

Child and youth protagonists in Habila's *Measuring Time* and Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*

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Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) deploy child and youth protagonists to offer nuanced and revealing perspectives on contemporary nationhood in Nigeria and South Africa respectively. By these means, these two important novels displace the adult—and mostly male—viewpoints that have dominated novelistic portrayals of postcolonial nationhood for decades. Using notions of the literary symbolism of childhood and the biological family as points of departure, this article analyses the portrayal of these protagonists in terms of their allegorical and metonymic representation of the nation as a social unit. This article explores the ways in which the subjectivities of the protagonists may reflect national anxieties in general and the problems of contemporary socio-political transition in particular. It highlights how the different pathways followed by Habila's and Dangor's characters may represent simultaneously dystopian and auspicious futures for Nigeria and South Africa while also bringing recent writing from two of Africa's eminent literary sites into a rare conversation that helps to extend our understanding of the continent's contemporary realities. **Keywords:** children, dystopia, family, nation, transition, youth.

Although Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) are not necessarily nationalist in outlook, they present marginal and nuanced perspectives on recent socio-political transitions in Nigeria and South Africa respectively by focusing on child and youth protagonists. They displace the adult—and mostly male—viewpoints that have dominated novelistic portrayals of postcolonial nationhood (see Hron 27–48). Told against historical and socio-political settings that are unambiguously national, and through allegorical and metonymic depictions of the family, each narrative maps the spaces, subjectivities, and temporalities of the nation in symbolic ways. The ubiquity of the trope of the biological family in national narratives and discourses across different regions and literary traditions is well documented (see Brennan; Bhabha; Boehmer). As Anne McClintock (63) demonstrates,

[n]ations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. The term "nation" derives from "nation": to be born. We speak of nations as "motherlands" and "fatherlands". Foreigners "adopt" countries that are not their native homes, and are "naturalized" into the national family. We talk of the Family of Nations, of "homelands" and "native" lands. In Britain, immigration matters are dealt with at the Home Office; in the United States, the President and his wife are called the

First Family. [...] In this way, nations are symbolically figured as *domestic genealogies*.
(original emphasis)

With regard to the early novels of Achebe for example, Elleke Boehmer (187) has shown that nationalist awareness is dramatized through his narrativization of “family and compound life”. While Habila’s and Dangor’s narratives and their intellectual orientations are clearly different from Achebe’s, in their representation of Lamang’s family (in *Measuring Time*) and Silas’s family (in *Bitter Fruit*), the signifying links—in terms of the multidirectional synecdoche—between family and nation are powerfully evoked. The connection between the public sphere of the nation and the domestic relations of the respective families are highlighted by the specific history and politics within which their individual filial interactions are framed. This provides scope for exploring the ways in which the portrayal of the Lamang and Ali families may reflect national anxieties in general, and the problems of socio-political transition in particular. It also highlights how the breakdown of these families (and other families in each novel), as well as the different pathways undertaken by members of these families, represent simultaneously dystopian and auspicious possibilities for Nigeria and South Africa.¹ I analyse the representation of these families and their individual members beginning with the ways in which the subjectivities of the major child and youth protagonists are delineated, and how their perspectives on the principal themes of the novels are articulated.²

This article expands scholarship on Habila’s acclaimed, yet underexplored novel while providing a new reading of Dangor’s novel that brings it into relationship, both narratologically and thematically, with the growing literature on Nigeria’s transition. This is quite important as each text was released during periods of significant socio-political transition in the respective countries—one after the end of Nelson Mandela’s presidency and the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the other after Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999. In this sense, the texts comment on how these two important postcolonial African societies deal with contemporary social change in cultural ways. Both countries have frequently been described as African literary giants (see Fasselt 23) for at least two ostensible reasons. First, both have thriving local literary industries that are larger than those of other African countries. Secondly, writers from these two countries have tended to dominate news of African writing for several decades, most notably by winning numerous prestigious literary prizes both within and outside the continent. More important is the eminent place that Nigeria and South Africa occupy (individually and together) in the various ways in which Africa is imagined, both within and outside the continent. This means that the evolving cultural archives of both sites invariably reflect a domain populated by historiographical and representational resources and practices that resonate across both sites, and that together extend our understanding of contemporary African realities.

In addition, the discussion of *Measuring Time* contributes to our understanding of post-independence and post-dictatorship Nigeria in ways that counter predominantly dystopian representations of West Africa. In this regard, Hari Kunzru has noted that literary representations of West Africa since the early post-independence period has been marked by “a vein of pervasive hopelessness”. And, according to Giulia D’Agostini (v), the region is often represented in literature as a zone of “perpetual emergency, where a progressively more vivid biopoliticisation of politics sanctions the reduction of the postcolonial (non-)citizen to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed ‘bare life’—a form of life that, exposed to sovereign violence, or caught in the sovereign ban, may be killed without committing homicide” .

Measuring Time is, in many ways, a family story. It is the story of Mamo Lamang and his twin brother, LaMamo; of their father, Musa Lamang; and of the people of Ketu, a fictional village in north-eastern Nigeria. The novel is also a story of life in Nigeria under various military dictatorships and civilian regimes, and of civil war and socio-political chaos in several post-independence West African nation-states during the 1980s and 1990s. At the surface level, the novel is the story of Mamo and LaMamo’s growth from when they are born just after the end of the Nigeria Civil War of 1967–70. In this way, it can be understood as an account of their intellectual coming-of-age during a period of momentous social, economic, cultural, and political upheavals.

As all these stories are rendered predominantly through, and held together by Mamo, the novel is also, essentially, Mamo’s personal life story. It is the story of his childhood struggle with sickle-cell anaemia, a debilitating congenital disease that afflicts hundreds of thousands of young people especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean (see Caroline). *Measuring Time* also tells the story of the sharp contrasts between the lives of the twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo.³ The former is an invalid, acutely despondent, despised by their father, and lacks a sense of purpose as a child, while the latter is healthy, good-looking, and is preferred by the father. Their different lives highlight the significance of individual choices and pathways in shaping personal and public destiny. In this regard, Toni Kan (n. p.) has linked Habila’s choice of twins with the novel’s historiographical and allegorical project as an invocation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, arguing that it is “in many ways, Helon’s own *Parallel Lives*: Mamo and LaMamo, Lamang and his brother Ilya, Zara and her sister Rhoda as well as Ketu and Nigeria”. For its part, *Bitter Fruit* tells the story of the gradual disintegration of the family of Silas Ali, a coloured former operative of the ANC’s underground armed group, Umkhonto we Sizwe also known as MK. The narrative is set in 1998 during the final stages of the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It begins when Silas, who works in the justice ministry as a liaison official to the TRC runs into François du Boise, a white former apartheid security police officer. Du Boise had raped Lydia, Silas’s wife, almost two

decades previously because of Silas's political activism. Silas relays his encounter with Du Boise to Lydia, and by so doing reignites the traumatic effect of the rape.

The couple realize that they have been unable to come to terms with the incident and to deal with its memory. Towards the end of the story, the disintegration of their marriage and family becomes accelerated after Lydia has sex with a stranger at Silas's fiftieth birthday party. As the relationship between Silas and Lydia deteriorates, they become estranged from their teenage son, Mikey, who learns from Lydia's diary that he was conceived during her rape. Mikey, who now insists on being called his proper name, Michael, joins a radical Muslim group which includes members of his surrogate father's family in "search for his roots" (*Bitter Fruit* 170).⁴ He then murders Du Boise in revenge for his mother's rape. He also kills Johan Viljoen, the white father of his coloured teenage friend, Vinu, because Viljoen has been sexually abusing Vinu. At the end of the story, Mikey is planning to escape from South Africa to India.

For *Measuring Time*, the characters under consideration in this discussion are Mamo and LaMamo, as well as the two other prominent youthful characters—Asabar, a cousin of the twins, and Zara, Mamo's lover. These four characters are examined for the ways in which they may typify the lived experiences and points of view of children and youths in relation to the changing social, cultural and political landscape of Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s. Their perceptions are also a valuable reflection on the post-1999 period during which the country returned to democracy after almost two decades of military dictatorship. Most importantly, their different life pathways serve as a trope for national transition in the post-independence and post-dictatorship periods. In regard to *Bitter Fruit*, the focus of this discussion is Mikey (who becomes Michael). I argue that his youthful and self-assured character is deployed as a symbolic alternative to the older generation of South Africans whose role in the country's transitional socio-political order is questioned in the novel.

Before turning to the texts proper, I begin with a summary of theoretical considerations on the narrative symbolism of childhood and youth and the evolving sub-genre of the postcolonial bildungsroman.⁵ In this regard, I draw on Christopher Ouma's (48–59) study of childhood in the novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ouma argues that current Nigerian writing "is actually informed by the idea of childhood [...] as 'a set of ideas' that engages, through alternative memory and the father figure, with what can be described as postmodern identities" (48). Similarly, Madelaine Hron (28) has demonstrated that child and youth protagonists perform a "nuanced and complex role" in contemporary Nigerian literature. She argues further that such protagonists occupy "hybrid spaces" within postcolonial societies, a point that is important for this study's interest in liminal, in-between subjectivities such as those of adolescent protagonists who are in transition from childhood to adulthood. Such protagonists, Hron observes, are a "particularly apt vehicle" through which writers articulate novel perspectives on postcolonial nationhood in a variety of contexts

including “multiculturalism, globalization, and international human rights”. For this reason, these characters are often used to question and deconstruct “overdetermined identity markers” (Krishnan 73). As Ogaga Okuyade (1) observes, the resurgence of the bildungsroman genre is not limited to third generation Nigerian writing alone, but is also a key feature of contemporary African fiction. He proposes a version of the genre, namely the postcolonial African bildungsroman to characterize the growing trend in contemporary African literature. Jack Kearney also provides a succinct and insightful account of postcolonial/African variants of the traditional bildungsroman.

Importantly also, it is these kinds of protagonists and contexts of literary production that are most suited to the bildungsroman form adopted in the two novels under consideration and by an increasing number of recent Nigerian texts. As Apollo Amoko (200) observes, the postcolonial African bildungsroman emerged, like its European predecessor, during times of “radical transformation and social upheaval when, in the wake of colonialism, the traditional ways of being were seriously undermined, if not forever transformed”. Such was the condition of Nigeria and indeed West Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. In Nigeria, three brutal military regimes held sway from 1983 to 1998 while civil wars raged in Liberia (1989–96 and 1999–2003) and Sierra Leone (1991–2002). These scenarios form the sub-regional historical and political backdrop to *Measuring Time*, and represent what the story’s young beleaguered protagonists have to contend with. The material conditions in South Africa during the late 1990s and the turn of the 21st century were markedly different. Yet, Dangor’s novel was also produced during and set within a period of heightened socio-political tension and controversy as the dramatic TRC hearings were about to close and Nelson Mandela’s presidency was ending. It is in this context that the transformation of Michael, the main child and youth protagonist in *Bitter Fruit* is explored.

Returning to Ouma’s (48) point about childhood as “a set of ideas” that grapples with the role of fathers, it is instructive that *Measuring Time* is also a story of Musa Lamang, the father of the twin protagonists, Mamo and LaMamo. Similarly, *Bitter Fruit* is also a story about Michael’s father, Silas Ali. While providing an account of the development of their major child and youth protagonists, the novels simultaneously represent an unmistakable critique of the generation of Nigerians and South Africans typified by the characters of Lamang and Silas respectively. Members of this generation are directly or indirectly linked to the societal problems that are thematized in each novel (see Kunzru in regard to *Measuring Time*). This is important for understanding the novels as examples of the bildungsroman genre, which, as Amoko (200) has argued, “marks the death of the father as a symbol of stable, unquestioned, traditional authority”.

Similarly, José S. F. Vázquez (87) notes that in the traditional bildungsroman, “the protagonist exhibits a profound disagreement with his family or society” that is often resolved at the end of the story. But this is often not the case in the African

situation as Vásquez demonstrates in his study of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992). In Vásquez's reading of that novel, the protagonist, Azaro is trapped between two seemingly contradictory cultures such that Azaro's disagreement with his indigenous paternalistic culture remains unresolved at the end of the story. There is a significant link here to the synecdochic reading of nation and family offered in this article. In the traditional bildungsroman, this disagreement often triggers a journey away from home (often to other countries). Yet, it ends with the return to the home country, re-integration into the family and nation. Even though the narratives in *Measuring Time* and *Bitter Fruit* provide ample opportunities for transnational allegiances, the nation seems to be confirmed as primary locus in the protagonists' final re-construction of subjectivity.

While the protagonists of *Measuring Time* and *Bitter Fruit* do not demonstrate the kind of indecision and contradictory socio-cultural affiliation felt by Okri's Azaro, their differences with the older generation remain unresolved. In the case of *Measuring Time*, the young protagonists reject the paternalistic and gerontocratic structures of their community and the twins remain deeply resentful of their negligent father. Similarly, but for different reasons, their cousin, Asabar rebels against his father, refuses to go to school, and ends up as a drug addict and thug. For her part, Zara resists pressure from her family to remain submissive to her abusive and philandering husband and divorces him. In *Bitter Fruit*, the child and youth perspective is rendered almost entirely through Michael who is highly indignant about the facetiousness of almost all the adults in his life: his parents, his lecturer, his rapist biological father, his father's colleagues, and the incestuous father of his friend, Vinu. This leads him to despise Silas and to murder both Du Boise and Vinu's father. In these ways, the protagonists dramatize some of the key features of postcolonial African versions of the traditional bildungsroman.

Importantly also, both novels adopt specific methods of character delineation that are well-suited to their ostensible narrative missions. They can be considered, in narratological terms, among novels narrated in what Franz K. Stanzel calls the "figural" style. Manfred Jahn (96) explains what this means: "Because it focuses on a reflector's mind, the figural style tends to avoid exposition of background information, it may restrict itself to recording a reflector's stream of associative consciousness, and often it moves toward an interior moment of 'epiphany' (revelation or recognition) rather than reaching a suspense-filled climax."

Habila's and Dangor's narratives focus on the consciousness—perceptions, thoughts, emotions, beliefs—of Mamo and Michael respectively thus facilitates the overall representation of the transformation of these protagonists.

I now turn to a detailed close reading of *Measuring Time* to analyse the delineation of Mamo and LaMamo, as well as the two other major youthful characters, Asabar and Zara. The discussion focuses on the ways in which character development in

this novel is used to explore contemporary socio-political changes in Nigeria. The way these characters develop from childhood to adulthood functions as the most powerful and evocative trope of transition in the story. On the one hand, their individual and collective metamorphoses can be read for their symbolic commentary on the changes in Keti. On the other, their development is read as representative of transformations in the wider national and sub-regional spheres for which the community of Keti serves as synecdoche. I suggest that the different trajectories of these characters' lives represent different possibilities for the community and the nation. Through each of them, Habila highlights the ways in which public concerns are invariably inscribed in the private lives of postcolonial citizens. The analysis will focus in greater detail on the main protagonist Mamo than on the other characters due to the evident superiority of his role in the narrative.

According to Anindyo Roy (5), the aforementioned link between the public and personal is at the heart of the constant recourse to history, not only in earlier Nigerian writing but also in current literatures from the country. He argues that in *Measuring Time*, Habila recognizes "the multiplicity of histories" (5) and adopts an innovative form of realism in which (auto)biography is linked with history in ways that enable "writing the self into history" (23). With regard to the main characters of the novel, Habila's idiosyncratic historiography (which relies on the biographical history of ordinary individuals) allows readers to contemplate the intersections between private lives and communal and by extension national life in terms of the extent to which the one may be imbricated in the other. In other words, the trajectory and fate of each character may be understood in the context of the tensions between individual choices versus the predetermining and circumscribing conditions associated with the history and destiny of the community at large. It has been argued in this regard that Achebe, for example, espouses the view that the fates of ordinary Africans are determined less by their individual circumstances and choices and more by the predetermining legacies of colonization (see Irele; Opata). This view is supported by the preponderance of tragic figures in Achebe's novels, and is reinforced by the following lines from *Anthills of the Savanna*:

"What must a people do to appease an embittered history?" [...] The explanation of the tragedy of Chris and Ikem in terms of petty human calculation or personal accident had begun to give way in her throbbing mind to an altogether more plausible theory of premeditation. Were they not in fact trailed travellers whose journeys from start to finish had been carefully programmed in advance by an alienated history? (Achebe 220)

Mamo and LaMamo become separated early in the story. Each takes a different life route even though they maintain a strong filial and psychological bond throughout the narrative. This separation can be understood as a particularly significant narrative strategy that enables Habila to decentre the point of view offered by the novel along

two main narrative strands. The first is that of Mamo. The reader follows his experiences and perspectives on life in rural Keti where he remains (visiting the capital city occasionally) throughout the story. The other major perspective is offered through LaMamo. In contrast to Mamo, LaMamo's experiences and views are rendered predominantly in the form of four letters addressed to his brother and written from the places where he wanders throughout the larger part of his life. He travels across West and North Africa—Chad, Libya, Mali, Liberia and Guinea—where he fights, first as a child soldier and later as an itinerant mercenary. Thus, while the view of one protagonist is articulated from a position that is relatively fixed (in geographical terms), that of the other assumes a more mobile and transnational character. Each narrative strand, therefore, offers unique portrayals of a range of private, social, political, and cultural phenomena that help to enrich the reader's understanding of the period and the region which the novel textualizes.

Mamo, the older twin, is far more important to the story than his brother since it is through his consciousness that the overwhelming bulk of the narrative is focalized. The novel's dominant themes are explored through the ways in which he "makes sense of the world" (Tenshak 55). Mamo is diagnosed with sickle-cell anaemia when he is only four years old and suffers constant spells of illness and despair throughout his childhood. Despised by his father, Mamo only survives by listening to stories told by his aunt and foster mother. He plans to run away from home with LaMamo and their cousin Asabar, but is prevented by ill-health. However, things improve as he grows older and as his intellect develops. At fourteen, he begins to write. And after dropping out of university—again due to ill-health—he becomes a history teacher and later, secretary to the traditional ruler. This is when he begins to write a biography of the ruler and the history of the community. It is from this book that most of the stories in the novel are excerpted.

Through Mamo's psychosocial metamorphosis, the significance of the "perspective, and *agency* of the child-hero" (Hron 27, emphasis added) becomes foregrounded. He transforms from a sickly reclusive child, despised by his father and despairing for life, to a young adult who is a passionate lover, respected community figure, and enthusiastic intellectual. According to Ken J. Lipenga (176), Mamo's transformation is connected to his role in the novel's historiographical project:

Mamo's re-storying of history can be read as an individually and socially enabling form of agency in *Measuring Time*. The constant reference to the appearance of [Mamo's] book in the future highlights a form of agency that Mamo discovers through writing. This agency is first and foremost something that helps him to assert his self-worth, in the face of criticism from his father, which is sometimes directed at his frail body.

This helps to demonstrate how Mamo's characterization functions in important narratological and discursive ways. According to Mamo, the stories Auntie Marina tells

him “far into the moonlit night” saved him “from early death, [and] taught [him] how to live with” his anaemic body (*Measuring Time* 22, 21). Ironically, it is this sickness that provides the circumstances in which his mental faculties of observation and articulation are sharpened. As with most bildungsroman heroes, his reflexive disposition and frequent solitude affords him an analytical distance from society which facilitates the development of his intellectual faculties (see Slaughter).

Mamo’s congenital disease can thus be understood as doubly symbolic—and probably teleological—representing both possibility and liability. In the first place, by preventing him from running away from home at sixteen, the disease saves him from LaMamo’s fate—the wandering, traumatic existence of a mercenary characterized by perpetual precarity (see Agamben; Butler). As an invalid, Mamo’s inability to pursue fulfilment in life through the more usual and recognizable avenues—physical work and sports, for example—means he has to explore alternative means. In other words, he has to live his life innovatively, and to find possibilities in his disability by turning inwards and tapping into his keen intellectual faculties as he is advised by Uncle Iliya (*Measuring Time* 86). It is through this process that his character and role in the story develops.

The importance of Mamo’s narrative role is foregrounded furthermore by the fact that he is especially discriminated against by his father due to his frail physical condition. This represents an important aspect of the social critique offered by the narrative as it draws attention to the ways in which disability functions as a trope for marginalization in post-dictatorship Nigerian society. It exemplifies Michael Oliver’s (22) influential definition of disability as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.” Lamang’s disregard for Mamo, especially his practice of ensuring that Mamo stays on the edges in their family photographs also reflect Nicole Quakenbush’s (9) association of disability with “society’s unwillingness to accept or accommodate bodily/mental difference”. In *Measuring Time*, Lamang figures as an archetype of the patriarchal power structures that organize and reinforce social marginalization.

Opposition to the oppressive and discriminatory nature of this system, and the male figures at their centre, as Ouma (48–59) demonstrates, is a core aspect of the construction of childhood in several post-dictatorship Nigerian texts.⁶ Ouma (48) notes that the majority of writers in the post-dictatorship era—including Habila—grew up under military dictatorships so that their memories of childhood reflect a distinct “post-military imagination”. Focusing on Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), he goes on to argue that, in the works of these writers, “the representation of childhood becomes a process of delegitimation that multiplies margins (Appiah 1992) and decentralises paterfamilias authority. The decentralisation of the father figure

and the quest for a multiplicity of authorities and sources of identity makes this representation of childhood amenable to postmodern consciousness, to the spirit of anti-foundationalism" (49).

It is important to note, at this juncture, that, as a narrative subject, Mamo does not remain static throughout the story. Indeed, the child Mamo must be distinguished from the adult Mamo. While the former exists and operates from a distinctly marginal standpoint, the latter's position is more complicated and fluid. As one of Keti's elite, the adult Mamo is situated in the society's centre of power and enjoys the privileges that accompany his social status. Yet, as someone who opposes the corrupt practices of the community's principal political and traditional leaders, he operates on the margins of the centre (*Measuring Time* 275–6). He actually finds himself conflicted by the obligation to write what would amount to a hagiography of the corrupt ruling class:

[H]e was brought face to face with the duplicity of his own position. His uncle had said to him, "I know they will feed you a bundle of lies. But I have no fear that you will write only the truth." He knew that, were he to be honest to his heart, he'd right now put down his pen and walk out and never again return. But what of fame, he reminded himself, what of immortality? (275–6)

In terms of his status as narrative subject, Mamo thus moves from outsider as a child, to insider as an adult, and then to an in-between position as a dissenting community leader whose moral judgements are compromised by personal ambition. These shifts in position invest his point of view with an important mobile quality that is similar, but not identical to LaMamo's. They also highlight the profoundly disjunctive nature of postcolonial transitions and the kaleidoscopic processes of subject formation in contemporary Africa. The fluidity of Mamo's psychological orientation serve to further decentre and pluralize the novel's overall perspective, dramatizing Michael Schatzberg's (9) observation that identity construction and social affiliation remain "protean, contextual and intermittent phenomen[a]". This process of transformation becomes the tonic that invigorates his frail body and reverses the melancholy of his childhood:

Suddenly he was no longer the awkward, bumbling idiot his father had so mercilessly derided. He felt strong and unafraid, he had somehow outwitted his sickle-cell anaemia, it had been over a year since he'd last fallen sick, and his odds of staying alive could only improve with each passing year. He felt like screaming out aloud, *I am alive and I am useful and everything will work out fine!* (*Measuring Time* 196, original emphasis)

It is very instructive that in this critical moment of self-realization, Mamo recalls the psychological violence he had suffered at the hands of his father as a child, and expresses his newly found sense of worth *in opposition to* his father's earlier abuse. This illustrates Ouma's (48) argument regarding the ways in which post-dictatorship

childhood operates to “delimit and transcend the symbolic boundaries carved out by identification with the father figure” in the process of asserting personal agency and charting possibility.

In an allegorical sense, Mamo’s congenital disease and the neglect of his irresponsible father represent the extremely difficult circumstances in which most West Africans lived in the 1980s and 1990s. These conditions, which Lipenga (16) describes as “disabling factors”, are understood to be a combination of the deep structural legacies of colonialism combined with the excesses of oppressive and inept political leaders such as Liberia’s late Samuel Doe and Nigeria’s Sani Abacha. Some of these dictators led their respective countries into protracted civil wars which resulted in millions of deaths, the spread of disease, widespread destruction of public infrastructure and institutions, abject poverty, high unemployment, and general socio-political dysfunction. Furthermore, large numbers of child soldiers were involved in the many civil wars that raged in the sub-region from the late 1980s until 2007.⁷

It was under these circumstances that many West African youths grew up during the mid to late 2000s when *Measuring Time* was first published.⁸ And although the Nigerian civil war was fought earlier, the situation under military dictatorships between 1984 and 1999 was similarly dire. Mamo’s later metamorphosis and success is therefore symbolic and represents possibility in the face of disability, as well as hope in spite of legacies of social, economic, and political dysfunction. His transformation can also be understood as a form of prospective socio-political commitment that emphasizes the value of self-reflexion as well as human and cultural capital to Africa’s future development. But, as noted earlier, Mamo represents only one of the several alternatives offered by the narrative. These are represented by the other youthful protagonists, notably LaMamo, who, in the words of Kunzru (n. p.) represents “the possibilities of the road not taken, the path of action instead of contemplation”.

During his time abroad as an itinerant soldier, LaMamo sends four letters to Mamo, each from a different country. These are strategically spread across the novel in order to blend Mamo’s epistolary accounts with Mamo’s more conventional narratives. This results in what Manfred Jahn (98) calls “collective focalisation,” a narratological strategy by which layers of consciousness of complementary ideas and imaginaries are blended together. In this way, diverse perspectives become subtextually “combine[d] to form a structured artistic system, and are *subordinated* to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole” (Bakhtin 261, 262; emphases added). As Bakhtin explains eloquently, the novel, as an artistic and discursive form, is a unified composite of a “diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised” (262). This blending of perspectives, in turn, enhances the overall polyvocality of *Measuring Time*, a key feature that supports Habila’s multifaceted thematic project. LaMamo’s first-hand reports of the tragedy and trauma of civil war in three West African countries supplements Mamo’s local

experiences of socio-political dysfunction in the region during the 1980s and 1990s.

The letters also map LaMamo's psychological and intellectual maturation in a way that fits neatly into the novel's wider plot and thematic mission. Very importantly also, it is through his story and letters (together with the flashback and relayed narrations provided by Uncle Iliya and Toma who fought in the Nigerian Civil War) that Habila depicts the tragic child soldier character that has become a recurring dystopian feature of recent African narratives (see Kearney). In *Measuring Time*, this is highlighted by the tragic death of LaMamo and also of Haruna who is the twins's uncle. Haruna had fought in the Nigerian Civil War as a teenager and is presumed dead when he does not return home after several years. He, however, resurfaces in Keti as a destitute man who has lost his mind and commits suicide six months later. The misfortunes of Zara and Asabar also contribute to the dystopian possibilities suggested by the narrative. Zara loses her mind after several failed relationships while Asabar becomes paralysed after many years as an alcoholic, drug-addict and political thug.

Together, these three reflect another set of possibilities different from the promise represented by Mamo. The fact that only Mamo appears to have made a success out of life intensifies the dystopian orientation of the text. Moreover, it is instructive that the individual and collective misfortunes of these characters are linked via synecdoche to an oppressive and dysfunctional socio-political order. This is illustrated in the description of the "mass of angry-looking youths" who LaMamo leads in protest against the traditional ruler towards the end of the story: "Most of them didn't know why they followed the one-eyed leader, but their minds were still fresh with images of yesterday's police brutality; there was also the drought and the imminent famine, which added fuel to their anger, and they felt that anything was better than the frustration and the hopelessness of their existence" (*Measuring Time* 347). The experiences of these characters constitute a youthful perspective on contemporary Nigerian nationalism that is largely, although not entirely, dystopian. Through Mamo in particular, the narrative expresses the hope that an alternative and auspicious post-dictatorship Nigerian future is possible. An analogous reading of *Bitter Fruit* produces similar insight. The transformation of the main protagonist, Mikey who becomes Michael, symbolizes South Africa's post-TRC possibilities. In particular, his self-assurance and agency can be understood as a symbolic alternative to the relative stasis and anxiousness demonstrated by Silas who sometimes typifies the country's older generation.

There is a sense in which *Bitter Fruit* can be read as a bildungsroman in regard to the delineation of the character of Michael. Though the story begins when Michael is already a teenager, the text uses extensive flashbacks to narrate his childhood. This enables the reader to follow his metamorphosis. As his parents' marriage unravels, he gradually becomes estranged from them. Learning the true circumstances of his

birth seems to mark the beginning of his transformation as it is after this event that he insists on being called by his proper name Michael rather than the childhood alias. Michael then embarks on a search for his “true” identity among the Muslim family of Silas, and refuses to identify himself with his biological rapist father. Yet, he does not fully embrace his foster father, Silas, but is indignant of Silas’s tendency towards psychological disorientation. After Michael kills Du Boise, he prepares to escape to India where he plans to learn more about, and possibly convert to, Islam.

Michael’s metamorphosis involves his transition from a child on the margins of the domestic world of his family to a young adult with agency; one who decides to use his initiative and to take action to shape his destiny. This is enabled by his intellect and powers of observation, as well as the turn of events that leads him to discover the violent circumstances of his birth. As an adult, Michael decides to retrace his identity and to avenge his mother’s rape and Vinu’s abuse. Towards these ends, he successfully deploys his sexual prowess in manipulative and instrumentalist ways, and later flirts with religion and the routes it might open to him. He is thus portrayed in stark contrast to his father Silas who can be understood as a possible archetype of South Africa’s older generation of the post-TRC period. In contrast to Michael’s self-assured character, Silas is portrayed as someone “whose whole sense of the future [is] made up of a series of anxieties” (*Bitter Fruit* 179):

Michael observes Silas at his familiar post by the kitchen sink, drinking glass after glass of water, and staring myopically into the darkness. What does he see in that mirror of his own eyes? A life lived as best he can, and therefore wasted, by definition. Michael resists the surge of sympathy he feels for Silas, his father in name, his keeper, mentor of sorts. Every now and then, Silas gets this wild look in his eyes, a redeeming sense of yearning, a desire for something more than mere existence. (200)

There is a strong sense in which Michael’s transformation (beginning from the moment he learns that he is a child of rape) is held up as an alternative to Silas’s condition of “*fragile stasis*” (Mafe 117, emphasis added), after Silas’s encounter with Du Boise and the distressing memory of his wife’s rape and his own humiliation. This is not to suggest, however, that Michael’s violent actions are to be read as a prescribed course of social action. Rather, they can be understood, together with the trajectories of other characters, in terms of plural and open-ended socio-political possibilities. It is significant that Michael’s coming of age—he is nineteen years old when the story begins—occurs during a period that is roughly coterminous with the twilight years of the Mandela presidency and the end of the TRC proceedings. There is therefore a strong sense in which his personal metamorphosis can be understood as an allegory of the country’s transition in the post-TRC dispensation. According to Diana Mafe (113–4), Michael is actually at the centre of the story as “the figurative ‘bitter fruit’ and the character that upsets the carefully preserved yet artificial balance” of the

still morphing and uncertain post-TRC socio-political order. The transformation of Michael is therefore another important layer of the palimpsest of coeval representations, allegories, tropes, and chronotopes by which *Bitter Fruit* dramatizes South Africa's post-TRC condition.

In similar ways, Habila's four young characters, taken together, can be understood as a powerful figure of (West) African nations caught in the throes of post-independence transition. Mamo's inherited anaemia can thus be read as a figure for the legacies of colonialism in postcolonial African nation-states. As Mamo was expected to die young, so too have the prospects of Nigeria's continued existence as a unified nation been bleak since the Biafran war that broke out only seven years after independence.⁹ In spite of these themes of disillusionment however, *Measuring Time*, like *Bitter Fruit*, resists a dystopian ending through the promise represented by the unexpected and hard-fought survival of the main protagonist.¹⁰

It is important to note that the adolescent and youthful subjectivities of these characters are constructed within the frame of fractured sensitivities. These signify the psychological and socio-political turbulences that confront postmodern subjects within a specific postcolonial context. It is significant, furthermore, that Habila marginalizes more familiar categories of group identification (ethnicity and religion in particular) in order to focus on what it means to be a young person at a specific historical moment and within a specific social space. To do this, the narrator follows each protagonist from childhood to adulthood, paying painstaking attention to their thoughts, perceptions, aspirations, and frustrations. *Bitter Fruit* similarly focuses on Michael's inner consciousness while also exploring an eclectic range of themes (notably gender, sexuality and race) in mapping Michael's psychosocial development. In these ways, the character development of the child and youth protagonists in both texts is given central narrative and discursive importance. And through these particular narratological processes, childhood and youth identities become cast, not merely as tropes of transition, but also in ontological terms as distinct modes of being. This therefore forces us also to re-consider socio-political transition in ways that may be significantly similar in spite of the evidently dissimilar historical trajectories of Nigeria and South Africa. Furthermore, the foregoing analysis extends our understanding of contemporary African fiction by shedding light on the range of intertextual narrative resources and practices that resonate across two of the continent's preeminent literary sites.

Notes

1. I use dystopia in the sense expounded by Gregory Claeys (109) in reference to "feasible negative visions of social and political development, cast principally in fictional form". In this connection, M. Kieth Booker (72) identified a "dystopian turn" in African fiction from the mid-1980s onward which he associated—in terms of narrative technique and form—with western literary influences on postcolonial writing. Many texts produced from this period famously reflect the disillusionment

with nation-building in many parts of the continent marked by the rise of totalitarian regimes, the proliferation of civil strife, and other forms of socio-political dysfunction that have apparently endured, albeit in different ways, to the present time.

2. It is important to emphasize that it is not the article's aim to compare between socio-political transition in Nigeria and South Africa but to explore the ways in which the child and youth protagonists are delineated and deployed in the respective texts.
3. A detailed exploration of the significance of twins is outside the scope of this article. See Phillip M. Peek's edited volume, *Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures* for an investigation of the significance of twins in divination, performance, artistic representation, religion and popular culture.
4. The aftermath of 9/11 affected the initial reception of the novel in the West (see Capur). It was only in 2005 that an American edition was published.
5. Detailed definitions of "childhood" and "youth", which are related and distinct terms, are outside the remit of this article. I use them to refer to the fluid and overlapping categories of age that are generally conceived in opposition to adulthood (see Georgieva). This is in line with the critical practice whereby the two terms are used side by side in the exploration of related sets of identities, experiences, behaviours, representations and/or realities (see Hron). This practice is reinforced by such periodicals as the influential *Journal of African Children's and Youth Literature* as well as by similar indexing categorisations adopted by several libraries and databases.
6. The major examples include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) and *Becoming Abigail* (2006), Dulue Mbachua's *War Games* (2005), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2007).
7. The list of civil wars in the region during this period include: Liberia (1989–96; 1999–2003); Mali (1990–95); Sierra Leone (1991–2002); and Côte d'Ivoire (2002–2007).
8. Most of the leading post-dictatorship writers were born in the period between 1967 (when Habila was born) to the early 1980s (see Adesanmi and Dunton vii–xii).
9. Long before independence, there were serious misgivings about the political viability of a united Nigeria. In February 1966, a small militia made a failed bid to establish a breakaway Niger Delta Republic. Then came the civil war in 1967. More recently, there have been rumours of a prediction from American security experts that the country would implode in 2015. Even though this did not happen, political and security tensions abound, and some commentators still express the view that the country may still break up in the future (see Nwamu).
10. In this sense, the novels recall the rhetoric of pessimism that characterized leading novels of the early post-independence period as noted previously.

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