

Reconfiguring Child Agency And Character Transformation In Southern African Childhood Memoirs

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Abstract

*Childhood in autobiographical narratives is frequently shown as a domain of fragility and restricted knowledge, subservient to the retrospective adult perspective. This article challenges that paradigm by providing an alternative perspective analyzing how southern African childhood memoirs portray the child as a credible and autonomous subject. Utilizing autobiography theory, specifically through the frameworks of the autobiographical, relational, and epistemic pacts. The study analyses *Kaffir Boy*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Born a Crime*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*. The four sampled memoirs that were purposively selected were found to be adequately representative of the childhood agency and child character transformation in southern African memoirs. Using descriptive-analytic research design the paper evaluated how creative agency transforms the character of the subject in southern African childhood memoirs by foregrounding the child narrator as both a credible witness and an agent of transformation who constructs meaning from fragmented memory in ways that affirm individual and collective becoming. Thematically, the study focussed on child agency, character transformation, while geographically, the experiences in the texts were domiciled in southern African region. The paper contends that childhood agency in these texts is relational, embodied, and contextually generated, rather than individualistic or abstract. It further elaborates this assertion by analysing how education extends beyond formal schooling into informal and alternate instructional environments, where children actively generate knowledge and reinterpret structural limitations. Secondly, family, especially maternal education, serves as a pivotal space for ethical development, while material creativity converts scarcity into a catalyst for invention and self-sufficiency. Third, linguistic and performative tactics such as multilingualism, code-switching, and humor allow child narrators to navigate identity, mediate trauma, and exert narrative authority within hierarchical linguistic contexts. This paper argues that retrospective narration does not undermine the child's epistemic authority but facilitates a nuanced expression of identity across different timeframes. The paper, therefore, by emphasizing these interlocking modalities, redefines childhood memoir as a site of knowledge creation and societal critique, wherein the child serves as an active participant in personal and socio-political transformation processes. Therefore children should be viewed as agentive, transformative and capable of relating their own childhood experiences.*

Keywords: Agency, Narrative Authority, Character Transformation, Retrospective Narration, Childhood Memoirs.

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I. Introduction

Childhood in autobiographical discourse has long been framed as a space of innocence, vulnerability, and dependence, subordinated to adult authority and retrospective interpretation. Life-writing scholarship has thus often privileged the retrospective adult narrator, marginalising the epistemic and narrative authority of the experiencing child (Lejeune, 1989; Smith & Watson, 2010). Within this paradigm, childhood appears as a passive stage of becoming rather than an active site of meaning-making.

However, developments in childhood studies have challenged this reductionist approach by repositioning children as social actors capable of agency, interpretation, and participation in shaping their worlds (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Corsaro, 2017). Childhood memoirs, therefore, offer a productive space for examining how agency and selfhood are narratively constructed.

Southern African childhood memoirs are particularly significant, given that they are embedded in histories of colonialism, apartheid, and postcolonial transformation. Texts such as *Kaffir Boy* (Mathabane, 1986), *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009), *Born a Crime* (Noah, 2016), and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* (Scott, 2008) foreground childhood as a site of struggle, resilience, and transformation. Across these narratives, the child emerges as perceptive and responsive, actively engaging with and reshaping

socio-political realities. These memoirs offer a productive space for examining the interplay between memory, identity, and narrative form, particularly in contexts marked by trauma and social upheaval. Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of relational and dialogic approaches to life-writing, where the self is constructed through interaction with others and within specific cultural frameworks (Eakin, 2011; Smith & Watson, 2010; Fabry, 2025). Building on these insights, this study argues that retrospection should not be seen as diminishing the child's voice. It, instead, functions as an aesthetic and epistemic strategy that enables the articulation of layered temporalities and complex subjectivities.

This study foregrounds child agency as a central analytic lens since children are reconstructed as active social actors who interpret, negotiate, and reshape their environments (James et al., 1998; Corsaro, 2017). Recent scholarship further emphasises children's narrative competence and meaning-making capacities within life-writing, challenging adult-centric epistemologies (Spyrou, 2018; Abebe, 2019). Accordingly, this study examines how childhood memoirs construct the child not as an object of narration but as a subject capable of agency, perception, and critique. The study also signposts, child character transformation, which is not explored as a linear progression toward adulthood, but conceptualised as a dynamic interplay between experience, memory, and narration. The research interrogates how retrospective narration reconfigures childhood experiences into coherent trajectories of growth, resistance, and self-fashioning. Recent work in life-writing studies underscores that such transformations are not merely developmental but are shaped by structural forces, including race, class, and historical violence (Couser, 2021; Gilmore, 2017).

This study therefore situates itself at the intersection of autobiography theory, drawing on autobiographical, relational, and epistemic frameworks (Lejeune, 1989; Eakin, 2011; Smith & Watson, 2010; Fabry, 2025). It argues that retrospection does not diminish the child's voice but operates as an aesthetic strategy that articulates complex temporalities of selfhood (Freeman, 2010). Furthermore, the study contributes to postcolonial life-writing scholarship by demonstrating how childhood memoirs contest dominant histories and position the child as a critical agent in negotiating identity, power, and resistance (Nuttall & Coetzee, 1998).

II. Material And Methods

The section that follows presents discussions relating to methodology in areas of study design, sample size, sample selection method, study location, study duration, and subject selection methods.

Study Design

This study employed descriptive-analytical research design, which is effective for exploring social phenomena. As a qualitative method of inquiry, analytical research design breaks down and understands the underlying structures and meanings within social contexts. This design is ideal for studying subjective experiences and implicit meanings, making it well-suited for analyzing memoirs that contain personal and nuanced reflections on past events (Creswell, 2013). Analytical research design was used to examine how adult memoirists in southern Africa recount and shape their childhood experiences. The design guided the analysis of narrative techniques, thematic expressions, as well as the portrayal of agency, truth-telling, and child character transformation within the selected memoirs: *The Kaffir Boy*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Twenty Chicken for a Saddle*, and *Born a Crime*. The sampled four texts provided adequate data amenable to descriptive analysis.

Study Location

The thematic area of the study was on child agency, character transformation, credibility and retrospective narration in childhood memoirs within the field of life writing studies in literature. Specifically, it examined child agency and character development, credibility mechanisms for child persona, and retrospective narrative techniques used in childhood memoirs. The research was geographically focused on memoirs from southern African countries, including South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia, Lesotho, Malawi, Eswatini, and Zimbabwe.

Study Duration: January 2026 to April 2026

Sample Size

This study adopted purposive sampling to select childhood memoirs written by adults from the southern African region. Purposive sampling is used to identify data sources that can provide rich, in-depth insights directly aligned with the study's objectives and research questions, largely relying on the researcher's judgment and discretion (Creswell, 2013). It is widely recognised as a deliberate and theoretically informed sampling strategy (Ritchie et al., 2014). This study selected four childhood memoirs as its primary data source because they offer access to the subjective experiences and reflective consciousness of children and adolescents as mediated through adult memory. These texts were considered particularly suitable due to their distinctive perspectives on transformative childhood experiences in southern Africa, as narrated by adults from Malawi, South Africa, and Botswana.

Subjects and Selection Method

The process involved several key steps. Firstly, representative memoirs that reflected diverse experiences within southern Africa were selected. These texts were systematically analysed to uncover themes related to childhood agency and the dynamics of memory and identity, and critically analysed on how these themes interact with cultural and social structures. By following the principles of analytical research, this study maintained rigour and ensured that each step, from selecting texts to interpreting their content, was carried out with focus on preserving the integrity of the research process and enhancing the validity of the findings.

III. Results And Discussion

This section presents the discussion of the findings.

Educational Agency: Formal, Informal, and Alternative Pedagogies

The examined memoirs collectively deconstruct the dichotomy between formal and informal schooling by emphasizing learning as a dynamic, contextually situated process through which the child asserts agency, develops identity, and navigates social limitations. Instead of viewing education as the only domain of intellectual development, these narratives illustrate a continuum of educational environments – books, classrooms, homes, streets, and experimental spaces – wherein children actively generate knowledge and reshape their social realities. By doing so, they conform to sociocultural and critical pedagogical frameworks that define learning as relational, experiential, and resistive (Freire, 1970; Illeris, 2018).

In *Kaffir Boy*, education functions both as a tool of oppression and a locus of epistemic resistance. Under apartheid's Bantu Education system, access to knowledge is racially segregated and intentionally limited. This systematic denial is epitomized in Mr. Brown's assertion: "They're schoolbooks all right... But only white people and Indians use them" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 150), a declaration that legitimizes exclusion while revealing its institutional rationale. However, Mathabane's reaction to this deprivation is not one of passivity. His covert involvement with "prohibited literature" constitutes an act of intellectual rebellion. Interactions with literary works such as *The Three Musketeers*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *David Copperfield* broaden his imaginative and ethical perspectives, allowing him to conceive "alternative forms of life and freedom beyond apartheid's racialized constraints." In this context, reading serves as a transformative endeavor through which the child reconstructs identity and reasserts narrative control from a system intended to suppress both.

This relationship is underscored by Mathabane's observation that "These books...revealed to me a new reality...They shaped my thoughts and emotions, inspiring my dreams." My fervor for acquiring knowledge heightened" (p. 171). In this context, education transcends its institutional framework and evolves into an emotional and intellectual process of self-creation. Remarkably, deprivation is redefined as productive: the lack of access engenders not despondency but heightened desire. The narrative reinterprets school as a contradictory arena where structural exclusion unintentionally fosters intellectual and existential liberation.

A similar reorganization of education transpires in *Born a Crime*, as the focus transitions from formal schooling to familial instruction and adaptive learning. Noah's assertion that "My mother showed me what was possible...she raised me as if there were no limitations on where I could go or what I could do" (Noah, 2016, p. 73) positions education as an existential framework rather than merely an academic endeavor. Her pedagogy is both ideological and emotional, fostering in Trevor a mindset of rebellion, adaptation, and self-esteem. He remembers, "She instructed me that the system was engineered to suppress me, yet I was not obligated to adhere to those regulations" (p. 68). Education in this context focuses not on assimilation into established frameworks but on the ability to reinterpret and challenge them.

This reorientation is further realized through Noah's involvement in informal economies and performative activities. His entrepreneurial endeavors – selling counterfeit CDs, operating a school tuck shop, and playing as a DJ – represent what he refers to as acquiring "real-world economics before I even knew what economics was" (p. 191). These behaviors convert marginality into a resource, enabling the child to obtain social, economic, and cultural capital beyond formal institutional structures. Education is thereby disseminated through lived experience, consistent with hooks' (2003) interpretation of learning as an embodied and relational endeavor that thrives in environments of resistance.

In *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, the marginalization of institutional schooling is much more evident. Deprived of formal education because of poverty, Kamkwamba creates an alternative knowledge framework based on self-directed learning and practical experience. His statement, "If I couldn't have a teacher, I'd have books" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 152), reinterprets restriction as autonomy, transforming the library into a locus of resistance. Crucially, his engagement with knowledge is not purely textual but multimodal: "I didn't understand everything, but I could see the windmill... I knew I could build that" (p. 156). Visual interpretation and practical experimentation serve as essential facilitators of comprehension, exemplifying a constructivist approach to learning where knowledge arises from engagement with resources and challenges (Vygotsky, 1978).

Kamkwamba's ultimate construction of the windmill illustrates the conversion of theoretical understanding into practical application. His observation that "many times the machine failed, and I had to begin again" (p. 181) emphasizes failure as a fundamental aspect of learning, while his insight that "with a windmill, we possessed illumination... And with lights, anything was possible" (p. 193) highlights the political implications of knowledge creation. Education in this context transcends self-improvement; it serves as a catalyst for social revolution that reshapes communal existence. The youngster appears as an epistemic agent able to produce knowledge rather than only acquiring it.

Robyn Scott's *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* further this redefinition by emphasizing a pedagogy based on mobility, curiosity, and emotional care. Her assertion that "Our classroom was wherever we happened to be that day, under a tree, in the back of the Land Rover, or beside a chicken coop" (Scott, 2008, p. 47) deconstructs the physical and institutional confines of education. Learning is inextricably linked to lived experience, arising from interactions with the environment, family, and daily practices. This is further reinforced by her description of a curriculum governed by interest rather than prescription: "We were taught according to whatever caught our fancy that week, sometimes earthworms, sometimes volcanoes, sometimes the ancient Greeks" (p. 105). This fluidity promotes intellectual independence and interdisciplinary collaboration, establishing curiosity as the foremost catalyst for knowledge acquisition.

The domestic environment, replete with literature and dialogue, operates as what Scott refers to as a "world of words and ideas that made our little farm seem enormous" (p. 59). In this context, reading serves as both sanctuary and defiance, allowing the child to surpass immediate material limitations while opposing hierarchical structures of knowledge. Her mother's pedagogical philosophy – "you should learn because you wanted to, not because someone was standing over you with a stick" (p. 54) – further underscores a shift from coercive to self-directed learning. In retrospect, this atypical schooling serves as the basis for Scott's epistemic confidence and critical awareness, demonstrating how non-normative pedagogies can generate credible and authoritative narrative voices.

In these stories, informal learning environments such as streets, homes, libraries, and experimental locations are revealed as essential domains of agency. Mathabane's assertion that "school [was] a sanctuary, not because of what it was, but because of what it was not: the streets, the garbage dumps, the police raids" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 102) embodies the relational essence of education, characterized as much by its alternatives as by its substance. Similarly, his reflection that "Tennis changed everything. The statement, "It was more than a game; it was the language of freedom I came to speak" (p. 231), exemplifies how seemingly non-educational activities may serve as teaching instruments, fostering discipline, strategy, and social advancement.

The commonality among these narratives is a collective reframing of education as a decentralized, flexible, and resilient profession. The child is consistently regarded as an active creator of knowledge, whether through unauthorized reading, mother guidance, entrepreneurial innovation, or experimental creation. These memoirs contradict adult-centric epistemologies that depict children as passive beneficiaries of instruction, instead portraying them as active agents who traverse, reinterpret, and modify the available pedagogical systems. By doing so, they broaden the conceptual limits of education, demonstrating that it is not a static institution but a dynamic process in which agency, identity, and social change are perpetually negotiated.

Family Pedagogy, Material Ingenuity, and Relational Agency

This part integrates three hitherto separate strands; family pedagogy, material ingenuity, and relational/ethical agency, into a cohesive analytical framework that emphasizes childhood agency as both affective and material, as well as social. In the chosen southern African memoirs, the child is not depicted as an independent liberal subject but as a relationally formed actor whose ability to act is influenced by close educational settings, resource-limited creativity, and ethical negotiations within communities. These works collectively contest Western individualist paradigms by illustrating that agency is developed through interdependence, improvisation, and moral responsiveness (Nsamenang, 2002; Murungi, 2014).

The memoirs constantly depict the family as a central locus of informal education, where values, survival tactics, and epistemic orientations are conveyed through quotidian practices. These educational environments are profoundly gendered, frequently organized around maternal labor, emotional care, and moral guidance, which collectively influence the child's developing identity and potential.

In *Kaffir Boy*, Mathabane's mother plays a significant educational role, expressing a perspective of education as both a means of survival and a pathway to liberation within the limitations of apartheid. Her extended reflection – "I want you to go to school, because I believe that an education is the key you need to open up a new world and a new life for yourself... Education will open doors where none seem to exist" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 133) – encapsulates a counter-hegemonic pedagogy grounded in hope rather than resignation. This stance is not simplistic but dialectical: she recognizes systemic constraints while asserting the transformative capacity of literacy.

Her position starkly contrasts with the father's historically rooted skepticism, influenced by the Bantu Education system's express objective to cultivate a subservient labor class (Christie, 1985). The ensuing intra-family conflict, between fatalism and aspiration, forms a foundational ethical and intellectual landscape in which Mathabane's agency evolves. In Freirean terminology, the mother's teaching promotes *conscientização*, nurturing a critical awareness that counters internalized oppression (Freire, 2000). Her support consequently converts education from a tool of oppression into a means for self-creation.

This educational dynamic transcends formal education, influencing broader survival strategies and decision-making processes. Mathabane's rejection of township gangs, despite significant pressure, since "to be poor and not steal was to invite ridicule and danger" (Mathabane, 1986), exemplifies how maternal influence shapes moral decision-making. His commitment to education and disciplined self-improvement reflects not only his choice but an expression of relational agency rooted in familial values.

A comparable arrangement of household education is evident in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, except the focus transitions to collective resilience and decentralized knowledge. Kamkwamba's father, Trywell, imparts ethical guidance: "He taught us always to tell the truth, to be strong, and to respect others" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 14), while his mother and sister offer emotional stability via nurturing and selflessness. His mother's silent perseverance, "She worked like a soldier to keep us fed" (p. 89), establishes the environment in which intellectual curiosity can thrive despite scarcity and hardship.

The memoir fundamentally undermines hierarchical concepts of pedagogy during situations of crisis. Kamkwamba observes that "When there's no food, everyone becomes a teacher. Even a child can tell you something useful" (p. 136), signalling a redistribution of epistemic authority. Knowledge is situational and collaborative, arising from necessity rather than institutional endorsement. This inversion highlights the family as a locus of knowledge where agency is collaboratively generated through mutual vulnerability and adaptive learning.

In *Born a Crime*, Patricia Noah embodies a type of maternal teaching that is ideological, ethical, and pragmatic. Her disobedience of apartheid legislation: "my mother broke the law every time she left the house with me" (Noah, 2016, p. 21), represents a tangible curriculum of resistance. Her instruction, "learn as much as you can. You can be anything" (p. 54) positions education as both a goal and a tool, while her ethical philosophy: "If you do not find the truth in yourself, the world will never offer it to you" (p. 71), fosters an internalized moral framework.

This educational approach is bolstered by linguistic instruction and rigorous upbringing. Noah's multilingualism, "If you spoke to me in Zulu, I replied to you in Zulu" (p. 56), is not inadvertent but intentionally developed as a means of social navigation and agency. Patricia's parenting coincides with African feminist frameworks that incorporate care, discipline, and moral development (Oduyoye, 2001; Nnaemeka, 2005). Her emotional and material labor epitomizes the "gendered labor of possibility," creating a child subject adept at navigating and reinterpreting structural restrictions.

Scott's *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* presents a distinct yet complementary paradigm of family pedagogy grounded in autonomy, creativity, and experiential learning. Her mother's educational philosophy, where "our classroom was the bush...our textbooks shared space with chicken feed and veterinary tools" (Scott, 2008, p. 52), obliterates the boundary between life and learning. This methodology corresponds with feminist epistemologies that emphasize embodied knowledge and relational comprehension (Belenky et al., 1986). In this context, agency is fostered through curiosity and exploration rather than solely through discipline, resulting in a narrator whose authority emanates from introspective engagement with personal experience.

Familial pedagogy establishes the ethical and emotional basis for agency, whereas material ingenuity represents its actual implementation. In these memoirs, scarcity operates not only as a limitation but as a generative state that drives youngsters to reconceptualize the potential of their surroundings. Agency is consequently expressed through acts of bricolage, adaptation, and innovation.

In *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, Kamkwamba's technological experimentation illustrates this phenomenon. His creation of a "Rambo-style commando knife" and subsequent radio repairs exemplify an iterative learning process rooted in observation and experimentation. His question, "How did these wires and bits of plastic make it possible for a DJ...to be speaking here in my home?" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 56), illustrates the amalgamation of inquisitiveness and technical logic that forms the foundation of his innovation.

This path culminates in the windmill, which converts abstract knowledge into collective advantage. The project's importance resides not only in its technical achievement but also in its social ramifications: supplying electricity and irrigation in an environment where these resources are limited. Kamkwamba's ingenuity functions at both individual and collective levels, exemplifying what Mbembe (2001) refers to as postcolonial improvisation, the transformation of constrained resources into novel possibilities.

Scott's book showcases a distinct form of material resourcefulness, grounded in lifestyle adaptation rather than systemic scarcity. The family's off-grid lifestyle: "We had no electricity...What we had instead were gas lamps, solar showers, and the most inventive father in Botswana" (Scott, 2008, p. 35), exemplifies a

philosophy of deliberate self-sufficiency. Her poultry-rearing venture demonstrates the instructional role of material engagement: “We learned to trade chickens...negotiate prices...account for losses” (p. 140). These behaviors foster economic literacy and accountability, converting routine activities into opportunities for education.

In *Kaffir Boy*, resourcefulness assumes a more survival-oriented manifestation. Mathabane's scavenging, “I scavenged through trash cans...anything to make a few pennies” (Mathabane, 1986, p. 50), demonstrates a keen knowledge of worth in contexts of deprivation. His involvement with literacy, “Books were my escape, my resistance, my hope” (p. 110), represents a manifestation of epistemic inventiveness, transforming waste resources into instruments of intellectual emancipation. Tennis, likewise, serves both a material and geographical strategy: “Tennis was my ticket out” (p. 220). By repurposing a predominantly white sport, Mathabane transforms a locus of exclusion into a conduit for advancement.

These material and instructional approaches are fundamentally integrated within extensive networks of relational and ethical negotiation. Agency in these memoirs is inherently relational; it is formed through interactions with family, peers, and the community, and influenced by ethical choices within limited contexts.

Kamkwamba's windmill exemplifies a community endeavor rather than a solitary accomplishment, facilitated by communal support: “One radio from each aunt and uncle and neighbour” (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 57). Its success is validated through communal recognition, “The boy has done it!” (p. 2), illustrating that agency is socially affirmed. Correspondingly, changes in familial attitudes, from skepticism to support, underscore the dialogic essence of agency, arising through discussion rather than isolation (Eakin, 2019).

In *Born a Crime*, relational agency is expressed through linguistic and social interactions. Noah's capacity to traverse many cultures via language, where “suspicions melted away” upon his speaking their language (Noah, 2016) illustrates that identity is collaboratively constructed through recognition. His mother's ethical instruction, “Even if the world is throwing you into the fire, don't become fire. Be water” (p. 218) further emphasizes an ethical framework of relational restraint and dignity.

Scott's story broadens relational agency to encompass emotional connections with animals and the environment, in addition to human interaction. Her memory of her chickens' “shiver of pleasure” (Scott, 2008, p. 216) emerges, in hindsight, as a nascent instance of ethical consciousness. Her reaction to familial change: “a readiness to leap into the unknown” (p. 440), exemplifies an adaptive ethics that reconceptualizes disruption as growth.

In *Kaffir Boy*, relational agency is prominently illustrated through the conflict between parental archetypes. The father's insistence on compliance juxtaposes the mother's aspiration for freedom, establishing a moral framework from which Mathabane must make a choice. His affiliation with education and resistance demonstrates an ethical viewpoint influenced by, but apart from, his parental background.

In these memoirs, childhood agency is depicted as a synthesis of educational influence, practical engagement, and interpersonal negotiation. It is nurtured within familial contexts, manifested through connection with physical surroundings, and affirmed through social participation. These narratives therefore oppose simplistic depictions of children as passive victims, instead portraying them as active agents in shaping their environments.

This type of agency is relational rather than individualistic, embodied rather than abstract, and continuously negotiated rather than static. The child subject is demonstrated to navigate and alter the frameworks that influence their existence, whether by maternal guidance, technology innovation, entrepreneurial trial, or ethical choices. The memoirs collectively redefine agency as a contextual, dynamic process that arises not in opposition to restriction, but through creative and ethical interaction with it.

Linguistic and Performative Agency: Humor, Code-Switching, and the Politics of Voice

This part integrates the examination of humor, code-switching, and language performance into a cohesive narrative regarding how child narrators in southern African childhood memoirs establish agency within and in opposition to historically entrenched power structures. This text expands on previous talks regarding narrative strategy, asserting that humor and multilingualism are not simply stylistic elements but create a sophisticated array of performative actions through which children navigate authority, process trauma, and build epistemic credibility. In these texts, language serves as both a domain of control and a means of defiance; humor, consequently, acts as a pivotal mechanism for the reinterpretation and reconfiguration of that domain.

Pavlenko (2005) illustrates that linguistic selection is inherently biased, reflecting identity, hierarchy, and power dynamics, especially in postcolonial settings where colonial languages have significant symbolic significance. Smith and Watson (2010) assert that autobiographical voice is both performative and relational, influenced by the interaction between lived experience and retrospective narration. In this context, humor and code-switching appear as mutually reliant storytelling techniques. Humor makes experiences narratable by reframing trauma, while code-switching facilitates navigation across social and cultural divides. Collectively, they generate a micro-politics of storytelling, wherein the child subject challenges adult-centric epistemologies and claims interpretive authority.

Throughout *Kaffir Boy* and *Born a Crime*, in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*, linguistic skill and humor serve as common strategies for navigating unstable identities influenced by race, class, and colonial legacies. These tactics not only mirror sociocultural embeddedness but also actively reform it. Language serves as a means of performative self-creation, while humor functions as a discursive shield that converts vulnerability into narrative authority. The child narrator serves as an active interpreter rather than a passive observer, re-narrating experiences to challenge the defining conventions imposed upon them.

In *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah's multilingualism illustrates the tactical use of language as both a defense and a tool. His renowned assertion: "I became a chameleon. My color didn't change, but I could change your perception of my color... If I spoke like you, I was you" (Noah, 2016, p. 67) encapsulates the performative aspect of linguistic identity. The language employed is not only expressive but also constitutive; it allows Noah to navigate racial borders, redefine his identity within evolving social contexts, and transform marginality into relational access. His capacity to 'simulcast' across languages undermines apartheid's inflexible racial classifications, exposing identity as fluid and negotiable rather than immutable.

Humor amplifies this language agency by allowing Noah to reconceptualize exclusion as opportunity. His claim that he was "born a crime... Being mixed in apartheid South Africa was like to being a unicorn – someone magical and illegal" (p. 21) recontextualizes biopolitical violence through irony, converting a coerced circumstance into a locus of narrative authority. Mbembe (2001) contends that laughing in African literature frequently serves as a means of "performing freedom," revealing the folly of authoritarian regimes while rejecting their totalizing rationale. Noah's humor does not alleviate pain; instead, it makes it expressible, enabling him to recount anxiety and instability while maintaining agency.

This dynamic is further illustrated in Noah's contemplations on racial hierarchy within personal environments. His remark that "my own family basically did what the American justice system: I given more lenient treatment than the black kids" (p. 62) employs humor as a critical analysis, revealing the reproduction of structural inequalities within the familial context. Likewise, his satirical depiction of being matched with another mixed-race student: "It was like our species was going to die out if we didn't mate and carry on" (p. 153), exposes the foolishness of racial essentialism by exaggerating it to the level of caricature. In each instance, humor enables the child narrator to convert enforced identities into subjects of critique, demonstrating interpretive dominance over the parameters of his own representation.

Noah's narrative emphasizes the ideological significance of language at a fundamental structural level. His remembrance that his grandmother had the belief that "my prayers were more powerful, because I prayed in English... Everyone knows that Jesus, who is white, speaks English" (p. 47) redefines the internalization of colonial language hierarchy. In this context, English serves as symbolic capital, linked to authority, legitimacy, and a sense of divine presence. Noah's ironic framing undermines this hierarchy by revealing its artificial nature. The narrative illustrates that child agency functions inside linguistic systems of power, leveraging their inconsistencies and exposing their contingency.

A similar discussion of language order arises in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, where English serves both as an access point and an obstacle. Kamkwamba's reflection that "Most of the books in the library were in English, and I couldn't understand most of the words. But the pictures and diagrams helped" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 161) illustrates the epistemic exclusion engendered by the supremacy of colonial language. This exclusion does not eliminate agency; rather, it fosters alternate forms of interaction. Utilizing visual literacy, Kamkwamba transcends linguistic obstacles, creating meaning through diagrams and hands-on experience.

This improvised epistemology is exemplified in his interaction with *Using Energy*: "I didn't know what the word 'energy' meant but I figured it had something to do with these things on towers that looked like propellers" (p. 164). Knowledge is generated not by linguistic proficiency but by inference, imagination, and physical engagement. Kamkwamba's narrative illustrates how language marginalization can create alternate epistemic paths, framing the child not as a defective learner but as an engaged knowledge creator.

Humor, while not as prominent as in Noah's narrative, serves as a supplementary tool for resilience. Kamkwamba's account of a near-electrocution, "Even Escom shocks you now!" (p. 183), transmutes technical failure into collective amusement, transforming peril into a communal moment of irony. This ability to reinterpret misfortune through humor preserves narrative agency, allowing the youngster to narrate hardship without being engulfed by it. Moreover, Kamkwamba's repeated physical actions: "Each time I climbed the tower, I felt like I was reaching above my circumstance... Like a small man grabbing lightning from the sky" (p. 204) extend the performativity into the corporeal realm, in accordance with Butler's (1997) interpretation of identity as manifested through recurrent gestures. Agency is hence both verbal and corporeal, expressed through voice and manifested through practice.

In *Kaffir Boy*, the politics of language are directly connected to mechanisms of oppression and defiance during apartheid. Mathabane's characterization of Afrikaans as "the language of the oppressor... of the police who came to arrest my father" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 106) highlights the profound connection between language and violence. The enforcement of Afrikaans in Black schools converted language into a battleground for political

conflict, where linguistic acquiescence represented complicity in one's own oppression. Conversely, English holds an ambiguous status. It serves as a "passport to a better life... If I mastered it, I could escape" (p. 133), providing access to education and mobility while also strengthening colonial inequalities.

This ambivalence illustrates Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the disproportionate allocation of symbolic capital, with Fanon's (1967) observation regarding the psychological toll of embracing the colonizer's language. Mathabane's linguistic journey encapsulates a conflict between empowerment and isolation. His multilingualism, "At home I spoke my mother tongue; at school, English and Afrikaans; in the streets, Tsotsitaal" (p. 84), demonstrates a seamless transition across linguistic registers, each linked to certain social contexts and power dynamics. This multiplicity corresponds with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," wherein identity is negotiated rather than static. Mathabane uses code-switching not just to adapt but also to deliberately recreate his identity, utilizing language as a means of survival and self-creation.

The humor in *Kaffir Boy* is more restrained yet nonetheless important, especially in the tonal contrast between a child's perspective and an adult's observation. The statement "They were not just men in uniform. They were monsters who stole me of sleep, of safety, of childhood" (p. 38) shows a dual-voiced narration that transmits and interprets trauma. This multifaceted voice bolsters credibility while enabling the narrator to regain control over past experiences, converting terror into a narratable and analyzable phenomena.

Robyn Scott's *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* presents a distinct arrangement of linguistic and performative agency, characterized by irony, hybridity, and self-reflexivity. Her assertion that education may be interrupted by "broken boreholes, wandering livestock, or the demands of subsistence" (Scott, 2008, pp. 62–64) reconceptualizes instability as narrative play, converting material precariousness into a locus of creative involvement. Humor serves a moderating role, allowing the narrator to resolve contradictions without eliminating them.

Scott's ironic self-detachment: "Drunk on optimism, I'd known that Best Turned-Out Pony was a bit of a gamble" (p. 234), demonstrates how retrospective narrative recontextualizes childhood experiences through critical reflection. According to Hutcheon (2003), this form of irony facilitates self-distance without rejection, permitting the narrator to both analyze and validate her former self. This dual perspective enhances story credibility while highlighting the artificial essence of memory and identity.

Her employment of code-switching between English and Setswana further positions her inside a culturally hybrid context. This linguistic fluctuation embodies what Bhabha (1994) refers to as the "third space," wherein meaning is negotiated across cultural boundaries. Scott's narrative, through hybridity, contests singular concepts of belonging, depicting identity as fluid, contingent, and relational.

In these memoirs, linguistic and performative agency is revealed to be inherently dynamic and interrelated. Language functions as both a limitation and an asset, a tool of oppression and a means of defiance. Humor and code-switching function not as separate strategies but as essential elements of a comprehensive narrative strategy through which the child expresses voice, navigates identity, and reasserts power.

These writings critically contest monolingual and adult-centric paradigms of narrative authority by emphasizing the child as an active participant in meaning-making. In this situation, voice is not inherent but is perpetually formed through verbal and emotional negotiation. Through the navigation of multilingual contexts, the appropriation of dominant languages, and the revaluation of marginalized forms of expression, child narrators convert language into a domain of agency. Their narratives do not simply depict the world; they actively reconstruct it, illustrating that even in severely restricted situations, the child subject possesses the ability to analyze, oppose, and rearrange the frameworks that influence their existence.

IV. Conclusion

This study contends that southern African childhood memoirs substantially alter the conceptual standing of the child in life-writing by emphasizing agency as a dynamic, relational, and transforming force. This analysis challenges prevailing conventions in autobiographical scholarship that emphasize the retrospective adult perspective and depict childhood mainly through themes of vulnerability and dependence (Lejeune, 1989; Smith & Watson, 2010), illustrating that the child, even when conveyed through adult narration, retains epistemic credibility and interpretive agency. These stories together redefine childhood not merely as a passive precursor to maturity, but as a vital arena for self-formation, social negotiation, and political action.

In the chosen texts; *Kaffir Boy*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Born a Crime*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*, agency manifests not as an abstract or individualized characteristic but as a contextual practice influenced by educational, material, linguistic, and relational dynamics. The study indicates that educational agency is not limited to formal institutions but is instead diffused across a spectrum of learning contexts. Children actively generate knowledge and reshape their socio-political reality through clandestine reading during apartheid, maternal education, entrepreneurial creativity, or experimental interaction with material items. Education is redefined as a decentralized and resilient activity that empowers the child to envision and realize alternate futures, even within structurally limited environments.

Secondly, by incorporating family pedagogy, material innovation, and relational ethics, the study has shown that agency is fostered through interdependence rather than independence. The family functions as a fundamental educational framework, wherein values, survival tactics, and ethical orientations are conveyed through gendered labor, especially maternal care. These educational frameworks are neither neutral nor incidental; they establish the emotive and moral circumstances that render agency comprehensible. Simultaneously, material ingenuity – exemplified by Kamkwamba’s technical improvisation, Mathabane’s strategic involvement in literacy and sports, or Scott’s entrepreneurial and ecological endeavors – demonstrates how youngsters convert scarcity into opportunity. These acts of bricolage are not only functional reactions to scarcity but rather embodied affirmations of identity that transform limitation into creative potential.

The examination of linguistic and performative agency has demonstrated that language serves as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance. Child narrators navigate their identities through multilingualism, code-switching, and humor within hierarchical linguistic economies influenced by colonial and apartheid legacies. These tactics facilitate movement across social borders, destabilize imposed categories, and make experience narratable while maintaining agency. Humor, specifically, serves as an essential mechanism for reframing, enabling trauma to be expressed, processed, and, importantly, regulated. Thus, voice emerges as a locus of agency, generated via continuous acts of verbal and emotional negotiation rather than predetermined.

Collectively, these findings enhance life-writing scholarship in two notable respects. Initially, they broaden the theoretical scope of autobiography by affirming the epistemic legitimacy of the child’s viewpoint, even in retroactive accounts. Retrospection serves as a constructive aesthetic and interpretative approach that facilitates the expression of complex temporalities of identity, rather than silencing the child’s voice (Freeman, 2010). Secondly, the study enhances postcolonial methodologies in life writing by illustrating how childhood memories function as venues for historical intervention. From the child’s perspective, these works challenge prevailing narratives of colonialism, apartheid, and development, presenting alternative views rooted in lived experience, improvisation, and relational knowledge (Nuttall & Coetzee, 1998).

The study also redefines agency itself. The memoirs examined indicate that agency should be perceived as a process arising from constraint rather than as autonomy or resistance in isolation. It is relational instead than individual, embodied rather than abstract, and iterative rather than static. Children in these works do not only respond to their circumstances; they actively understand, negotiate, and modify them, frequently surpassing the expectations of adult authority and institutional constraints.

These findings have broader implications for the conceptualization of childhood in literary and cultural studies. By emphasizing the child as a locus of knowledge creation, ethical deliberation, and social intervention, southern African childhood memoirs contest simplistic dichotomies of innocence and experience, as well as dependency and agency. They depict infancy as a multifaceted, historically contextualized, and politically influenced state in which subjectivity is perpetually negotiated and redefined.

Subsequent research may broaden this study by incorporating a more extensive corpus of African life writing, particularly texts that emphasize girlhood, disability, or displacement, to further examine the interconnections of childhood, agency, and structural inequality. Furthermore, comparative analysis across diverse postcolonial contexts may reveal how analogous dynamics of relational and material agency function under differing historical circumstances.

This study thus confirms that childhood memoirs are not only retrospective narratives of development but serve as active interventions in the comprehension of subjectivity, knowledge, and social change. These texts, positioning the child as a transformative entity, necessitate a re-evaluation of both autobiography and childhood, demonstrating that even in the most restricted conditions, the child has significant agency in interpretation, imagination, and transformation.

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