

**BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: NEGOTIATING PARENTAL
ABANDONMENT AND FAMILY LIFE IN SADE
ADENIRAN'S *IMAGINE THIS***

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Abstract⁷¹

*Using African feminist and post-colonial theories, this paper examines the representation of the institution of family in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*, in order to explore the character's creation of a third space – one that is ambivalent and traumatic – in her context of divorce and family abandonment. As depicted in the narrative, a major reason behind such family tragedies is an overlap between patriarchy and the post-colonial state. Thus, through the protagonist's troubled identity and traumatic experience due to her family's dynamics, the narrative questions the role of a child in reconnecting fragmented family bonds. This heroine's traumatised hatred of her culture and of the institution of motherhood raises questions about the future of African feminism. If this ideology marginalises culture and renders motherhood as an institution no longer centrally important to contemporary African women, then it requires critical engagement. I explore how the literary genre inspired by African feminism enters established socio-cultural spaces critically and interrogates family dynamics ruthlessly. And I query whether it offers any solutions to the dilemmas of women that are uncovered and illuminated thereby. I will argue that the child protagonist in this narrative is presented not merely as a victim of circumstance – existing as she does betwixt and between family identities that are simultaneously familiar and strange – she is also depicted as attempting valiantly to reconnect the fragmented family bonds.*

Keywords: *African feminism, Sade Adeniran, betwixt and between, divorce, family*

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⁷¹ This paper derives from chapter four and other portions of the author's 2015 doctoral thesis.

Introduction

The dynamics that result from the disintegration of the biological family warrant careful examination. This paper provides such investigation by exploring marriage and the parent-child relationship in relation to travel, identity crisis, and divorce, as portrayed in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*. I explore how the narrative uses a female protagonist to comment on the expectations of parents, as well as the precarious state of her family, and how the narrative challenges the existing array of African feminisms (African Womanism, Motherism, Stiwanism, Nego-feminism, and Snail-Sense Feminism). In theorising the parent-child relationship in the context of divorce, Smart (2006: 156) considers children to "have much to say about how their family lives have been changed or affected." This is because children become the first victims of the separation of their parents. By using a child protagonist, Adeniran provides what Eagleton (2013) calls a peculiar freshness and immediacy in perceiving objects. I thus argue that the child protagonist in this narrative is not only a victim of circumstance who exists in betwixt and between family spaces that are simultaneously familiar and strange, but she also attempts to reconnect the fragmented family bonds.

Adeniran's use of a child narrator *qua* protagonist to epitomise post-coloniality and its impact on the family space, harks back to African canonical texts such as Camara Laye's *African Child* (1955), Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966), Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1971), and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). Whereas in these canonical texts the use of a child narrator/protagonist symbolises particularly African problems – such as egregious alienation (in Laye), colonial violence (in Oyono) or post-colonial disillusionment (in Okri)⁷² – Adeniran allegorises childhood to question the childhood space in contemporary writing; and she examines how children are endowed with a "vision of reality" – to borrow Eagleton's phrase (2013: 85) – about the post-colonial state. As Bryce and Hron in different contexts point out,⁷³ the female childhood space becomes a centre for "exploring the repressed feminine in relation to a socially conditioned version of femininity" (Bryce 2008: 50). It further "represents a particular resistance of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of differences that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults" (Hron 2008: 30). Thus, Adeniran represents the child as an agent of

⁷² Nabutanyi is theorising how the canonical literary texts that use child narrator/protagonist represent childhood.

⁷³ Whereas Bryce is speaking of the depiction of twin children in Nigerian third-generation writers such as Diana Evans and Helen Oyeyemi, Hron discusses the representation of childhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Uzodinma Iweala's narratives.

change in different socio-economic, cultural and political spheres. The narrative technique of using child narrators not only celebrates the flexibility of children in adapting to different identities; it can also be read in relation to the development of the post-colonial nation.

The *Bildungsroman* has its origins in the two German words *Bildung* (formation) and *roman* (novel), (cf. Okuyade 2011: 143). In the course of problematizing the concept of *Bildungsroman*, Bakhtin – as translated by McGee – shows how we can read characters in the novel (Ng'umbi 2015), emphasising the development of the plot in light of the physical, mental, as well as social growth of the protagonist. Bakhtin writes: “[i]t is necessary, first of all, to single out specifically the aspect of man’s essential *becoming*” (1937: 20; italics in the original). He further points out that “[a]ll movements [of the protagonist] in the novel, all the events and escapades depicted in it, shift the hero in space,” to imply the interplay between time and space or what he calls “chronotope” in the growth of the hero. Bakhtin simply defines *Bildungsroman* as “the novel of education” or a novel of formation that accounts for the growth of the protagonist and its challenges.

Okuyade (2011) goes further to distinguish between the classical and contemporary *Bildungsroman*. Whereas ‘classical’ refers to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, ‘contemporary’ denotes the modernist and post-colonial, particularly the twenty-first century. According to Okuyade, a classical *Bildungsroman* is characterised by the depiction of a young protagonist growing towards the ability to live in society; whereas the contemporary contribution to this genre is characterised by protagonists who are unable to cope with society. Arguing in line with Okuyade, Vázquez (2002: 87) is of the view that protagonists in the contemporary *Bildungsroman* “often find themselves incapable of choosing between two sets of values.” For Vázquez, this inability of choosing a set of values results in “internal conflicts [that] remain unsolved at the end of the narrative.”

While agreeing with Okuyade and Vázquez, I also observe that the protagonist in *Imagine This* not only leaves internal conflicts unsolved at the end of the narrative; but she also creates her own space, independent of her family. I centre my discussion on how the selected writer depicts her female protagonist with unsolved internal conflicts that push her to create a new space for negotiation. I demonstrate how Adeniran represents a female character who inhabits an in-between space: on the one hand, this child narrator offers a “vision of reality” (to borrow Eagleton’s phrase again (2013: 85)) regarding the dynamics in the family. On the other hand, the child protagonist attempts to negotiate family reunification.

In their exploration of childhood memories, African women writers of the twenty-first century, Nigerians in particular, claim that there has been a subtle shift in the artistic curve of African literature in terms of style and thematic concerns. Okuyade appreciates this shift especially in the novel genre that marks the beginning of a new epoch.⁷⁴ Whereas Bryce asks a provocative question about where their works are taking the Nigerian and other Africans' novel, Okuyade expounds on their styles and thematic representation in their writings. As Okuyade observes, "their style and thematic concerns do not only bequeath the badge of newness and 'nowness' to their arts, but also give them a discrete position in the development of the African novel" (2011: 138).

As exemplified by Adeniran's narrative, the *Bildungsroman* tradition has become an endeavour, one that makes children occupy a hybrid space that enables them to navigate between private and public spaces. Besides, it is through the eyes of child narrators that a different perspective becomes accessible, regarding the struggles of the adult world. Thus Adeniran's novel enters in conversation with other contemporary narratives published in the first and early second decades of the twenty-first century, such as Dorine Baingana's *Tropical Fish* (2005), Diana Evans's *26a* (2005), Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones* (2006), Sefi Atta's *Swallow* (2010) and Elieshi Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* (2011). All of these authors' protagonists and narrators are female children. Unlike her contemporaries, Adeniran represents her female protagonist in more complicated scenarios. The child is a victim of several overlapping circumstances of post-colony, divorce, patriarchy, matriarchy, and eventually orphanage.

By 'parental abandonment' or separation, I refer to temporary or permanent isolation of children, which occurs when parents travel, or in times of political instability, or when divorce occurs. As Smart contends, in the divorce context it is an isolation that forces children

. . . to negotiate new moral terrains on which they have to make decisions about how to act, how to relate, how to prioritise, how to safeguard [themselves] . . . how to balance their own needs against those of others, and ultimately how to reconstruct family living (Smart 2004: 407).

⁷⁴ Okuyade compares first, second and third generation writers in terms of their stylistic and thematic representation. Using Ernest Emenyonu's ideas, Okuyade calls for a need to evolve new templates (that identify third generation writers) to redirect and sustain the hopes and aspirations of the African people through narratives. Therefore, the shift I am discussing in this paper is from the use of adult to child narrator or protagonist that dominates contemporary women's writing.

'Betwixt and between' refers to the liminal spaces which this female character locates as she tries to negotiate between the biological family space and elsewhere. Turner (1969: 95) uses the phrase in an ethnographic context to mean 'neither here nor there' because it is an ambiguous space that communicates "social and cultural transitions." It is similar to what Bhabha (2013: 109), in the analysis "In Between Cultures," calls a "borderline" that encounters "newness." Bhabha contends that the borderline is "'not part of the continuum of past and present'" but is rather a space in which "the past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living" (2013: 109). It is this liminal, indeterminate and often contradictory space that this paper interrogates in relation to how it unsettles the protagonist, as she struggles to construct an identity.

How does the mobility of characters impact on the family space and elsewhere? In particular, how does separation following divorce compel people to negotiate new moral priorities for themselves that, in turn, generate new ways of reconnecting their families? (Smart 2004: 401). Guided by these questions, I will explore how Adeniran's narrative enters the family space by interrogating divorce, abandonment of children, and the various forms of negotiation that children adopt in re-uniting their fragmented family ties.

Imagine This

Sade Adeniran is a Nigerian by birth who lives in London.⁷⁵ During her childhood, Adeniran's father took her to live in Nigeria with her relatives but later returned to London. In terms of publication, *Imagine This* is her debut novel. It charts the story of Lola, the protagonist, and her encounters in life as she attempts to search for family stability. As a migrant child in Nigeria, born in London but forced by her father to live in Idogun, a village in Nigeria, Lola suffers from being abandoned and mistreated by her paternal relatives. The mistreatment that Lola receives from her relatives makes her unsettled physically and psychologically, and forces her to constantly inhabit two spaces between the raucous city of Lagos and the village Idogun. The disintegration of Lola's nuclear family caused by the divorce of her parents is one of the main causes of the hardship in her life. As a result, she remains lonely and depressed. She seeks sympathy and solace from an imagined character called Jupiter with whom she shares her life through writing letters.

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Davies wants us to read the post-colonial narratives such as this in a transnational context, as a "series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed,

⁷⁵ See <https://geosireads.wordpress.com/2013/10/07/interview-with-nigerian-writer-sade-adeniran/> for more information about Adeniran's biographical information.

geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (1994: 4). For her, this way of migration through geo-political border and cultural crossing necessitates definition and redefinition of identity. Thus in a migratory milieu, Davies refutes the idea of a single cultural identity by suggesting what Nyman (2009: 21) calls “shuffling between cultures by locating their subjects” in an in-between space. As Nyman contends, the in-between space allows the hybridisation of identity which results in the free-floating of subjects entering new worlds and acquiring new identities.

Although Adeniran’s narrative appears to cohere with Davies’ and Nyman’s analyses, it rejects the notion of forced identity construction at the expense of family detachment. Adeniran represents her protagonist as one who is conscious of her acquired identity in the diasporic home while she refuses to accept her ancestral identity. In this stance, the novel refutes imposed traditions as oppressive and geared towards sustaining patriarchal hegemony. Concomitant with the new identity is the patriarchal control that finds its root in African traditions. Therefore, the prominent theme of denying the heroine her Idogun cultural values in Nigeria signifies the narrative’s struggle to discard traditional values that glorify patriarchal power over women.

Tucker’s (1993) “Writing Home: *Evelina*, the Epistolary Novel and the Paradox of Property” is an analysis of Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, in which Tucker comes up with the characteristic features of an epistolary novel. In order to contrast the various uses of personal letter writing as a literary device, Tucker relies on Charles Porter’s (1986) theorisation of ‘actual letters’ (i.e. the ones written to be posted) and letters as presented in an epistolary novel. Whereas actual letters have a specific reader in mind, those appearing in novels rely on an entirely different set of presuppositions. According to Tucker (1993: 422):

. . . an author known to and readily identifiable (even if vaguely) by the intended reader . . . the epistolary novel departs most strikingly from its ‘real-life’ counterpart with regard to the identities of author and reader . . . [In the] epistolary frame, the letter is limited as an act of self-representation of its author within the text not only because it must be received and read before it can effectively represent, but also because it is literally the representation of another author—the author of the novel.

Tucker’s problematisation of the epistolary novel makes one read *Imagine This* not only as a *Bildungsroman* but also as an epistolary novel. And, since the protagonist Lola is a female child who, as Okuyade writes

(2011: 145), grows and “becomes aware that her condition of life is a limitation to her aspiration for a better future [and so] begins . . . display[ing] tendencies of resentment,” I consider the novel, in Okuyade’s terms, a female *Bildungsroman* (2011:145).

Adeniran has admitted in an interview with Wilson (2014: 1) that this novel “is and isn’t” an echo of her own life, [insofar as] some things in the book are based on real incidents.” Like the fictional character Lola, Adeniran’s ordeal with being displaced by her father yielded for her an understanding of Idogun culture as profoundly “different from the white man’s” (Adeniran 2007: 238). As Adeniran confesses in her interview, “what happens to the character Lola is not what happened to me [but in the village], the restrictions that are placed on you there as a woman are extreme” (Wilson 2014: 1). Here Adeniran invites readers to read *Imagine This* not as an autobiography but rather a fictional work that chronicles the author’s own childhood memories of her struggle to achieve a better life. Thus the author’s life experience becomes not only an event that catalyses the author’s creativity but also, as Tucker puts it, fictionalises the author’s construction of self.

In representing the theme of parent-child relations and dynamics in the institution of family, *Imagine This* underscores divorce as one of the striking forces that create family instability. Through Samuel, Lola’s father, the narrative blames patriarchal power for mistreating and oppressing women. For example, Constance Olufemi, Lola’s mother, has “many defects in [her] body as the result of [Samuel’s] beating.” As Constance writes in her letter to Samuel, he is “beating me like [an] animal daily—these defects I have to repair.” This is the reason Constance divorces Samuel. But for a naïve Lola, this is a sign of Constance’s fleeing family responsibilities and lacking passion and perseverance on behalf of her children. “If that’s why she left, why didn’t she take us with her?”

Smart (2004) points out that the ethos of divorce needs to emphasise reconfiguring family life after divorce, with the aim of preserving the welfare of the children. As a consequence, Samuel entrusts his children to the care of his relatives in the village, to train them and prepare them “for when [they] get married.” Samuel’s approach does not work, as Lola and her brother, Adebola, become victims of their parent’s divorce and relatives’ ill-treatment; they remain outcasts in Nigeria because they fail to conform to the Idogun traditions and then end up blaming their parents and relatives. It is at this juncture that Lola spearheads the struggle to re-unite her family by devising different ways to make “everything . . . go back to the way it once was, with Daddy, Adebola and [Lola]”—living like a family.

As a representative of the contemporary African woman, Lola rejects all forms of subjugation that deny women a voice in the public sphere. Through Lola, a young female teenager, the story can be read as “a critical perception of and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel who must face a patriarchal institution . . . [and] a metamorphosis leading to female victory” (Ogunyemi 1985: 65).

Arguing in a vein similar to Ogunyemi, Nadaswaran (2011: 29) views the girl’s growth into a womanist through experiencing a traumatic event as justifying womanist theory. For Nadaswaran, Lola, as a young girl-child, Nigerian and British “offer[s] a complex account of the hybrid spaces . . . [she] locates [herself] within, countering patriarchal repression and feminine submission.” By so doing, Lola seeks independence for herself by refusing to “fall into the same trap as [her] mother.” This theme is also found in the decision making of Nyapol and Aziza in Grace Ogot’s *The Promised Land* (1966), Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Maiguru and Ma’shingayi in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1980) (Nadaswaran 2011: 20). More significantly, Lola occupies an in-between, hybrid space that enables her to struggle and pull together the fragmented family ties; but eventually she fails. The liminal space Lola inhabits limits her in re-connecting with her family. She is shut out by the patriarchal powers of her uncles, aunts and paternal grandmother.

Lola’s life in Idogun is unbearable, though it nostalgically reminds her of life in London. Lola comes to know who she is while in Idogun. In the village, Lola feels abandoned by her parents: “my struggles really began in Idogun. I prevailed because to resign oneself to one’s fate is to be crippled fast.” The narrative gives Idogun a metonymic space to represent Nigeria and the African continent as a whole. Thus Lola’s struggle is a call for transformation among African women by fighting against all forms of stereotyping and oppression. Nadaswaran (2013: 35) observes in her theorising of Ogunyemi’s womanist theory of fictional development of women characters, transformation requires women’s progress in their communities (2013: 35). Since transformation requires change by rejecting and accepting certain sets of norms, Lola develops a hatred of Idogun culture and everything the Idogun people do. She constructs Idogun through images of lice, worms, witchcraft, superstition, poor supply of services such as water and electricity, riots among university students and the closing of universities, brutality from teachers and relatives.

As Mbembe has argued, these images communicate the instability of the post-colonial state that is characterised by violence and identified by ‘the world it produces; the type of institutions, knowledge, norms, and practises’

(Mbembe 1992: 4). Lola wants a stable family where the roles of mother, father and children are well-articulated and exercised: '[a]ll I've ever wanted is to have a family of my own, a Father, a mother and a brother of my own'. The need for family re-unification becomes a cliché in Lola's complaints against the hostile environment of Idogun. It is true that Constance on her side fights against patriarchal hegemony by imposing divorce as an alternative to self-determination and independence but, according to Lola, she [her mother] 'fail[ed] to divorce in the proper manner' (Smart, 2006:168). Thus Lola says it is her father's fault for letting his wife leave but 'why did she leave [her children] behind?' Pondering over Lola's mother, Nadaswaran views Constance as a second generation woman, the likes of Emecheta's Nnu Ego, who 'find themselves immobile and shackled with the patriarchal dominance propagated by tradition and culture [...] the women who have internalized this form of living as a norm as a result of colonial displacement, experiencing a triple colonization' (2011:27). However, as Nadaswaran notes, this kind of struggle to get rid of patriarchal shackles, as Constance exemplifies, is done at the expense of her relationship with her children.

In this context where the mother seeks self-independence at the expense of her relationship with children, Smart suggests resorting to extended family members to take care of the divorced couple's children. Whereas Smart underscores the role of grandparents in providing a safe haven for children and 'supporting contact between a father and his children', the narrative suggests a betwixt space independent of parents and grandparents (Smart, 2004:406). By locating the protagonist in the in-between space, perhaps, apart from negotiating for family re-unification, Lola rejects what Nadaswaran would call first and second-generation women by creating a new space where women are free from patriarchal and traditional oppression. Thus, Lola envisions the significant change in power relations between men and women in the twenty-first century. She considers childhood as a stage where youngsters can be prepared and take centre-stage in the fight against all forms of oppression against women. Lola says, 'I can't wait to grow up and make my own decisions'. To achieve that power, the novel suggests constructing the institution of family as a solid base that will nurture morally-upright children who, in turn, will bring about a stable and harmonised society. Using the character of Lola, Adeniran holds the view that the gender stereotype free state will be achieved through what Ogunyemi calls 'the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women' (1985:71). That is why Lola calls upon her brother, Adebola, to join hands in their fight against the cruelty of their relatives in Idogun.

However, the narrative mutes Adebola in his struggle for family re-unification in order to give an unmitigated voice for her heroine, Lola. Like

Lola, Adebola is victimised by divorce and is taken to live with his uncle, Joseph, in the village where he contends with harassment and torture of different sorts, under the pretext of ‘masculinising’ him. The silent mode makes Lola create a new space where she can express her feelings: woes, loneliness, and all forms of desperation. Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* seeks sympathy from her childhood friend, Aissatou, and readers are invited to experience the pain of betrayal and neglect by her husband which Ramatoulaye is going through. In the same vein, Lola creates an imaginary friend, Jupiter, as a counterspace to replace Adebola. Jupiter becomes the source of Lola’s comfort and friendship and is an embodiment of the universe from which Lola looks for solace. Thus the novel appeals to readers to feel the pain Lola is going through by being treated as an outcast. To vindicate the power of familial bond over friendship, the narrative on some occasions juxtaposes Adebayo and Jupiter. For example, when Adebola gets an opportunity to come to Idogun during the burial of their grandfather, Baba, Lola stops communicating with Jupiter. She says, ‘now that Adebola and me are talking again I really don’t have to tell you everything’. The death of Adebola because of ill-treatment from his relatives epitomises the anger the text invites readers to share with regard to the forced separation of children from their biological parents under the guise of ‘acquisition’ of cultural values.

To ensure that a stable family is constructed, Lola adopts ‘new moral codes’ that will make her leave Idogun for her father in Lagos or resume life in London with her family members. I use the term ‘new moral codes’ in this context to mean going against what is considered ‘normal’ in a given society at a particular time. It is what Gikandi considers as a ‘morality tale’ that varies according to time and cultural space. As Gikandi suggests, these sets of values open ‘vistas to discourses about self and community, art, and gender’ (2001:4) and, thus, call attention to multiplicity and *differences* based on time and culture. Like Gikandi’s question on Okonkwo (why did he beat his wife during the week of peace or kill Ikemefuna?), *Imagine This* intrigues readers by asking why Lola opts for a new moral code to reconnect with her family.

To respond to this question, one has to consider two factors that prompt Lola to become rebellious: the situation that forces her to be rebellious and the age factor. In discussing the situation, I focus on time, physical environment, and the people against whom Lola reacts. And, in terms of age, I read Lola’s physical and mental growth. Here I agree with Tucker (1993) about the use of dates as a marker of timeframe in epistolary novels. The two aspects of time-framing (date and time) accentuate the temporality of human action. It is not surprising that the narrative uses dates linearly to show what Tucker calls the “natural passage of time” and the growth of the protagonist.

The development of Lola from childhood to adulthood falls between the late nineteen-seventies to early nineteen-nineties, a period rife with military governance and political instability in Nigeria. Adeniran nuances this instability in the Nigerian government through the frequent beating of Lola by her relatives, riots among university students and the closure of universities.

Adeniran begins her narrative by teasing out the story of her protagonist when she is already in London after more than ten years of hardship and sufferings in Idogun. It is a childhood memory and a way towards future success: “[n]ow I am older, and wiser. I have put my childish ways behind me and view the world with a weary cynicism that has become hard to shake.” By beginning her narrative with the 1991 event when Lola is already back in London, Adeniran uses the flashback structure of her narrative to underscore the achievement of her protagonist. She introduces her narrative with an African proverb: *The spirit that keeps one going when one has no choice of what else to do must not be mistaken for valour*. This proverb, according to Jegede (2012: 280), “prepares the reader’s mind for the struggles of the protagonist’s life.” The flashback narrative structure not only communicates the aesthetic quality of the story (through incorporating short oral formulaic forms); it also accentuates the fruits of struggle among women. The narrative uses this proverb to prepare readers to interrogate the struggle Lola engages in against all the forms of oppression she faces as a migrant child and daughter.

The other events take place from 1977 to 1987 in Idogun where Lola is forced to defend her position as an abandoned female child, a girl, and teenager. It is within Idogun that I interrogate Lola’s adoption of new moral codes as a way of escaping from the hands of oppressive relatives and re-joining her family.

Lola’s struggle in Idogun and her retaliation against her oppressive extended family members reminds one of the Yoruba proverb: *When the jackal dies the fowls do not mourn, for the jackal never brings up a chicken* (Adeniran 2007: 317). Lola uses this proverb to convey her message about the death of her father. The death of Lola’s father means the end of patriarchal power, representing new opportunities for women. Lola, however, sympathises with the death of her father, not because of “what he was but what he wasn’t and the possibility of what he could have been.” The proverb captures Lola’s devising of stratagems that lead to her expulsion from Idogun, allowing her to rejoin her family in Lagos and eventually in London. These stratagems include engaging in sexual intercourse, failing exams, scheming about becoming a witch, and advocating for the death of her relatives. She

thus puts herself in a position where she can be ostracised and subsequently banished from her traditional society.

Lola holds the view that a family, as an institution, should constitute a father and mother who live together and who cherish their children. Therefore, the loss of parental love makes Lola not only an orphan but also a survivor who has escaped death from her relative's brutality. As a result, she yearns for love from and acceptance by her family. Discovering that wanton misbehaviour and flagrant impropriety (opening her legs)⁷⁶ did not suffice to get her expelled from school, Lola resorts to failing in class. Thus she says, "I've missed most of the classes this term, so I'll probably end up at the bottom of the class again." She continues, "It seems I'll have to work harder at failing the end of year exams. Not that it would be very difficult, since the only lessons I've attended are English and Literature."

Here one thinks of Adeniran's partial depiction of her personal life and studies at university through Lola (Wilson, 2014:3). Thus Adeniran writes from her personal experiences to show how it feels to be detached from one's parents. Through Lola, therefore, Adeniran creates an atmosphere in which abandoned children negotiate family ties by adopting new moral codes that inevitably make them rejoin their natural families.

Besides, Lola is envious of Fatima, her fellow student, because she is likely to be expelled from school, having been accused of witchcraft by her fellow students. Fatima is so traumatised by the accusation that she attempts to commit suicide by drinking half a gallon of gasoline. Jumoke, a student who initiates the hunt for witches in the dormitory, is expected to report the case to the Principal for Fatima to be expelled. Jealous of what could happen to Fatima, Lola proposes to take the blame and get expelled instead of Fatima. Here the novel invites us to read the three incidents – witchcraft, attempt to commit suicide, and expulsion from school – as forms of what Cazenave (2000: 4) calls women's rebellion, infused within a larger systematic provocation, committed by women who are marginalised in stagnant postcolonial social environments dominated and rendered dysfunctional by the presence of masculine authority.

As a figure of rebellion, Lola is aware of how much Idogun society and the school environment have marginalised her. She seeks for power that will enable her to disrupt patriarchal dominance and have her own voice heard

⁷⁶ When Moyin, a student in Lola's class, was expelled from school because she 'cannot keep her legs closed', euphemistically to mean engaging in sex, Lola interprets it literally and she goes to the Principle's office where she sits while her legs are open so that she can be expelled from school.

in society. Lola considers witchcraft and being expelled from school as viable solutions that could provide her some leverage to decide on her own and to regain a decent life with her family. Lola uses the 'witchcraft' trope to symbolise power dominance and control by juxtaposing it with Christian virtues: "If I did become a witch I'd like to be a good one, I'd feed all the starving people like Jesus did with his five loaves of bread and fish." For Lola, the two powers – witchcraft and Christianity – are co-extensive because, apart from centring their belief on the supernatural power, they are both unconventional, and they can be grounded morally by the mere helping of another human being to have a good life.

The evocation of the two supernatural powers makes Lola's rebellion more appealing because it is not vengeful but is rather motivated by the urge to contribute to creating a good and harmonious society: "I'd like people like Mama do good things only and I'd make Daddy love me and my mother come back and live with us so we could be a family." In this case, the text makes us read Lola as a rebellious female character who has created her own space, using witchcraft and school truancy as her special way of using devious means to achieve laudable ends: that of reconnecting with her family.

Lola, as Smart (2006) would argue, has a keen sense of what a proper childhood should be and what constitutes the responsibilities of her parents. That is why Lola is so dismayed when her father fails to play his parental role by loving and taking care of his children. Lola defines her father as someone who doesn't care. In contrast, she holds a strong and vivid ideal of what a father should be: "Daddy [is] someone you love, someone who kisses away your tears, tells you everything would be alright with your world, someone who is there for you." According to Lola, Samuel has lost the legitimacy of being called daddy because of his irresponsibility.

Whereas Boehmer (2005), in her theorisation of the post-colonial state, considers the male figure as an icon in administrative structure, policies, and leadership, *Imagine This* challenges his power and control. Rendering Samuel irresponsible, as Boehmer would argue, disrupts the symbolic inheritance wrapped in African traditions that pushed women to the periphery and elevated the status of men. Instead, Adeniran creates a strong woman destined to nurture her family for the well-being of the society, compensating for the weakness and moral vacuity of her father.

To demonstrate disapproval of parental abandonment, the novel subjects Lola to tragic trade-offs by which she is able to gain love and solace at a high price. Adeniran represents the sickness and the death of Lola's relatives in Idogun as tragic events that ironically provide Lola with an opportunity to find care and to get sustenance. Thus when she falls sick,

“[e]veryone was really nice to me, maybe I should get sick more often.” When Baba dies, Lola’s grandfather on her father’s side, she enjoys eating a lot of food at the funeral feast: “If someone dies every week or so for the next five years then I’ll never go hungry again, but I might run out of relatives.” Even when Mama is admitted to hospital for “leaking blood from her bottom,” Lola is peaceful and prays that she dies there because “there would be mourners and lots of food to eat.” Lola can convincingly express these macabre thoughts because of the innocence and guileless amorality associated with a child persona. Although the desire to be sick communicates Lola’s pursuit of love and solace, the death of Baba and desire for the death of Mama alludes to the burying of traditional systems that are oppressive to women. It is a call for a new generation that is gender oppression-free and grounded in a solid and loving family. Also, the narrative’s resort to tragedy and morbid self-centredness exhibits the moral vacuity that surrounds the child abandoned by a broken home, the complete absence of socially acceptable and conventionally moral means to make Lola – as a desperate child – receive family and parental love from the adults around her.

Reading *Imagine This* alongside *Ancestor Stones*, one grasps the struggle with moral paradoxes such as these, that contemporary African writers confront in their campaign to eliminate obstacles that apparently hinder women from achieving equal power with men. Forna’s narrative, as argued in “Re-imagining Family and Gender Roles in Aminatta Forna’s *Ancestor Stones*,” (2017) suggests the strategy of eliminating men who hinder women in their struggle. Adeniran’s goes further, by depicting the way women themselves oppress and hinder other women. Adeniran’s narrative challenges Nnaemeka’s (1998: 4) simplistic concept of a sisterhood “that underscores the power of African women to work with patriarchal/cultural structures that are liberating and enabling while challenging those that are limiting and debilitating.” Rather, in the realistic complexity drawn by Adeniran, where a female child is abandoned by her family, *Imagine This* suggests that the individual daily struggle with the alienation and desperation wrought by patriarchal oppression is lonely and isolating: “I was inside myself but outside myself too” and “I’d rather be by myself.”

Besides negotiating for family re-connection, as do Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010), Adeniran’s novel does not hide its stand on the new strand of African feminism. For example, the character of Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* and Samuel in *Imagine This* are depicted as paradoxical father figures to represent the patriarchal institution. Whereas Baba Segi is impotent, taking care of children who are not his biological offspring, Samuel refrains from caring for his own biological family to the extent of making his

children suspicious that “[m]aybe he’s not really my father [and] that’s why my mother left me.”

Both of these father figures enable readers to critically reconsider fatherhood as it is portrayed in contemporary African women’s fiction. For example, Baba Segi demonstrates his parental care by being physically present in his family and looking after ‘his’ children. According to Shoneyin, Baba Segi plays the role of both a father and a parent. In contrast, Samuel is only a biological father. Ultimately, the two father figures are both rendered incapable and irresponsible. Like Shoneyin, Adeniran’s narrative dismantles the traditional and colonial mentality that underlies male stoic distance and detachment. Instead, Adeniran envisions a gender-balanced society that recognises men and women as equal beings who respect each other without enforcing any sort of oppression based on their sex differences.

However, Adeniran’s novel goes a step further than this idealism, by challenging Ogunyemi’s theory of womanism. Whereas Ogunyemi considers motherhood as a central institution that automatically releases power to African women, *Imagine This* discourages this essentialist ideology by rendering motherhood oppressive. In so doing, the narrative suggestively joins hands with Nnaemeka in her principle of evacuation, where a woman with integrity can sustain a valuable and wholesome life without having children. It is worth noting that, for Lola, the denial of womanhood and motherhood is circumstantial. She grows up in a system where womanhood and motherhood connote pain for women. For example, when aged ten, Lola witnesses her aunt Bunmi delivering a baby and she is forced by this circumstance to be a mid-wife. The act of birthing communicates the woman’s endurance of pain in the making of the geo-political nation but Lola is not convinced: “I’m never going to have children if it is this painful;” and “I’m never getting pregnant if it makes you sick.” These biological processes make Lola begin to hate her own sexuality, her adult body: “I never want breasts.”

Through Lola, Adeniran makes readers grasp the commitment and power that the contemporary generation of African women writers demonstrate by using the family institution. Through Lola, the narrative condemns and thereby discourages the circumstances in which children – especially female children – are abandoned by their families and end up being negotiators of family ties instead of protected beneficiaries of those ties, free to concentrate on flourishing and building their own future lives. The narrative recounts it as Samuel’s incapacity to maintain a solid and loving, secure family that drives Lola to live with her relatives in Idogun where she

is subjected to negative images of womanhood, motherhood, and Africanhood.

Redefining African feminism

Adeniran as an emerging African woman writer produces a narrative that challenges the narratives of her predecessors. Like her contemporaries including Baingana, Atta, Forna and Evans, Adeniran depicts a central character who does not fit in the established framework of prevailing global feminism. *Imagine This* challenges received frameworks of contrast that characterise the uniqueness of African feminist fiction, such as the extensive criteria drawn up by Coulibaly in “Theorizing and Categorizing African Feminism within the Context of African Female Novel” (2015). Adeniran’s story reveals the mistake of assuming that African society is constant. Adeniran creates a context that necessitates a re-reading of received characterisations of feminism by questioning the centrality of African motherhood and embrace of a hostile culture. Lola is a product of aggressive behaviour that continues haunting her throughout her life, that she herself is socialised to personify. Yet Lola, as Nadaswaran (2011:22) would argue, is “magnified and fully realised: responsible, courageous, audacious, wilful and whole” regardless of her self-destructive tendencies. Her complexity and weather-beaten heroism appears to usher in a new dimension of thinking about the future of African feminism and African women.

Directly experienced with being of a generation of African women who are traumatised and repressed by socio-cultural, economic and political instabilities, Lola invites African feminist theorists to find a three dimensional, intersectional and promethean space to occupy, for theorising about African womanhood. The novel ends with Lola leaving for London after failing to reunite her family. This suggests as an option the reframing of African feminist theory in a way that disorganises and problematizes socio-political, geographical and cultural borders which may appear richly endowed and fecund to the international gaze, but which in fact limit and starve African women within the confines of an artificially domesticated space in the global imaginary. Rather, she has to be theorised as a transnational being.

Conclusion

Exemplified by Adeniran’s *Imagine This*, the instability of the post-colonial state has resulted in the fragmentation of family, which causes suffering to children forced to fend for themselves in an essentially amoral atmosphere. Adeniran’s novel sympathises and champions the young heroine by creating a third space, the in-between, where she negotiates conflicting familial loyalties and role models, father and mother, in the corrosive remains

of divorce. In her narratives, Adeniran gives a voice and sympathy to vulnerable, independent, rebellious, wilful and wily girls in their puberty, symbolising the need to nurture and protect the growth of post-colonial African states to achieve equity and fairness in the development of social and political spaces that benefit both men and women.

I have argued that the different stages of growth of Adeniran's main character in *Imagine This* are what prompt one to read this novel as a *Bildungsroman* narrative. It is unfortunate that Lola fails to reunite her family and ends up leaving the indigenous village for the cosmopolitan centre of the former colonizing empire. At the same time, the indomitable spirit of young Lola is determined never to bear children. This resolution invites readers to think beyond the prevailing received African feminist strands: Is it morally tolerable to champion motherhood as central to someone who has been traumatised to the extent of hateful disdain for her own maturing body? Is there a way to theorise about African women which frees them to nobly explore and honourably occupy global arenas and all possibilities, rather than boxing their identities into a fixed essentialist domestic space?

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