



NEGOTIATING INDIVIDUALITY UNDER CONSTRAINT: STRATEGIES OF BOYS' IDENTITY FORMATION IN ELNATHAN JOHN'S *BORN ON A TUESDAY*

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Abstract

This article examines how boys form their identities while navigating the cultural, religious, and political pressures of the Almajiri system. The system is a qur'anic schooling tradition that is widespread in Northern Nigeria. In this system, boys are often sent away from home at a young age to study under an Islamic teacher Malam. They frequently have to beg for food and shelter. The article examines these experiences as depicted in Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday*, a novel set in Northern Nigeria. While African literary studies have explored masculinity in depth, there has been little focus on how boys actively navigate the cultural forces that shape them. Using psychoanalytic literary theory, this study applies Sigmund Freud's ideas of repression and the ego, as well as Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic Order and the Real. It conducts a close reading of the main character, Dantala. The analysis identifies four interconnected strategies for forming identity: strategic compliance with inner dissent, language and literacy as alternative symbolic tools, friendship among boys as a way to build identity, and the negotiation of moral ambiguity in creating an ethical self. The findings show that identity in the novel arises not from rebellion or complete submission but from ongoing, internal negotiation between cultural expectations and personal identity. The study provides a way to understand boys' agency within restrictive cultural systems, with implications for teaching literature and mental health efforts focused on African boys.

Keywords: Boyhood, Masculinity, Identity Formation, Psychoanalytic Theory, Almajiri system, African literature, *Born on a Tuesday*

INTRODUCTION

Within African literary discourses, much work has been done on masculinity. But this research has primarily concentrated on adult males and boyhood has been considered more of a preparation for adulthood rather than a developmental stage in itself worthy of study (Oloruntoba, 2021). Because of this, there has been little

research that examines how boys actively negotiate, resist and reshape the cultural expectations that are placed upon them, particularly in African Islamic contexts that are shaped by religious authority, poverty and political violence. *Born on a Tuesday* (2015) is a rare first-person account of a boy's journey in the Almajiri system of Northern Nigeria by Elnathan John. It exposes an inner life that would not normally be uncovered in sociological research on the socialisation of masculinity. Although the novel's political and religious dimensions have been explored (Adesanmi, 2019), it has failed to receive adequate attention from the perspective of the novel's main character, Dantala, in constructing a personal identity in the face of opposing cultural pressures. This article aims to fill that gap, by focusing on how boys in *Born on a Tuesday* work to construct their individual identities as they negotiate cultural contexts. Contrary to resistance and passive acceptance of dominant norms, the study suggests that Dantala constructs his identity through four different strategies: acquiescence with inner dissent, language as a symbolic departure, friendship as a reflective relationship, and moral reasoning in ambiguous contexts. This study contributes to African literary and masculinity studies and enhanced understanding of boyhood agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of religious institutions in the construction of masculinities in Africa is a known phenomenon. For example, Ayodabo (2024) illustrates how Christian and Muslim ideologies have brought in new forms of manhood to African gender regimes, always reinforcing male dominance, but at the same time, providing new concepts of ethicality, compassion, justice, and restraint which may challenge the traditional masculinity ideology. This is the same thing being noted by Izugbara and Dako-Gyeke (2022) in their study on the role of religion in the

process of constructing masculinity among adolescent boys in Ghana and Uganda in which the religious authorities are both a constraint and resource. Political violence is another form of violence that further complicates the already heightened tension of politics and religion; as indicated by Annor et al. (2022) in their survey, Kenyan boys are highly exposed to violence and the effect of political violence on masculinities remains under examined as a problem in literary criticism.

The Almajiri system in the novel *Born on a Tuesday* is at the nexus of all these pressures. This is about religion, exposure to economic vulnerability and political mobilisation. The novel's political and religious aspects have been studied (Adesanmi, 2019) as have the wider changes in the depiction of more emotionally expressive male characters in Nigerian literature (Gleibermann, 2020). The scholar sees the emphasis of emotion over the stoicism of the traditional models of masculinity in culture in the way the contemporary Nigerian writers such as John write about it. Despite this, previous scholarship has given limited attention to the specific processes involved in forming an identity under the strains of these institutions, with which this study is concerned.

These dynamics are also contextualized in the regional literature. In the novel, Dantala embodies a contradictory masculinity that Kabiru et al. (2020) found that boys in Korogocho slums in Nairobi identify with two types of masculinity: idealised-provider masculinity, and dominating-aggressive masculinity. The psychological consequences of not meeting expectations of being providers as migrants do in Kenya is illustrated by Schmidt (2024) and Izugbara et al. (2014) who showed that for Kenyan boys and men not being able to meet masculine expectations results in psychological stress. However, the current analysis shows that the transition from boyhood to manhood should not only be understood as a violent experience, but Kovač and Schulz (2023) describe this process as moral negotiation which corresponds to the moral ambiguity approach in the current analysis. A number of studies on boyhood vulnerability in fiction from both East and West Africa have been conducted, but mostly through the eyes of adults in the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, leaving a gap where studies on boyhood vulnerability in literature was neglected. Boyhood vulnerability has been explored in literary studies in a thematic way and not within an identity construction context (Lunabba, 2023).

As a whole, this body of work makes three major points. There is no fixed definition of masculinity, as it's something constructed by society. It can also manifest itself in various forms depending on the social/cultural context. In African contexts characterised by poverty, religious power and political violence, restrictive upbringing of boys is incredibly psychological. Although not often applied in this context, psychoanalytic theory offers a good foundation for considering the internal struggle for identity in literary characters. What is lacking, however, is a study that brings these three threads together, a study that will closely investigate how an African boy protagonist develops a sense of his own

identity amidst overlapping cultural pressures. This paper attempts to fill that void by providing a psychoanalytic close reading of *Born on a Tuesday*, with a special focus on the way in which Dantala negotiates and builds his identity.

THEORY AND METHODS

The approach of this research is psychoanalytic literary theory. Psychoanalysis explains why repressed emotions are not totally eradicated but redirected to violence, isolation or adherence to ideology and how each individual has a private and often contradictory psyche (Freud, 1961, 1953). Freud's ideas are useful for examining Dantala's emotional struggles and the ways his childhood experiences influence his development and responses to social pressures. Lacan's concept of the Symbolic Order (Lacan, 1977) adds to this explanation by theorising identity as formed in language and social laws, and The Real as that which resists symbolisation, for example, affect or traumatised. Hook (2021) shows how psychoanalysis can be applied in a non-Western therapeutic context, while Ratele (2022) analyzes African masculinity and the interplay of emotional power in the analysis of his book, but none of these has previously applied psychoanalytic theory to boy characters in Nigeria fiction.

This study uses a research design that is an interpretive type of qualitative research with a case study approach that is appropriate for the principles of literary studies. This is because the aim of an interpretive qualitative research design is to make sense of the data, explore meanings and symbolic structure (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research is conducted using a single case study design and *Born on a Tuesday* is considered as a bounded case which is appropriate for in-depth study (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). This study uses a single case study design which is appropriate for this type of literary research because it allows for the critical analysis of the structure, character and language of a bounded case.

This study is based on the novel, *Born on a Tuesday* (2015), by Elnathan John, which is set in Northern Nigeria. It tells the story of Dantala, an Almajiri boy, from childhood till he was grown in the Mosque community of Sheikh Jamal in Bayan Layi, his arrest and torture in a time of religious and political tensions. The novel is purposely selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015) since it is closely related to the objectives of the study. First, it highlights boyhood experiences as opposed to childhood as merely a phase prior to adulthood. Second, it is written in the first-person point of view, and is told through a diary-like method which allows for seeing Dantala's thoughts and feelings directly and thus is particularly appropriate for psychoanalytic analysis. Third, the novel does deal with issues of violence, religious power, and moral ambiguity all of which play an important role in the pressures that mold the protagonist's identity. Lastly, its depiction of the Almajiri system provides a rich socio-religious backdrop to the study of boyhood identity formation in African literature which has been under utilised.

The study has employed theoretical sampling by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to see which evidence in the novel is most relevant. This includes choosing parts of the text, dialogues, situations and relationships between characters that exemplify how Dantala was dealing with the question of negotiating his identity. This is an iterative and flexible method where key themes and analytical categories may be identified in the text, but are still relevant to the research objective of the study (Kiritu et al., 2024). In this study, data collection is carried out in the following stages: (i) Pre-reading, which is to get a general overview of the plot, characters, and setting, making notes about the text at initial reading without being too specific, which can be used in the study of the text; (ii) Analytical Reading, which is reading the text carefully and systematically, making notes about the text with the focus on the text when there is conformity and rebellion, language, friendship and moral reasoning; (iii) Making analytical notes, which is the reading process that focuses on the text in the process of writing notes that consist of conformity, rebellion and language, friendship, moral reasoning. The secondary data sources used in the study are scholarly articles on masculinity, boyhood, psychoanalytic theory and African literature.

The analysis of data has been done by careful reading of novel in the context of psychoanalytic literary criticism. The method of analysis is carried out in three steps: first, the texts are coded into themes that are directly related to the study objective; next, the passages coded under each theme are grouped and interpreted based on the psychoanalytic concepts, namely, how the ideas of repression, the ego, and developmental conflict can be used to explain how Dantala deals with difficult emotions and inner struggles, and how the Symbolic Order and the Real are used to explain how language, religion, and cultural expectations shape Dantala's identity, while experiences such as grief, fear, and desire remain difficult for Dantala to express fully; finally, the findings from all the themes are brought together to explain how Dantala negotiates his identity throughout the novel. This process allows us to gain insight into the impact his experiences and relationships have on his growth and development throughout the story.

This study is best served by a qualitative, theory-driven, close reading rather than other kinds of readings for a few reasons. A straightforward thematic or content-analysis would only have enumerated passages of compliance, friendship, or moral dilemma in the text without providing an account of what those moments pertain to psychologically. This data is not only described, but Psychoanalytical interpretation can be used. It is not suitable to do empirical research (interview or observation of the actual boys) either, because this is a literary study. Finally, the decision to focus on just one text instead of several is a conscious one, and one that was chosen for the purposes of this study because of the need for depth: in order to build a detailed framework rooted in a single strong argument, it was felt that one very richly first-person narrative was more useful than several analysed thinly.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of how Dantala faces and deals with the cultural pressures surrounding him, and how he constructs an individual identity in the process, yields four strategies, which are interrelated: strategic compliance with interior dissent; language and literacy as alternative symbolic resources; masculine friendship as relational identity formation and negotiation of moral ambiguity in the construction of an ethical self.

Strategic Compliance with Interior Dissent

What emerges clearly from the narrative is the way in which Dantala's compliance with religious and male authority goes hand-in-hand with continual internal criticism. For the most part, Dantala conforms to the rules of his community at the mosque, participating in community practices and listening to his elders, but what his first-person narration gives to the reader is an internal commentary that contrasts with his behaviour in the outside world. Dantala feels that even if his life has been thrown out of order and he's not sure what to do, he is trying to examine the situation in a critical manner.

When Dantala privately dissents from Malam Abdul-Nur's increasingly more extreme stance on members of other Muslim sects, while yet being granted his patronage and taking orders from him, this is an internal criticism. In fact, it is precisely this mistrust of and taking advantage of the Malam's help that makes Freud's concept of mediator between drive and constraint – the Ego – meaningful; it is Dantala's mind that is grappling with this contradiction in its internal structure without having solved it. But Dantala still remains within the Symbolic Order created based on the hierarchy of religion, this can be understood as an understanding based on Lacan's theory.

Dantala does not ask questions openly because it could be shameful, for example if he does not understand the sermon. Through this behavior, the Fear of social judgement is representative of Freudian repression because he is silent. It also corresponds to Lacan's conception of Symbolic Order, where social norms shape the ability to express things openly or not. As Dantala's story progresses he senses some inconsistencies among the authority figures around him, but does not confront them directly. In all these cases, compliance is not just passive but is a way of survival – and Dantala can have an inner arena for moral judgment.

Language and Literacy as Alternative Symbolic Resources

The second is focused on the evolving relationship between Dantala and language; his learning of English and Hausa and his Quranic Arabic. In Lacan, language is the Symbolic Order and it is by means of it that subjects become known. Thus, the growing linguistic repertoire of Dantala serves as agency for an alternative symbolic code other than the religious and masculine codes of the Almajiri system. By describing the sound of English as 'not so heavy' and 'not so difficult' to learn, his stated desire for English places it in a space of ease and

possibility, which is in contrast to the demands of religious Arabic.

Also, literacy changes Dantala's cognitive perception of his environment; he is able to compare the meaning of the same word in different languages, from Hausa to English, which represents his ability to think in a sophisticated manner. As far as the last chapters of the novel go, the notebook with words he compiled holds much emotional importance for him: having survived torture and imprisonment, he first thinks about his notebook, showing that his perception of himself is tied to this body of information as opposed to religious and political power, which previously had governed his life. Naming, too, which is problematic in the novel, where his given name and nickname are contrasted, is another space where Dantala negotiates his identity – because, according to Lacan, identity is constructed by language.

Masculine Friendship as Relational Identity Formation

The other is Dantala's construction of identity via his ties with other men Banda and Jibril as well as those with men above him religious or political leaders. Dantala is given protection, affiliation and loyalty by Banda at a vulnerable time in his life, and it's to Banda that Dantala attributes his good. This is because of the shared marginalisation experience as well as the little caring acts that they do for each other; in a Freudian sense, friendship is a compensation for not receiving love and in a Lacanian perspective, the character of Banda is a mirror for Dantala to know himself. Banda's death is a considerable unresolved trauma for Dantala's ongoing formation.

The relationship between Dantala and 'Jibril', a non-Hausa man speaking in the language of the Yoruba in the predominantly Hausa religious community, is another step in the development of this strategy. Marginalisation of the two boys is a way of limiting whatever they are able to attain in terms of emotional openness and friendship, since the "friendship" is not a friendship of the two boys but of masculinity as rivalry and hierarchy, a friendship that Dantala can only share with his intellectual interest and with concerns and doubts that he would never share with his superior. Their bond reaches its peak in the end of the novel when, after his disappearance, Jibril leaves behind a message for Dantala which, in its essence of "care," is the most explicitly expressed emotion of emotionally open male bonding in the novel.

Navigating Moral Ambiguity in the Development of Ethical Identity

The fourth one is the gradual independent moral judgments of Dantala in situations where right and wrong are not always obvious. He is involved in politically charged violence, at the start of the novel without full awareness of the implications. This is in line with Freud's idea that group pressure can bring out aggressive tendencies that are otherwise repressed in the individual. But, later Dantala regrets greatly of what he has done. His remorse is an indication that his conscience has developed

Freud states that the superego comes about through feelings of guilt and moral responsibility.

The most severe challenge to Dantala's moral development is when security forces arrest and torture him to get information about Jibril. He is under extreme pressure but he doesn't betray his friend. This choice demonstrates that he no longer bases his morality off of obeying authority. Rather their conduct is determined by values he has acquired in his own moral deliberations. Likewise, he has been able to see the complexity of human character by seeing Dantala as neither all good nor all bad, but Malam Abdul-Nur. In all this time, he never simplifies people or circumstances into polarizing moral opposites. Rather, he embraces ambiguity and uses it as a means to make thoughtful ethical decisions. These findings indicate that moral ambiguity is not portrayed as something that should be resisted. Instead, it gives him the means by which Dantala is able to have an ethical view of masculinity, which is neither one of unquestioning compliance, nor of outright defiance.

Read together, these four strategies converge on a single pattern. Dantala remains embedded in the systems that surround him even as he slowly develops an independent sense of self, so that his identity is grown as much from his own reflection and decisions as from the expectations placed on him. The remainder of this discussion situates that pattern within existing theory.

The results also support the theory of "hegemonic masculinity" put forward by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), which proposes that masculine norms are perpetuated by consent and coercion. They have a framework which explains why boys accept dominant masculine ideals, but this study reveals that boys do not necessarily internalize these ideals. Dantala feels that he has to do what is socially acceptable in order to survive but questions and reflects on it. This is visible directly in the narrative structure. Dantala continues attending sermons following instructions, and observing communal practice outwardly. His first-person narration continually supplies the reader with a running internal commentary doubt about Malam Abdul-Nur's increasingly extreme sectarian views, disagreement he never voices aloud neither the outward record of his compliance alone would not reveal. His identity is thus grown from the outside by conforming, and from the inside by being independent. This can be seen as compliant interiority than as total internalisation of the dominant masculine norms. The study thus fills the existing research gap pointed by Kameni (2021) and Kiritu et al. (2024). These scholars focus on the transmission of these masculine ideals to boys, but not so much on how they negotiate, interpret, or even how they may reject them in more covert ways.

The centrality of language as a means of identity formation brings Lacanian literary criticism into a specifically African, multilingual context. Whereas Lacan's original theorisation of the Symbolic Order assumes access to one linguistic and cultural order, Dantala's experience of Hausa, Quranic Arabic and aspirational English indicates that multilingual

postcolonial subjects may simultaneously access partially different symbolic orders, with each of them having different gendered and religious meanings. This is not simply a matter of linguistic range: Dantala explicitly separates the religious weight of Quranic Arabic from the ease he associates with English, describing its sound as not so heavy and not so difficult, so that each language carries a distinct emotional charge rather than functioning as an interchangeable code. His practice of comparing the same word across Hausa and English shows him actively working across symbolic orders rather than being simply produced by any one of them, and the emotional weight he places on the notebook of words he has compiled. The first thing he thinks of after surviving torture and imprisonment suggests that this accumulated, self-authored language, rather than the religious or political authority that had previously governed his life, has become a central anchor for his sense of self. Even the split between his given name and his nickname registers as a further site of this negotiation, since naming, for Lacan, is one of the primary mechanisms through which the Symbolic Order fixes a subject's identity. Following Hook (2021) and Ratele (2022), this finding is a textual example of how a postcolonial multilingualism complicates the psychoanalytic assumption of subject formation through a single, unified symbolic order, suggesting that Lacanian frameworks applied to African context need to account for subjects moving between, rather than being seated within one order.

This also challenges the dominant narratives of masculine relationality in Africa, which have focused on hierarchical, patronage, or competitive relations among men (Schmidt, 2024; Izugbara et al., 2014). The friendships between Dantala and Banda and, particularly, Jibril point to a different kind of relationship that is based on disclosure and concern for the other, which is what Hernandez and Macaluso (2024) identify as a way of modelling possibilities for development that may not be readily available within boys' social worlds. Banda's protection and loyalty toward Dantala, offered at one of the most vulnerable points in Dantala's life, is the clearest example of this bond. It is grounded in their shared experience of marginalisation rather than in any hierarchy of authority. Their relationship is built on mutual care rather than competition. Banda's death therefore registers in the narrative as an unresolved grief that continues to shape Dantala's sense of self long afterward.

Dantala's friendship with Jibril, a non-Hausa, Yoruba-speaking boy in a predominantly Hausa religious community, extends this pattern of marginalisation. Their shared outsider status creates a bond based on mutual understanding rather than patronage or hierarchy. The friendship culminates in Jibril's parting message of care to Dantala. This is the novel's most explicit instance of emotionally open male bonding. It is significant because it occurs after Jibril's disappearance, at a moment when nothing is being exchanged or performed for an audience of other men. The fact that this alternative relational mode is found between two marginalised boys and not within the novel's mainstream religious or political institutions

suggests that open, emotional masculinity of this kind survives at the edges of, rather than inside, dominant cultural forms and structures, a pattern that would benefit from testing against other African coming-of-age narratives in future comparative work.

Finally, the fact that moral ambiguity can serve as a developmental resource rather than a barrier to Dantala's moral development suggests caution in viewing the boyhood-to-manhood transition as simply violent and morally straightforward as cautioned by Kovač and Schulz (2023). Two moments in the analysis established support this claim directly. Dantala's refusal to betray Jibril under torture, which shows a moral code arrived at through his own deliberation rather than through obedience to authority, and his refusal to cast Malam Abdul-Nur as either simply good or simply corrupt, which shows him tolerating contradiction in another person rather than resolving it into a verdict. Neither moment is taught to Dantala directly; both emerge from his own accumulated exposure to situations that resist easy moral preparation. The conclusions indicate that it is this constant exposure to moral complexity, rather than direct moral instruction, that allows Dantala to develop an independent moral sense, with repercussions for how African literary texts of this kind could be used pedagogically: not as a vehicle for a moral lesson delivered to a boy, but as a resource for practising the tolerance of moral ambiguity that ethical maturity in a constrained environment seems to demand.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that qualify its findings. The single-text case-study design was chosen deliberately for depth, to build a detailed, textually grounded framework from one richly first-person narrative rather than a thinner reading of several. However, it means the analysis rests on one reader's interpretation of the text without the inter-rater checks common to qualitative coding. Therefore, the four strategies identified here should be read as a close reading rather than as an intersubjectively validated coding scheme. Second, Dantala's specific context a Northern Nigerian, Islamic, Almajiri setting shaped by particular conditions of poverty, religious authority and political violence is historically and culturally situated. The abstract and conclusion's references to African boyhood broadly should not be read as claiming that these four strategies generalise, without qualification, beyond this setting. Other African contexts, shaped by different religious, economic and political configurations, may produce different negotiating strategies. Third, applying a psychoanalytic framework developed largely within a European clinical tradition to a Nigerian Islamic setting carries interpretive risks that this article addresses only partially through Hook's (2021) and Ratele's (2022) work on psychoanalysis outside Western contexts; a fuller engagement with indigenous and Islamic frameworks for selfhood and moral development is left for future work. These limitations do not undermine the four-strategy framework developed here, but they do mean its claims

are best understood as novel-specific findings that are suggestive for, rather than directly generalisable to, African boyhood more broadly a gap that the comparative studies called for in the conclusion below are intended to help close.

In sum, the novel's events, its depictions of Dantala's poverty and displacement, and its portrayal of institutional losses do not imply that he can overcome or move beyond the cultural systems that bind him. Instead, this article argues that identity formation under constraint is an ongoing, partial and resilient process, that selfhood is created through constant negotiation of, and not transcendence of, the partly inescapable cultural forces that shape a boy's life, especially when he is born on a Tuesday.

CONCLUSION

The present study is significant because it is a detailed account of how boys, in particular, and not adult men, actively construct their identity within constricting cultural systems, which is a crucial and unexplored territory in the field of African literary and masculinity studies. Although there is research which has found masculine socialisation to be serious psychological costs, and African masculinities culturally plural and historically situated, it has all too rarely detailed the lived strategies by which a boy might negotiate, rather than simply absorb, the pressures bearing on him. This study contributes to African literary criticism with four such strategies: strategic compliance with interior dissent, an alternative symbolic resource of language, relational identity formation of friendship, and moral ambiguity as developmental resource.

This contribution is not limited to the interpretation of the literary work. *Born on a Tuesday* is a textured account of the interior of an African boy's life, rarely revealed in sociological or survey-driven descriptions of masculine socialisation and thus provides educators, mental health workers and policy makers interested in African boys with an insider perspective on how the process of negotiating identity is negotiated in practice, under conditions of poverty, religious authority and political violence. This analysis has implications for the design of interventions, if boys like Dantala can retain interior agency even in the face of extreme constraint, then it suggests that interventions that either assume that boys are already completely saturated by harmful norms or that they can simply reject harmful norms wholesale may miss what is the more realistic landscape of partial and ongoing negotiation.

On the larger scale, the significance of this study is to prove that African fiction is not limited to merely recording the destructive effects of narrow-minded masculine socialisation. It can describe, in rich narrative detail, how boys might build their selfhood without either conforming to or merely evading the cultures in which they are embedded. Literary texts that make this negotiation visible and scholarship that treats this negotiation seriously as a subject of analysis, are a

resource not so easily accessible through other kinds of inquiry, as the cost of mental health of rigid masculine socialisation is what African societies are still struggling with. Comparative studies of other African boyhood narratives in this framework would be useful to determine if there is a pattern of such strategies in contemporary African literary representations of boyhood or if the strategies identified here are specific to *Born on a Tuesday*.

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