They lean heavily on oral storytelling, which African communities have always used to pass down wisdom and preserve their culture.

During the rough period of colonization, many countries struggled as their value systems were distorted. In response, leaders and educated writers worked to mix traditional stories with modern issues. They wanted to engage the younger generation and prepare them to lead by addressing real problems such as poverty, gender inequality, and environmental concerns. After independence, interest in African history grew, and we saw a surge in African fiction. Writers got international acclaim, and publishers finally started supporting these diverse projects. For a long time, children in many African countries learned to read using books written by authors from Europe or North America. Those books helped them read, but they often carried the authors' biases. The rise of African writers changed that dynamic. It allowed for a reflection of heritage free from prejudice. These books became windows into cultural identity and mirrors for society to

look at itself. This goes beyond just learning or having fun; it is an active part of the decolonization process. While much has been written about adult postcolonial literature, the impact of children's books is often overlooked. This paper argues that African children's literature acts as a powerful form of decolonial practice. It builds narrative independence, affirms who these kids are, and empowers them through resistance in both language and theme.

2. Literature Review

It is well-noted that children's literature is one of the fastest-growing areas in the literary world, and African children's literature is evolving right alongside it. African books do not offer mere stories; they reflect authentic African heritage while actively challenging old Western stereotypes and ideas of submission (Uwakweh, 2013). Naturally, scholars are paying more attention. So, a real drive has emerged to understand the themes, values, and beliefs tucked away in these stories, leading to a wave of new research. For instance, Anna Chitando (2017) points out that African children's literature contributes to the climate change conversation, highlighting traditional folktales that have long promoted respect for the environment. Pauline Ada Uwakweh (2013) emphasizes that these books play a crucial role in equipping young readers to handle the challenges of immigration while grounding them in essential African values. Mitsch (2010) examines various texts to reveal the diverse values associated with African identity, effectively challenging the notion that African heritage is somehow passive. Hastings (1999) analyzes the contrast between European and African depictions of the continent. He notes that while negative imagery exists, prominent African authors are countering it by adapting their work for film and stage to make it more accessible to younger generations within the continent and beyond. Meena Khorana (2009) focuses on South African children's literature, tracing the cultural and political influences from 1883 to 2004 to show how these works have reshaped African awareness. Hart (2013) examines the apartheid era, noting how it sparked a literary spirit that helped build the ideological framework for a post-apartheid world.

Recently, the focus has shifted toward using these stories as tools for decolonization. Ford (2024) makes a strong case in her article, *Beyond Lip Service, that high-quality books can foster racial pride and liberation among Black and minority students*. Acheampong (2022) also sees these stories as a form of resistance, asserting that they use indigenous values to empower young readers and help them reconstruct their identities. In her thesis, Gamze Ar supports this, showing how African-authored texts are reclaiming cultural agency and redefining the conversation around literature and identity (Ar, 2025).

3. Research Objectives

This paper takes a close look at the role of African children's literature in shaping cultural identity, fostering moral values, and driving the intentional process of decolonization within African communities. It focuses specifically on how this impacts the younger generation. To address questions about whether these books are truly effective, the paper explores three key areas. First, it asks if shifting from oral storytelling to written books changed the way lessons are taught to young Africans. Second, it investigates how children's books have contributed to decolonization among young people during both the colonial and postcolonial eras. Finally, it looks at whether these selected texts accurately reflect and support traditional African values and norms. Exploring these questions clarifies the literary landscape. It highlights that children's literature is a crucial tool for decolonization, echoing important discussions in scholarship today (Bojan, 2025; Kandemiri, 2021).

4. Research Methodology

This paper employs postcolonial literary criticism through a thematic analysis to closely examine themes emerging, interpreting them within a cultural context that emphasizes decolonization, identity formation, and empowerment. The study examines both the text itself and the elements surrounding it to identify how these themes are constructed and how they relate to the broader ideological landscape. Grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theory, the study engages in a close reading of the texts, systematically coding relevant content and consistently connecting it back to the research questions. The study further integrates stylistic and discourse-analytic strategies to explore the effective use of syntactic simplicity, lexical selection, pronominal and narrative agency, and their employment as decolonial strategies within the textual structure. To provide a genuine understanding of African children's literature, the study centers on two works by two canonical figures who have played a vital role in preserving African identity. These stories embody the work of decolonization by celebrating cultural heritage, the value of resistance, and moral structures rooted in African traditions and values. There are specific reasons behind selecting these texts. First, their deep connection to African culture and their ability to reflect indigenous perspectives. Second, prioritizing works by prominent African authors adds authenticity to the discussion and helps in reclaiming narrative agency. Third, their accessibility underscores the genre's diversity. However, this study is limited to Anglophone texts; future research could certainly expand this scope to include Francophone African children's books. Throughout the paper, the concept of cultural decolonization has been explored through the frameworks of theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. For instance, Fanon discusses the psychological toll of colonialism on identity, showing how it often leaves individuals struggling with an inferiority complex shaped by Western ideologies (Fanon, 2008). Similarly, Said's concept of Orientalism offers insight into how colonizers promoted negative, stereotypical representations of African nations and how narratives in African children's literature actively challenge and correct them (Said, 2003). Additionally, Ngugi wa Thiong'o emphasizes the critical importance of preserving indigenous languages and cultures as essential tools for effective decolonization, a perspective this study seeks to adopt and further explain (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986).

5. African Children's Literature: Origins, Development, and Impact

Literature is not just about words on a page; it reflects society and everything around it. African children's literature reflects the continent's dynamic history. It documents the shifting factors and deep roots that have shaped the heritage of these nations. Traditionally,

African societies were deeply communal, so people did not rely on writing to preserve their history. Instead, they spoke. Oral communication was the heartbeat of preserving heritage and teaching values to the next generation. It was revered as “one of the major means by which societies educated, instructed, and socialized their young members” (Odaga, 1985, p. 1). During that time, elders were gathering the young and adults in the evening to share stories, songs, and proverbs. Recent scholarship shows that many modern African children’s books are born of these oral traditions. They take those folktales and songs and transcribe them to ensure cultural memory and moral values do not fade away (Finnegan, 2012; Yitah, 2009). This evolution tells a complicated story about colonialism, too. While conquerors were trying to reshape African identity to fit European standards, on the flip side, African writers pushed back, challenged hard to keep the authentic spirit of their identity alive. The authors dealt with the stories we read as kids that stick with us. So, they view these works as vital tools for the younger generation to carry on their country’s legacy. Scholars argue that young readers need to engage with stories that actually reflect their own language and culture. As Chinweizu noted, “what type of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on” (Chinweizu, 1988, p. xxviii).

Historically, colonizers did not just bring their physical presence; they brought their culture, norms, and values, using written texts to glorify their own standards while pushing African traditions aside. They circulated English-language books that made learning English seem superior while looking down on native languages. It was an early attempt to undercut indigenous heritage and make people feel inferior. Even worse, these texts often pushed negative stereotypes, painting African people as primitive or barbaric to reinforce the idea that Europe was better. This systematic pressure pushed traditional folktales to the margins. Ngugi critiqued this powerfully, saying that adopting the “others” language meant that “language and literature took the African child further away from themselves and their world to other selves and other worlds” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 12). Many critics have pointed out how these perpetuated Eurocentric standards and really damaged African self-esteem (Antigala, 2020; Hart, 2013). By the early twentieth century, however, many African authors realized how dangerous this Westernization process really was. They warned that it threatened to wipe out their cultural legacy and destroy their nations from within. In response, they started creating stories and books specifically for children, insisting on writing in their native African languages. This literary awakening was powerful in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. A wave of new books emerged there to rival the English ones, all aimed at educating and empowering young readers to be proud of who they are.

African children’s literature has done incredible work in fostering a fundamental understanding of local history and culture, effectively countering those old colonial narratives. It was not just about education, either. The goal was to swap out Western fairy tales for stories that offered joy and felt culturally relevant. As the African publishing industry found its footing, local governments recognized the value of these narratives and began weaving them into school curricula. By the mid-twentieth century, just as independence was approaching, you could see a real shift. Colonial authorities relaxed their restrictions, allowing diverse local reading materials in schools and encouraging publishing companies to open across the continent. This era gave us memorable works like *Tales Out of School* (1963) by Nkem Nwankwo, *My Mother’s Daughter* (1987) by Mabel Segun, and *One Week, One Trouble* (1972) by Anezi Okoro. These early books built the foundation for authentic stories that actually resonated with young readers. As Schmidt (1977) noted, the landscape of children’s literature looked completely different by 1987 compared to 1957. There was an apparent rise in the number of books written, illustrated, and published by Africans that accurately captured their own contexts. Countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and Cameroon became centers of this emerging literature, supported by local authorities even as economic challenges made growth difficult. This postcolonial wave has been essential for amplifying African voices. Major authors like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o contributed significantly to the genre, ensuring these stories reached a wider audience. Their writings champion African identity, push for social justice, and explore complex themes like migration and poverty, ultimately preparing future generations for a global context.

5.1 African Children’s Books: A Vital Tool of Nurturing African Identity

People have tried for years to come up with a comprehensive definition of children’s literature, but the field is so diverse that most attempts fall short. Even so, writers and critics agree that it matters deeply, pointing to the lasting impact stories have on personal development. This paper examines the power of African children’s texts and their role in preserving identity, a role that is crucial given the traumatic history of the colonial era. The Nigerian writer Fayose explains this influence well. He notes that African literature for children draws its subject matter directly from the African context, using a style and language that an African child can truly understand (Fayose, 1991, p. 74). He suggests that this kind of literature promotes African culture, helping children understand and appreciate their own environment while they enjoy reading. Building on that idea, a few factors maximize the impact of these texts in the decolonization process. The first is creating content in a language the child knows. This does not just make it easier to understand; it ensures the message comes through clearly and helps young readers value their own language and heritage. The second factor is mirroring the culture in which these children actually live. As mentioned before, seeing their own world in print builds a sense of relevance and belonging. The third factor is simply the pleasure of reading. These books need to be enjoyable sources of entertainment. African writers have managed to weave these factors together, creating texts that teach and delight at the same time. Many studies track the ongoing effort to create more African books for younger generations, a movement that spans from pre-colonial times to the present. Advocates believe these books are essential for resisting the colonial standards imposed on education, politics, and culture. Additionally, these writers are actively countering negative portrayals of Africa by offering narratives that preserve identity and celebrate a rich history. They want to instill pride in children and empower them to question stereotypes that try to erase African identity. Recognizing this power, African writers craft stories rooted in their culture and language, turning young readers into the protagonists of their own narratives. Both adults and children find joy in relevant stories. As Estes points out, “Above all, the soul wants stories... If courage and heroism are the muscles of the spiritual

drive that help a person to become whole, then stories are the bones." This connection between narrative and experience forms the foundation of cultural understanding and resilience (Estes, 2008).

5.2 *The Role and Impact of Storytelling in African Children's Literature*

Ogunyemi (2013) points out that these stories were not just entertainment; they were built to teach lessons about courage, honesty, respect, hospitality, and perseverance. The goal was to encourage good behavior and steer kids away from bad habits. By illustrating these themes, the stories aimed to "boost the need to do good and shun bad vices" (Ogunyemi, 2013, p. 345). The writers believed this was the best way to help children develop the social skills and values they needed to fit into their own societies, fostering a genuine sense of community. They wove in traditional proverbs and folktales to ground young readers in their own culture, rather than letting foreign influences dictate their moral compass. This dedication to heritage was actually a natural reaction to the Western narratives that dominated during colonial rule. Those colonial stories often tried to silence indigenous voices. They had popular tales like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, pushing a standard of beauty that completely marginalized children with darker skin. Moreover, Antigala (2020) notes that during this era, children across different colonies were given the same textbooks that promoted specific ideals about religion and the empire, making them feel grateful for colonial rule (p. 65). African writers like Chinua Achebe saw the danger clearly. He insisted on writing stories that would shield future generations from the destructive values hidden in those Western tales. Achebe was incredibly direct about this, urging Africans to examine the books on their shelves. He viewed many of them as "unwholesome for the African people" and famously described them as "beautifully embalmed poison smuggled into the continent in the form of children's storybooks" (Antigala, 2020, p. 64). This perspective shifted the purpose of African children's literature. It had two main jobs: to preserve African identity by celebrating traditional values, and to challenge the stereotypes spread by colonial powers. Because of this, the literature gives young readers familiar references, offering "an accustomed array of games and verse for their play" (Finnegan, 2012, p. 295). It reinforces what society actually values. These books prioritize family and community, teaching kids to persevere and look out for one another, especially when times get tough. In doing so, these writers went beyond simple cultural representation to tackle real social issues, engaging young minds with stories that truly reflect their lives and dreams.

5.3 *Themes in African Children's Literature*

Emerging social issues such as gender inequality, migration, and climate change are becoming increasingly visible in African children's literature. On top of that, the reader often finds themes centered on social justice and human rights running through these narratives. They serve to wake up the community and push back against the apartheid practices that have affected these communities for so long. Nature and animals still play huge roles in these stories, drawing from a deep well of historical fables and myths that keep cultural heritage alive. In the postcolonial period, many writers have turned their focus to how modernity interacts with tradition. They argue that exploring contemporary life should not overshadow the importance of understanding your roots. The reader can see this emphasis in many African tales, which highlight the value of recognizing diverse cultures while respecting their languages and traditions. By weaving these themes into folktales and proverbs, African children's literature is doing important work to preserve identity and foster real social awareness.

6. **Chinua Achebe's *The Flute*: The Power of Thematic Focus**

When we talk about the heavy hitters of the literary world, Chinua Achebe stands out as one of the most influential African writers, celebrated for the incredible range of his storytelling. His childhood in Nigeria really set the stage for this. Growing up during times of intense social and political shaking, leading right up to the civil war, did not just shape his worldview; it gave him the fuel to advocate for African identity (Barksdale-Hall, 2007). By diving deep into themes from his own culture, Achebe did more than just tell stories. He fought to preserve that identity and push back against the weight of colonial ideas. There is a certain clarity and truth in his writing that changed everything (Ismail, 2023b). He effectively cleared the path for future generations of African writers to step up, tell their own stories, and reclaim who they are. His work can now be found in classrooms all over the world, sparking the necessary conversations about the legacy of colonialism, not just in Africa but everywhere.

In his narrative *The Flute* (1977), for instance, Achebe chronicles the human journey, illustrating the moral functions of African children's literature by blending simple storytelling with profound symbolism (Ogunyemi, 2013). The story serves as a powerful model for cultural decolonization and finding one's identity. Achebe uses the story to explore personal agency, framing traditional authority as something to be overcome, with the flute itself representing that reclamation of culture (Simola, 1999). Recent studies point out how Achebe critiques adult authority in his story while championing the agency and growth of children. If we look at this through the lens of postcolonial theory, especially drawing on Fanon's ideas about psychological decolonization and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's narrative agency, we get a much richer understanding of the text (Mamdani, 2018). The story revolves around a man with two wives and several children, tracking a young boy's quest to find his lost flute as he tries to defy his father's rejection. Along the way, he meets spirits on the farm who offer him a golden flute. He turns it down, insisting on finding his own bamboo flute. Because of his brave interactions with these spirits, he is gifted a magical pot, which he gratefully accepts. When he returns home to share his story, it symbolizes the restoration of his agency and identity despite traditional constraints.

In this story, Achebe's linguistic choices reflect the ideological background not only stylistically, but also. For instance, the story employs a simple, straightforward syntactic structure. He uses short declarative sentences in the active voice, such as "I have come for my flute" (Achebe, 1977, p. 12). This sentence reflects the oral storytelling rhythms while assuring epistemic clarity. So, the reader can understand that this syntactic transparency challenges the authoritative, superior tones that often accompany colonial narratives and educational texts.

Lexically, Achebe prioritizes the indigenous, local terms (bamboo flute, magic pot, farm) over the foreign or non-tangible terms. In this way, he tries to ground these nouns in young readers' minds and to portray cultural heritage through tangible, concrete indigenous objects. Additionally, the boy's sentence "I want my own flute, the one I lost" gives it pragmatic force, functioning as an explicit, determined declaration of ownership and attachment; it is not only a request. Also, Achebe's repeated use of the possessive pronoun "my" shows this kind of selfhood versus erasure. All of these discourse strategies should support the process of decolonization and ensure that language serves as a channel for self-articulation.

6.1 Achebe's Use of Journey Metaphors in His Narratives

Then you have Achebe offering a different angle through the experiences of a second boy, the son of the man's other wife. He tries to copy the first boy by claiming he lost his flute, too. However, this kid is a sharp contrast to the first; he is rude and deceitful to the spirits he meets. Consequently, he gets precisely the punishment his shameful behavior deserves. Through this short story, Achebe creates an engaging way to teach moral lessons, using simple language and characters that young readers can actually understand. This helps them pick up on various messages and insights. One key message is about the metaphorical journeys the boys take, which Achebe uses to show boundaries. The night journey and the encounters with spirits metaphorically underline that "morning is the appropriate time for men to plant their yams, and nighttime is for the spirits" (Simola, 1999, p. 89). This nighttime setting acts as a crucial space where identities are challenged and negotiated (Bhabha, 1994). The boy's brave interaction with the spirits shows that he is an active participant, capable of negotiating and rejecting authority rather than just taking what he is given. Moreover, his decision to turn down the golden flute for his traditional bamboo one shows a preference for absolute cultural values over the tempting but shallow colonial ones. Achebe highlights truth and courage when the first boy declares: "I have come for my flute, ... I know you have many flutes here. But I want my own flute, the one I lost" (Achebe, 1977, p. 12). These moments work as tools for decolonization, echoing Ngugi's push to preserve indigenous languages against dominant colonial ones (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). Similarly, the boy's determination to get his specific flute back mirrors the effort to keep cultural identity alive, which is essential for defining who we are (Fanon, 2008). The journey further reveals that the magical pot he receives symbolizes community values of courage and truth. These ideals are central to indigenous cultures and stand in contrast to Western narratives that often support passive, copycat attitudes aligned with colonial values (Said, 2003). Achebe and his peers often weave these values into their texts to empower young readers and connect them to authentic traditions. The boy's assertion, "I want my own flute, the one I lost" (Achebe, 1977, p. 12), really underlines this theme. The bamboo flute, crafted locally and acoustically imperfect, stands in opposition to the golden flute offered by the spirits, which represents the allure of imported, prestigious colonial culture. This rejection goes deeper than personal preference; it is an act of resistance. By choosing the bamboo, the boy validates the value of locally produced, familiar artifacts. This moment captures what Ngugi identifies as "the base of the people's culture" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 4), a source of knowledge and identity that colonial education tries to undermine. The simplicity of saying "my own flute" carries heavy political weight, touching on themes of ownership, memory, and continuity. Conversely, the story of the second boy, who tries to mimic the first without sincerity or understanding, acts as a foil that deepens the analysis. His story explores how an unthinking, imitative attitude ultimately leads to failure (Bhabha, 1994).

6.2 Postcolonial Context and Identity Formation

When we look at the postcolonial landscape, we often see a tendency for specific individuals and communities to adopt external norms without really checking if those "shiny" imposed values actually fit their existing culture. Achebe shows us the consequences of swallowing these ideas whole. He writes, "But the second boy... he did not get a magic pot. He got nothing... because he had not been truthful" (Achebe, 1977, p. 20). By contrasting these two boys and their different paths, Achebe highlights the importance of staying authentic as one forms an identity. It is the only way to prevent that feeling of cultural dislocation. Additionally, by depicting the boys as Black, each with their own unique personalities and skills, Achebe pushes back against the old colonial narrative that puts white protagonists on a pedestal while erasing Black representation (Fanon, 2008; Said, 2003). By presenting them this way, he aims to build confidence and a real sense of empowerment (Ogunyemi, 2013). The story becomes even more interesting when the young boy ignores his father's warning about the dangers of traveling at night, prompting a conversation about personal agency and authority. Achebe underscores the boy's respectful but firm response: "But father, I must go. I have lost my flute. I must find it" (Achebe, 1977, p. 5). In a traditional setting that prioritizes obedience to parents, this appears to be a form of rebellion (Simola, 1999). However, it actually opens a necessary dialogue about giving individuals space to explore and take responsibility for their choices within a community (Mignolo, 2012). The story wraps up with the affirmation: "And the boy took the magic pot and went home. And he told his father and his mother and his brothers and sisters about his adventure" (Achebe, 1977, p. 18). This reinforces the essential value of honoring cultural norms while standing by the boy's commitment to truth and tradition. This tension underscores the need to restructure indigenous frameworks to align with authentic identities, rather than simply rejecting the colonial context entirely. Achebe does a brilliant job of weaving a traditional folktale that is both entertaining and educational, using the text as a tool for decolonization and to challenge forced stereotypes. His work not only affirms African identity but also empowers people to navigate their worlds with confidence while embracing their heritage. In *The Flute*, that old bamboo flute symbolizes cultural authenticity. By comparing the journeys of the two boys and their outcomes, Achebe explores the difference between real agency and mere imitation, adding to the broader conversation on identity and resistance in postcolonial literature.

7. Ngugi wa Thiong'o *The Upright Revolution*: The Significance of Simplicity

The Upright Revolution (2019) can be considered a modern fable. It uses the human body to show us what society looks like, reminding

us how connected we all really are. In the story, different body parts like the arms, legs, eyes, and ears get into a heated argument because everyone thinks they are the most important one. This conflict is driven by ego, and it eventually causes the whole body to collapse. Things only work again when they realize they are in this together. They have to cooperate to survive, and that shift is what leads to what the author calls the upright revolution. While the story might feel simple, it carries some profound lessons for young readers, especially about the risks of fighting amongst yourselves when you are facing trouble from the outside. It really drives home the importance of collaboration, prompting us to consider how our actions affect the bigger picture.

7.1 Ngugi's *Call for Decolonization and Mutual Respect*

In this story, Ngugi wa Thiong'o releases a modern warning for humanity. He urges us to cooperate to achieve real progress and prosperity, suggesting we leave behind notions of superiority in favor of mutual respect. In his narrative, Ngugi draws deeply on the oral storytelling traditions of many African communities, using rhythmic, playful language that resonates with both young readers and adults. This children's book is an excellent example of his lifelong commitment to decolonizing minds through authentic African narratives that reflect indigenous contexts (Githuku et al., 2014). He challenges the mental and cultural frameworks imposed by colonizers, looking at them through a satirical lens. Ngugi digs into themes of human nature, identity formation, and liberation. He uses these interconnected concepts to advance decolonization, emphasizing empowerment and reaffirming African identity. Even though the original text of this story was written in Gikuyu, the English translation retains many of the distinct discourse markers of African oral storytelling and communal references. Also, the story is full of anaphoric repetition, such as "It was not the head alone... It was the whole body," and of inclusive pronominal usage, such as "We must ALL agree." These references reinforce Ngugi's usual view of collective subjectivity. Syntactically, the story privileges paratactic constructions over complex subordination, reflecting the additive logic of their oral traditions rather than the Western hierarchical syntax. For example, Ngugi mentions that "Things had to change. But change must come through cooperation, not conflict" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2019, p. 18). In this sentence, Ngugi uses juxtaposition and a contrastive conjunction (But) to ground the moral reasoning behind this advice without giving abstract, useless theorization. Lexically, Ngugi uses many simple words and avoids Latinate diction to enhance the accessibility of meaning and implicitly reject the Western prestige lexicon of colonial academia. It clearly aligns with Ngugi's attitude; the linguistic features of this narrative function as pragmatic strategies of resistance and of enhancing African epistemologies.

He even critiques the theory of evolution from a Western context, arguing that we should engage with knowledge through our own language and understanding. This matches his broader point that language "carries culture, and culture carries the entire worldview of a society" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 15). The text satirically critiques Western intellectual dominance and the authoritative language often used in science, which tends to impose cultural biases on non-Western societies. Like other writers in this space, Ngugi uses postcolonial literature as a tool to take apart colonial assumptions and expose where that discourse falls short (Ashcroft et al., 2005, p. 142). By highlighting the importance of African knowledge systems, the book offers fresh perspectives for understanding human behavior. This aligns with Walter Mignolo's (2012) concept of "epistemic disobedience," which advocates rejecting purely Western interpretations to validate other ways of knowing. The title's central metaphor, "humans walk upright," encourages us to look beyond our immediate surroundings and highlights the role of consciousness in shaping our identities. As Ngugi puts it, "We must look beyond our immediate surroundings. We must look far and wide" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2019, p. 12). His narrative also emphasizes decision-making as a community rather than solely as individuals, reflecting the collective values of African societies while critiquing the Western model of individualism. This resonates with Ali Mazrui's (2020) observation that a collective identity rooted in African traditions builds shared responsibility, countering the Western focus on the self (p. 78). Ngugi reinforces this ethos, stating, "It was not the head alone that decided. It was the whole body. We must ALL agree" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2019, p. 15). The text continues to balance modernity and tradition, revealing the ongoing tension between the two. Ngugi skillfully integrates modern elements while honoring their roots in authentic traditions, acknowledging that change is necessary but must happen the right way: "Things had to change. But change must come through cooperation, not conflict" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2019, p. 18). Through this lens, Ngugi illustrates that adopting modern culture does not mean abandoning traditional heritage; instead, tradition should be preserved to support its legacy. His determined choice to write in Gikuyu shows his belief in using indigenous languages as tools for cultural reclamation, helping young readers fully embrace their traditional culture. Notably, this book was translated into multiple languages, including English, to reach a wider audience and celebrate African culture on a global scale. Ngugi also uses a playful tone to make complex scientific and theoretical concepts accessible to the everyday reader, which reflects his commitment to democratizing knowledge. He advocates for a type of decolonization that resonates across all levels of the community to foster collective empowerment. His examination of collective decision-making in evolution mirrors the contemporary struggles faced by African communities in the postcolonial period, encompassing cultural, social, and political liberation. Ngugi suggests alternative paths for growth, encouraging readers to explore options grounded in their rich histories and cultures. In this respect, Ngugi successfully transforms the colonizer's language and knowledge discourse into a liberatory space, broadening the decolonization project to include cultural and intellectual dimensions. Through his work, he demonstrates that cultural reclamation is a vital mechanism for empowering both individuals and communities.

8. The Context of Decolonization: A Comparative Study

In this section, we examine African children's literature alongside works from the Caribbean and South Asia. You see both similarities and unique approaches, but they are all aiming for the same thing: preserving culture and shaping identity. The shared struggles of the colonial era profoundly shape the writing from these places. It is a history marked by the forced use of foreign languages and norms, often at the

expense of genuine cultural heritage (Ashcroft et al., 2005). These shared experiences pushed writers in all three regions to create counter-narratives. They are challenging Eurocentric standards and the way their nations have been misrepresented (Said, 2003). Just as importantly, these authors focus on instilling pride in their national cultures. At the heart of these stories is the need to reclaim authentic voices, primarily through language. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o pointed out, keeping native languages alive is essential to decolonization, and that idea resonates in Caribbean literature as well. For instance, writers like V.S. Reid have intentionally used local dialects to bridge young readers to their roots, countering the dominance of colonial languages (Savory, 2003). We see something similar with South Asian authors who weave local languages in with foreign ones. It enriches the cultural tapestry and questions the linguistic control imposed by colonizers (Major, 2011). This shared commitment to language agency represents a strong, collective effort to challenge colonial domination. On top of that, all three literary traditions draw on traditional narrative forms. These comparisons do not merely support the argument for decolonization through literature; they also highlight how culture and language interact to build resilient identities. It aligns perfectly with recent scholarship on decolonial pedagogy that advocates for these transformative narratives (Baptista et al., 2019).

8.1 Traditional and Contemporary Influences in Children's Literature

Children's literature across Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia often delves into traditional proverbs, folktales, and local myths to reinforce cultural norms and traditions (Finnegan, 2012; Odaga, 1985). In the Caribbean, for example, narratives frequently weave traditional elements such as Anansi tales, calypso, and trickster figures into modern issues. This helps keep cultural legacies alive while supporting resistance efforts (Hunt, 1996). South Asian children's books do something similar by engaging extensively with regional folktales and classical epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, linking these old stories to their specific local heritage (Major, 2011). These stories are not just enjoyable to read; they make culture accessible and pass down essential lessons. Of course, because the history and social contexts differ in each place, the ways they handle local challenges vary, even if the core goals are the same. Caribbean literature demonstrates considerable flexibility in exploring hybrid identities, with writers celebrating diverse backgrounds. South Asian narratives tend to shift across languages and religious traditions, focusing on indigenous identities and adapting classical texts to contemporary problems (Major, 2011; Roy, 2017). African narratives, on the other hand, often present a unified perspective that celebrates authentic heritage and builds pride in history. Each region tackles themes that reflect its own political landscape. Caribbean literature focuses on slavery and freedom; South Asian texts deal with partition and caste dynamics; and African literature wrestles with colonial borders and the uncertainties of governing after independence. Yet, despite these differences, they all share a common thread of fighting cultural displacement left over from colonial rule. These stories highlight the importance of positive main characters in affirming identity and challenging the degrading depictions found in colonial narratives (Fanon, 2008). By looking at African children's literature alongside Caribbean and South Asian works, we can see a shared objective: reinforcing decolonization and affirming identity. Ultimately, this collection of literature challenges stereotypes and preserves indigenous heritage. While each narrative is shaped by its own unique postcolonial reality, this comparison helps us better understand African children's books. It also offers insight into how these societies are empowering future generations through storytelling, connecting their authentic heritage to the challenges they face today.

9. Conclusion

This paper has explored the deep significance of African children's literature, viewing it not just as entertainment but as a pivotal force in preserving culture, affirming identity, and advancing decolonization. These books provide a necessary counter-narrative to centuries of colonial misrepresentation and false stereotypes. Throughout the discussion, we have seen how African children's literature effectively challenges the erasure of cultural history by offering authentic representations that empower young readers. By engaging with themes of resilience, community, and identity, these texts do more than reclaim the narrative space colonial powers tried to dominate. They also foster a genuine sense of belonging and self-worth. This analysis highlights how literature serves as a medium for preserving and reimagining cultural connections, making African children's literature a vital part of the ongoing conversation about decolonization.

When you look at works like Achebe's *The Flute* or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Upright Revolution*, the reader can see just how vital African children's literature is for reshaping a child's self-image. It is about more than just storytelling; it places black protagonists in their own cultural settings, honoring the world they actually live in. These narratives offer moral lessons that are deeply tied to community heritage. Authors here are doing important work in the post-independence era, pushing back against foreign values to keep their authentic norms alive. This paper examines how African writers use their texts to champion these themes, both in what they say and in the language they choose. By writing in both colonial and indigenous languages, they ensure their stories reach everyone, from locals to a global audience. Beyond that, by weaving in themes of family and community, these books help young readers navigate modern life while building a strong identity rooted in African culture. It turns literature into a dynamic platform for self-awareness. The main characters are not just bystanders; they are agents of change, inspiring the next generation to assert themselves and build a culturally grounded identity. This study adds to the conversation on postcolonial literature by showing how these authors use their work as tools of resistance and identity reclamation. The findings make a strong case for getting these stories into school curricula across African nations to boost cultural pride. As for what comes next, future research could explore how these texts are adapting to digital media and new technology.

Acknowledgments

NA

Author's contributions

Dr. Hisham M. Ismail was responsible for the study design and revision.

Funding:

NA

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer-reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Acheampong, K. (2022). A literary turn in African studies: The contribution of three generations of African writers to the advancement of decoloniality in African studies. *The Thinker*, 93(4), 54-62. https://doi.org/10.36615/the_thinker.v93i4.2206
- Achebe, C. (1977). *The flute*. Heinemann Educational Books. ISBN: 9780435902966.
- Antigala, O. (2020). Social commitment and didacticism in children's African prose fiction. *Abraka Humanities Review*, 10(1), 67-78. [No DOI; journal site only]
- Ar, G. (2025). *Representations of African Americans in American children's literature: The search for Black identity in Jacqueline Woodson's picture books* (Doctoral dissertation, Ege University). <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.13320.74240>
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (Eds.). (2005). *The post-colonial studies reader* (2nd ed.). Routledge. ISBN: 978041534565
- Baptista, J., Belsky, J., Marques, S., Silva, J. R., Martins, C., & Soares, I. (2019). Early family adversity, stability, and consistency of institutional care, and infant cognitive, language, and motor development across the first six months of institutionalization. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 57, Article 101387. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infbeh.2019.101387>
- Barksdale-Hall, R. (2007). Chinua Achebe: A bio-bibliographic review. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(8), 9-11.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>
- Bojan, M. (2025). *Decolonial feminism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Vienna).
- Chinweizu. (1988). *Voices from twentieth-century Africa: Griots and town criers*. Faber & Faber. ISBN: 9780571133028
- Chitando, A. (2017). African children's literature, spirituality, and climate change. *The Ecumenical Review*, 69(3), 375-385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12300>
- Estes, C. P. (2008). Introduction to the 2004 comprehensive edition: A Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell (1949). In *What does the soul want?* (pp. xxix-xlii). Princeton University Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. ISBN: 9780802143006 (Original work published 1952)
- Fayose, P. O. (1991). *Children's literature research in Africa: Problems and prospects*. Ibadan University Press. ISBN: 9789781210738
- Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral literature in Africa* (Rev. ed.). Open Book Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0025>

- Ford, D. Y. (2024). Beyond lip service: Decolonizing children's literature for promoting racial pride, equity, achievement, and liberation. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 73(1), 47-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23813377241285816>
- Githuku, N. K. (2014). Mau Mau crucible of war: Statehood, national identity and politics in postcolonial Kenya (Doctoral dissertation, West Virginia University). <https://doi.org/10.33915/ETD.5677>
- Hart, G. (2013). The African Renaissance and children's literature: Is South African librarianship abdicating its role? *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, 68(1), 29-38. <https://doi.org/10.7553/68-1-763>
- Hastings, A. (1999). Critical perspectives on postcolonial African children's and young adult literature (review). *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 23(3), 452-455. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.1999.0026>
- Hunt, P. (Ed.). (1996). *International companion encyclopedia of children's literature*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203168127>
- Ismail, H. M. (2023a). Children's literature: The significance and other impacts. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(3), 593-598. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1303.07>
- Ismail, H. M. (2023b). Colonialism and a history of oppression in Africa: Scenes from selected African novels. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 4(3), 55-66. <https://doi.org/10.58256/rjah.v4i3.1249>
- Kandemiri, C. M. (2021). Literary archives of conflict: Decoloniality of materialities and resilience in selected narratives of genocide in Namibia (Doctoral dissertation, University of Namibia).
- Khorana, M. G. (2009). National character in South African English children's literature (review). *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 34(4), 399-402. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1940>
- Major, J. (2011). Constructions of the tongue: Language, nationalism, and identity in South Asia. *India Review*, 10(2), 185-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2011.568689>
- Mamdani, M. (2018). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.23943/9781400889716>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2012). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691156095.001.0001>
- Mitsch, R. H. (2010). African children's and youth literature at the dawn of the 21st century (review). *Research in African Literatures*, 41(3), 155-157. <https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.2010.41.3.155>
- National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies. (2010). 37th annual conference proceedings. CORE.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey. ISBN: 9780852555010
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (2019). *The upright revolution: Or why humans walk upright* (S. Banerjee, Illus.). Seagull Books. ISBN: 9780857426414
- Odaga, B. (1985). *Literature for children and young people in Kenya*. Kenya Literature Bureau. ISBN: 9789966443007
- Ogunyemi, C. B. (2013). A meta-critical study of Akachi Ezeigbo's perspectives on children's literature in Nigeria: Narratology as scientific instrument, morality, and didactics in analysis. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4(8), 344-351. <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL2013.0366>
- Said, E. W. (2003). *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics. ISBN: 9780141187426 (Original work published 1978)
- Savory, E. (2003). *Postcolonial texts: African, Canadian, and Caribbean connections*. University of Toronto Press. ISBN: 9780802084866
- Schmidt, N. J. (1977). Bibliography: African folklore for African children. *Research in African Literatures*, 8(3), 304-326. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3818771>
- Simola, R. (1999). The flute, the drum, and how the leopard got his claws by Chinua Achebe. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2(1), 87-99. <https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v2i1.721>
- Uwakweh, P. A. (2013). Mediating cultures through African children's literature in the diaspora. *African Literature Today*, 31, 1-15. [No DOI; authentic print source]
- Yitah, H. (2009). Children's literature in Ghana: A survey. *Children's Literature*, 37, 236-255. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0816>