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Liminality in Tanzanian Young Adult fiction

Common in many young adult novels are the challenges of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. During this transition, young adult characters take on ambiguous statuses and responsibilities. The liminal or threshold state is the term used to describe this transition. This article examines the transition along with how the young adult characters in selected Tanzanian young adult novels navigate it: *The Birthday Party* (2013) by Mkama Mwijarubi, *The Temporary Orphan* (2014) by Hussein Tuwa, *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* (2017) by Hussein Kayera, and *If She Were Alive* (2019) by Deus Lubacha. In this case, liminality serves as a framework for analysing the portrayal of the precariousness of the transition and the different strategies that young adult characters use to reveal just how the transition is both limiting and enabling. Nonetheless, given the disparity in power between the young adults and their parents/guardians, and awareness of their vulnerability, the young adult characters invent different strategies to pretend to be conforming to parental expectations while simultaneously crafting alternative ways to expose the shortcomings of the adult society. Many of the tensions in the texts can be attributed to the parents and the young adult characters' differing ideas of what it means to be a child and an adult. Put otherwise, the notions of childhood and adulthood are just as elusive as the transition itself. **Keywords:** adulthood, childhood, liminality, young adult characters, Tanzania, Young Adult fiction.

Introduction


In this article, I present my analysis of selected Tanzanian Young Adult (YA) novels: *The Birthday Party* (2013) by Mkama Mwijarubi, *The Temporary Orphan* (2014) by Hussein Tuwa, *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* (2017) by Hussein Kayera, and *If She Were Alive* (2019) by Deus Lubacha. I contend that the young adult characters live in a liminal zone between childhood and adulthood. I analyse the different strategies they use to negotiate their position in this liminal domain. First, the concept of YA fiction is briefly outlined, followed by a brief historical contextualisation of YA literature in Tanzania. Second, a conceptualisation of liminality and its tenets, starting with Arnold van Gennep and followed by Victor Turner and Homi Bhabha, among others, is provided. Third, the application of this conceptualisation of liminality is illustrated through an analysis of four young adult novels. The article closes with a conclusion.

Characteristics of YA fiction and contextualization of the genre in Tanzania

Discussions surrounding YA literature have encompassed various topics, including the challenges of defining the specific audience for YA fiction, determining the boundaries of young adulthood, and examining crossover fiction, which refers to fiction that appeals to both adult and child audiences. Regarding the targeted readers, Rachel Falconer maintains that “the main character, who may also serve as the first-person narrator, falls between the ages of 11 and 19, and the intended reader of the text is assumed to be of a similar age” (90–1). For Thomas Bean and Karen Moni, the age group for this literature is 12 to 20 years, while for Belbin, the corresponding age bracket is 13 to 20. These age groups indicate that YA literature is aimed at teenagers. Defining YA fiction based on readership becomes complex due to crossover readers. For example, Falconer points out that in today’s world, “not only are there children zooming to adulthood,” but there are also “adults tumbling into childhood” (92). Therefore, it is reasonable to anticipate diversity in the readership of YA fiction. Robert Carlsen argues that in the YA text,

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the protagonist is “either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective” (48). Carlsen further claims that such texts “describe initiation into the adult world or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world” which suggests that although they are “generally written for a teenage reader” they “address the entire spectrum of life” (48). This definition is consistent with that offered by Rachel Wadham and Jonathan Ostenson, who emphasise the “teenage perspective on the world” as a defining feature of YA fiction (14). Thematically, the focus of this genre is problems of both transition and occupation of space between childhood and adulthood, or as Johanna Risku has called it, the “liminal state between childhood and adulthood” and a “blurry margin between adult and child” (30). Joyce Stallworth claims that YA fiction is often didactic and primarily inspires young adults to enjoy “reading and exploring who they are” (59). In exploring who they are, Katherine Butcher and Kaavonia Hinton argue that it “allows [young adults] to explore life experiences and realities, and helps them understand the many joys, trials, successes, and problems of life” (1). Thus, YA fiction is essential in helping adolescents become aware of themselves and answer questions about their lives. It functions as a mirror through which they can view themselves and others. In terms of structure, Alfred Malugu (51–3) states that YA novels have simple storylines and fast-paced action with chronological narration. A good ending, usually in favour of the young adult protagonist, is a common narrative strategy.

According to Leonard Bakize, the history of children’s literature in Tanzania is short in that the writing of children’s works, especially novels, became a phenomenon after independence in 1961; it then gained some momentum in the 1970s and 1980s and further accelerated in the 1990s (61–2). Nyambura Alice Mpesha as well as Flavia Traore bemoan the fact that before the 1990s, children’s literature was significantly limited in quality and quantity in Tanzania—it was a sporadic activity for Tanzanian writers and publishers. There is a consensus among scholars such as Bakize, Edith Lyimo, Traore, Mugyabuso Mulokozi, and Irmi Maral-Hanak, among others, that what pushed the writing of children’s fiction forward in Tanzania was the Tanzania Children’s Book Project (CBP) that began in 1991 and was funded by the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE). According to Traore, the project’s success lies in the release of 237 Swahili titles, which were then distributed to 3642 primary schools throughout the nation. In terms of contents, these books included novels for young readers. Another development was the BURT Literary Award for writers of English YA novels, which began in 2008.¹ Between 2008 and 2018, the project produced 21 YA titles. Since the project aims to support the publication of culturally relevant books, the novels are realistic in that they deal with contemporary social issues in Tanzania while also stressing the importance of a young adult as an individual. This social realism orientation deals with the hardship in the adolescent’s social life. For example, in her review of selected BURT award Tanzanian YA texts, Mpale Yvonne Silkiluwasha notes how contemporary issues are a central preoccupation of the novels, mentioning, for example, ongoing environmental issues in texts such as *Tree Land: The Land of Laughter*, and *Face Under the Sea* by Mkama Mwijarubi and William Mkufya respectively. Young adult characters’ agency is another recurring theme, and Nahida Esmail’s *Living in the Shade: Aiming for the Summit* (2017) details how a young girl with albinism overcomes all the challenges that combine to disadvantage her. Helping the family is another recurring theme, and Edwin Semzaba’s *The Adventures of Tunda and Zamaradi* (2016) recounts how young adults can help their parents. Many of the texts are didactic, for example, Tune Salim’s *Close Calls* (2012), Mwamgwirani Mwakimatu’s *The Wish* (2014), and *Run Free* (2013) by Richard Mabala. Didacticism seems so recurring that even when a text is investigative, such as *The Detectives of Shangani* (2014) by Esmail or Elias Mutani’s *Human Poachers* (2015), the denouements in them always teach morals. The novels are short, mostly between 80 and 120 pages.

This article focuses on *The Birthday Party* (2013) by Mwijarubi, *The Temporary Orphan* (2014) by Hussein Tuwa, *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* (2017) by Hussein Kayera, and *If She Were Alive* (2019) by Deus Lubacha, all of which were developed as BURT award manuscripts and deploy young adult protagonists between the ages of 12 and 15. The most notable trajectory in the texts is that of the young adult characters being exposed to challenging problems—often problems with parents and their attempts to overcome them. Typical of many YA texts, despite all the odds, somehow through their ingenuity or the help of other people, or sometimes through sheer luck, they overcome the problems and lay a foundation for the fulfilment of their dreams. All the protagonists are in school and going through puberty, or about to go through it.

The four novels variously focus on the problem of biological and social orphanhood, particularly the causes of it. Through this problem of orphanhood, other issues are incorporated, such as forced marriage, rape, child labour, child marriage, abusive stepparents, inattentive biological parents, and oppressive cultural institutions. The novel’s main argument is that the young adult characters who are biologically or socially orphaned can develop

strategies to live with it or even change it. For example, *The Birthday Party* and *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* focus on the problem of social orphanhood in that the young adult characters have both parents living but somehow one of their parents has abandoned them. They are deprived of complete parental care in a way like that of a child whose parent is dead. The novels use the protagonists as moral beacons, portraying them as morally redemptive figures dedicated to mending their broken families. By using these texts and reading them using the concept of liminality, I hope to shed light on the relationships between these young adults and their guardians during this transition to adulthood.

The concept of liminality

The concept of liminality is credited to Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* which describes the life transitions of the Aborigines of Australia, focusing on birth, puberty, marriage, and death. For each of these, he developed three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. During separation, the individual is removed from his previous social position. This is followed by a temporary transition period, during which the individual is on the borderline between the two positions. Gennep called this the *liminal* phase. The third phase is the full entry into the position. By being liminal, the subjects, argued Gennep, elude all forms of classification because they are in-between positions and inhabit an ambiguous state. Victor Turner further developed Gennep's notion of liminality and focused on the transition category. In *The Ritual Process: Structures and Anti-structure*, he mainly demonstrates how rituals bring about transitions for persons and groups. He theorises that in the liminal phase, the characteristics of the ritual subject are "ambiguous" because the subject "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (359). The liminal personae, he claimed, are "threshold people" and are "neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" and as such they display "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes" (360). He argues that transition, as a liminal space, is characterised by in-betweenness and indeterminacy. In *The Forest of Symbols*, he argues that the strength of liminal space is that "[i]t is a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (97) and it is a "stage of reflection" (105). Like Gennep, Turner links liminality with temporariness rather than permanence. In liminal spaces, people make decisions and choices to move on. It is for this reason that Juha Pentikäinen advises that symbolically, transformation is possible in the liminal space because actors "are beyond the boundaries of the normal social structure, its values, norms and obligations" and as such, they may behave "according to the habits and norms which do not coincide with those of the 'normal' social structure and its conditions" (156). Emphasizing the transgressional possibility of liminality, Turner notes: "In liminality, profane-social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down" ("Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology" 59). Therefore, liminality may also include subversive possibilities.

What Turner calls the interstices of structure or "threshold", Homi Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, calls the "third space"—the "in-between" space characterised by hybridity and "difference within" (19). Bhabha argues that the third space is interstitial because it is characterised by the "overlap and displacement of domains of differences" (2). Resulting from this context, Bhabha argues, a liminal subject is a hybrid subject, a "reformed, recognizable other [...] a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (18). Gennep, Turner, and Bhabha emphasise ambiguity, indeterminacy, hybridity, and transformation as critical attributes of the liminal space. These tenets have given the concept of liminality a privileged position in postcolonial studies. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that the usefulness of the concept lies in its ability to "describe an 'in-between' space in which changes may occur. It is an area where "strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated; a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states" (130). As theorised by these scholars, liminality is a fruitful concept in understanding the portrayal of young adult characters as liminal subjects. Drawing insights from this theorisation, I selected YA fiction as a gateway to understanding young adult characters' lives as a case of liminality. I show how, as "liminal personas" or "threshold people", they are, as Turner has claimed, "necessarily ambiguous" and "elude or slip through the network of classification" (*Ritual Process* 359). The article also shows how this space allows them to exercise their agency and craft their subjectivities as they seek to belong, participate, and create meanings in this symbolic space.

Liminal experiences of young adult characters in the selected novels

In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas notes that danger “lies in the transitional states simply because the transition is neither one state nor the next” and the transitional figure is “himself in danger and emanates danger to others” (97). This is because the transition “separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time” (97). Hussein Tuwa’s protagonist in *The Temporary Orphan* fits well in this theorisation and interrogates the dangers of transition from childhood to adulthood in the context of a dysfunctional family. At the age of 15, Kidani, a young girl, is forced to live with a single father because of her parents’ separation. When Kidani has her first menstrual period, her father plans to marry her off and even receives the money for the bride price in advance. The girl’s puberty is, therefore, a dangerous feat and is placing her at risk of being married off against her will. This arranged marriage is an impediment to Kidani and a threat to her dream of becoming a Miss Tanzania.

Conflict between parents and young adults are among the distinctive characteristics of young adult literature, and in most cases, they expose adolescents to dangers. Portrayed as perceptive and independent, Kidani escapes the night before the wedding and runs away to the next village where her mother lives with her new husband. As if to suggest that running from a problem does not help to solve it, Kidani finds herself in difficult circumstances again. Her stay with her mother is short-lived because her stepfather begins “looking at her with lust” and attempting to seduce her to sleep with him. When she reports him to her mother, the mother does not believe her and instead accuses her of trying to sleep with her stepfather (44). This way, Kidani is pitted against two hostile adults in their own home. Typical of YA fiction, the action is fast-paced, and Kidani runs away to the next township and seeks refuge at an orphanage where she believes she is not meant to stay permanently, thus the title of the novel, *The Temporary Orphan*. Although Kidani’s parents are still alive, she is forced to live like an orphan, and this way, she becomes a social orphan.

At the novel’s centre is the problem of young adults becoming ‘adults’ overnight by shouldering adult responsibilities. When Kidani’s parents divorce and her mother leaves for another man, she becomes a provider for the family—ensuring that her drunkard father and aging paternal grandmother are taken care of. At this young age, Kidani is experiencing a process which Jahnine Davis and Nicholas Marsh have called adultification—treating and perceiving children as “as being more adult-like” (255). By shouldering adult responsibilities at her age, she becomes an adult—that is, she is both an adult and an adolescent at the same time. At the age of 15, this is a sudden transition. By showing that Kidani is quickly becoming an adult against her age and that his father is quickly regressing and becoming a child-adult—immature and irresponsible—the novel offers a critique of the failure of the adults within this society.

Kidani’s status is blurred in that she is forced to be both a child and an adult simultaneously. As if to illustrate this confusion, when she has had her first menstruation, her father is happy that she has finally “grown up. She is now a woman” (31). While there seems to be a consensus in the village that she is an ‘adult’ now, Kidani, on the contrary, thinks that she is “still a child” because she goes to school (31). Even the father hovers between taking Kidani to be a ‘child’ and an ‘adult’ at the same time. For him, Kidani is an ‘adult’ because she has experienced her first menstrual blood and is, therefore, marriageable. Yet, Kidani is still a ‘child’ because she is not allowed by custom to negotiate her destiny with her father, let alone decide when to get married. This demonstrates the challenges and identity crisis that young adults face while transitioning to adulthood. Kidani does not belong to her previous child status and is still not yet part of the adult world. Thus, the failure to reconcile the meaning of child and adult becomes the main problem between adolescents and parents.

According to Claudia Schnugg (2018), liminality is characterised by blurring and merging of distinction” and “simultaneous presence of the familiar and the unfamiliar” (82). While Kidani is still obsessed with her ambition to complete school and become a Miss Tanzania, her family is embarking on a secret mission of preparing her for marriage. A special trainer or *somo* is hired for this preparation to be smooth. She must teach her “things to do with marital life”—things that are “never taught in school” (31). For Kidani, the teachings from her *somo* are not only absurd and unfamiliar but are also “outdated” and must be “changed”, and she will “not allow her family and relatives to follow it” (37). This deployment of an assertive Kidani is a deliberate strategy for critiquing the adult society and the institutions that disadvantage adolescent girls.

The theme of irresponsible parenting also features in Deus Lubacha’s *If She Were Alive*, in which Wema, a young girl of 12 years, becomes vulnerable due to a dysfunctional family. At the start of the novel, Wema’s mother, an elder wife of Mzee Daudi, is on her deathbed as a result of an incurable cancer. She is abandoned by both her husband and a co-wife, Mama Kabula. Thus, Mama Wema only has her daughter, Wema, who must balance

her schoolwork and caring for her dying mother. She has no choice but to become an adult herself. For example, she has to wake up at the first cock crow, go to the well to fetch water, start a fire, warm water for her mother, cook porridge for her, escort her to the bathroom, and then go to school. This state of affairs causes a great deal of psychological strain. At school, she is a regular object of punishment and “nobody wondered about the way teachers treated her because she was a chronic latecomer” (14).

Subsequently, Wema needs to transition from the time when her mother was alive to when she is no longer there. The liminal period after the loss of a loved one is the most critical in the life of a person. If not managed well, the transition in this period can seriously affect a young adult character like Wema. For example, immediately after Mama Wema’s funeral, Mama Kabula forcefully snatches away the little things and money that the late Mama Wema left for her daughter and even threatens her with unpleasant repercussions should she report the matter to her father.

A hostile family environment can be a factor for a young adult character to leave home in search of relief. Flight becomes the only strategy for leaving the insecurity of the home environment. When Wema’s her father beats after she dares to tell him the truth about Mama Kabula, she runs away without even knowing where she is going. She faints during her journey and is miraculously rescued by the Mayalas, a family in another village. By speaking out, Wema has achieved an important step, but one that involves more danger than relief. Her liminal position has increased her sense of reflection, which is consistent with Turner, who claims that liminal occasions are “privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think, about the terms in which they conduct their thinking, or to feel about how they feel in daily life” (*The Anthropology of Performance* 102). By speaking up and running away, Wema questions her father’s values and authority.

By running away, Wema becomes an outcast and is forced to stay with strangers almost in the same way as Kidani, who seeks refuge in the orphanage in *The Temporary Orphan* analysed above. Like Kidani, Wema is trying to create a new home for herself. Wema’s new homes, first with the Mayalas and later with Sister Mihayo, are more homely than her original home. In the same way, the Mayalas are more caring than Mzee Daudi and Mama Kabula. In other words, Wema is seeking a new home and looking for someone who can take her parents’ place. Although these new homes are meant to be transitional and temporary, they are consistent with Turner’s theorisation of interim liminality in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* in which he talks about “the possibility of standing aside not only from one’s social position but from all social positions and of formulating unlimited series of social arrangements” (13–4). Consistent with this theorisation, Wema has stood aside from the traumatizing guardians.

Liminality involves the exploration and testing of alternative coping strategies. Wema knows that her survival in her new home will depend on her extravagant blandishment of her hosts. She resorts to working very hard for the Mayalas in the hope that they will send her to school. For her, it doesn’t matter what strategies she uses to return to school. She finally fakes being possessed by demons and has these fake demons insinuate that she wants to go to school. When her father is informed about her strange illness and possession by demons, he suggests engaging a witch doctor. As they wait for a witch doctor, a psychologist discovers that she is faking being possessed. In his study of spirit possession, Ioan Lewis argues that spirit possession is among how “depressed categories” of people “exert pressures upon their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration” (318). That is to say, feigned spirit possession may represent a covert form of social protest for the oppressed, especially for whom any open protest would be exceptionally dangerous. By dramatizing this, Wema’s strategy fits very well in this theory, and although it doesn’t work out for her, she makes it known that she only wants to return to school.

In this transition, Wema is constantly haunted by ambiguity. When the Mayalas finally send her to live with Sister Mihayo, her host is unsure whether to treat her as a child or an adult, only to learn that Wema can “work all day, serving customers” (94). What Sister Mihayo doesn’t know is that Wema has been hardened by life to take everything as it comes and pretend that all is well even though by evening, “the headache and back pain bore on her” (94). Pretending and feigning ignorance are some of the strategies Wema is using here to cope with life with Sister Mihayo. When she has to share a bed with Sister Mihayo who invites lovers for sex at night, Sister Mihayo thinks Wema “knows nothing about this stuff” while, in fact, “she knew what they were doing but kept quiet so as not to disturb their pleasure” (95). Thus, for Sister Mihayo, Wema is both a child and an adult, depending on context.

In summary, Kidani and Wema, who are the protagonists of *The Temporary Orphan* and *If She Were Alive*, are determined to overcome one problem after another by transgressing and running away from their families without seeking to mend these broken families. Whereas they run away from their dysfunctional families and seek to restart their lives elsewhere, the protagonists in *The Birthday Party* and *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* seek to repair their broken families as they are victims of social orphanhood because they have both parents living but one of their parents has abandoned them. They are deprived of complete parental care in a way similar to that of a child whose parent is dead, as is the case for Wema and Kidani in *If She Were Alive* and *The Temporary Orphan*, respectively. Since the young adults live like social orphans, the two novels deliberately turn them into moral beacons ready to mend their broken families.

Since a successful transition to adulthood will be stress-free within a peaceful family set-up, the novels show that the young adult characters can strategically work to reform their dysfunctional families. In *The Birthday Party*, Kiss, a twelve-year-old girl prepares for her 13th birthday. Since she has been staying with her grandmother in Mbeya, she and her grandmother must travel to Dar es Salaam and celebrate with her family. The birthday is meant to bring together a disrupted family: a mother who stays alone, Kiddo, a son who stays with his father, and a daughter who stays with her maternal grandmother. When Kiss and Kiddo finally meet, they constantly pester their mother about why she chose to separate from their father: “Yes, I’m grown-up Mama, tell me the truth now. Why are you and Baba not staying together?” (44). Rather than be a bystander in the matrimonial fight, Kiss and Kiddo are ready to drag themselves into this adult issue. While their mother and grandmother feel that they are “too young to know” these adult issues, they argue that they “are no longer little ones” and should be told everything (49). The dilemma is that while they see themselves as grown-ups, their parents see them as too young to get involved in the whole issue. Liminality helps them to negotiate for their status; the young adult characters, their mother, and their grandmother are playing with the concepts of childhood and adulthood. For Kiss and Kiddo, the play allows them access their parents’ matrimonial conflict, while the mother and grandmother aim to deny them access.

One of the most common sources of conflict between parents and their adolescents is the perceived difference in the latter’s maturity. This difference is usually manifested by parents insisting that their children are still ‘children’ while the children feel they are no longer children. This characterises their liminal phase to be full of surprises and tensions. In the text, Kiss is not happy that her mother has refused to share her beauty products with her because she is too young for the products. In a surprising turn of events, she makes her mother knock on her door before entering, a bold move to show that she is a grown-up. While Kiss’s action seems to be unrealistic and strange in the context where parents wield power, the text seems to suggest that young adults can believe in themselves and convince the older generation. This theme of resistance against the older generation and questioning parents’ decisions is the hallmark of liminality.

Liminality allows different ways for young adults to express their feelings. Although the parents are separated, the children’s basic needs have been adequately met; all they lack is their parents’ care, love, and attention. The effect of this social orphanhood is that they feel useless, isolated, and unworthy. When Mama Kiss adamantly suggests that Kiss will return to Mbeya and her brother Kiddo to his father after the birthday, the children’s response is unanimously rebellious: “No way, we are going nowhere” (49). This boldness means they are willing to take on their parents on issues affecting their lives. As the family prepares for eating, Mama Kiss instructs that Kiss should serve all the adults first before serving the children, to which Kiss suggests, “Why not start with the children? It is their day” (100). Here, Kiss questions her mother and the custom in general and shows that it should be re-evaluated. This conforms with Turner’s claim that liminality is usually “anti-structure” in that it challenges the authority (*Ritual Process* 52). As an empowering and enabling space, liminality offers young adults an opportunity to articulate diverse social stances. As children transition from childhood to adulthood, they attempt to create alternative arrangements, and in the course of doing so, they become more adventurous and risk-takers. Kiss and Kiddo are optimistic that their parents should restart their lives as husband and wife, which is a daunting feat. They aim to see them staying together and be able to ‘speak to each other’ just as they did in the past. “They wanted them to forgive each other” (115).

Immediately after the birthday party, they lock the door while the parents are inside and throw away the key. In a typical happy ending fashion of a young adult text, when neighbours gather to help open the door, and Kiss and Kiddo are brought up to answer, they respond in unison: “We wanted to see you and Baba together; We want to be a family again” (120). Yet, in taking this obligation, the text falls short in that it offers a simplistic

solution that works only in the text in that it helps reunite the parents, but in the real-life context may not be the best option. What is positive is that the young adult characters are willing to mediate and arbitrate the parents' conflict is only possible because they are liminal figures. This way, liminality is akin to neutrality, which is crucial for them to play a redemptive role in their family. As neutrals and in-between, the kids function as a bridge that can potentially reconnect their parents into a new marriage.

If in *The Birthday Party* the young adult characters have deliberately worked to resuscitate their failing family, in *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto*, the young adult characters also miraculously bring their separated parents together to redress the problem of social orphanhood. In both cases, the parents reflect and decide to restart their family. The text deals with parents' absence due to conflict and the anxiety it causes the children. The focus of the story is Kulwa and Doto, the teenage twins. When their parents separate, they are torn between staying with their mother and remaining with their father in Masaki or following him to Kisumu in Kenya. This in-betweenness is further complicated by the fact that they are also in transition—transitioning from living with two parents to living with one parent, transitioning from the affluent Masaki area and life to a life in the poverty-stricken Mabibo area, and transitioning from studying in private well-to-do English medium schools to learning in a poorly-serviced government school. Caught in this situation, the twins harbour feelings of anger and grief about their parents' decision to divorce. This transition and the resulting challenges indicate that adolescence, as a liminal stage, is characterised by instability and complicates the childhood-adulthood transition. For example, while Kulwa has always been the best pupil in her English medium school, she struggles in her current school. The transition from English to Kiswahili medium school means the twins have to work hard to compensate for their language deficit.

In "The World and the Home" Bhabha theorises that the condition of in-betweenness leads to unhomeliness which is an "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed space" (445). Kulwa and Doto are not homeless but are unhomely in the new setting. The disorientation of these two youngsters is psychologically traumatizing, primarily when they associate their current poor life with their parent's decision to divorce. The poorly-managed public school, poor neighbourhoods and housing in the Mabibo area, tiny houses with small rooms, lack of indoor plumbing, absence of gardens, lack of fences and gates, few televisions and satellite dishes, dirty and unpaved narrow streets, small retail businesses everywhere' and each house with a small business—these youngsters identify all these as resulting from parents' separation. This way, divorce has disoriented them, and they cannot help but ask, "Why did Mama and Baba divorce?" (72). This contemplation of their situation is meant to incite a reflection on the limitations of adult behaviour within a broader context. For the twins, the parents' divorce has initiated a rite of passage—a three-stage schema: separation from their father—almost like having their father die; a period of liminality—learning to live without him; and coping with new life or getting used to living without their father. The twins' transition shows that liminality is a precarious state.

In their application of the concept of liminality to youth culture, Paulo Jesus, Maria das Dores Formosinho and Maria Helena Damião theorise about the prevalence of "risk-taking" behaviour in youth culture. Liminality, they argue, is characterised by "self-experimentation" that "involves the refusal of social norms" and is characterised by "resistance to social constraints", and love of "risk-taking initiatives" (456). When Kulwa and Doto secretly hatch a plan to look for their father, the aim is to fill the void of having no father in their home. Their decision to hatch and finance a secret mission of traveling thousands of kilometres to rejoin their father is one example of risk-taking displayed by the twins. When finally, the twins see their father after a spell of near-death travails on their journey, their father is remorseful and declares that he "should have been more attentive to their needs" ((8). What began as Kulwa and Doto's childish adventure to see their father quickly turns into a family affair. When they finally meet in Mwanza, with both parents, they "had a good time with their mother and father" (98) and "witnessed their mother and father getting closer and closer again" (98). The meeting rekindled something in their hearts that seemed to have been lost. As liminal figures between their parents, the twins have finally succeeded, though accidentally, in bringing their divorced parents together and in a typical happy ending style of all YA novels, the father confirms that they are all going home and "Your mother and I have talked about our differences that we had in the past and have decided to put them aside. We are all going to live together as a family again" (98). This solution has been orchestrated by the liminal figures—the young adult figures. Although this happy ending to the story seems to be possible only by dint of a miracle, it offers an important basis for confidence, particularly for young adults who can personally relate to the twins' problems.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how young adult characters' transition from childhood to adulthood is portrayed. I have shown that since they are in transition, the young adult characters exist in a liminal space that is both enabling and restricting. I have also demonstrated how inconsistent the parents' and young adult characters' ideas of what defines a "child" and an "adult" are throughout the texts. In turn, this inconsistency explains a great deal of the tensions and conflicts that arise between the young adult characters and their parents. Yet, because of the power differences between them and their parents, the young adult characters are mindful of their vulnerability. Thus, the flight motif, among other techniques employed by the protagonists in the first two novels, is partly in recognition of this power imbalance. It is a conscious narrative strategy to relocate and allow them to reflect, learn, and relearn from outsiders. Through some sheer luck, flight helps Wema in *If She Were Alive* to go back to school while Kidani in *The Temporary Orphan* commits to staying at the orphanage not because she is a biological orphan, but because the orphanage offers her a more promising future than her parents. The young adult characters' attempts to question their parents' decisions in *The Temporary Orphan* and *If She Were Alive* and their attempts to resuscitate their failing families in *The Birthday Party* and *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto* means that the liminal space is not only limiting but is also transformative. Across the texts, the problems that the protagonists face are simply too many and challenging to an extent that the element of fantastic or luck aids them in overcoming them. Pitted against so many, sometimes seemingly insurmountable challenges, the victories of the young adult protagonists in all the texts are crucial for revealing their parents' faults. The victory of these young adults against their parents, Kidani in *The Temporary Orphan*, Wema in *If She Were Alive*, Kiss and Kiddo in *The Birthday Party*, and Kulwa and Doto in *The Adventures of Kulwa and Doto*, are the authors' attempts to show hope in a hopeless context as they help dispel the reliance on destiny in difficult contexts.

Notes

1. The BURT Literary Award is named after Bill Burt, a Canadian philanthropist and sponsor. It is an initiative that identifies excellence in YA literature and provides young readers (12 to 18 years of age) with high-quality, engaging books.

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